

Leaders are Called to Serve a Holy God

Courage to Lead Series

1 Samuel 6:1-7:1

Pastor Bryan Clark

You know, you might go to the mall or a store, a park, wherever, and you see children out of control. They're rude; they're out of control. They're engaged in behavior that I would consider to be unacceptable...unacceptable. So, what do you do? For the most part, you just tolerate it. I would not step in and try to fix it. Why? Because they're not my children. My expectations and what I would tolerate from my own children is dramatically different. It is the same with God. God may tolerate a lot of behavior from unbelievers that He won't put up with from His own children.

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 6. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. The Philistines have taken the ark of the God of Israel. They believe that they have conquered the God of Israel. They put the ark in the temple of Dagon, kind of as a prisoner of war, but God defeats Dagon completely and totally. God sends a plague on the people and brings the Philistines to their knees. They acknowledge that the God of Israel is, ultimately, the one true God and the chapter ends with them crying out to heaven for mercy and looking for some way to get rid of God's judgment on them. That's where we pick up the story, then, in chapter 6, verse 1:

Now the ark of the LORD had been in the country of the Philistines [for] seven months. And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we shall send it to its place." They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but you shall surely return to Him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you." Then they said, "What shall be the guilt offering which we shall return to Him?" And they said, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for one plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you shall make likenesses of your tumors and likenesses of your mice that ravage the land, and you shall give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps He will ease His hand from you, your gods, and your land.

(*NASB, 1 Samuel 6:1-5)

So, we learn that the ark of the covenant has been among the Philistines for seven months. This isn't a couple of weeks of misery. This is now seven months of misery, where God has demonstrated He is the one true God, and the pagan Philistines have come to the point where they are willing to acknowledge that. So now they're trying to figure out, "What do we do? How do we give the ark back and get God's judgment off of us?" Now throughout this story—chapters four, five, and six—there's a number of references to what happened long before in Egypt with the Pharaoh. We saw it in chapter four. There are little phrases that remind us of that. For example, "Send away the ark," is the identical Hebrew to the Pharaoh's sending away the children of Israel. The plagues, you remember that came up in chapter four, where when the ark of the covenant came to Ebenezer and the people shouted, the Philistines were trying to figure out, "What are they shouting about?" and they figured out it's because the ark is there. And then they remembered what God did to the

Egyptians and the plagues and, “Woe is us. He’s going to do that to us.” Maybe, at first, they thought they had won the battle, but it ends up the same story. They are inflicted with these plagues that bring them to their knees and it will come up again regarding the Pharaoh here in just a second. And so they’re trying to figure out, “What do we do?” The answer is, “We’ll send the ark back. But we can’t send it back empty. We need to send it back with some sort of a guilt offering.” The diviners, the priests, the religious leaders, the wise men of the land, say, “You have to offer some sort of a guilt offering as an atonement for what you’ve done,” in other words, seeking forgiveness from this God that you have violated.

Now, this is a very interesting twist in the story. You remember, the story begins all the way back in chapter three with Hophni and Phinehas who were the priests in Israel, who, even though they were God’s priests, did not know God. They were pagan to the core. They were abusive of the people, and their behavior was summarized by the statement, “They despised the offering of the LORD.” So, you have the people of God and their leaders despising the offering of the LORD and you have the pagan Philistines, in all sincerity, trying to figure out what would be an appropriate guilt offering atonement for what we have done to this holy God. So, in their sincerity they’re trying to figure this out and the wise men tell them, “You know, you need to offer these gold offerings—replicas of your tumors and replicas of the rats,” (or mice). The Hebrew goes either way. Now this may seem strange to us. First of all, the idea of the mice or rats: a lot of scholars think it was like a bubonic plague. The plague was with the rats or the mice and that would create hemorrhoid-like tumors in their hidden places. We talked about this last week. So this week it just gets weirder in that they take gold and make a replica of the hemorrhoid-like tumors and we think, “That is really weird.” But the idea is this: that if we make these golden replicas and send it with the ark, the idea is that as these guilt offerings go away with the ark, the desire is that the plagues and the mice and the rats go with the ark. In other words, God would lift his judgment. So, putting them on the ark is sending them away in hopes that God would honor that. That’s the idea there.

