

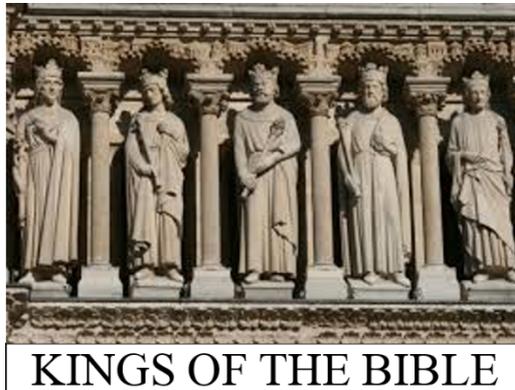
**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, May 3, 2020**

“The Company King Ahab Kept”

**Third of six in a sermon series entitled “Kings of the Bible”
Fourth Sunday of Easter**

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: II Chronicles 18:14-27

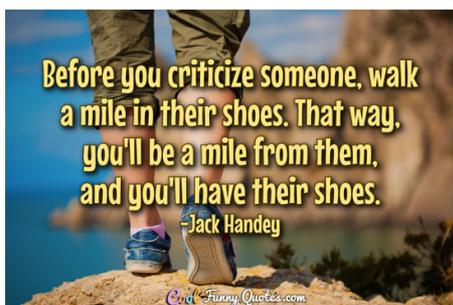


[Welcome to the third of six sermons that focus on the historical biographies of biblical ‘kings’. In this series entitled “Kings of the Bible”, we will move from one end of the Bible to the other mining spiritual lessons learned from scriptural rulers. My aim is to apply these lessons to our own lives and to those who we choose to be our leaders. This week, we continue with King Ahab to learn the dangers of only keeping company with those who praise us.]



Comedian Daniel Tosh once accurately said, “Honest criticism is hard to take, particularly from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a [complete] stranger”. That is so true! Is it not? How many of you enjoy being criticized? I think I can say, pretty safely, that no one likes to be criticized. I find it ironic that those who most are the most sensitive to criticism are those who make themselves especially vulnerable to it: people in the public ‘eye’. I include artists or performers. I include politicians. I include ministers of religion, and thus me, who preach on a weekly basis.

Yet, as difficult as it is to receive criticism well, it is equally challenging to offer criticism well. Think about it. It is a real art to constructively criticize someone so that, one, they can hear it and use it and, two, so a positive relationship can continue thereafter. Before we delve into our scripture, let me give this bit of humorous advice about how to offer criticism:



Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes. That way when you criticize them, you are a mile away [and you've got yourself a new pair of shoes]!

As this is a sermon series on historical biographies, let me briefly inflict upon you a little history. Last week, we left-off with King David who unified the twelve tribes of Israel into one nation-state for the first time. His son, Solomon, is infamous for his wisdom, many wives, and the construction of the first temple. But following Solomon, in about 931 BCE, the kingdom split into two: the north called 'Israel' and the south called 'Judea' – each with their own king.

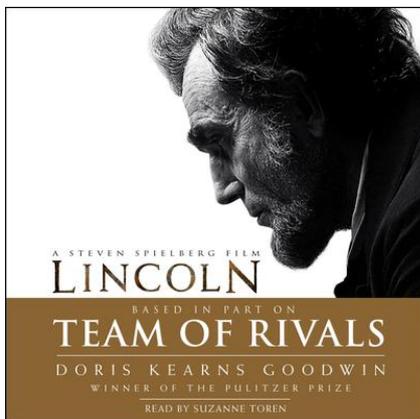
The Kings of Israel			
Saul			
David			
Solomon			
Divided Kingdom			
Northern: Kingdom of Israel		Southern: Kingdom of Judah	
1. Jeroboam	11. Jehu	1. Rehoboam	11. Jotham
2. Nadab	12. Jehoahaz	2. Abijam	12. Ahaz
3. Baasha	13. Jehoash	3. Asa	13. Hezekiah
4. Elah	14. Jeroboam	4. Jehoshaphat	14. Manasseh
5. Zimri	15. Zechariah	5. Jehoram	15. Amon
6. Tibni	16. Shallum	6. Ahaziah	16. Josiah
7. Omri	17. Menahem	7. (Q) Athaliah	17. Jehoahaz
8. Ahab	18. Pekahiah	8. Joash	18. Jehoikim
9. Ahaziah	19. Pekah	9. Amaziah	19. Jehoichin
10. Joram	20. Hoshea	10. Azariah	20. Zedekiah

If we countdown in the northern kingdom, there were eight kings before King Ahab.¹ In the southern kingdom, there were about four kings before King Jehoshaphat. These are our two main characters: the king of the north, Ahab,

¹ Or six, depending on whose counting.

and the king of the south, Jehoshaphat (along with the prophet Micaiah son of Imla).

