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THOSE CLUNKERS ON THE CAR LOT 2 Samuel 5

I was watching television when a commercial came on that featured young, athletic people essentially doing extreme workouts. It showed them sprinting, lifting, practicing their craft to exhaustion and beyond. They were pushing themselves mercilessly, and they were displaying incredible, finely honed athletic skill. Every time I see something like that even now my blood starts to pump. Something in me says, “Yeah, I want to push myself. I want to get out there and work that hard. I want to get myself into that kind of finely honed physical condition. I can do this!” I want to respond to that challenge.

Then I think, “Nah, what I want is to eat a doughnut.” I try not to give in to that tempting voice, but I do have to come back to earth. There are some realities that I have to deal with. At my age no matter how hard I work I am never going to look anything like those athletes I see on television and I am never going to be in the condition they are in. Another reality is that if I try to work as hard as those people I will injure myself, guaranteed. Earlier this year Laurie and I committed to a workout regimen that was a good deal more rigorous than we had been doing. The plan lasted for 8 weeks. This regimen wasn’t as extreme as what I saw on that commercial, but it was a definite escalation for both of us. By the end of the 8 weeks I may have been in a little better condition, possibly. But I wasn’t in much better shape. More to the point my left hip was hurting, both knees were barking at me, one shoulder was bothering me. These were not just “work through it kinds of things.” They were overuse problems that only got better when I eased off.

This can be defeating. We can easily decide “why even try? It’s not going to get any better and if I try working out hard I ending hurting.” We kind of give up. So the effect of our effort to get stronger physically is to end up being less motivated than ever. This is not a sermon about getting in physical shape. It is about what can happen when we fail to see the spiritual reality about ourselves. There is something analogous to that physical problem that can happen in the spiritual realm. We can envision ourselves being something we’re not, we can strive mightily for it, fail, end up hurting ourselves and eventually just give up. I want to give you some hope today that will motivate you. To do so we’re going to look at David in 2 Samuel 5, see a great positive turning point in his life, but then ask a curious question. The answer to that question is essential for spiritual health.

DAVID FINALLY BECAME KING

We saw in 2 Samuel 1 that David learned that Saul, who had made his life miserable for so long, had died. By 2 Samuel 5 a lot of water has passed under the bridge since Samuel first anointed David, the young shepherd boy, to be the divinely chosen next king of Israel. David has defeated Goliath in battle, he has become a military hero, he has been part of the royal court, he has married the king's daughter, he has spent years on the run from a nearly insane king obsessed with killing him, he has struggled to survive in caves and desolate wilderness areas, he has gathered his own private army, twice he fled to enemy territory to escape from Saul. But finally Saul died after being fatally wounded in battle. In 2 Samuel 2:4 we learn that after Saul's death David settled in Hebron, in southern Israel. There the leaders of the tribe of Judah proclaimed him to be the king of the tribe of Judah.

This was nice but it presented a problem. Israel was supposed to be one nation, but now one of its 12 tribes was declaring a man to be its king regardless of what the other 11 did. Imagine what would happen if, say, Texas, this year said, "We don't like either of the candidates that are being presented by the major parties. So we are electing someone else to be the president of Texas and we don't care who the rest of you elect. Neither do we recognize the right of the person you elect to rule over us."

How well do you think that would go over? It probably wouldn't go well. That issue kind of got settled back in the 1860's. Israel had been mostly a confederation of tribes with no central leadership prior to Saul. Saul brought them together as one nation under a king, but now Saul was gone, and the best possibility for one of his heirs to be king, Jonathan, had died with him.

Maybe Israel would fracture back into a bunch of tribes. Judah's decision to launch off on its own could have precipitated a break up. But one of Saul's sons was still alive, and in that day the way power was transferred was either from father to son, or some usurper assassinated the king and seized power for himself. The surviving son of Saul decided that he should be the next king. With Judah declaring David to be their king and many in the nation wanting him to rule over the whole enchilada the inevitable happened. A civil war ensued.