Now in verse five, it’s really quite a remarkable statement when we’re told that their sincere desire is to give glory to the God of Israel. Now think about this. These are pagans who have now encountered the one true God of Israel and on the basis of their experience, their desire is to somehow bring glory to this God. Now we talked about this last week. The Hebrew word literally means *weight* and it gets kind of abstract, but it’s the idea that the sum total of all that God is, is His weight and that is God’s glory. So, if you imagine the God of the Hebrews on one end of the scale and the many gods of the Philistines on the other end of the scale, the weight of the one true God far exceeds the weight of any Philistine god and that’s what they’re saying. They’re acknowledging, “The God of the Hebrews wins! He is God.” And now sincerely they’re trying to seek His forgiveness in order for the judgment to be lifted. It says that the judgment was on them, on their gods, and on their land—a complete and total victory for God.

Now these chapters—four, five and six, called the *ark narrative*—are almost parenthetical in the story of Samuel in the sense that the Samuel story is about leadership. It’s about three primary leaders. It’s about Samuel; it’s about Saul, and it’s about David. But there is this parenthetical section that’s different from anything else in 1 and 2 Samuel. That is this view of God without leaders, without an army, without his people. It’s just God alone bringing the Philistines to their knees, where they are accepting that the God of Israel is the one true God. “We surrender. We give up. What does it take to bring You glory and some sort of a guilt offering?” The purpose this serves in the Samuel story is to say that, at the end of the day Israel had one true leader and it wasn’t Samuel; it wasn’t Saul; it wasn’t David. It was God! And what brought about the victories for the people of Israel didn’t have much to do with the great skill of Samuel, the great skill of Saul and the

great skill of David. The text isn't primarily about them reading twenty-one books on irrefutable laws of leadership and figuring it out and being highly successful. The point throughout the story will be the willingness of the leader to submit to and obey the one true leader of Israel; that will determine whether there's victory or not among the people of God. So that's the purpose of these chapters—to say, at the end of the day, God is the primary leader in this story. Verse six,

Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He had severely dealt with them, did they not allow the people to go, and they departed?

Now, most scholars think that this reflects possibly that the lords, the five lords of the Philistines were thinking, "Maybe this amount of gold was a little over the top, a little too costly." There's no way to calculate the gold because nobody knows how big the replicas were, but the indication is it was very costly—extravagant. And so maybe the lords are saying, "This seems like it's too much," and they're starting to think, "Maybe we don't want to do this." So the wise men are basically saying, "Don't make the same mistake that the Pharaoh made." The Pharaoh hardened his heart again and again and again. The God of Israel made Himself known to the Pharaoh through His plagues, through His power, through these warnings, but each time the Pharaoh was determined not to admit that the God of Israel is God. And so he kept losing one thing after another until, at the end of the story, he has lost his firstborn son, as well as all the firstborn sons in Egypt. He's lost his land; he's lost his army; he loses severely, and yet the children of Israel still go free. In other words, he lost and he didn't prevent the one thing that he was trying to prevent. The idea is you can't fight this God and win. And so now the lords of the Philistines have a decision to make: Are they going to be like the Pharaoh and keep fighting and lose everything or have they suffered enough to say, "I give up and the God of Israel is ultimately God. We acknowledge that. Here you go. Hopefully this is enough to grant some sort of a guilt offering and remove the judgment." So what this part of the text is about is, "Don't make that mistake. You can't fight this God and win. Admit it, and let's move on with the plan." Verse seven,

Now therefore, take and prepare a new cart and two milch cows on which there has never been a yoke; and hitch the cows to the cart and take their calves home, away from them. Take the ark of the LORD and place it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you return to Him as a guilt offering in a box by its side. Then send it away that it may go. Watch, if it goes up by the way of its own territory to Beth-shemesh, then He has done us this great evil. But if not, then we will know that it was not His hand that struck us; it happened to us by chance." (Vs. 7-9)

