

Unit One - Seminar Reading

Niccolò Machiavelli

From *The Prince*, 1512

Those who want to gain a prince's favour usually offer him those things they value most or that they think he likes best. So we often see people giving him horses, armour, cloth of gold, gems, and similar ornaments suitable to their position. Wishing to offer Your Magnificence something on my behalf as evidence of my devotion, I find nothing in my possessions I value higher than the knowledge of the actions of great men, which I have gained from long experience of the affairs today and from constant study of the past. I have carefully examined and thought about these matters for a long time, and now I have written it all down in a small volume, which I send to Your Magnificence.

Although I judge this book unworthy for you to receive, I am confident that you will generously accept it, especially when you recall that I can give no greater gift than to help you understand in a very short time what it has taken me many years and many dangers and much discomfort to learn.

A prince, first of all, should have no other object or thought in mind than war and how to wage it. He must not take up anything else to be skilful in, for war is the only art essential to those who govern. It is, moreover, of such great value that it not only keeps in power those who have been born rulers, but often helps men of humble origin to rise to high rank. On the other hand, when princes turn their attention more to luxuries than to war, they lose their power. The chief cause of losing power is neglect of the art of war; the chief means of acquiring power is skill in the art of war.

We must now see what methods and rules a prince should use in dealing with his subjects and his friends. Because I know that many have written about this, I fear that my writing about it will be judged presumptuous, since I disagree in this matter completely with the opinions of others. But since I intend to write something useful to those who understand, it seems to me more practical to go directly to the actual truth of the matter than to speculate about it. Many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known really to exist. But there is such a difference between how we live and how we ought to live that he who turns away from what actually does occur for the sake of what ought to occur, does something that will ruin him rather than save him. For he who wants to be a good man all the time will be ruined among so many who are not good. It is therefore necessary for a prince who wants to survive to learn how not to be good and to use goodness, or not use it, according to what needs to be done.

Leaving aside, then, those matters which concern only an imaginary prince and talking about those things that are real, I say that all men, and especially princes because they are situated higher, exhibit certain qualities which bring them either blame or praise. Thus, one is termed liberal or generous, another miserly or stingy...one is thought unselfish, another greedy; one cruel, another compassionate; one unreliable, another trustworthy; one effeminate and cowardly, another fierce and courageous; one humane, another proud; one lascivious, another chaste; one frank, the other crafty; one harsh, the other easygoing; one serious, the other light-minded; one religious, the other an unbeliever; and so on.

I know that everyone will admit that it would be very fine for a prince to have all of the qualities mentioned above that are judged good. But because human nature will not allow it, they cannot all be possessed or maintained. It is necessary, therefore, that the prince be clever enough to know how to avoid a bad reputation for having those vices which might endanger his position, and if he can do so, he should also avoid those vices that are not dangerous to his position. But if he cannot do so, he can let them persist with less worry. He must

not care if he gets a bad reputation on account of those vices without which he could not protect the state; because, all things considered, we find that some things which seem to be virtues would, if followed, lead to ruin, whereas something else which seems vicious will bring about security and well-being.

Beginning now with the first of the qualities mentioned above, I say that it would be well to be thought liberal or generous. Nevertheless, liberality used to such a degree that you are known for it, is harmful to you. If you practise it moderately, as one ought to, no one will know about it, and you will be blamed for the opposite vice. If, on the other hand, you want to gain a reputation for being liberal or generous, you must not omit any extravagance, to such an extent that a prince who does so will use up his resources. It will then become necessary at last, if he wants to keep on being known for his liberality, for him to tax his people heavily, to extort money from them, and do everything possible just to get money.

This will begin to make his subjects hate him, and when he becomes poor no one will think much of him. Thus, having harmed many and benefited few by his generosity, he will be subject to all kinds of hardships and all kinds of dangers. If he realizes this and wants to change his ways, he is immediately blamed for becoming stingy.

A prince, therefore, being unable to use this virtue of liberality or generosity to the point where it is recognized without harming himself, ought not, if he is wise, object to being termed stingy. For as time passes he will be termed more liberal when people see that because of his thriftiness his income is enough both to defend himself against those who make war against him and to begin his own enterprises without burdening the people. Such a prince is actually liberal to those from whom he takes nothing, who are numerous, and stingy to those to whom he does not give, who are few.