The surviving son of Saul is called Ish-Bosheth. The name means "Man of Shame." Obviously that doesn't bode well. Hey he probably would have fit in just fine in this year's presidential campaign. I suspect that wasn't his real name, but was a play on his real name based on a negative evaluation of his character. It was

likely a description of him. The man actually pushing the Saul dynasty agenda was a military leader named Abner. He had been Saul's top general, and he saw himself as the power behind the throne. He wanted to prop Ish-Bosheth up on the throne so he could keep his position.

Ish-Bosheth was no leader. He appears only here in the Bible and he comes across as a weak puppet. The account of Saul's death makes a pretty loud statement. After 1 Samuel 31:5 tells how Saul died verse 6 says, "So Saul and his three sons and his armor bearer and all his men died together that same day." Saul's three sons died with him. Not "three of Saul's sons died with him," but "his three sons" died. What about Ish-Bosheth? There is no mention of him. Maybe he was too young to be in combat. Or maybe he should have been but he opted out for some reason. He was immediately put forward by Abner to be the king, which suggests that he wasn't too young. Maybe part of his shame was that he wasn't out there fighting to defend Israel like his father and brothers were.

Nevertheless, civil war, led by Abner against David and Judah, broke out. 2 Samuel 3:1 says, "The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker." Things really turned bad for the house of Saul when Abner was killed in battle. There were a couple of men who led raiding parties for Ish-Bosheth that realized after Abner died that they were on the losing side. They decided to switch sides dramatically, so they snuck into the house of Ish-Bosheth while he was asleep and killed him, thinking that would win David's approval. David was furious, for the last thing he wanted was to kill Saul's last son. He ordered the two assassins executed. Nevertheless, with Abner and Ish-Bosheth dead the civil war ended. And so we see in 2 Samuel 5:3 that all the elders of Israel came to David at Hebron and proclaimed him king over the entire nation. He was 30 years old at the time.

DAVID CONQUERED JERUSALEM

David realized that ruling from Hebron would not be a good idea. Hebron was in Judah territory in the south. He would be seen as a member of the tribe of Judah ruling from Judah. He would be perceived by people from the northern tribes as mainly a southern king. He needed to move his capital to a more central location.

He determined that the ideal spot was the city of Jerusalem. It had never been occupied by any of the tribes of Israel so it was neutral ground. It was centrally located and it was built on an elevated area making it a very defensible position. But that was the problem. It was a very defensible position occupied by a local

Canaanite population. In order to make it his capital he was going to have to defeat the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem and take over the city by laying siege to it.

The local population wasn't too worried about David. They viewed their city as impregnable. According to verse 6 they said to David, "You will not get in here. Even the blind and lame could ward you off." They were trash talking. This was kind of like "my mother could beat you with one hand tied behind her back." Our cripples and our blind could keep you out of this city, David.

What happened might make a cool movie. It was an exciting military story of David being faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem. How was he going to defeat the Jebusites who were strong and secure in their daunting fortress? It's perfect for Hollywood because we don't know the details of what happened, thus leaving lots of room for the movie makers to create all kinds of story arcs the way they love to do. But we know the gist of the battle. It appears that David found a chink in the defenses of the supposedly impregnable fortress. They had a tunnel system they used to bring water into the city from the Gihon Spring. David figured out a way to access one of those tunnels and move his troops into the city through it, bypassing the imposing city defenses. In 2008 well known Israeli archaeologist Dr. Eilat Mazar discovered an ancient tunnel in Jerusalem that may well have been the one David's troops used to infiltrate the city. Once inside the city David's troops caught the Jebusites by surprise and defeated them.

