

Sunday, 12 June 2016

1 Kings 21- Justice and Power



1 Kings 21:1-21

What would you do if you knew you would get away with it? Would you slash someone's tires? Would you rob a bank? Make counterfeit money? Would you cheat on your spouse? What if you knew no one would ever know? Well, for those of us who believe in God there is always someone watching. There is always someone available to call for justice.

This is sometimes called the difference between '**subjective morality**' and '**objective morality**'. Subjective morality means that I basically decide what is right and wrong. Or more accurately, 'we' as a society get to decide about what is right and wrong. We get to decide how people should be treated. If women should be treated equally as men that's up to us. If women should be treated unequally, then that is up to us. If we should allow slavery or not allow slavery, that is up to us. Each society gets to define morality. That's subjective morality. The people involved get to figure it out, but there really isn't anyone

else to say if they ‘got it right’ or not. It’s all up to them. This also means that one society has a hard time judging another society. If morality is just what a society makes up, then on what basis do we condemn the actions of Nazi Germany? We would really be judging them and the morality they formed on the basis of the morality we decided on.

Objective morality means there really is such a thing as morality out there even if there are no human beings. Objective morality means that morality is a force of nature like gravity. Your job is to discover it and align yourself to it. If there is a God always watching, or there is a God who created a law of morality along with a law of gravity, then there is a moral law out there that all human beings will be judged against regardless of what society we live in or what century we are from.

Some people think all that exists is subjective morality. In our culture that means if you can get a law to declare something okay then it’s moral and right. So if a company like Monsanto wants to put a patent on a life form, like a genetically modified seed, then they can pay expensive lawyers and lobbyists to push their interest and get the law to go their way.[\[1\]](#) Then they can own a life form and sue farmers who save back some of their crop for seeding as if they are stealing because that life form belongs to them.

Or say you’re a company that uses modern day slaves (many of whom are children) to make your chocolate, or your clothes. Or, say you induce war and violence to protect your profits. In a world of subjective morality the winners get to decide what morality is. Or say you are a bank that causes the near collapse of the economic system because of greed and lobbying for continued removal of government controls, then when an economic collapse is impending you get a government

bailout and still pay yourself a huge bonus for the good work you've done. If you get the law changed, you win. If you gain control of the government, you win. If you make more profits by moving to a country that allows modern day slavery, you win. In a world of subjective morality, what is moral is often what you can get away with.

If, however, there is an objective morality that exists like the law of gravity and can't be manipulated by bribes, or the legal system, or violence, then all these actions will be judged according to these universal standards. There is an all seeing, un-bribeable judge.

I'll get back to this in a minute, but now we turn to our Bible passage for today. In the book of *1st Kings* chapter 21 we read about the conflict between a powerful person and a common person who both hold different views of the world. Ahab thinks it would be nice to have a vegetable garden next to his secondary palace for when he happens to be there, so he asks Naboth who has a vineyard next to the palace if he can buy his land. However, he refuses.

To we who have grown up in urban Capitalist North America we are a bit confused. The King offered good money, or even a better piece of land somewhere else. To many of us Naboth is just being plain stubborn.

The majority of us (especially those who have grown up in the city) have grown up with a very different understanding of property. It is so ingrained in us that we really have a hard time thinking any other way. For us to say something is "priceless" is really just another way of saying that something is really really expensive. For us to understand Naboth's refusal we have to grasp how he viewed his land.

For Naboth, the land King Ahab spoke of is on his family's portion of the Promised Land. When his family were slaves in Egypt, God used Moses to bring Naboth's ancestors out of slavery and into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership. This land that Naboth was living on and tending was a symbol of God's love and care for his people. It was his job to care for it. In a sense it really wasn't his land to sell. Naboth viewed himself as steward of the land that was handed down to him from his ancestors. It was his responsibility to care for it and hand it on to his children.