So here's the plan: One more way to determine if this is really the God of Israel or is this a coincidence that since we've had the ark life has been miserable? And so they'll build a new cart. Again, these are pagans, but in all sincerity they're trying to do the right thing. And they think, "Let's make a new cart that nothing has ever ridden on and that will be honorable to put the ark on." And then the gold goes next to the ark and then this idea of two milch cows—not necessarily dairy cows, but cows that have calves. And they've never been yoked before, so we're going to yoke them up, and then we're going to take their calves away from them and we're going to put them in the pen and we're going to turn them loose. If the cows go straight for Beth-shemesh and deliver the ark, against their natural instinct to go back to their calves, we will know that the God of the Hebrews is superintending the process and that will be our answer. If the cows just wander back to their calves, then we'll just assume that the plagues are a coincidence during the time we've had the ark. So that's the basic idea of the plan. Verse ten,

Then the men did so, and took two milch cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. They put the ark of the LORD on the cart, and the box with the golden mice and the likenesses of their tumors. And the cows took the straight way in the direction of Beth-shemesh; they went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left. And the lords of the Philistines followed them to the border of Beth-shemesh. (Vs. 10-12)

So Beth-shemesh is about nine miles south and east of Ekron. It was a border town. If you read the book of Judges, a lot of the time the Philistines possessed the town. During this part of the story, it belongs to the Israelites. The name of the town is actually pagan; it means *the temple of the sun god*, and it just kind of seems to go back and forth in terms of who was controlling it. But, it was a likely place to make the exchange, right on the border. So that's the plan. They operate according to the plan—they yoke the cows; they pen up the calves, and they turn the cows loose. The text is very careful to say that the cows went straight for Beth-shemesh—not to the right, not to the left, but lowing all the way. It's a way of saying that their heart was for their calves, but there was a stronger power superintending these cows in the direction that God wanted them to go. It was a clear evidence that the cows were driven against their own nature to be obedient to fulfill the plan of the Philistines. So, even though this is the Philistines' plan, God is happy to demonstrate He is the one true God and the cows deliver the ark.

One of the parts of the story that's worth noting is the Hebrew word that is used for *calves* is actually the Hebrew word for *sons*. Now, what is the son of a cow? Well, it's a calf and that's the way it's translated. But there's more to it than that. The Hebrew is trying to connect a storyline. It causes us to go back to a previous story—in the opening part of 1 Samuel when there was a woman who finally had a long-awaited-for son that she would take to Shiloh and she would dedicate to God and, against her motherly instinct, she would leave him there in obedience to God and go back home because God was beginning to do something to raise up a leader by the name of Samuel, that would call a nation back to God. So now at this point of the story, here are these cows who are also under the obedience of God, leaving their calves behind in order to carry out the God-given mission as God is preparing the people of a nation to receive their leader in order for something dramatically to change. Verse thirteen,

Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley, and they raised their eyes and saw the ark and were glad to see it. The cart came into the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite and stood there where there was a large stone; and they split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. The Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was with it, in which were the articles of gold, and put them on the large stone; and the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices that day to the LORD. When the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned to Ekron that day. These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned for a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron; and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both of fortified cities and of country villages. The large stone on which they set the ark of the LORD is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite.

(Vs. 13-18)

So imagine this: you're in Beth-shemesh, you're harvesting wheat. It's been seven months since the glory of the LORD departed Israel. The ark is gone. The leaders are dead. They're just waiting for the Philistines to finish them off. These had to have been seven months of pure despair. Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, here comes the ark all by itself with two cows, and it's loaded up with gold. I think the text understates they were happy to see it. They were probably absolutely thrilled to see it! The ark, the cows, stop right beside a large stone. The Levites, who were the only ones allowed to touch the ark, take it off, put it on the stone as well as with the gold. The wood of the cart is used to make fire and the cows are used to make sacrifice. Then the text goes through the five cities of the Philistines identifying with the five lords and then concludes with the reminder that at the time of the writing—and I think implied of the first readers—that they still were aware that there was a large stone in Beth-shemesh that was a marker stone to what God did for them that day. Now, if this was a movie, this was a wonderful story. It's full of goose-pimples and, "Isn't this awesome?" and filled with hope. At this point in the story, the music would start to play; the credits would start to roll. We're gathering our things to leave—and we are shocked, stunned, by the next words!

