



**“You’ve gone too far!”** You might have heard those words shouted out before. They sounded once in the camp of ancient Israel in a very dramatic scene. Many of the leaders of Israel had sided against Moses. It had grown to a great schism. Two men who were leaders in the rebellion, Dathan, and Abiram stood defiantly against Moses. Israel was an apparent mess. Its leadership was crumbling as the people struggled to decide who they were going to follow and who should be in charge. That’s the scene which we’ll be looking at today from Numbers 16 as we take on another part of our sermon series on “Fighting Temptation.” How do you fight temptation when you feel like you should be in charge?

**This rebellion didn’t boil up overnight.** You could sense the tension months earlier when they were trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army. They questioned Moses ability to lead them. Not too long afterwards when they got thirsty, they were ready to stone Moses to death. And when they doubted God’s promise that they would be able to enter the promised land Moses had to tell them that they wouldn’t enter it but would die in the wilderness. They were forced to return back.

**That’s when the rebellion began to boil over into** the hearts of many Israelites. A man from the tribe of Levi by the name of Korah, and two men from the tribe of Rueben, Datham and Abiram, formed an organized coup against Moses. Many of the people backed them up. Furthermore, 250 leaders of the people joined with them. “You have gone too far, Moses!” They charged him with failing to bring them into the promised land. The scene was ugly and tense. It led Moses to fall facedown. He knew this couldn’t end well. “No, you have gone too far!” Moses replied. The tear was now so big, something had to give.

**Such a division should never have occurred under Moses.** Less than two years earlier they witnessed the plagues on Egypt and the destruction of their army in the sea. They had water come from the rock when they thirsted. God provided food from heaven when they hungered. They had God fight on their side against their enemies. And they carried the very Word of God. If any congregation of people should have been without division, you think it would have been Israel under the direction of Moses. Yet Israel seemed absent of any solidarity. They were fighting over who should be in charge.

So it still will happen in God’s church today; **schisms will arise.** It doesn’t matter what church you belong to, they will happen. Sometimes such divisions happen in God’s church because of false teachings, but other times it is disagreement over who gets to be in charge. What happens when one member of a congregation disagrees with the way their church is doing things? He either leaves or tries to take control. What happens when a group of believers decides they want to take matters into their own hands? Rebellion, division, and a messy schism within the group of believers. The Israelites hated having any authority over them and that hatred began to show itself. It can happen anywhere -including in God’s church.

Those who were **rebelling against Moses’ leadership were overlooking some very important truths.** They charged Moses “You’ve gone too far in setting yourself up over these people!” But it was God who had called and appointed Moses. Far from setting himself up he was the reluctant prophet whom God choose to lead his people. Moses did anything but set himself up.

And **God made it very clear that no one should set themselves up in charge or dare approach him to serve him without his invitation.** Had they not noticed what God had impressed on them so far? He instructed the people to the most minute details how they were to build his tent, the Tabernacle, which would serve as the center of their worship life. The whole design was to show them how they were not worthy to serve him. The people were given specific encampment and marching orders. All roughly 2 million people surrounded the central encampment of the tribe of Levi. It was only the tribe of Levi that camped in the center of them all. This tribe was broken down into further divisions as they surrounded the courtyard of the tabernacle of God. This courtyard with its altar for sacrifice surrounded and separated the Levites from the inner tent of the tabernacle. The tabernacle separated the few who came to offer sacrifice on the altar from the holy place. This holy place was further divided into an inner room that was separated from the rest. Inside this shielded inner room was the area called the most holy place. And here only one man, the high priest, was allowed to enter once a year. Even he had to be completely sure he was ceremonially clean. Inside this holy of holies place was the ark of the covenant, the box which carried the commandments and symbolized God’s presence with his people. Even this ark was shielded by carved out wings of angels, further separating it from anyone. Even two of Aaron’s own sons had been put to death by fire from the Lord when they approached uninvited. *The message God stressed for his people was clear:* No one is really holy enough to be in the presence of God or serve him! Sin separates us from our God. We dare not approach him to serve him without his invitation.

**Moses set up an appropriate test which would give God the ultimate word on who should be in charge.** Those who were considered themselves worthy to take charge should come the next day to offer incense before God. The bold rebels took up the challenge. But two of them wouldn’t come to Moses, so he came to Dathan and Abiram. The Lord told Moses to warn the people, “Move away from the tents of Dathan and Abiram.” They stood defiantly, not moving even after hearing this warning. “If these men die an unnatural death, if they are swallowed by the earth, then you will know God has set me to do what I do and that it was not my own idea!” Moses and hardly finished speaking when God caused the earth to respond. It opened up and closed after swallowing them and all that was with them. At the sound of their screaming fear seized the people of Israel. Meanwhile fire came out from the Lord and consumed those 250 men trying to offer incense as priests. God’s anger became evident in a most striking way. Nothing was left behind but ash and the bronze censers.