With Ahab and Jehoshaphat we have a bit of a détente between the two nations. Jehoshaphat went to see Ahab to have a barbeque. While they sat in their lawn chairs on the porch, they had a few beers (Bud Lights, I think), Ahab asked Jehoshaphat to join him in a scrap, a little war with the local Arameans. Jehoshaphat said, ‘Sure. Why not? But, let us consult our experts.’”



Sadly, unlike Abraham Lincoln who chose a team of rivals for key cabinet positions, Ahab and Jehoshaphat chose, what we refer to in South Africa as, ‘praise-singers’.² Often leaders surround themselves with people who tell the leader what they think the leader wants to hear so as to keep in the leader’s good graces: positive news, compliments, appreciation, and lavish praise. We don’t have to look far to see leaders who surround themselves with sycophants. If an advisor contradicts or does not bow in obeisance, then that advisor is

² Edwards Bates (Attorney General), Salmon Chase (Secretary of the Treasury), William Seward (Secretary of State).

Goodwin, Doris Kearns, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks), 2005.

ridiculed, rendered useless, dismissed, and replaced. No one is left but worthless and slavish minions. A 'group-think' mentality develops and wisdom, discernment, and creative thinking evaporate.

After hearing nothing but affirmation, Jehoshaphat resisted this dynamic and cajoled Ahab to find a new opinion.



The kings summoned the prophet Micaiah. Micaiah told Ahab what Ahab wanted to hear: 'Ahab is a great warrior and will defeat the Arameans!' Ahab sensed insincerity and asked Micaiah again. Micaiah stated truthfully, "You're going down". This enraged Ahab and his four-hundred bootlickers. Ahab condemned Micaiah. This is inevitably the fate of the advisors, or the media, who disagree with one who is especially sensitive to criticism. This is often the fate of prophetic opposition, be it Elijah, Jeremiah, and Jesus the Christ.



But, let us not demonize Ahab. Let us be charitable, let us extend Christian grace to him. Let us also not idealize Micaiah. I believe Ahab could have accepted and heeded criticism better if Micaiah would have offered advice more sensitively. I don't see how Micaiah offered advice constructively. So, I understand how Ahab could complain "I hate the man, because he never prophesies any good for me; never anything but evil" (II Chronicles 18:7). Perhaps Micaiah needed to learn how to more sensitively criticize as much as Ahab needed to have thicker skin and be more introspective, humble, and less retributive.



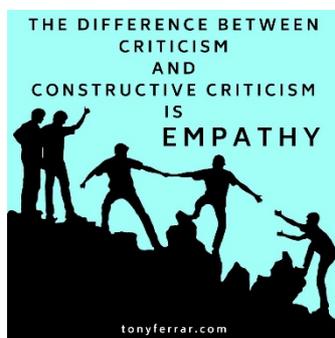
Friends, leaders of homes, churches, companies, states, and nations should not surround themselves with cultish devotees as was the case of Ahab. To do so is to envelope themselves in an alternative reality that will lead them

and all those who they lead to destruction. As a minister, I am sensitive to criticism. But I need to hear, listen, and heed it. By accepting and heeding criticism, I will improve myself and our ministry.

Yet, this morning, I plead that you take care in how you criticize – not just me, but also your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ at Centre Church.

Likewise, if you have a spouse or a partner, give great care to the manner in which you speak truth to him or her. In your relationship, you have great power to affirm and to afflict. Do not criticize without complimenting. If you have a son or daughter, beware. Your words to them will linger for years and decades.

Parents must guide and instruct – but if your counsel is saturated in disappointment, you will cause a lifetime of hurt.



This Sunday, let us learn from Ahab. Chose leaders who can accept criticism and heed advice. This Sunday, let us learn from Micaiah. Should you feel compelled to criticize, be sure to do so constructively and with love.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".