After David took over Jerusalem the people of that day made the "lame and blind" comment into a saying. The "blind and lame will not enter this house" is a literal translation. It is not exactly clear how that was used. My guess, and it is only a guess, is that it was an ironic taunt of a supposedly superior opponent. Maybe you've seen the State Farm Insurance commercial where Green Bay Packers linebacker Clay Matthews and quarterback Aaron Rodgers pump up their teammates in the locker room saying, "No one comes into this house without paying the price. Not here, not ever!" Then at home Rodgers sees a bee sit on a plate and says "No one comes into this house without paying the price. Not here, not ever." Then he attacks the bee with a golf club. It kind of reminds me of how Laurie responds to seeing a spider in our house. He ends shattering a window in the house and a car outside. Just like the Jebusites claimed their blind and lame were too strong for David but ended up losing to him, it is saying, "You who think you're so strong, you're like the blind and lame of the Jebusites, and you will not come in this house without paying the price. Not here, not ever."

David built a palace for himself and began ruling all of Israel from Jerusalem, the city of David, just as God had promised.

DAVID DEFEATED THE PHILISTINES

Prior to and throughout Saul's reign the Philistines on the western border of Israel had been a constant problem. You might remember that Samson, who lived in the time of the Judges before Israel had a king, had some problems with Philistines. He especially had a problem with one particular Philistine, a hot babe named Delilah. She turned out to be a Philistine honey trap they used to defeat Samson. So the Philistine issue was a long standing problem. It was a problem Saul was unable to totally resolve. He fought them, often successfully, but he was unable to completely eradicate the Philistine threat.

This is just my speculation, but I wonder if the reason Saul was not able to effectively deal with the Philistines was his obsession with David. He didn't keep his eye on the ball. Instead of focusing his energy and resources on the real threat, the Philistines, he squandered them on his pursuit of an imaginary threat, the supposed David conspiracy. I can't help but wonder if Saul employed David with all his military prowess in his regime whether the Israelite forces might have put an end to the Philistine threat during his reign.

In the last part of chapter 5 David turns his attention to the Philistines. He soundly defeated them in two separate battles. While the Philistines continued to exist after these battles they were never a serious problem for Israel again. David accomplished what Saul never could.

IMPLICATIONS

QUESTION: WAS DAVID BETTER THAN SAUL?

God clearly blessed David. We have seen that God specifically took the throne away from Saul and appointed David to reign. Repeatedly we have seen that "the Lord was with David" so he succeeded in everything he did. We will find later that God promised that David's kingdom would last forever, so that even Messiah is known as a Son of David, as one who sits on the throne of David, ruling from the city of David.

But something we see in this chapter causes me some heartburn. We know that the kingdom was first taken from Saul because he failed to wait for the prophet Samuel to offer sacrifices before a battle. Instead he offered the sacrifices himself. I understand that he failed to trust God and obey him. But this doesn't seem like an egregious offense, does it? He wasn't evil. He didn't murder anyone, at least at

first. The throne wasn't taken from him because he was cruel, because he abused and tortured people or did something heinous. He just offered some sacrifices when it wasn't his job. Yes, he impatiently overstepped, but isn't that a sort of administrative error?

This is where the problem comes in. According to verse 13, "After he left Hebron David took more concubines and wives in Jerusalem." Let's review for a moment. Look back at 2 Samuel 3:13-16. David was in negotiations with Abner to end the civil war before Ish-Bosheth was killed. David said, "I will make an agreement with you. But I demand one thing of you. Do not come into my presence unless you bring Michal daughter of Saul when you come to see me. Then David sent messengers to Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, demanding, 'Give me my wife Michal, whom I betrothed to myself for the price of a hundred Philistine foreskins.' So Ish-Bosheth gave orders and had her taken away from her husband Paltiel son of Laish. Her husband, however, went with her, weeping behind her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, 'Go back home!' So he went back." Saul had given Michal to another man to spite David, so now David wanted her back. Oh, what a beautiful love story. Michal and David loved each other so much the one thing David wanted wasn't the throne, it was Michal. Uh, that's not quite right.

