

Greatness: The Life of Israel's Greatest King and How Yours Can Be Better
The Ends Don't Justify The Means
2 Samuel 4

Introduction: *The Prince*, a book by Niccolò Machiavelli, was formally published in 1532. In it, Machiavelli proposed that as long as the results of your actions can be seen as something good, then the means to achieve those results, no matter how unethical or immoral they may be, are justified. The phrase used to summarize this political philosophy is “the ends justify the means.” Therefore, a ruler needs not to waste any time or emotional capital worrying about how he achieved something as long as what he achieved can be seen as beneficial.

Now, be sure that Machiavelli in no way invented this concept. No one needed Machiavelli to teach them how to think this way; Machiavelli simply tried to insulate leaders from feeling guilty about it! Mankind has been attempting to justify his actions since Adam and Eve first rationalized disobeying God's clear instructions not to eat the forbidden tree's fruit because they believed it would make them wiser. To no surprise, then, in our study of the book of Samuel, we find numerous examples of people thinking the end result of their actions justified their sinful actions to achieve it, none of which are any more straightforward than the story in 2 Samuel 4. So, let me walk you through it, and then we will turn to the New Testament to see how the New Covenant in Christ addresses it.

Now, before we start, let me remind you of some of the essential things that led up to this. After Saul and all but one of his sons were killed in battle, the elders of Judah crowned David as their king. However, Abner, the commander of Saul's army who had escaped death, made Ish-bosheth the king over the other eleven tribes. Abner didn't appoint him King because of his loyalty to Saul or because he was convinced God had anointed Ish-bosheth to be the next king but rather out of total selfish ambition.

Ish-bosheth, who was called the worthless son of Saul, apparently contributed nothing to the household of Saul nor Israel and seemingly had no aspirations in life other than living off his father's wealth. In addition, Ish-bosheth greatly feared Abner, and seemingly so did the elders of the eleven tribes; therefore, in appointing Ish-bosheth as king, Abner was putting a puppet on the throne who would do his bidding.

However, after an extended civil war with David where the house of David grew stronger and stronger, and the other eleven tribes who were “technically” under the reign of Ish-bosheth grew weaker and weaker, Abner decided it was time to abandon the ship and ditch Ish-bosheth. Abner met with the elders of the 11 tribes under Ish-bosheth, who had apparently been wanting David to be their King anyway (2 Samuel 3:17) so that he could confidently go to David and arrange the transfer of power over those tribes to David, and it worked. The elders of the eleven tribes totally embraced the idea, so Abner went to Hebron to meet with David. When he arrived, David welcomed him with a big party, agreed to the peaceful transfer, and did so presumably with no punitive judgments towards Abner, Ish-bosheth, or anyone else in the eleven tribes who had been at war with David and the tribe of Judah. David and all of Israel were ready for peace, and thus, they were all

going to lay aside whatever grievances they had with one another, forgive one another, and unite around the clear will of God for David to be their King. When Abner left Hebron, he had to have left with tremendous optimism about his future, something he clearly didn't have before that meeting.

However, Abner didn't get far before Joab's messengers caught up with him and delivered a message to return to Hebron, which was not only the capital city of Judah but also an official city of refuge. Therefore, it appears Joab, the head of David's army, took advantage of this reality and used it to deceive Abner into coming back under the promise of objectively addressing what happened between him and Asahel at the pool of Gibeon. But, to Abner's shock, it wasn't a trial at all but an unjust execution. Joab and his brother Abishai killed Abner and did so, attempting to justify their clearly unethical and unlawful actions with the presumption that Abner was setting David up in some way to be killed.

