

Be Careful What You Wish For
1 Samuel 8:4-22
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In case you've never really taken it seriously, grammar and punctuation are very important, and can even be the difference between life and death. Take, for example, the story of a panda who walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and proceeds to fire it at the other patrons. "Why did you do that?" asks the confused, surviving waiter amidst the carnage, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder. "Well, I'm a panda," he says, at the door. "Look it up." The waiter turns to the relevant entry in the manual and, sure enough, finds an explanation. "Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

That joke is, of course, the case study on which was based a very funny book on the increasingly bad punctuation habits of English speakers. The author of "Eats, Shoots and Leaves" argues that a careless use of the gifts of the English language has its consequences, not least of which is communicating a lack of respect for one's readers. You see, if you can't be bothered to make what you've written as readable as possible, what does that say about what you think about those readers? Indeed, not so many years ago, in churches like ours all over the world, the minister might well have been run out of town, severely chastised, or at

least been the object of scorn, for using poor grammar from the pulpit. Especially in tall steeple churches, the eloquence of the minister's prose was every bit as important a mark of a good preacher as was his effectiveness in communicating the Gospel. Woe betide the pastor who used the wrong conjugation of a common verb, or left a participle dangling. Indeed, today's sermon title, "Be careful what you wish for," despite the fact that it is one of the most common and widely accepted violations of the rule that one should never end a sentence with a preposition, could have landed the careless cleric in hot water. It is hard to imagine, of course, saying, "be careful for what you wish," although it would be the correct way of saying it.

I begin with this little exercise in grammar not to avoid any trouble over saying "Be careful what you wish for," but to suggest that in a sense, what the Israelites have done, as we read about their request for a king in First Samuel 8, is end their sentence with a preposition. That is not literally true, in either the original Hebrew or our English translations, but it is true when you read between the lines of their request and see the total lack of respect for both God and Samuel. It is not that the words of their request were the wrong words, but rather, that they were in the wrong order and with the wrong emphasis. What they said was "Give us a king to govern us," when they should have said, "Govern us, and give us a king." The mistake they made was thinking that they needed a king to govern them, rather a king who was willing to be governed by God. That may not sound like a big difference, but I think it was to God and Samuel, who heard their request as an

insult, as an affront to the ears equal perhaps to hearing the venerable Doxology sung in the vernacular. To end our service today, we will be singing those famous, and grammatically correct, words, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” But imagine singing “Praise God who all blessings flow from.” It’s just not right, and there will be consequences.

Of course it is not just an error in grammar they are making, but rather an error in judgment and in faith and in trust, and that error will result in consequences. You will remember that Samuel was what they called in those days a judge, a person whom God lifted up whenever there was a need for a leader of what was still a loose band of semi-nomadic tribes trying to carve out a life in the promised land. The judges did not so much rule Israel as they did settle disputes among tribes and clans and families, and rally the people in the face of enemy attack. What should have been clear to them from this system was that in fact, they already had a king, who was God, a king who had won a great victory over Egypt and who brought them out of slavery, and who provided for their welfare with judges like Deborah and Eli and Samuel. You may remember from the second chapter of the book of Judges these words, that “Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them.” And so a judge was something like a general appointed by the commander-in-chief, or the

king. But now something has changed, and instead of recognizing they already had a judge among them, even if he was old, and trusting that God, as their king, would provide another as there might be need, they decide to ask for a human king, so they can be more like the very nations around them who always persecuted and oppressed them, a slap in the face to Samuel the judge, and the king who had placed that judge over them.

“Be careful, O Israel, what you wish for...you just might get it. And then what will you do?” That is God’s response to their request for a king to govern them. OK, you can have your king, but do you know what you are really asking for? Oops, there I go again. Do you really know for what you are asking? Do you know that a king will take from you rather than give to you? Do you know the real cost of what you ask? Are you willing to sacrifice your sons and daughters and fields and vineyards and slaves and flocks all for what you perceive at this moment as a more secure future? Do you know that when you have a king I will not answer you when you cry out to me like I did in the past? “O Israel, be careful what you wish for...you just might get it.” And of course, they ignore this wisdom and go on ending their sentences with prepositions, and the kings do exactly what God has predicted they would do, and the rest is history. A little respect would have gone a long way.

