

“Showing Kindness”
2 Samuel 9:1-13

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Hope and Hese

We outlined this book and chose today’s passage weeks before we knew that Farrell and Raul would be in town, and I wrote this manuscript before I knew they would share the story of Chepe - the young man who they have loved for nearly a decade. He has gone from a neglected child to a rebellious youth to a boy on the run to a newly-baptized Christian who will work for their ministry. Although we didn’t set out to talk about David and Mephibosheth and The Hope Project, it’s a really beautiful overlap on our schedule. Chepe’s story is a wonderful illustration of what we’re talking about today.

One of the things that I love the most about many of our missions partners - and The Hope Project is on that list! - is how they work so hard to not just put a band-aid on the obvious problem, but they also dig deeper to find the source of the problem. Some folks focus on one or the other, but I think the real magic happens when we jump in with both feet and do both. And at Corinth, we partner with a lot of places that follow that model of trying to improve the present while also equipping others to change the future.

It’s probably safe to assume that neither we as a church nor our mission partners get this balance of addressing current problems and underlying causes right all the time. I trust that we get it right some of the time - and I hope we get it right more often than we get it wrong. We keep trying because the Bible is rich with examples of what it looks like to show up and show kindness to others. 2 Samuel 9 is one of those examples. In this passage, we’re going to see one of David’s better moments. David has plenty of bad moments (go back and read chapter 8, or stay tuned for the Bathsheba affair), but in spite of his failures, he still gets some things right. Today, we will see David show up in an unexpected way and show undeserved kindness to a stranger.

Kings and Their Descendants (1-3)

David begins his search with the question, “Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake?” (1) In this moment, we’re stepping into a complicated story that has been unfolding for years. David was first summoned to King Saul’s service in 1 Samuel 16, when Saul heard that David was a skilled musician. In turn, he became one of the king’s armor-bearers, and eventually one of his most successful warriors. As David amassed greater and greater military victories, he also

developed a deep friendship with Saul's son, Jonathan, and married one of Saul's daughters, Michal.

Eventually, David's success was too much of a threat for King Saul to bear. Saul became afraid of David's success and his popularity among the people. He tells Jonathan and the rest of his forces to kill David. Saul's children (Jonathan and Michal) protect David from their dad. David goes into hiding, but before he leaves, Jonathan says to him "May the Lord be with you as he has been with my father. But show me unfailing kindness like the Lord's kindness as long as I live, so that I may not be killed, and do not ever cut off your kindness from my family – not even when the Lord has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth." (1 Samuel 20:13-15)

Jonathan asks his dear friend and brother-in-law, now a fugitive on the run, to promise to extend kindness to Jonathan's family forever, even as David is trying to avoid being murdered by that very family. I think Jonathan had a sense that David would one day be king, but in this moment, it's certainly not clear how the future is going to unfold or when that might happen. In any case, Jonathan wants to make sure that, his father's machinations aside, he and David would always be friends and care for one another's families.

The book of 2 Samuel opens with David learning that King Saul and Jonathan have both been killed in battle. After a time of mourning, David went to the southern region of Judah and was crowned king (ch 2). One of Saul's other sons became king over the northern region of Israel (ch 2). The kingdoms of Israel and Judah went to war against each other (ch 2-4). Eventually, David's army wins (ch 4), and David becomes king over the whole territory of Israel and Judah (ch 5). David continues his military conquests (ch 5), and brings the Ark back to Jerusalem with all kinds of pomp and circumstance (ch 6). He settles down in his palace, and God tells him that he will establish David's house forever (ch 7). David conquers even more enemies (ch 8) before we learn that "David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people." (8:15)

It is from this place of relative peace and security that David asks, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (1) Although his circumstances have changed dramatically from the time when he made the promise to Jonathan, David has not forgotten the promise.

The question "Is there anyone still left," is particularly interesting. In 21st century America, it's generally agreed upon that our leaders should participate in a peaceful transition of power. Whether we're electing new presidents, new congresspeople, new mayors, or even hiring a new CEO or manager - we expect that on a certain date and with a certain set of steps, the old leaders will leave office and take up some new role elsewhere and the new leaders will take over. Sometimes there are challenges, but the expectation is that changes of leadership in our culture are going to be an unremarkable affair. In the ancient world, things were a little different. In those days, it was common for the incoming king to eradicate the entire family line of the former king. Wives, children, grandchildren – often, nobody was spared. Their belief was that any remaining

descendant of the former king could someday claim that they were the rightful heir to the throne. The safest move politically was to kill everybody right out the gate.

For David to ask “Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul,” makes good sense. To end the question, “to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake” marks a radical departure from what would have been considered normal behavior for a king in that time in that part of the world.