Interestingly, while David was deeply grieving and publicly mourning the death of Abner, Ish-bosheth was in complete panic mode! 2 Samuel 4:1 states,

1 When Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, heard that Abner had died at Hebron, his courage failed, and all Israel was dismayed. (4:1)

"Unfortunately, the same fear that left Ishbaal without courage also affected his entire realm. This included those groups with which Abner had conferred and who had agreed to unite with the tribe of Judah in acknowledging David as king. Why were they afraid now? Because it had been Abner who had arranged the deal with David, his death left them with the impression that the agreement they had set their hopes upon was now canceled. They may not have known that David had disavowed the murderous act of Joab and given tribute to Abner. Furthermore, they might be expected to think that, if David could give his official support to Abner and then do nothing when Joab killed him, could they—Abner's followers—feel secure in his promises? Their fears were based upon the lethal uncertainty of the situation."¹

Ish-bosheth never did anything other than live off the success of others, so when Abner died, it appeared his meal ticket to a life of prosperity and protection went with it.

In addition, all of Israel wondered what this meant, especially the elders of the eleven tribes that sent Abner to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power with David to be their King. Instead of hearing from Abner about David's acceptance of their offer, they heard that Abner had been executed. Therefore, you can imagine the panic that ensued!

Even with all our modern information technology that can instantly send data worldwide, it still doesn't keep false narratives and assumptions from outperforming the truth. Therefore, to no surprise, unless a society was using carrier pigeons, information could only travel as fast as a person could physically get it there, and thus word of Abner being killed by Joab would have been reaching the elders of Israel and Ish-bosheth before any

¹ Hoffner, H. A., Jr. (2015). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 229–235). Lexham Press.

news of David's grief over Abner's death or acceptance of the offer for a peaceful transfer of power.

Given Abner ultimately instigated the civil war between Judah and the other eleven tribes of Israel, they would have easily assumed David ordered Joab to kill Abner, especially given Abner's role in leading Saul's army and thus being a part of Saul's effort to try and kill David. Therefore, was David about to kill off everybody who had aligned with Abner through their endorsement of his puppet, Ish-bosheth, as king? Had David finally run out of patience with the elders of the tribes?

It's no surprise that verse one tells us that "all Israel was dismayed," which could also be translated as "all Israel was terrified." This sets the stage for what happens next. The author of Samuel then introduces us to some people we haven't met yet.

2 Now Saul's son had two men who were captains of raiding bands; the name of the one was Baanah, and the name of the other Rechab, sons of Rimmon a man of Benjamin from Beeroth (for Beeroth also is counted part of Benjamin; 3 the Beerothites fled to Gittaim and have been sojourners there to this day). (4:2-3)

The "raiding bands" were smaller groups of elite soldiers who attacked enemies of Israel, took their possessions, and brought them back to Ish-bosheth and Abner. Now, hold on to that thought for a second. What the author does next provides not only important context for what was going on but also sets us up for something down the road.

4 Jonathan, the son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled, and as she fled in her haste, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth. (4:4)

"The author then notes parenthetically that no other viable candidate for the throne could be found within the royal family. The son of Jonathan was now only twelve. He had been crippled from childhood. He was unwilling or unable to press any claims to the throne (4:1-4)."²

Therefore, the point is that everyone knew Ish-bosheth was the only person who could argue that they in some way deserved to be King instead of David because he was the only physically viable male descendant of Saul.

Ok, with that insight, the author takes us to this chapter's main event.

5 Now the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, set out, and about the heat of the day they came to the house of Ish-bosheth as he was taking his noontday rest. 6 And they came into the midst of the house as if to get wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped. 7 When they came

² Smith, J. E. (1995). [*The Books of History*](#) (pp. 332-333). College Press.

into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bedroom, they struck him and put him to death and beheaded him. (4:5-7a)

“...as responsible military leaders, they could enter the royal bedchamber during the noon siesta under the pretext of having an emergency conference with the king without arousing the suspicion of his guards.”³

“Thus ended Ish-Bosheth’s reign. He presumably left no sons, and his only close relative was his *crippled* nephew *Mephibosheth* ... Clearly, nobody supposed that Mephibosheth was capable of becoming king.”⁴

These two men thought they had just done something admirable and possibly even godly. They had killed the false king of Israel to make way for the one everyone was already talking about as the one God had actually ordained to be their King—David (2 Samuel 3:18). But how were they to prove to David that not only was Ish-bosheth dead, but that they were now truly committed to serve David. They needed proof, and thus why, they cut his head off and took it with them to Hebron. The narrator tells us,

They took his head and went by the way of the Arabah all night, 8 and brought the head of Ish-bosheth to David at Hebron. And they said to the king, "Here is the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life. The LORD has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring." (4:7b-8)

Interestingly, they claim God is the one who did it—“The LORD has avenged my Lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring.”