Remember when David had that run-in with that Bozo, Nabal. After Bozo died didn't his gorgeous wife, Abigail, marry David? Yes, she did, so what is David doing making a thing of taking Michal from another man so he can have her back and have two wives? It gets worse. There is something we didn't spend time on when we looked at the story of Bozo and Abigail. In 1 Samuel 25:43 we read this, "David had also married Ahinoam of Jezreel, and they both were his wives." So David had two wives, but he still demanded getting Michal back? Yes, but even she wasn't enough. Now we read in verse 13 that once he was ruling in Jerusalem David took even more wives and concubines. Does anybody else see a problem here? Doesn't it seem like David wasn't controlled either by his brain or his heart but by an organ considerably farther south in his anatomy? As you already know, we're going to see that this is indeed a problem later on, and it really turns ugly.

Deuteronomy 17:17 says of Israel's king, "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray." How is David doing on obeying that one? He had three wives, then he took a bunch more, and even that wasn't enough for him so he had to have a bunch of mistresses.

How is offering sacrifices in worship of God instead of waiting for the prophet worse than David insisting that every decent looking woman on the planet be either

his wife or his mistress? The history of President Clinton among others suggests that David probably could have managed to stay in power in the White House, but there's not a church in this country that would accept him as a leader. Given that, how is it that Saul got ousted by God and David was chosen?

GOD IS SOVEREIGN

There is a truth that is difficult for us to swallow that this story illustrates in part. Romans 9:14-18 says, "For (God) says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."''

It doesn't depend on human desire or effort. This is a concept that our minds have difficulty accepting. This may be totally foreign to us, but there is an excellent and fairly obvious reason for it. If you give it a little thought you'll see it. When God chooses people to use in his great plan to rescue the human race he does not have the option of picking ones that are flawless. There was only one perfect human, and that was Jesus. All of the billions of other humans, including us, are fallen, flawed people. If God's choosing of people and his using them in his plan depended on human desire or effort he would choose exactly zero of us. None of us are worthy of his choosing and his compassion.

How many perfect people do you know? You and I both know that the answer to that is zero. Some people might appear flawless, until you are up close to them for a while, then you discover that no matter how good they are, they aren't perfect. I'm married to a woman who is close to perfect, but I've also seen what happens when she is driving and another driver aggravates her. Her response isn't extreme, it is relatively mild (she's had no road rage incidents), but I suspect that you would not describe it as perfect either.

God's only options are imperfect ones. I recall a time when Toby was in high school and had his driver's license that we needed to get a vehicle that he could use to get to school since we only had 1 car between the 3 of us. He preferred that we get either a truck or an SUV that would allow him to transport surfboards and hockey equipment as required. We decided an SUV would be best, so the search began. The problem was we were on a very limited budget. We weren't looking for one of those huge, brand new Nimitz class SUV's. They were way too expensive

for us. We needed something that was maybe a quarter to a tenth of the cost of one of those behemoths. We found several possibilities, but they all had something in common. They weren't perfect. There was something wrong with every one of them, usually there were several things wrong with them. In our budget category perfection simply wasn't on the menu. We ended up buying an older Jeep Cherokee, which would have been a great vehicle for him except for the fact that it broke down with amazing consistency. I guess you shouldn't be surprised when the market you are shopping in has nothing but clunkers, if the vehicle you end up with is a clunker.

When God goes people shopping, perfect models aren't on the menu. He is unfortunately looking at nothing but clunkers. There is a theme that runs through the Bible. Noah celebrated being saved from the flood by getting drunk and disgracing himself. Abraham showed appalling cowardice and dishonesty that compromised his wife on two occasions, then he went along with a cockamamie scheme to have a son by sleeping with one of the servants. Definitely clunker behavior. Jacob was an inveterate con man who ripped off his own father and his brother, among others. Moses murdered a man, again definitely a clunker class offense. Gideon was an idol worshiper. Samson went brain dead when he was around a hot woman. It continued in the New Testament. The hand picked disciples of Jesus were obsessed with which of them ought to be the most famous and powerful. Peter boasted that even if everyone else flamed out he would never fail Jesus, but when the chips were down he proved to be a clunker. He turned tail and ran. Paul was a bad dude who abused innocent Christians and by his own words was the chief of sinners. In other words, if clunkers elected a president he'd win in a landslide. He was a clunker among clunkers.

