

WHEN COUNTING IS WRONG

Even though King David was a man after God's own heart, his life was riddled with periods of deeply flawed judgments and lack of self-control. One of the lesser-known examples of his poor judgment is found in II Samuel 24 and I Chronicles 21. Recently, the Lord brought this story to my mind, reminding me how I and so many other believers still make the very same mistakes that David did. David was undoubtedly the greatest king who ever reigned in Israel. His exploits before and during his reign are legendary. Toward the end of his reign, Satan appeals to David's pride, enticing him to take a census to find out how many able-bodied men he has available for his army. In demanding this count, David demonstrates three prideful mistakes that cause both David and Israel to endure a terrible tragedy.

Prideful Mistake #1: Ownership

Numbering Israel was a precarious business. Exodus 30:12 emphasizes that God is the owner of Israel, not any king or prophet. In ancient times, a man had every right to count what belonged to him...but Israel belonged to God. If God had wanted His army counted, it would have been His prerogative to order it, not David's—who only served as steward-king of God's people. As soon as David commanded Joab to count what did not belong to him, Joab and all the top military commanders immediately recognized this order for what it was—a dangerous mistake. In fact, Joab strongly objected and boldly confronted David by asking, *Why should [you] be a cause of guilt to Israel?* (I Chronicles 21:3, NASB).

Prideful Mistake #2: Security

Joab, as the commander of all of David's military forces, also recognized in David's order to count the men that he was looking for increased security as Israel's king—seeking to put his trust more in the size of his *army* than in the size of his *God*. Joab exposed this very motive when he asked David, *May the Lord your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?* (II Kings 24:3, NIV). As the commentator Morgan states, “The spirit of vainglory in numbers had taken possession of the king...to trust in numbers and forget God.”

Prideful Mistake #3: Achievement

Since this event takes place near the end of David's reign, this prideful numbering was also likely motivated by David's desire to try to measure his achievements over the past 40 years. Israel at this time was undoubtedly much larger, stronger and more prosperous than it had ever been in its entire history. David wanted the count so he could bask in all his remarkable successes over his “working” career.

It took almost ten months for Joab and the commanders to count all the men throughout Israel. At some point near the end of this needless and ill-conceived census, II Samuel 24:10 (NASB) tells us, *David's heart troubled him*. He knew that what he had done was wrong. I suspect he always knew what he wanted to do was wrong. But

he wasn't willing to admit it, like we so often aren't, until after the "deed is done." As Adam Clarke states in commentary, "[God] determined that the props of his vain ambition shall be taken away." So God sent the prophet Gad to give David a choice on how he would be punished for his unabashed, sinful pride. By the time this story ends, David's wrongful counting resulted in the deaths of 70,000 innocent Israelites. So, what can we learn from this great counting tragedy? I think the lessons for us are quite profound.

Our Counting is Wrong When it is Done to Measure How Much We Own

Even though David wrote Psalm 24:1, *The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it*, he must have forgotten his own declaration and at some point begun seeing himself as the owner of Israel and the one who had the right to count what he owned. You might question, "Wait, isn't a careful accounting of our possessions just good stewardship?" Yes, on the one hand, it is. Solomon even tells us to, "*know well the condition of your flocks, and pay attention to your herds*" (Proverbs 27:23). But on the other hand, if our counting is motivated by the "pride of ownership" and not by a humble accounting of God's property, our counting, like David's, will be wrong.

I think we would all agree that there is a huge emotional and psychological difference between how an owner looks at his own balance sheet and how his accountant looks at the very same balance sheet. And it was this ownership attitude that did David in and will do us in as well. This issue of ownership is the central demand of the gospel. Are we willing to surrender everything, give it *all* up, return back to the rightful Owner everything we have wrongfully confiscated and claimed to be our own? When we do find ourselves tempted to count what we own, we must remember, it doesn't take very long to count *nothing*! Do you count your stuff as the *owner* or as His *steward*?