He struck down some of the men of Beth-shemesh because they had looked into the ark of the Lord. He struck down of all the people, 50,070 men, and the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great slaughter. The men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up from us?" So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have brought back the ark of the Lord; come down and take it up to you." And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took the ark of the Lord and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord. (Vs 19-6:1)

Now, just a couple of details and then to the point: So, they have this moment where God reminds them that He is a holy God and they send the ark away. One question would be: why didn't they send the ark to Shiloh? The answer is because in the battle between Ebenezer and Aphek, where Israel lost, the Philistines went all the way into Shiloh and destroyed Shiloh. So, at this point in the story, there is no Shiloh and there is no religious center in Israel. That's why they're questioning, "What do we do with the ark?" It lands in Kiriath-jearim where it will stay for about a hundred years. It will stay there until David finally moves the ark to Jerusalem and Jerusalem becomes the religious center of the nation.

There's a lot of discussion around the actual number of people slaughtered. There's a, like, manuscript confusion—maybe it was recorded incorrectly—but the idea of 50,070—this was a relatively small village—is pretty much unrealistic by all the scholar standards. Some think the number is meant to be 70; some of your translations reflect that. At the end of the day, the actual number isn't all that significant. What is significant is that God tells His people, "I won't put up with that anymore," and the people get that. They respond, "This is a holy God. Now what are we supposed to do?"

Stop and think about this: the way the text is organized—we would refer to this as a structural element—that the way it is written is meant to kind of shock us. It kind of catches us off-guard in that about the time the story seems like it has a relatively happy ending—Boom! —this happens! The ark, for seven months, has been with the Philistines. The Philistines thought they had won. In short order the God of Israel demonstrates that He is God and He wins! He always wins, and they get that. They recognize that the God of Israel is God above all gods, so in their own pagan way

they're trying to figure out, "What's the right thing to do with a God this holy?" They offer a new cart. They're trying to send a guilt offering. They're trying to figure out, "What do we do to bring glory to this God who is above all gods?"

Now there are several things they did that they should not have done, but they were pagans; how could they possibly know that? But God recognizes the intent of their heart. But as soon as the ark gets to the people of God, they immediately desecrate it. They have no sense of the holiness and the reverence of their own God. Back in, what you might say, "the glory days", back when the ark was created and the tabernacle and Moses, the ark was a spectacular piece of furniture that represented the very presence of God—the Shekinah glory of God. It dwelt in the Holy of Holies, a place so holy no one was allowed in this place except the high priest and only once a year. Nobody would have thought of just strolling in and touching the ark or peeking inside of it. But by now, the nation has drifted so far from God and has lost any sense of the holiness of their God, so they just stroll over and open it up, maybe thinking there's more gold inside. And immediately God strikes them dead and his message is, "I won't put up with that anymore." God put up with a lot from the Philistines because the Philistines were pagans. But he expected more from his own children and he sent a message, "I won't put up with that anymore." The men understood that, and they responded, "This God is so holy, what do we do?" Sadly, rather than responding with confession of sin, with repentance, with worship, they responded the same as the Philistines, "Just get rid of the ark. Move it somewhere else." So now the ark is in Kiriath-jearim. Tension is in the air. What is God going to do next and where in the world has Samuel gone? We'll find that out next week.

As we wrap this up this morning, there's no question that the text is written and structured in such a way that what God does to his own people is meant to be startling—kind of shocking—to send a message that God expects more from His own children. When we go to work, when we go to school, in our neighborhoods—wherever—unbelievers do things everyday that are hurtful and that are offensive to God, and it seems like God doesn't care. It seems like they get away with it; they make it work. It's very frustrating, and you think, "Why is that? And why does it seem like God doesn't allow His own children to get away with it?" We've just answered our own question—because you are God's children. I understand why the unbelievers live the way they do. That's not a mystery to me; it makes sense. They don't know God. They live in darkness; they're trying to find significance; they're trying to find value. They're trying to find something to do with their guilt and their shame. I understand that. They're in darkness and they do all kinds of crazy, offensive things. That actually makes sense to me.