God sovereignly decides to use some clunkers. He chose to use David despite his clunker behavior with women, among other clunker-like actions. We might be tempted to ask, "how is that right and fair?" Romans 9:20 says, "Who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?" I will paraphrase that. "That question is above your pay grade." That's not my favorite answer. It feels a bit like that parental cliché, "because I said so." But here's the problem in picture form. We occasionally take care of Toby and Anna's dogs, Doc and Banjo. Doc is an Australian Shepherd who is smart, has an amazingly sweet disposition and is deep need of Valium. To call him hyperactive is like saying the surface of the sun is a bit warm. Doc for some mysterious reason has a problem with people taking a shower. When I try to take a shower he goes absolutely insane, barking, freaking out, running around, doing everything he can to keep me from going into that awful place. I've sat him down and patiently explained to him the great virtues of a

shower. I've demonstrated how harmless it is. Doesn't matter. Whatever is wrong with that dog, he absolutely cannot understand. It's above his pay grade. He is incapable of comprehending a shower, so I end up saying, "Deal with it, dog." And we are equally incapable of understanding why God does what he does. When you start telling God he is not being fair you are just like Doc freaking out because someone is taking a shower. You are literally that ludicrous.

There is a great aspect to this message. Romans 3:3-4 says, "What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all. Let God be true, and every human being a liar." The point is God is faithful and works his plan despite the unfaithfulness and sin of human beings. This is terrific news for us. At least I find it is for me. The longer I live, the more I know, the more honest and realistic I am about myself, the more I see how much of a clunker I am. But the great news here is that God still loves me, still chooses me, and even still finds a way to use me as part of his divine plan.

Because I am so far from what I know I ought to be I find it easy to get down on myself, to get discouraged, even to the point where I feel like giving up. Some Christians go to the extreme of striving mightily to improve themselves and convince themselves and others that they are making progress. Why, who knows, if they are disciplined enough maybe they might graduate out of the clunker class. Here's the bad news. On their best days, at the peak of their discipline, the best people we know, the most spiritual Christians on the planet, are still clunkers. They may have a new coat of paint, but underneath, they're clunkers. Here's the simple reality: if they could be anything other than clunkers Jesus did not need to die on the cross. He died because clunkers need rescue.

The great news is this means the pressure is off. We can be at peace with God because Jesus has died and risen from the dead for us. He promises that he will restore us. The interesting thing about restored vehicles is most of the time we don't realize they might have once been a clunker. All their parts have been replaced, all the dents and rust have been repaired and painted and they look like they belong on a showroom. That's our future. In the meantime we don't need to prove anything nor do we need to worry about being a clunker. **God is the great Restorer.** We put ourselves in his hands, for we cannot restore ourselves any more than a clunker can make itself into a shiny new car. So we can rejoice that God loves us, we can admit our flaws, we can accept that we need not be defeated by them and we can do what David did, which was to present himself to be used by God in his plan despite all of his flaws.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

Admit

It is not up to you to be perfect to gain God's approval or to make yourself good enough to somehow be used by him. This is one of the great pressures many Christians live with. But when we live with that pressure it has some negative impacts.

The first is it saps the life right out of us. Recently one of the guys at our Anchorman breakfast was talking about seeing a show about the building of the twin towers of the World Trade Center back in the day. He talked about seeing the iron workers working a thousand feet in the air, walking on the iron girders that form the skeletons of those buildings. They walk along those things with no safety harness and no net. Just the thought of that makes me queasy. Can you imagine doing that? How relaxing would that be? Just make one slightly wrong step and you could plunge 1000 feet to your death. When we think God chooses and uses us because somehow we are worthy or deserving of it our lives become like that. We are inches from a misstep that could destroy us. Every new day presents the possibility of a horrifying fall and every single step holds the frightening threat of a terrible death.