Clearly, these two men had not paid attention to the news of David publicly weeping and mourning the death of Saul and even killing the man who falsely claimed to have done it. Think about that for a minute. David deeply grieved the death of Saul, the man who had, over the years, tried to kill David. So, why in the world would these men think David would jump up and praise them for celebrating Saul and Ish-bosheth’s death, much less for being the ones who killed Ish-bosheth? It took a while for the news to travel, but surely, after more than two years, these men would have heard how David and all his men tore their clothes, wept, and fasted over the news of Saul and his son’s death, especially Jonathan.

However, David not only mourned the death of Saul, but he swiftly executed the man who tried to gain favor with him by falsely claiming he did it! The news of that had to have traveled as well!

But, as we have stated over the last few weeks, pride and arrogance always lead to foolishness, and here we have another example of that truth. These two men were clearly driven by selfish ambition and a desire to quickly gain favor with David, the man getting

³ Hoffner, H. A., Jr. (2015). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 229–235). Lexham Press.

⁴ Payne, D. F. (1994). [1 and 2 Samuel](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 323). Inter-Varsity Press.

ready to become the ruler of all of Israel, and as such, foolishly disregarded the well-told and accurate stories of David's response to the death of Saul. And as a result, here's what happened next.

9 But David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity, 10 when one told me, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him at Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news. 11 How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and destroy you from the earth?" 12 And David commanded his young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet and hanged them beside the pool at Hebron. But they took the head of Ish-bosheth and buried it in the tomb of Abner at Hebron. (4:9-12)

It can't be missed that David made it super clear in verse 9 that he knew why he had survived a decade of Saul's efforts to kill him—GOD! Along the way, David certainly had some moments of faithless fear and panic that resulted in him making some terribly foolish decisions, but by this point in David's life, God had made it clear that He alone was the reason for David's successes. It's why David wrote things like this,

9 The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. 10 And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you. (Psalm 9:9-10)

7 I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul, 8 and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place. (Psalm 31:7-8)

So, the idea that David needed any man to take it upon themselves to ensure his safety was a ridiculous suggestion to David, not because he saw himself as some superhero but because God had made a covenant with him to be King, and he knew how loving, faithful and trustworthy God was. These men's actions were not only reprehensible to David, but they were also absurd! H.A. Hoffner put it this way,

"We cannot predict what David's reaction might have been to a less drastic proposal by these men. But from his reported reaction when confronted with the finished deed, we can be fairly certain that he would have vetoed it. Even if not on "moral" grounds, he would have opposed it because there were better ways—bloodless ones—to achieve the same result—ways which would not leave him open to retaliation from [Ish-bosheth's] relatives. Rechab and Baanah died not only because of their callous disregard for human life and especially for the life of a legitimate king whose father had been anointed by a prophet of Yahweh, but because of their stupidity."⁵

⁵ Hoffner, H. A., Jr. (2015). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 229–235). Lexham Press.

The point is that these men thought the end would justify the means; that is, although their actions were completely unethical, they felt that the result of making it easier for David to become King would justify them! And listen, it can't be missed that these two guys had no reservations about their actions. They truly believed David was going to reward their efforts! They didn't present the head of Ish-bosheth with even an ounce of shame, humility, or fear but with utter confidence in their worthiness to be praised!

However, David made it clear that these two men, without David's consent, killed an innocent man. Ish-bosheth may have been lazy, lacked the ability and drive to lead Israel, and seemingly had no courage at all, but, nonetheless, he had never committed any evil that justified his being executed, especially without a trial and even more so without David even being consulted!