In our times we have not seen any great achievements except the ones performed by those considered stingy. The others have failed. Pope Julius II, though he used his reputation for generosity to win the papacy, did not try to maintain it afterwards because he wanted to be able to wage war. The present king of France has made many wars without imposing heavy taxes on his people because the extra expenditures were paid for by his long-term economies. The present king of Spain, if he had continued being liberal, would not have begun or completed so many undertakings.

For these reasons a prince ought to care little about being thought stingy if he thereby avoids robbing his subjects and can still defend himself, and if he does not become poor and contemptible or is not forced to become greedy. For this vice of stinginess is one of those that will enable him to rule. If someone says that Caesar came to power by using liberality and many others attained high rank by being generous or being thought so, I reply that you are already a prince or you are on the way to becoming one. In the first case, this liberality is dangerous; in the second it is quite necessary to be considered generous. Caesar was one of those who wished to come to power in Rome. But if, after attaining power, he had lived and had not decreased his expenditures, he would have destroyed his authority. And if someone should reply that there have been many princes considered to be very generous and who have done great deeds with their armies, I say that either the prince spends his own money and his subjects' or someone else's. In the first case, he ought be careful; in the other case, he should not neglect in any way being very generous.

Generosity is necessary for the prince who marches with his army and lives on plunder, loot, and ransoms, and uses other people's wealth. Otherwise his soldiers would not follow him. You can be very generous with what does not belong to you or to your subjects, as were Cyrus, Caesar, and Alexander. To spend others' money does not harm your reputation but helps it. It is only spending your own money that hurts you. There is nothing that uses itself up like generosity. For while you use it, you lose the power to use it, and you become either poor and despised, or, in order to escape poverty, you become greedy and hated. Above all, a prince must guard against being despised and hated, and generosity or liberality brings you to one or the other condition. However, it is

wiser to be known as stingy, which brings you disgrace without hatred, than trying to be known as liberal, which necessarily makes you known as rapacious; having a reputation for that brings disgrace and hatred....

Proceeding to the other qualities mentioned before, I say that every prince ought to wish to be thought merciful and not cruel, but he ought to be careful not to misuse that mercy. Cesare Borgia was considered cruel; nevertheless, his cruelty pacified the Romagna, united it, and restored it to peace and loyalty. If this is well thought through, it will be seen to have been more merciful than the people of Florence who, in order to avoid being called cruel, allowed Pistoia to be destroyed. Hence, a prince ought not to worry about a reputation for being cruel in order to keep his subjects unified and loyal, for with a very few examples of cruelty he will prove more merciful than those who, because of too much leniency, allow disorder to erupt, whence arise murders and lootings. For these harm a whole community, whereas the executions ordered by the prince harm only individuals. And of all princes, it is impossible for a new one to avoid the reputation of being cruel because new states are full of dangers. Virgil says in Dido's words: "Harsh times and the newness of the state force me to do such things and to guard all my lands." Nevertheless, the prince should be cautious in judging and acting, but not timid. He should proceed in a temperate manner, with prudence and humanity, so that overconfidence does not make him careless, or excessive suspicions make him intolerable.

From this rises a question: Is it better to be loved than feared, or the reverse? The answer is that the prince should be both feared and loved, if possible. But since it is difficult for the two to go together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two has to be given up. For it can be said of men in general that they are ungrateful, talkative, tricky and deceitful, eager to avoid dangers, anxious for gain. While you are doing them favours, they are all yours, offering you blood, possessions, life, and children, as I said before, when need for these is remote; but when you need them, they turn on you. And the prince who has trusted their words without making other preparations is ruined, for friendships gained by favours, and not by greatness and nobility, cannot be counted upon when needed. Men care less about offending someone who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared, because love is supported by a chain of obligation, which because of man's debased nature, is broken at every occasion for selfish profit; but fear, maintained by dread of punishment, never fails.

Nevertheless, the prince should make himself feared in such a way that if he does not gain love, he at least avoids hatred. For to be feared and not to be hated go very well together. This can always be done if the prince refrains from taking the property and women of his subjects. And when indeed it is necessary to take someone's life, it should be when there is sufficient justification and obvious cause. But above all he should refrain from taking the property of others, for men forget the death of their father sooner than the loss of their property. Moreover, reasons for taking property are never lacking, and he who begins to live by extortion always finds reasons to take the goods of others, whereas reasons for taking life are fewer and less lasting.