This does not produce joy and peace. It makes us tense and fearful. It requires such constant attention that it quickly becomes exhausting. Forget running and not growing weary. Life becomes about just making it through the day. We will never be energized by that life. We can only be full of life, joyful and at peace, when we can be relaxed and go at life with everything in us because we are not afraid of the threats.

The other thing that happens when we think we have to make ourselves good enough for God to use is we have to cover up our flaws. If you are a clunker, with dents and flaking paint, some rips in your interior, electronics that don't work right and AC on the fritz, maybe a piston that is having a problem, and you're trying to prove what a showroom ready ride you are, what are you going to do? All you can do is hide, try to cover up the reality.

Again that effort is exhausting, but it also means you can never actually be close to people. All your effort has to go into using all your guile and cleverness and strength to keep them from seeing the problems that you have. What you are not doing is loving them. Your attention is all on you. What a relief it is to quit pretending, to stop striving, to just admit that you are a clunker, and to rejoice that God still accepts you and wants to use you anyway.

Accept

All of us are clunkers. There is not a one of us that is worthy of that prime spot in the Great Dealer's showroom. It is kind of absurd when we are the equivalent of a beat up, rusted out, barely operating Ford Pinto and we find fault with that disreputable old Nissan Sentra over there. The hope for all of us is the same. It is that somehow, for reasons we cannot possibly understand, God chooses to drive us and promises us to restore us to showroom new glory.

Given that, we should have a very gentle way with each other. When I see myself as a clunker being restored purely by God's sovereign grace and nothing else, I'm going to have some real empathy towards another clunker. Laurie and I were on vacation. One morning we were watching some people try to stand up paddle board. They weren't very good. They were struggling mightily to stand up on the board and kept falling off. We've done this a few times with some success so I found it easy to critique them. I rather smugly observed their feeble efforts and analyzed what they were doing wrong. Later that day we went out. What I had not noted was that the water was pretty rough. As it turned out the boards we had probably should have been a little larger. I ended up struggling mightily, falling all over the place. I flailed around as woefully as those people I had observed and critiqued so smugly. I managed to fall and scrape my leg on a coral head, and the wound eventually got infected. The scar was with me for a couple of years. How do you think I evaluated those other wannabe paddle boarders after that? I saw them through much more sympathetic eyes.

Aspire

2 Corinthians 3:17 says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." We are like a dog that has been kept on a leash, and now he's taken out into the country and taken off leash. He's free to run with abandon. That's what God's grace has done for us. He's taken us off the leash and we are free to run without fear. Aspire to live in that freedom, pursuing God's will with reckless abandon.

David could have been derailed by his failures. Recognizing the high cost of some of his compromises could have easily caused him to give up. Or he could have been sidetracked. Saul was sidetracked by becoming so focused on being the king that it was all that mattered to him. That led to his compromises. David could have gotten so focused on being the king or on protecting himself that nothing else mattered. For some brief moments he did, but then he "got back on track." And when he did he roared down that track for all he was worth.

It is crucial for us to understand that our failures and our inadequacies and our weakness do not derail us. That enables us to be honest, to admit them. When they are not fatal for our acceptance or our value, we can admit them and turn away from them. Yes, we will fail and somehow get sidetracked at times. But we can do what David did, which was to go back to pursuing knowing, serving and glorifying God with everything that he had. He would get back on the track to his destination. Yes, he would do it with all his dents and his flaws on display for all to see, but he threw himself into it with reckless abandon. He had a heart after God's own heart, meaning more than anything else he wanted what God wanted and pursued that. When he fell, he admitted his failure, got right back up and got back on track, pursuing what God wanted. Let's do the same. When we realize we're on a sidetrack, we don't just stay there. We don't just say, "well, maybe I'll just follow this and see where it goes." We get back on the main track, the one to our destination.