

## ***The Example We Set***

**I Kings 21:1-21a, 27-29; 22:51-53**

Alex Rodriguez, the New York Yankees megastar, is a man who has a lot to lose and it's quite possible that, any day now, he could lose much of it. A-Rod, who is the highest paid player in the history of Major League Baseball, has yet to return from an off-season hip surgery that could be extended soon with a 100-game suspension for the use of PEDs, or performance-enhancing drugs.

A-Rod is the marquis name in an investigation by the Commissioner's office of Miami-based clinic, Biogenesis—a questionable and now defunct operation that evidently provided PEDs to a number of players over the last decade. If the allegations are proven true, then it's possible that at 37 A-Rod will have played his final game as a Yankee and as a Major League ballplayer, and his lucrative 10-year \$275 million contract with the team, along with all of his commercial endorsement deals, will be terminated. That is what you call a “game-changer!”

Yet, despite his financial fears, what may be an even greater loss to A-Rod will be his reputation and legacy as possibly the greatest player of all time and his storied place in Cooperstown. A-Rod holds 13 Major League records; he's been the MVP three times; a 12-time All-Star; and ten-time Silver Slugger Award winner, among dozens of other achievements.

Yet, even with all that on his resume, he could join the ranks of some of the more celebrated stars of the last three decades who have been ignominiously shamed and shut out of the Hall of Fame because of cheating: Pete Rose, Mark McGwire, Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens,

Sammy Sosa, Manny Ramirez, just to name a few. All of them are learning the hard way that when you trade lifelong glory and a valuable brand for endless public ridicule and shame, it ends up being a Faustian fate of epic cost.

If cheating were only an issue that baseball alone had to address, it would be nothing more than a sideshow. However, serious fraud goes on through all professional sports, as well as in a number of other arenas. From baseball to football to cycling, from Main St. to Wall St. to Pennsylvania Avenue, ambitious, aggressive, and greedy people have tried to game the system to give themselves an unfair advantage over their competition, or simply to exploit each opportunity they can for their own personal gain.

David Callahan, author of the book, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, cites some startling estimated losses to our economy and social system (mind you, these are from a decade ago): \$350 billion annually in tax avoidance; another \$250 billion a year in corporate and investor fraud; and a breath-taking \$600 billion in theft by employees.<sup>1</sup>

“The payoff for cheating,” says CNN’s Dr. Wendy Walsh, “whether it’s cheating on a college SAT test or cheating on your wife or cheating in athletic competition, is you’ll win and get all the proceeds and accolades that [come with it].”<sup>2</sup> People cheat with their eyes on the prize.

Certainly, incentives, desires, and economic and social pressures are key factors in the motivation to cheat, but there are also

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<sup>1</sup> David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, Harcourt, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Martinez, “Cheating Arise from desires, incentives, pressures,” CNN.com, January 18, 2013.

the underlying psychological needs or disorders at work. Some people cheat because they're acting out of a need to prove themselves better than others, usually because they have felt inferior, or they haven't lived up to a parent's or some other person's expectations. They are maniacally driven to succeed at any cost to show that they are worthy of love and respect. Then, there are those on the other end of the spectrum with what is termed, "Narcissistic Personality Disorder"—a condition where one believes that he or she is superior to all others and above accountability. It's more common than we might think. It's an ego on steroids—sometimes literally.

The distressing thing is, our society typically overlooks or even condones this, if not rewards extremists of all types. We lionize big-moneymakers as being entrepreneurial and enterprising; we tweet about celebrities who stand out from the crowd and do outrageous things. We re-elect corrupt politicians or acclaim those who reach the top of their field without scrutinizing how they got there. At every level of life, opportunism and exploitation are deemed positively, as virtues of the ambitious. And outrage only arises when someone is caught doing something illegal, even though so much of what they've done to get to the top is likely to have been unethical, immoral, or at least deeply damaging to themselves or those around them.

It's not that we shouldn't strive to achieve or reward ambition; it's that greatness and success have to be measured by other characteristics and aspirations as well, including the moral values of integrity, honesty, and of treating others fairly, considerately, and cooperatively along the way. We shouldn't have to rely on a world of surveillance to catch and punish all possible cheaters and criminals.

It's a matter of fostering and reinforcing, defending and rewarding honesty and integrity. This is a rally cry, not a revelation! Our children, generation after generation, learn from the examples we set. What they often see is our culture rewards the wrong people; we celebrate the wrong achievements; we set the wrong examples. It seems we do more to motivate people toward selfish ambition instead of selfless service and it's to our ultimate detriment in human civilization.

This is one reason the lectionary text for today of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel is useful to us. It's a classic example of dishonesty, selfish greed, opportunism gone wrong, the abuse of power, injustice, among other things, that leave their mark on the succeeding generation. Quite frankly, it's not my favorite story, even though it's the kind of plot you might see in a TV drama, or the type of exposé you'd get on "Dateline" or "48 Hours." It illustrates bad behavior: the extreme measures some will take in order to get what they want, even if they have to cheat and harm others in the process.

Now, when you consider this in its broader biblical context, it's not much worse than David's poor example when he abused his authority and power as king to take advantage of Bathsheba and conspire to have her husband, Uriah, killed in a cover-up. Power and opportunity tends to corrupt the moral conscience, even among the best.