What doesn't make sense to me is, "Why do the people of God continue to do the same behaviors?" Now that we've moved from darkness into the light, now that we actually have the nature of Christ in us, now that we have the very presence of the Spirit of God in us, everything has changed. Now that God has shined his light on truth in reality, why would we continue to engage in the same sinful, offensive behaviors? That's the thing that makes no sense. Because you are God's child, God is not going to ignore your sin and look away. He cares too much for you. Grace does not mean that sin is no longer offensive to God. God expects His children to respond with love and obedience, to experience the life that He longs for you to know. God will hold His children accountable, not because He's mean, not because He's unfair, not because He's angry or judgmental, but because He loves you too much to let you destroy your life with sin. He will tolerate a lot of behavior from the pagans that He will not put up with from His own people. You wonder, "Why does it seem like God deals with us, and the pagans get away with it?" Peter says in the New Testament, "Judgment begins with the household of God." Right now God's attention is on His people. It's on His children. He loves His children and He wants His children to experience life, to experience

freedom, to experience forgiveness. He's given them a high and a holy calling. He wants them to know that and to live for His the things that matter. Therefore, right now, His attention is on His children.

Hebrews 12 says that God disciplines us like a father because He loves us like a father. He corrects us; He loves us, in order to get us on the path of life. So let me say it this way: If you are God's child, you can do this the easy way or you can do this the hard way. That's up to you. The easy way would be to look inside your heart and examine your life and listen to the voice of the Spirit and identify areas of sin and confess them before a holy God—to repent of that sin and do whatever is necessary to get back on the path of righteousness. My prayer for you this morning is that would be the choice you make. Or, you can do it the hard way. You can harden your heart and say, "I don't really think I'm done sinning yet. I'm going to ride this wave a little bit farther." As God's child, I guarantee you, God will not ignore you in your sin. God will not pretend everything's fine. It's not fine, and He loves you too much to just let you continue down a path of destruction. God will do whatever is necessary to bring His children to their knees to confess and repent of their sin, in order that they might experience the life, the freedom, the fulfillment that God wants them to experience. So it's up to you: you can do it the hard way if you want, but I assure you this, God will bring you to your knees because He loves you. Or, you can deal with it yourself, this morning, and confess your sin, repent of your sin, and get back on the path of righteousness.

Our Father, we celebrate this morning that we are Your children based on the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus. Only on the basis of Jesus do we stand right in Your presence. But we also understand, as your children, You love us too much to ignore our sin. God, my prayer this morning would be that we as Your children would deal with our sin wherever we're at this morning, that it would not take more than what's transpired to get our attention and to turn us from our sin to walking uprightly before a holy God. God, this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Leaders Are Called to Serve a Holy God

Courage to Lead Series

1 Samuel 6:1-7:1

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. How would your expectations of Christians differ from your expectations of unbelievers in business, school, neighbors, etc...? Why?
2. What should be the difference between parents responsibility to their own kids versus their responsibility to other kids in the community? Why?
3. Does grace mean we should treat God with less honor? Why or why not? Would it be true to say that the more you really understand grace the more you will love and worship God? What are we to conclude then if a Christian recklessly offends God with no real conviction?

Bible Study

1. Read 1 Samuel 6:1-9. How are the pagan Philistines now responding to Israel's God? Why?
2. Review the story of what happened in Egypt with the Pharaoh (Ex. 7-14). See also the reference to this story in 1 Samuel 4:8, 9 and Joshua 2:8-11. What had the pagans figured out about the God of Israel? Contrast that with the attitude of Eli and his sons. Why do you suppose the Philistines (and other pagans) seemed to understand the Holiness of God more than the people of God during the time of the Judges?
3. What might be the modern day equivalent of the Philistines and Israel today? What are the issues among the people of God today that might lead to failure to honor and worship God as a Holy God?

4. Read 1 Samuel 6:10-18. What is the plan and how does it show the power of God to the Philistines? What is the reaction of the people of Beth-Shemesh?

5. Read 1 Samuel 6:19-7:1. Why do you think the writer moves from what seems very positive for Israel in verses 13-18 to an abrupt action by God disciplining His own people? What's the point being made by this technique?

6. How do the following texts relate to our story in 1 Samuel 6 and what do we learn from them?
 - i. Hebrews 12:4-11
 - ii. 1 Peter 4:12-17
 - iii. Acts 5:1-11

Application

1. What does God expect from us as His children? Why? Is this unfair or reasonable given what Christ has done for us?

2. Because God both loves us and has called us to a high and holy calling, is it right to believe God will do what is necessary to discipline and correct us in order that we might fulfill our purpose and live for what truly matters? How might He do that?

3. What would you consider to be the most appropriate thing to do as God's child given what you've learned in this study?