King Ahab saw the land as a commodity- as resources to be used and consumed. It is something to be bought and sold. He cared about having a nice vegetable garden, not about his ancestral inheritance. Naboth had a very different view of the land. In this reading we have a collision of values. This kind of collision happens all the time, and the way it was often resolved (unfortunately) depended on who has more power. [\[2\]](#)

While Ahab, as the emotionally mature king that he was, goes to his room angry, sulking and refusing to eat, his wife Jezebel comes to him to figure out what's wrong and then sets off to fix it. She uses the king's authority to command leaders in Naboth's town to accuse him of a crime that will get him executed. To do this she tells them to find two "scoundrels" who will lie and accuse Naboth of the false crime. They needed two because in the justice system of Israel you needed two witnesses to accuse a person of a crime just in case someone was lying. Jezebel uses the justice system of Israel to commit murder. How ironic that this conspiracy used the thing meant for justice to create injustice. Jezebel's plan is successful and Naboth is killed.

Now if subjective morality is all there is, then those with the power have a lot of ability to make up the rules. They can

manipulate the legal system, even using it as a tool to do their bidding. Under the idea of subjective morality as long as people are okay with this, or even don't know about this, then there are no ultimate consequences for this kind of immorality.[\[3\]](#)

This kind of thing is what I was talking about at the beginning of this sermon. There are numerous situations involving corporations and societies that mimic this situation. A powerful individual, or group, versus a less powerful individual or group. The powerful manipulate the system to allow for their behavior, effectively buying justice. If all there is is subjective morality then the powerful get their way, and the little guy is trodden underfoot and forgotten about.

If, however, there is an objective morality in the universe, a morality that exists even if no one believes it, a morality that exists like a law of physics, then all these actions will be judged and justice will be had. If all there is is subjective morality then Jezebel and Ahab get away with it. If there is an objective morality, then there will be consequences sooner or later.

I had a friend who was really interested in Liberation Theology, which is basically a way of thinking about God and reading the Bible with an emphasis on releasing those who are being oppressed. My friend was explaining to me what Liberation theology was all about and he said, "Liberation Theology can be summed up by this phrase- 'God takes sides'". In the conflict between King Ahab and the peasant farmer Naboth- God chooses Naboth's side. God cares and calls for justice for Naboth's murder. Injustice is never hidden from God's eyes. After the conspiracy and murder are over, the prophet Elijah meets the king in Naboth's garden. God speaks through Elijah and asks the king, "Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?" In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's

blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!' ". The King thought he got away with it. He is the king after all. Now, here comes this odd man, the prophet Elijah, and he knows everything because God has told him. God sees everything, and God has taken a side. God has an un-shakable, un-buyable, un-manipulatable standard of morality. The violence done to Naboth will come back on Ahab and his wife Jezebel.

The church has often shone at its brightest when it has stood alongside those who are oppressed- like William Wilberforce standing alongside the slaves, or like Mother Theresa standing alongside those living in the slums of Calcutta, or Bishop Desmond Tutu standing with his people against Apartheid.

That is our place as Christians. We are called to stand alongside the Naboths who are crushed by the powers of this world who think they can buy justice- who think that justice and laws are for those with the most expensive lawyers and government lobbyists. Like Ahab, there are those who would even use the legal system to cover their injustices. Justice will be had eventually.

In Matt 25 Jesus says:

³⁴"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or

needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Jesus identified with the Naboths of the world. Those who have been beaten up by the bullies of this world. Standing with the Naboth's can be scary. It means you are standing against the King Ahabs and Queen Jezebels of the world, but I think we would much rather stand with the prophet Elijah and the peasant Naboth- because that means we are standing with God.

Additional reflection:

If we look hard we can find ourselves in this 1st Kings reading. We can be one of three people in the reading. At our worst, we can be Jezebel. We can be openly and obviously cruel. We conspire to do horrible things to people. I remember one time when I was in elementary school there was a card being sent around the class. It was near my friend Chris' birthday so I thought it was going to be a birthday card for him. Once everyone had signed it the girl who started it collected the card back with all the signatures and wrote "we all hate you Daniella" and gave it to the girl. Once I found out I felt awful. I even signed my name with a happy face. And on top of that I had a bit of a crush on Daniella. It was heartless and cruel. She left the school shortly after that. At our darkest we can be Jezebel. Usually we aren't that willingly cruel, and we can think of many people throughout history that are heartless, drunk on power, and more than willing to crush others.