So, the fact of the matter is that these two men were driven by nothing but self-ambition, and David knew it. As such, these two men attempted to justify their completely unethical action by the ends they believed it produced, and David wanted nothing to do with it. There was no way David would ever endorse what they did, and if they had even an ounce of common sense, they would have known it! After all, it was well known that David had repeatedly refused to kill Saul even though Saul was unjustly trying to kill David and that David had, without hesitation, killed the man who falsely claimed to have killed Saul. The means didn't justify the ends at all in David's mind, especially since he knew the elders of the eleven tribes under Ish-bosheth had already committed to transfer power to David. It was not only an unlawful execution, it was also wholly senseless and unneeded, and thus why, David not only swiftly executed both men but did it in a way that made it very public that no one should ever presume to do something like that ever again. Furthermore, it's clear that the men who executed Ish-bosheth did so not for the benefit of David but out of their own foolish, selfish ambition to earn favor with David.

So, what do we take away from this? How do we protect ourselves from walking in sin that we believe is justified because it somehow produces things that are good for others or because it doesn't appear to cause any harm to others?

Proposition: We need to remember three critical Biblical truths to protect ourselves from walking in sin that we believe is justified by the ends it may or may not produce.

The first important truth to remember is that,

(1) God judges what we do AND why we do it.

A. The Bible is VERY clear that God judges the heart. For instance,

Note: 10 "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jeremiah 17:10)

B. The Bible is also clear about the standard God will use to judge our hearts—love!

Note: **38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:38-40)**

- C. God's standard for us is love, which is the opposite of religion. Religion establishes a transactional relationship with God and others, whereby we do what we are supposed to do to get what we want. Therefore, in the end, a religious relationship is nothing more than an effort of self-gratification with a mask of nobility over it.
- D. However, the standard of God for relationships with each other and with Him is love, and love does what a person should do regardless of what is received. As a matter of fact, love isn't a method to receive anything but the reality that drives a person who is being transformed by the Holy Spirit of God!
- E. The point is that if God judges the heart and His standard is love, then when we stand before Him, He will judge not only what we did but also why we did it!
- F. That being said, there is a real danger in letting our hearts be the judge of hearts! Solomon wrote,
- G. **2 Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart. (Proverbs 21:2)**
- H. As such, we need to get in God's Word and let the Holy Spirit use it to expose the truth about why we are doing what we are doing! The writer of Hebrews wrote,
- I. **12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)**
- J. But even when doing that, we must be careful! This leads us to the second important truth.

The second important truth we need to remember to protect ourselves from walking in sin that we believe is justified by the ends it may or may not produce is,

(2) God's Word is not there to justify our beliefs and actions but to form them.

- A. Paul wrote to Timothy and said,
- B. **16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man**

of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

- C. However, it is only profitable for those things if it is God's Word that is forming and driving your beliefs and actions. If you are using God's word to justify them, then you are actually making a mockery of the Word of God and headed straight for destruction with Bible verses tattooed all over you, claiming you are right! For instance, in another letter to Timothy, Paul talked about those who were doing this very thing; that is, they claimed to be authorities on God's Word, all while using it to justify things that are clearly sinful! Paul wrote,

- D. **3 As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 5 The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. 8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, 11 in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. (1 Timothy 1:3-11)**

The third important truth we need to remember to protect ourselves from walking in sin that we believe is justified by the ends it may or may not produce is,

- (3) **We need people who love us enough to recognize our motives and then lovingly and objectively question them when there seems to be a problem.**
 - A. By objective, I mean they don't presume to be the authority but love us enough to ask questions, to raise up caution flags when they sense our hearts could be misaligned and, as such, justifying things that are either outright sin or being done with sinful motives.

