The Best Laid Plans

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ARTICLE ABSTRACT

As soul physicians, we do well to offer our best efforts to reconcile people to each other and to God. Our efforts, however, must be guided by a careful consideration of scriptural truth. As is demonstrated by David’s effort to relocate the Ark of the Covenant, we can give instructions that are counter to God’s directives even when we are well intentioned and have been careful in our own deliberations. The purpose of this article is to highlight the need, especially for spiritual leaders, to heed God’s Word as the foundation for sharing God’s counsel.

When Saul was king of Israel, the whole nation knew that he had failed to follow the will of God and had fallen short in his royal responsibilities. In the end, the prophet Samuel pronounced God’s judgment against Saul and proclaimed that, after him, God would seek “for himself a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:13-14). God would find that man in David (Acts 13:22). When David became king, hope was rekindled among the people that Israel’s relationship with God would be restored (1 Chronicles 10:1-13). Indeed, one of the first acts of David as king was to reinstate the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place.

Being a wise king, he “conferred with each of his officers, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. He then said to the whole assembly of Israel, ‘If it seems good to you and if it is the will of the Lord our God, let us send word... throughout the territories... and also to the priests and Levites... to come and join us. Let us bring the ark of our God back to us...’ The whole assembly agreed to do this, because it seemed right to all the people’ (1 Chronicles 13:1-4, NASB). Restoring the ark to its central place of prominence was a symbolic gesture that God would be, once again, a priority in the lives of the Israelites. The commemoration was to be a collaborative effort by all. Undoubtedly, David’s heart was in the right place. He did well as a man who loved God and desired the best for his people. Which made what happened next all the more shocking!

God’s Plan and Ours

While transporting the ark on a new cart, the oxen drawing the cart stumbled. Uzzah, one of the men assigned to guide and drive the cart, reached out his hand to stabilize the ark. But in a flash, “The anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, so He struck him down because he put his hand to the ark; and he died there before God” (13:9-10). The horror of death in that moment of celebration must have felt like an electrocution! Gasp of shock and bewilderment rippled through the multitude. Imagine the thoughts which exploded in David’s mind: “How could God punish and kill someone who was trying to do the right thing?” The best intentions of David and the best efforts of his men failed that day.

If we are sincere in our expressions of love for God, does it matter that some things are not done as precisely as the Scriptures have prescribed? Clearly, the answer is yes, it does matter. The most sincere human desires and efforts do not amend the directives of God. A plea for “if the Lord wills” does not excuse our responsibilities to the truth. Even for someone as beloved as David, his well-intentioned plan did not present an exception to God’s rule. Indeed, God has given specific instructions which we must obey and many principles which we must carefully apply to our lives.

David was stunned that God would re-
ject such a sincere human offering and effort. His immediate reaction was one of anger toward God. Then, as the realization set in that he had made a terrible mistake, anger gave way to fear (13:12), and it was in that state of fear that he was compelled to relearn the instructions of God and to correct his fault. Providentially, in due course, he would lead Israel again to restore the ark to its rightful place and, that time, the full blessings of God were upon them (1 Chronicles 15).

The Counsel of the Lord

The application of this account for biblical counseling may be found in the proverb: “Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand” (Proverbs 19:21). As pastors and counselors standing in the gateways of many in difficulties and turmoil, we do the best we can to provide wise counsel. We all have responsibilities to encourage, admonish, instruct, or comfort one another. The hope, always, is that we may redirect people to the correct path, to traverse the right journey. But, even though we do not mean to ignore God’s will, we can wind up substituting our plans for His. David, and the priests and Levites (God’s spiritual guardians) realized too late that they had neglected God’s specific instructions concerning their actions (Exodus 25:12-15, Numbers 4:15).

The field of “people helping” is saturated with instructions of “how to.” In these roles, we must not negate our responsibilities to critique and wisely apply sound instructions. Moreover, it would be imprudent for us to beseech the will of the Lord without also undertaking a studious evaluation and application of His Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

As soul physicians engaged in the task of spiritual formation, we must not be ignorant of God’s instructions, for we will be setting up many for emotional distress and spiritual shipwreck if we assume that only by our sincere motives and careful deliberations God will accord His affection and approval. Such mistakes can have detrimental effects upon those who look to us for guidance. We would do well to remember that the ministry of reconciliation begins with knowing what it means to “fear the Lord” before we try to “persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11).

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