The second way we might see ourselves in this story is to see ourselves as King Ahab. He didn't really make the order, but the murder was done so he could benefit from it. This is more subtle. Sometimes we benefit from oppression. We are not commanding murder or causing wars or forcing someone into slavery, but we can benefit from the oppression those wars cause. If wars are caused over oil, do we benefit from that? If goods are made cheaper by being made in a sweatshop, do we benefit from it? Sure we aren't running around shooting people because we want cheap oil. We certainly don't have a sweatshop full of enslaved children in our garage. King Ahab did not kill anyone. He didn't even command the killing of anyone, but he didn't stop it. His silence was an approval of Jezebel's tactics to get him Naboth's vineyard. In the end he received judgement. It is easy for us to fall into this way of being because it is subtle and we aren't intimately connected to those being hurt. Though I'm not sure if Ignorance is an excuse here.

The 3rd person we can be in this story is Naboth. We can live under the oppression of someone, or a group of someones. We can fall through the cracks of our society. The laws can leave us exposed. I've had phone calls from people stuck between organizations and so are left without a foothold. The structures we sometimes set up can fall apart. Sometimes we end up being crushed by the powerful organization. Sometimes we are bullied at work. Sometimes we are kicked around by the powers and principalities that terrorize this world. Sometimes we are not Naboth, but we choose to stand beside him. Sometimes we are not the one oppressed, but we stand in solidarity with the person who is oppressed.

[1] I know I have stepped on a few toes with this remark. We have to be careful to avoid extremes and demonizing. These companies do what they do because consumers and voters have created this kind of a setting. Genetically modified seed is driven by the consumer demand for cheaper food. Sweatshops are driven by the consumer demand for cheaper clothes. Modern slavery is often driven by North American consumer demands. The finger is pointed at us as well for creating a context where these kinds of issues are possible and they thrive because we tend to be relatively complacent.

[2] Naboth's view of the land is much like the view of many Aboriginal people's. In many ways the deceptions in the guise of treaties and the sheer physical and political violence used against aboriginal peoples is an example of the conflict between Ahab, Jezebel, and Naboth. The European settlers had decided that they wanted the land that was occupied by a variety of native peoples. The native peoples actually had a view of the land that was somewhat similar to that of Naboth. The settlers saw resources and had a sense of ownership that collided with the Native American view of the land.

One particular event you might know about. The "Trail of Tears" was a relocation of many Native American peoples from their homelands to present day Oklahoma in the western United States in the early 1800's. During this forced relocation many people died from exposure, disease, and starvation. 4,000 of the 15,000 relocated Cherokee people died while on route.

By 1837, 46,000 Native American people had been removed from their homes in the South Eastern United States. The result was that 25 million acres were made available for settlement by European settlers.

A look at the history of the treaty process exposes much injustice, manipulation, and exploitation. For example I heard a First Nations pastor named Cheryl "Bear" Barnettson say that much of Vancouver, from the coast to a mile inland, according to one treaty actually belongs to the Musquim, Broad Inlet, and Squamish nations.

Cheryl summed up her people's view of the land by saying, "No one can own the land, any more than anyone can own the air or the sun that shines, or the rain that falls". According to Cheryl the Native American understanding of land was much like the Old Testament concept of stewardship. The Land was God's and those who lived on that land were responsible for taking care of it and not abusing it.

Now I'm not sure what to say about this. I think we need to feel disturbed by the injustice that has happened to the Native peoples of this continent, but I'm not sure what the answer is, honestly. I do feel strongly that there is a parallel between Naboth and the many individuals and peoples on this planet who have suffered injustice at the hands of the powerful, who often use conspiracy and even the justice systems to oppress other peoples.

[3] I heard Doug Wilson once comment on John Lennon's song "Imagine" which paints an idealized world with no afterlife. "Imagine: Above Auschwitz only sky. Imagine there's no heaven above us, no hell below." The idea is that if there is no afterlife then Stalin or Hitler never really have to face the suffering they've caused.