What does this all have to do with us? We read earlier today, “I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. <sup>2</sup> They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. <sup>3</sup> They all ate the same spiritual food <sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. <sup>6</sup> Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. <sup>7</sup> These things ... were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. (1 Corinthians 10:1-7)

**God wants all of us to apply this warning.** Like the followers of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram we have been afforded a high place serving in God’s kingdom. We come into his presence because like Israel every one of us is called holy by God. Peter reminds us that through faith we are a “holy nation, a kingdom of priest” before God. But when we desire to take on more authority than God has given us, we rebel against him. I don’t serve as pastor because I am holier than others. I only serve by God’s grace. I must never forget that it is not of my own accord I am called to speak his Word. How easy it is for my heart to say, “I’m the pastor because I passed all my classes at the Seminary.” Is it not a fearful thing to approach the Lord to serve him in personal pride? Dare I ever say, “I ought to have more control, more authority, make more decisions, or be President of the synod because I can do better?” Dare anyone take on any position by their own right? You don’t serve the Lord because you of your own right are holier or born better than anyone else in this world. You know this. You serve God by his grace and invitation. But that same rebellious plea of Korah can also slip into your hearts. “Why should that guy serve on the church council and not me?” We forget that other guy isn’t serving by their own right, but because of God’s grace and invitation. Those who have an important role of service in the church can begin to think like Korah, “I’m just as holy as others; I can do better than them.”

And in our own lives doesn’t the sinful heart want to rebel against having God’s Word and his Spirit lead us? Our sinful flesh leads a rebellion every day against the direction of the Spirit saying, “You’ve gone too far in putting yourself in charge of my life. I should be in charge.” We may at times like to think we can complain and ought to be in charge, but this is not us speaking in the Spirit and in faith, but in sinful, rebellious pride.

**Any rebellion against our God means we deserve to die.** That’s a warning that hits home with all our hearts for the times we wanted to be in charge of more than God has given us. At the end of this rebellion in Israel some 15,000 people ended up dying. That’s about the size of Payson. That’s a strong warning indeed for us when we complain and want to be in charge!

**Yet because of God’s grace we won’t all die for wanting to be in charge.** God had invited Aaron to serve for a purpose. He accepted Aaron’s interceding for them as priest and the death stopped. God gave Aaron instruction to take the bronze from the censers left behind to cover the altar. In his grace that altar covered with bronze would remind the people of the need for sacrifice. And God alone in his grace could provide the needed sacrifice to bring us to his presence. He would pardon our pride.

**In amazing humility, and without any trace of pride or rebellion, the Son of God came to serve.** The Father invited him to carry on his role. And he never demanded to be in charge as we walked and lived in our place. He only said, “I came to do the will of the one who sent me.” And when it come to the hardest choices of his life he still cried out, “Father, your will be done, not mine.” And he approached the very throne of God when invited to offer sacrifice -offering his very self. As the perfect Son of God he was the only one who could ever rightly serve as priest -the only who had the right to approach God’s throne.

**We read in 1 Peter 3 just what God provided for us in order to bring us into his presence!** “Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God.” That bronze altar pointed the people to the ultimate sacrifice: Jesus Christ and his death. He died on the cross once and for all. As undeserving and unholy as we are, he *brought us to God.* And because our sins have been removed in his sacrificial death, we now are holy. Every one of us! We now can come into the presence of God. We don’t have to assert ourselves before God and say, “I’m holy, every one of us is holy.” No, God himself has made us holy and tells us we are made holy through Jesus. Peter also says, “You are a chosen people, a holy nation!” God has *chosen you* to be his holy people in Jesus!

**And the result? God has brought you near to himself to serve him as his holy priests!** No longer is it just the high priest coming into the pretense of God once a year. No longer is it the special tribe of Levi serving as temple workers and priests. You are all holy and made to be priest, servants in God’s kingdom. You don’t have to assert yourselves and say you want an important position! You are called to do the most important and most influential work there is! You are a member of his church! You serve not because we deserve it or have a right to it, but because he graciously gives you the position –all of you.

There is now no I **should** get to be in charge. Now a faith-filled answer humble can say, “**I serve him in his kingdom because of his grace.**” There will never be any fire of judgment for those who approach God through Jesus his Son. There will never be any rejection of those who in simple faith serve God through his Son Jesus!

Moses had pointed out to the Levites who rebelled: “God has set you above your brother Israelites, ...you have the privilege of serving God in this way!” **Our privilege is even greater!** We are those whom Paul says have the fulfillment of the ages. With faith in Jesus our sacrifices are acceptable to God through his son. In fact, **everything we now do to serve him goes up as a pleasing aroma to God.** Our requests to God are like incense, pleasing through Christ Jesus. We can humbly ask anything! He’s in charge, but he invites us to come before him!

When you feel like you should be in charge step back and look at him who alone is. Look at him who came to serve and carry out his Father’s will. Look at him who invites you to come into the very presence of God as holy in his sight. To him, who is our head, be all service, all praise, all honor. Amen.