There are, of course, lessons to be learned from this experience besides the need for good grammar, and this passage begs for those lessons to be learned again

and again. So let's do that again tonight. I think the first lesson we are meant to learn is that Father still knows best. If God had wanted a king for Israel, God would have appointed a king for Israel, but they thought they knew better than God. Maybe some of you have heard what author Mark Twain wrote about his father: "When I was 14, I thought my father was the most ignorant person I'd ever met. By the time I was 21, I was amazed at how much he'd learned in just seven years." Sometimes we think we've arrived, spiritually speaking, or professionally speaking, or parentally speaking, and are ready to become the teacher rather than the student. And that is fine, because we all do mature and grow up, except we need to remember we must always remain a student even while we are a teacher. We never outgrow the need to be mentored, or subjected to another's wisdom. In the world of psychology, the conventional wisdom is that all therapists should be in therapy. In the practice of Christian Spiritual Direction, it is recommended that spiritual directors be under the care of another spiritual director. Even Jesus' disciples, with their master every day for three years, couldn't master what he had to say in that period of time. It is a lifetime's work to remain faithful, to trust in God's wisdom, and we need to seek out those judges whom God the King has given us to guide us, rather than ask for a new king out of our ignorance and hubris.

Another lesson worth remembering again and again is one that in our own time we call "Don't keep up with the Joneses." In their own day, the Israelites tried

to keep up with the Ammonites and the Jebusites and all the rest. They wanted a king because the other nations around them had acquired one. Bad idea. Just as overextending your credit to buy a big SUV because all your neighbors have one is a bad idea, so is seeking to make your religion something it is not, just because someone else's is slicker, or more popular, or promises you that big SUV if you are just faithful enough. The so-called Prosperity Gospel that seems to gain more people every day claims to be based on promises of God's blessings and abundance, but in fact it is based on the premises of market economics, and the desire and covetousness that system produces. These churches have traded their judge for a king, and shouldn't be surprised when the Lord does not answer on that day they cry out. Let us not make the same mistake.

A final lesson we might take from this story is to pay attention to what God has already done in your life. The Israelites had a pretty short memory, as we still do, and forgot pretty quickly how they were delivered from Egypt and sustained in the desert, and given the promised land. They couldn't remember far back enough to see that they already had a king, who did for them all they were asking a king to do for them now, but at a fraction of the cost. It is for this reason that over and over in Scripture we read that recitation of their history, about our God being the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, about how the Lord brought you up from the land of Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey, about how the kings of Israel and Judah did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and all those repetitious things

that can make reading the Old Testament a test of patience at times. But those things are repeated so often precisely because we forget them so easily, and we can never afford to take our eyes off them. If you've never done a spiritual review of your life, written your spiritual autobiography, so to speak, I invite you to take some time and do that this summer. Go back and revisit God's presence in those difficult moments of your life. Go back and remember God's faithfulness that has kept you faithful. Go back and revel in those times you have experienced God's joy and goodness. And when you do that, I think you'll find whatever need you have for a king take a backseat to the judge you already have.

Finally, let me suggest that you be always attentive to your grammar, in both how you speak to God, and how you speak to others about God. You see, just as with the grammar of our native tongues, the grammar of our language about God can be a matter of life and death, whether someone finds life in Jesus Christ, or finds death in the bottom of a bottle, or in an abuse relationship, or from economic despair. In the respect we show God by how we talk about God, which order of words we use, and what our emphasis suggests, we give people the opportunity to make no mistake about what we mean. There should be no ambiguity in our faithfulness, our service, our commitment to Jesus Christ, no stray commas or sentences ending in prepositions, no matter how awkward or uncomfortable it may feel to us, because that is something up with which God will not put. May God bless us in good grammar and bad. Amen.