

## **Successes and Failures of Leadership**

### **From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on 2 Samuel**

The Bible regards David as the model king of Israel, and the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles describe his many successes. Yet even David, "a man after God's own heart," abuses his power and acts faithlessly at times. He tends to succeed when he does not take himself too seriously, but gets into serious trouble when power goes to his head—for example when he takes a census in violation of God's command or when he sexually exploits Bathsheba and orders the assassination of her husband, Uriah.

Over the course of history, this encounter between David and Bathsheba has often been described as adultery, which implies mutual consent. However, as we examine the details, we see that it is actually sexual abuse of power. Neither the text nor the context supports the conclusion that it was an affair between two consenting adults.

David's crime was an abuse of power. As sovereign over Israel's largest empire, David had arguably more power than any other Israelite in the Old Testament. Before David took the throne, he used his power to serve others, perhaps most notably the defenseless cities of Keilah and Ziklag, but with Bathsheba he abused his power first to serve his lust, and then to preserve his reputation.

While few of us have as much authority as David did, many of us have power in smaller spheres in family or work contexts, either as a result of our sex, race, position, wealth or other status markers or simply as we get older, gain experience, and have more responsibility. It is tempting to take advantage of our power and privilege, thinking that we have worked hard for these perks (better offices, special parking spaces, higher salaries), even though people with less power don't share them.

After the crimes were committed, the prophet Nathan was prompted by God to confront the king, who fortunately for his soul listened to the message.

Most of us aren't in situations where confronting a boss or supervisor involves risking our life, but speaking up in these types of contexts can mean losing status, a promotion, or a job. But as this story, and many others like it in Scripture illustrate, God calls his people to act as prophets in our churches, schools, businesses, and wherever we work and live. The example of

Nathan—in addition to Jesus's instructions in Matthew 18:15-17—suggest that ideally we should speak up face-to-face with the perpetrator.

For those of us who are conflict avoidant, learning to speak truth to people in authority can be developed gradually over time, like doing physical therapy for a weak or injured muscle. We cultivate the ability to confront by starting with small steps, asking questions or pointing out minor problems. We can then move to more significant issues by offering alternative perspectives that may not be popular. Over time, we can grow to be more courageous so that if we are aware of a significant moral failure like sexual abuse by a colleague or a superior, we can hopefully speak truth in a wise and gracious manner. On the other side of the equation, wise leaders make it easy for their subordinates to hold them accountable and raise issues. When you function as a leader, what do you do to welcome or solicit negative feedback from others?.