Our Counting is Wrong When it is Done to Determine How Secure We Are

I have two friends, both of whom happen to have retirement plans that are about the same size. My one friend constantly watches his account, running projections to determine if he has set aside enough to maintain a comparable lifestyle when he gets to 65 and retires. He always very closely knows the current balance. It was fascinating to watch how he handled his plummeting account when the market most recently crashed, and how troubled he was watching his funds evaporate before his very eyes. Now that the account balance has come back, he is much more relaxed, feeling secure that he is again going to be able to "make it" with what he has accumulated.

My other friend saw his retirement account as a stumbling block to him fully trusting in Christ for his and his family's future. He found himself placing his security in the "things of earth" and not in the Provider of those good things. In response to this spiritual self-realization, this friend chose to liquidate his retirement account and give all the money away, so he could be better positioned to learn to trust God for his and his family's future—looking first to Him for their *daily bread*.

In an earthly economy, my latter friend was just plain foolish. But in God's economy, I would suggest he might have actually been the wiser of the two. He had learned that the less he had to count, the less he had to worry about losing, and the more he needed to trust in God and not in riches. Many seek financial independence so they won't be forced to depend on God. Those seeking financial freedom, on the other hand, are seeking freedom from finding security in their material things. Think about it. Are you planning for financial *independence* or financial *freedom*?

David counted his men to gain a greater sense of self-security. We can easily find ourselves counting our “stuff” for the very same reason. And when we are motivated to count in order to gain a greater sense of self-security, our counting will be wrong.

Our Counting is Wrong When it is Done to Measure How Successful We Have Been

Recently I became painfully aware of just how guilty I myself have been of this kind of “success counting.” I am continually counting how many people visit my website each day. I count how many people are following me on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. I watch to see how many people actually read my newsletters. I keep count of how many of our studies we sell. And when the numbers are going up, my sense of success and well-being go up with them. And when, for whatever the reason, the numbers are going down, I find myself emotionally going down with them.

Sometimes I inadvertently fall prey to one of Satan’s greatest lies in our culture: “Success in life is best measured by counting.” I was recently visiting with a young man who was telling me about a couple of his friends who he thought had become really successful. When I quizzed him on how he determined their success, he gushed, “You should see the cars they drive!” Listen, if we try to measure our success in life by how big, how much, how new, how expensive, or how plush, our counting is always going to be wrong.

True life-success cannot be counted using numbers. As the old saying goes, “You don’t want to spend your life climbing the ladder of success only to realize, once you finally reach the top, that it is leaning against the wrong wall.” When David tried to count his success, many people besides himself suffered great loss because of it. The same can be true for us if we try to count our success in the same way. How many marriages have failed, children been lost, friendships ended, health sacrificed, and moral failures resulted because people were obsessed with counting what was not a legitimate measure of success?

Do you want to avoid wrong counting? Remember these three powerful truths. (1) Our God owns it all. So, there is nothing for us to count. (2) Our security is in our *Provider* and not in our *provisions*. (3) Our success is measured by who we *become* and not what we *achieve*. If we fully embrace these three immutable truths, we will never give in to the temptation to count. We will instead find ourselves feeling content, secure and very much at peace. Sounds like the way God intended for us to live, doesn’t it?

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E. G. “Jay” Link has a unique combination of being an ordained minister with a Master Divinity degree in Biblical Theology and a professional Stewardship planning coach who for over 40 years has been working with very affluent Christian families to enable them to optimize their Kingdom impact with all that the Lord has entrusted to them to manage. After retiring from his personal practice, he then served for five years as Director of Taylor University’s Stewardship Planning Ministry, which he launched for them. Most recently, Jay founded the Stewardship Resource Group to serve Christian ministries, colleges, and churches to better minister to their highest capacity families. He has written six books, hundreds of articles and has provided extensive training curriculum for hundreds of professional financial and legal advisors in how to provide stewardship planning services for their clients.