Here is just another example of moral failure among those at the top. King Ahab wanted to possess Naboth's land because it was a convenient location. After failing to cut a deal (since Naboth refused to sell it because it was ancestral land), Ahab sulked and stewed in his

anger. Jezebel, perhaps more enterprising, came up with a way to circumvent the moral and legal protocols. She gamed the system. Charges were trumped up against Naboth—an indictment of treason, in effect—in order to raise public outrage against Naboth and rendering him subject to death. The sentence was carried out and the king and queen confiscated the vineyard as their own.

This would have been the end of the story, seemingly unknown except to the conspirators; this is often the great blindspot of those who cheat and commit crimes. They think they can get away with it. That might have been the case (since they exercised supreme power as king and queen) except for two matters—serious consequences that Ahab and Jezebel hadn't accounted for. First, they didn't plan on being exposed with the truth coming out, which it did when Elijah, the prophet, called them on it.

I've always been impressed with the example Elijah set here, for I don't believe what made him prophetic was his unique ability to figure this out with divine help. In other words, I don't think Elijah had some divine insight that no one else possessed. I have to imagine, as these things go, many people suspected, if not knew, a terrible injustice had been done (in spite of the kangaroo court), but no one was in the position to say or do anything about it, lest they become the target of the powers that be. That's the way power gets used and abused; the powerful know they can intimidate and threaten those under them, since they possess the power to punish. That's the character of politics—in government, in the workplace, virtually anywhere. People may know the truth, but they calculate their own self-interests, and the powerful get away with it.

So what made Elijah prophetic here was not his supernatural insight, but instead his courage—his willingness to put his own life on the line to be the truth-teller—the one to speak truth to power and call them into account. That was where the inspirational power of God was with him. Believe me, he was sticking his neck out. He was asking for trouble. He was the one to make public what the government tried to keep secret (sounds familiar, doesn't it?). His example of courage and boldness in being a whistleblower on cheating, fraud, corruption, and abuse is one we should all take to heart—taking the risk to speak truth to power. Most people are timid and would prefer to stay below the radar. But, then, that only reinforces and protects the cheater and the crime. So there's a lesson here—an example to follow: to call upon God for the courage to take the risk to pursue justice against those who will game the system for their own benefit, lest injustice and cheating become the tolerated norm and corruption and fraud are rewarded. Of course, we know who benefits from that.

The other consequence the king and queen failed to account for was the ultimate impact this episode would have on their lasting legacy and reputation as leaders and particularly on their son, Ahaziah, who would eventually succeed them. As the story unfolds, Ahab and Jezebel are called into account and, even with Ahab's remorse, saw the grandeur of their power and the prestige of their position melt away over time, not only for this, but for other crimes. It actually illustrates a sad reality: when you want something so much that you are willing to destroy another person for it, then what you also kill is your conscience—your moral sensibilities toward others

and your self control to quell reckless ambition and abuse. Those who are driven by selfish motives sow the seeds of their own undoing.

The example Ahab and Jezebel set for their own children became evident when Ahaziah followed in his father's footsteps. He reigned for only a couple of years until everything collapsed and his legacy was in ruin. One wonders: would Ahab and Jezebel have acted differently had they known this would be the ultimate price they'd pay for a little plot of land? The price people pay, and their children pay, for a reckless act of selfish ambition in order to get ahead in life tends to be greater than the risk seems to present at the time. Cheating, fraud, deception, manipulation—whatever you call it—is a terrible gamble that rarely pays off and usually results in personal and public shame. Ask the Madoffs; ask Lance Armstrong; ask a million others who thought they could get away with something and they ended up losing far more than they gained.

That's an important lesson of those who set a bad example—who succumb to dishonesty, to criminal motives, and to abuse: your children will either follow you in that downward spiral of shame and pay the terrible price for it, or they'll spend the rest of their lives trying to redeem and fix the mess their lives have become because of it. No one close is untouched by a person's deceit and shame. As in the case of Ahab and Jezebel, the "sins of the father" shall be laid upon the children. Our moral legacy is always inherited, in one way or another, by those who follow us.

A story like this, of course, causes us to pause and ponder what sort of example do we set for our children? What do they see in us as their mentors in life? We, of course, like every generation, inherited

the examples we saw in our parents, as good or bad as they may be, as wise or as short-sighted as they came to be. We are likely living out and benefiting from what we learned from them, or we may be acting out or dealing with their moral failures and shame that continue to haunt us. Each story is different; each life has its joys and pain. But as each generation comes forth, what we leave our children and grandchildren in terms of character is far more significant and valuable to them than material wealth. So what is the example we are presenting for their lives? What do they learn, and see, and admire, and follow in us? What will they be like, based on who we are?

This, more than human ambition and achievement, is what matters for the welfare of our lives and the ongoing preservation of our civilization. It's the moral qualities of decency and care that enrich our lives. It's what characterizes the human need for love and the impact that love well shown has on all of us. It's what God has made plain in the scriptures deemed holy for thousands of years. Its wisdom is still for us to ponder and take to heart. For the example we set is our ultimate legacy, as the value of a life is measured not by what one has gained, but how one, and one's character, is ultimately cherished.

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