 - B. **17 Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17)**

 - C. People who genuinely know you also tend to know your motives. After 25 years of marriage, nobody knows me better than my wife, so we can sense things about each other without a word being spoken or even despite what's spoken! For instance, Ada and I were on the way to the Lincolnton service the other day. Ari was volunteering that night with our AVL, so he had to go up there earlier

than I needed to. He had asked me to pick him up a Chai Tea from Starbucks, so I swung into the stand-alone Starbucks in Lincolnton on my way to the Cultural Center (the current location of our Lincolnton, North Carolina campus) to get it. Ada and I had been on the phone with my dad as we drove up, so to give us a few more minutes with him, we sat in the parking lot and ordered everything from my phone and then just walked in when it was ready, grabbed it and went on to the Cultural Center. But, when we were getting out of the car at the Cultural Center, I remembered that Keri, who had been up in Hickory all day with Remi at an AAU gymnastics tournament, was singing in that service and would likely want a hot cup of something to help soothe her throat from cheering for Remi all day!

- D. However, while multi-tasking, talking to my dad, and ordering stuff for Ari, Ada, and myself, I had forgotten Keri would be singing at that service! So before I entered the building, I decided to give my drink to Keri, knowing that if I told her I had originally bought it for myself, she wouldn't take it! As soon as I walked into the green room, I grabbed a hot chai tea out of the carry case and gave it right to her, saying, "Hey babe, I got you a little something," and she, without even hesitating, looked dead at me and said, "did you get this for yourself or me?" Busted! I denied it up and down, so much so that it ended up being a point of discussion among some of the people on the band who I think were trying to defend me that I had indeed purchased it for her, but when we got home that night, she put Ada in the hot seat, and Ada couldn't maintain a straight face. Keri finally had her proof! She was right. I had initially purchased the drink for myself, but she was wrong about when I decided to give it to her. She thought it was when I saw her, but in fact, I had already told Ada that on the way into the building, I had messed up and was going to give Keri my drink. Now, we obviously laughed about this the entire time, but it also illustrates my point. We know each other so well that she instantly knew the drink I was giving her wasn't initially purchased for her but for myself. She could tell something was up as soon as I walked into the room!
- E. The following passage is often quoted in marriage ceremonies, so a lot of people think it's exclusive about marriage, but it's not. It's certainly relevant to it, but it applies to any relationship built around an abiding relationship in Christ. Solomon wrote,
- F. **9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him--a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)**
- G. The implications of what Solomon wrote in verse ten, "**But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up,**" carry directly into

what we are talking about today because he takes it to another level of understanding in verse twelve when he says, “**a threefold cord is not quickly broken.**”

- H. There is a lot we can discuss there, but for our purposes today, I just want you to understand what this passage implies about the power of a true, abiding relationship in Christ to bring two people together. If the relationship is built on how we can bind ourselves together, then it entirely depends on us; however, when it is brought together by how we are bound to Christ, then we have something totally reliable and unchanging that brings us together. Solomon was pointing us to a greater relationship than even what is attainable by two people genuinely committed to one another, and that is two people who are genuinely committed to one another because they are committed to Christ.
- I. And this is where it applies to what I’m talking about today. When you are truly bound together with somebody because you are bound together in Christ, the second one of you starts pulling away from Christ; the other person knows it!
- J. Therefore, if Keri and I are truly being bound together in a relationship with Christ, we not only notice when we pull away from each other, but we also notice when we are pulling away from Christ! In fact, I can’t pull away from Keri without also pulling away from Christ, nor can I pull away from Christ without also pulling away from Keri. It’s the nature of a threefold cord!

Challenge: What are the sinful actions or attitudes you are attempting to justify, and who in your life knows you well enough to see that it not only doesn’t align with Christ but also loves you enough to call you out?

These kind of relationships are not built overnight! They take time and intentionality. What Keri and I have has taken 25 years of marriage to develop, but it started with an intentional commitment to build a relationship not just with one another but with one another as we abide in Christ. You can only grow it one day at a time. You can go slower, but you can’t go faster.

And listen, marriage isn’t the only way to be bound with somebody in Christ. As believers, we are supposed to have an abiding relationship with others in Christ as well, not like what we have with our spouse, but no less in Christ. Listen to what Paul wrote,

15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Who are the people in your life that you are intentionally being bound to in Christ? Who knows you well enough to see when you are deceiving yourself and justifying sin? Who are

you intentionally getting to know well enough that you can trust them to confront you with love and objectivity?