Servants and Sons (3-7)

A servant of Saul’s, who has presumably become a servant of David’s, has an answer to the king’s inquiry. Ziba the servant is brought before David the king and tells him that his old friend Jonathan has a son who is still alive. Ziba doesn’t mention the son’s name, but does give David one peculiar detail. “He is lame in both feet.” (3) Scholars have different ideas about why that one detail is the only one the servant shares. A lot of scholars think it’s to show David that this son of Jonathan’s isn’t a political rival. In other words, he’s a “safe person” to show mercy to. In the ancient world, having a physical disability would have disqualified the son from being king. If that bothers you or it feels unjust or unfair – you’re right. We still get it wrong sometimes, but we’ve come a very long way since David’s time in terms of how we understand disability and how we incorporate those with disabilities into our culture. I’m not suggesting Ziba and David were right or fair or even reasonable in considering Jonathan’s disabled son to have no ability to gain or wield political power – but I am saying that’s how people thought in those days. Ziba’s response is basically, “someone is left, but you don’t need to kill him!”

David wants to know more. Ziba tells him that this son of Jonathan’s (we still don’t know his name) is living in “the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.” (5) Makir and Ammiel are names we see elsewhere in the Old Testament, and they have a good reputation. The exact location of Lo Debar is a mystery, but it’s also not all that important. What we learn from this description is that Jonathan’s son is living, and he is in the care of somebody else. By “care” I don’t necessarily mean nursing care; what we’re talking about here is more socioeconomic care. He’s not able to make it on his own, and he’s not able to establish his own household and provide for his family.

This man, who possesses little to no power or position, is summoned by the king. When the man arrives, he bows down before the king and presents himself as a servant. Keep in mind, this man surely knows that it’s customary for the king to kill all remaining relatives of his predecessor. I’m not sure what the man knew about why the king summoned him, but I have to imagine that he either didn’t know or didn’t believe that the king had anything good in mind.

David calls Mephibosheth by name. That’s an interesting detail, since we as readers of this story never find out when or how David learns Mephibosheth’s name. Ziba had only described Mephibosheth’s relationship to Saul and where he was living. When Mephibosheth comes in, kneels down, and then says “At your service” (6), he’s playing

out in word and in action that he knows his status is far below the king's in the social order. He reiterates this in his next words, when he says to David, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" (8) I think in just about any time and place, it's pretty obvious that a man calling himself a "dead dog" is not flattery. Some of us are "dog people," but nobody in David's culture was. Dogs were pests, not household pets and certainly not "man's best friend." At best, they were an annoyance; at worst, they were hated. So Mephibosheth lowers himself even farther. Why should the king talk to a despicable dog like him - and a dead dog at that!

David apparently has no time to respond to that inquiry. Instead of negotiating with Mephibosheth about his value or worth, David is going to skip ahead and start upending everything Mephibosheth knows about life as a royal subject. David is not about to kill him. David is not in the market for another servant. David is about to show him what the kindness of God, which he had promised to Mephibosheth's father, looks like.

Turning the Tables (7-13)

Before he reveals his plan, David says to Mephibosheth the same thing that messengers from God often say throughout the Bible - "Don't be afraid!" Then, David turns his search into a promise, "I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan." He also expands on how he's going to show kindness. "I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table." (7)

Saul's land would have become royal property when David took the throne. David's approach to showing kindness was to restore to Mephibosheth his family land. The kindness is more than the restoration of seized property. David also gives Mephibosheth a working estate, the resources to farm it, and royal status.

We don't know exactly where the land was, but we can assume that it was a significant size. After all, David calls in Ziba - the servant who had told him about Mephibosheth - and tells Ziba that he, his sons, and his servants will work the land for Mephibosheth. Ziba has fifteen sons and twenty servants. Thirty-six people can tend to an awfully large parcel of land! Furthermore, 36 people are certainly able to farm more than enough produce for themselves to eat their fill. This land would also yield an abundance of produce that could be sold. So Mephibosheth gets the land, he gets the means to farm the land, and he gets an income stream. But wait! There's more!

Mephibosheth also gets to eat at the king's table, "like one of the king's sons." (11) Scholars have different ideas about whether "always eating at the king's table" (10) means that Mephibosheth is over for dinner every night, or if he has a standing invitation for ceremonies and feasts. In either case, it's an ongoing invitation to the table that doesn't have an expiration date. Mephibosheth is "in" with King David. His station in life has been radically changed, and as long as David is king, his plan is to keep

Mephibosheth in that place of honor. This is far greater and deeper kindness than Mephibosheth ever could have expected or imagined.

