

## *What Is Different for the Successful?*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, (24Oct), 2010.*

The second sermon in a series of three, *The Bathsheba Syndrome: Ethical Failures of Successful Leaders*.

Text: 2Samuel 11

There were several responses to first sermon in this series: First, three quoted Lord Acton, “*Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.*” Another said, alluding to Lord Acton, he thought that the problem was not power but the person exercising power. He told me, “Another way of putting this: it isn't power itself that causes the Bathsheba Syndrome; the syndrome occurs because power is given to people who are not prepared to use it wisely.” One said he thought that temptation is no different for the weak or the powerful, for ordinary or successful people. But I am still wondering if it is not? The sources of temptation are the same—sex, money, and pride—but are the paths to a fall different for a successful leader from a person who is not so successful? Yet another person asked if I had been too easy on David? Did I unintentionally attempt to explain away his failures in that first sermon? Still another person had the simplest answer as to why successful people like King David commit sin: “*Because they can!*” he said. (That view would considerably shorten this sermon series!) Yet another noted the difference between David who was alone in his palace and Uriah who was in the field with comrades. He wondered if the ‘*separateness*’ of leaders contributes to their fall. David had no community to warn him from his behavior. (I am going to address this very good point in the third sermon.) Several people kept thinking this was all about sex. As I mentioned in the first sermon, David violated at least four commandments before this was over. Sex is one of the great portals of the devil but not the only one. Though our culture is sex-obsessed, there are other issues here. I will return to these comments in our last sermon in two weeks when I look at the issue of what successful leaders can do to avoid the Bathsheba Syndrome.

Today in our attempt to answer the question about the peculiar problems of ethical failure for successful people, I look again at Ludwig & Longenecker.<sup>1</sup> They found three pitfalls characteristic of successful people in the story of David and Bathsheba. I listed these at the end of the first sermon but here they are in more detail:

1. *David lost strategic focus in his success.* He had grown complacent and used subordinates to execute his strategy on the battlefield. “Too often we see executives lead

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig, Dean C. and Longenecker, Clinton O. *Journal of Business Ethics*: Apr 1993. Research Library, 265-273.

their organizations to the top of the competitive heap, displaying exceptional courage, energy, and leadership, only then to put their organizations on auto pilot, kick back, and indulge themselves for all the sacrifices they have made along the way. Their set-up for ethical failure begins by not being where they are supposed to be.”<sup>2</sup> Though there is nothing wrong with delegating tasks, “David seemed to be delegating not out of a sense of necessity but out of a sense of self-indulgence.”<sup>3</sup> If David felt he needed a break after all his previous battles, why did he not feel his troops also deserved a break, as well?

2. David’s success led to privileged access, and he misused his privilege. On that rooftop he was looking around, but not for the good of his nation’s well-being. His privileged vantage point in the story is symbolized by how much he could see from atop the palace. However, this vantage point was given to him to help him lead the country, not for feeding his self-indulgence. “By this point, David’s lack of involvement in the war’s leadership combined with his privileged position, allowed him to shift his focus to the satisfaction of personal wants.”<sup>4</sup> Recent scandals in our day result often from privileged access to information about stocks and bonds, certain relationships, “from leaders’ apparent inability to understand that their privileged position is supposed to give them a perspective from which they can more effectively lead—not from which they can more successfully satisfy personal wants.”<sup>5</sup> One of my auditors last week told me about a case he had been involved in. He told me:

Having seen several of these cases myself, what I have seen is a tendency for people who have amassed power to develop a sense of entitlement that blurs, distorts or overrides any moral compass they may have otherwise had. And [it] leads them to believe that they can do whatever they want. My first case involved a chief financial officer for whom I worked. He stole almost \$2 million from his company. His excuse was that he wasn't adequately compensated so he turned to fraud and theft to give himself what he thought he deserved.

Again, he had access to the books and the ability to move funds around so that he could best help the company succeed. This authority was not for him, but in his privileged access he began to think it was all about himself.

3. David’s success led to a false belief in his personal ability to control outcomes. David used servants, his general, and even the husband of the woman he coveted to do his bidding. He knew what he was doing was wrong, yet he thought he could count on his

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

underlings not only to abet his behavior, but also to cover up his secrets. The only thing he had not counted on and could not undo was her pregnancy. When all his cover-up strategies failed, David had the man killed and then acted as if this were a small matter of no particular ethical concern.<sup>6</sup> Write Ludwig and Longenecker:

David, in short, chose to do something he knew was clearly wrong in the firm belief that through his personal power and control over resources he could cover up. David's inflated, self-confident belief in his own personal ability to manipulate the outcome ... is probably representative of the attitude of many of today's professionally trained managers of business. Trained in attitude and technique 'to get things done' and 'make things happen,' today's business school graduates often possess a dangerously inflated self-confidence. Reinforced by success, given increasing control of resources and subjected to decreasing levels of supervision, these managers too often stumble as the move into [more senior] leadership roles.<sup>7</sup>

These three things—authority over strategy, privileged access and ability to control outcomes—are granted to leaders and are necessary for their success. A leader needs to delegate. She needs help from subordinates to allow her the freedom to think, plan and execute strategically. He needs to have control of resources and privileged access to information. A leader needs to be able to have some control over outcomes. Otherwise leaders would never get anything done. But these prerequisites of power put leaders in a position fraught with personal danger.

In their analysis of David's story in 2Samuel, Ludwig and Longenecker never use the word *sin*—an odd omission. Must not be a Business School term! A few years ago at a meeting of the New Jersey Association, a Montclair accountant led a discussion about money, church treasurers and the danger of embezzlement. The CPA made a striking statement that he had never known anyone, who, given the right circumstance, would not be tempted to take money not his own. There is always a justification in one's mind that can be fabricated to explain away a wrong deed, he said. Moreover, fraud always starts with one small thing at a time. No one starts out saying, 'I'm going to commit fraud today.' The sin begins insignificantly, with small deeds, excused by circumstance and good intention, but bad nonetheless. Sin is the problem behind this propensity we humans have, but what is the difference between the ethical temptation for a successful person and someone else, less successful? Simply this, the stakes being larger, the fall is greater.

Now I remind you I am not talking here about immoral people thrust into leadership. They will inevitably make wrong decisions and misuse power. I am not particularly interested in them.

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<sup>6</sup> 2Samuel 11:25.

<sup>7</sup> *Op cit.*, 269.

David was not one of these. He was an ethical and religious man. His eventual response to his sin reveals both his piety and his better nature.<sup>8</sup> The questions for ethical leaders are these: Does power *always* corrupt? Does success *always* create a minefield impossible for almost all previously moral people to navigate? Not always but the temptations require particular care if you are a successful man or woman and maybe even more so if you are a moral-religious person. Self-justification abounds!

In the next sermon<sup>9</sup> I want to examine strategies for avoiding ethical failure. We do have choices but we must take care with them to guard against a sin like David's with Bathsheba.

End

Bathsheba Syndrome 2.DOC

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<sup>8</sup> Note chapter 12 of 2Samuel.

<sup>9</sup> Nov. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010.