Showing Kindness

But there's also something strange going on in this exchange. Did you notice what was missing? Or rather... who was missing? This is one of several parts of the Bible where God seems to be hidden. It's not quite as glaring as, say, the book of Esther, where God's name never appears. But God has definitely moved to the background of this chapter. We only see his name once, in verse 3, when David asks his question the second time. "To whom can I show *God's* kindness?" (3)

As we said last week and as I mentioned earlier, life is looking really good for David right now. He has become the king. He has conquered his enemies. He is living in relative peace with relative prosperity. From his point of view, God has given him blessing upon blessing. Last week, in chapter 7, he expressed his gratitude and awe to God in prayer. This week, in chapter 9, he expresses his gratitude by paying it forward. David is prompted to show kindness to Mephibosheth because God has shown kindness to David.

The "kindness" that we see throughout this chapter is the Hebrew word "hesed." Hesed is a deep, covenant loyalty and kindness. It's a love that is unbreakable and unshakeable and flows from the very nature and heart of God. God's people have received his hesed in immeasurable ways; in this chapter David wants to spread some hesed around. And as God's people, it's our job to be in the hesed business too.

What does it look like to be hesed people? I see three clear characteristics in this passage of what it looks like to show kindness in a biblical way. First, it's covenantal. Second, it's systemic. Third, it's incarnational.

Covenantal. David shows kindness to Mephibosheth because of God's covenant kindness to him and because he remembers his covenant with Jonathan. Promises matter to David. He could have walked away from his promise to Jonathan, and nobody could have done a thing in the world to hold him accountable. But David takes the high road; he keeps a promise because he has seen God keep promises. In the same way, we are people of a covenant. On his last night on earth, Jesus was sharing a supper with his disciples. He lifted a cup and said "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20) As Christians, as people who claim redemption and forgiveness through the blood of Jesus, we have also become covenant people. God claimed us apart from our good deeds or our best efforts. God has showered us with undeserved kindness. When we remember God's covenant with us and his unfailing love and mercy, the proper response is to ask the question, "Is there anyone to whom I can show God's kindness?"

Systemic. David shows a kindness to Mephibosheth that is systemic. He does not give the lame man a new set of crutches and a hot meal or a satchel of money - though any of those would probably have been welcome blessings. What David does is to dig deeper and look farther into the problem. His approach to showing kindness is to provide something good right now, and to move Mephibosheth from one path in life to a completely different path. David breaks out of a system that allowed (encouraged?) one man to take possession of everything someone else owned and to kill anyone who might seek to get it back. We see the same radical upheaval when God intervenes in the world. Jesus didn't make things marginally better. Jesus rocked the world to its core, broke apart the established systems and opened the door to a completely different end to our stories. Applying this to our world might feel daunting, but it shouldn't. Systemic changes can start small. The first question is "What's the problem?" The important second question is "What caused this problem?" When you dig into the second question, you're working on systemic change.

Incarnational. Finally, David invites Mephibosheth to his table. His kindness doesn't involve doing something nice then moving on. Kindness is not a disposition, it's a disruption to David's "normal." Mephibosheth will never again be out of sight and out of mind. For the rest of his days, he has a seat at the king's table. They are going to be doing life together and their stories will be intertwined. If you ever doubt that God's ideal for showing kindness is incarnational, reread the opening chapters of the gospels. Jesus left the throne of heaven and became incarnate because proximity matters. God could have come up with a way to redeem us from a distance, but he didn't. His greatest act of love and kindness involved putting on flesh and getting all up in our business. Our approach to showing kindness doesn't need to be invasive, but it should involve relationships. True hesed, biblical kindness, isn't drive-by charity. It's a way of life that brings outsiders in and lovingly welcomes and embraces those who haven't had a seat at the table before.

There are so many ways to show this kind of kindness. And if you need help coming up with how you can do it, I'd love to talk to you about that. I wear my "missions pastor" hat proudly, and a big component of that part of my job is connecting needs and resources. Whether you do it on your own or with some help from friends or family or mentors or me, there are a few questions to consider when it comes to how and where you can spread some hesed around.

How has God shown kindness to me? This is our covenant question. Remember what God has done in your life and reflect on those undeserved blessings. The next two go together - *Who needs me to show kindness? Why are they in need of this kindness?* The first gets us looking in the right direction. The second prompts us to think bigger and broader than what our first response might be. These are our systemic questions. Finally, *How can I invite them to my table?* This could be literal - it's always powerful to share a meal with someone. But it's ultimately the incarnational question. How do you build a relationship and invest in the long-term? When we ask and answer these questions, we begin to show God's kindness in the way the Bible teaches us.