I conclude, therefore, that as far as being feared or loved are concerned, men love as they please but fear as the prince wills. A wise prince ought to rely on what is in his power and not in the power of others, only being careful to avoid being hated, as I have pointed out....

Everyone knows how praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his word and to live honestly and not be deceitful. Nevertheless, experience shows that princes in our times who have done great things have cared little for honesty; they have known how to confuse men's minds with their cleverness and have finally defeated those who put their faith in honesty.

You ought to realize, therefore, that there are two ways of fighting: one according to laws, the other with force. The first is appropriate to men, the second to animals. But often the first is not enough, and it is necessary to turn to the second. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince to know very well the methods of both animal and man. This lesson was secretly taught by writers of antiquity, who tell how Achilles and many other princes of ancient times were given to the centaur Chiron, so that he could raise and teach them. Their having as tutor a

creature half-animal and half-man indicates the need of a prince's knowing how to use the nature of both and that one cannot bring success without the other.

Therefore, since it is necessary for a prince to know well how to act like an animal, he should choose the natures of the fox and the lion; for the lion cannot defend himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. A prince needs to be a fox to know about traps, and a lion to terrify the wolves. Those who behave only like the lion do not understand this. Therefore, a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when to do so would be disadvantageous and when the reasons for making promises no longer exist. If all men were good, this precept would not be good. But since they are bad and would not keep their promises to you, it is not necessary for you to keep yours to them. A prince never lacks good reason to excuse his breaking his word. One could give innumerable modern examples of this and show how many peace treaties and promises have been broken and made ineffective by the untrustworthiness of princes. He who has best known how to act like a fox has succeeded best. But he who has this talent has to know how to keep it hidden and to pretend and deceive. Men are so simple and yield to the needs of the present so readily that he who deceives will always find those who let themselves be deceived.

I do not wish to remain silent about one recent example. Alexander VI did nothing else but deceive men and thought of nothing else, yet he always found the opportunity to do so. There never was a man who had greater success in affirming something; and the more oaths he used in affirming it, the sooner he broke his promise. Nevertheless, his deceptions always succeeded in the way he wanted, for he knew the way of the world.

It is not necessary, then, for a prince to have the good qualities mentioned above, but it is necessary to seem to have them. I would even say this: to have them and use them all the time is dangerous, but seeming to have them is useful. He should seem to be pious, faithful, humane, honest, religious, and to be so. But he should have his mind so prepared that when occasion requires, he is able to change to the opposite. And it must be understood that a prince, especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are considered good; it is often necessary to act contrary to faith, charity, humanity, and religion in order to maintain the state. It is therefore necessary for him to have the ability to change his mind according to the way the winds of fortune and conditions require. If possible, he ought not, as I have said before, turn away from what is good, but he should be able to do evil if necessary.

A prince should be very careful that nothing ever comes from his mouth that is not full of the aforementioned [good] qualities. Those who see and hear him should think him all compassion, all faith, all integrity, all humaneness, all religion. And nothing is more necessary to seem to have than the last quality. For people in general judge more with their eyes than with their minds. Everyone can see; few have understanding. Everyone sees what you seem to be; few know what you really are. And those few do not dare oppose the opinion of the many, who have the power of the state to support them. In the actions of individuals, especially princes, when there is no judge to appeal to, people look at the results. A prince only has to conquer and maintain the state. His means will always be considered honourable, and everyone will praise them because the common crowd is always deceived by appearances and by the way things turn out. In the world the crowd is everything. The few are isolated when the crowd is in control. A certain prince of the present time, whom it would be well not to mention by name, always preaches peace and fidelity but is actually a great enemy of both. Either of these qualities, had he followed them, would often have taken from him his reputation or his state....

Since I have spoken of the most important of the qualities mentioned above, I want to discuss the others briefly, with this generalization: the prince should pay attention, as has been said before, to avoiding those things which make him hated and despised. As long as he succeeds in this, he will have done his part and will not find danger in other vices. Hatred, as I have said, comes from being greedy and seizing his subjects' property and women. He must refrain from doing these things. For most men live contentedly as long as they are not deprived of their property or honour. Then he has to contend only with the ambition of a few, which he can easily control in many ways. He is judged contemptible if he is thought changeable, frivolous, effeminate, cowardly, and irresolute. A prince ought to guard against these as from a dangerous reef. He must try to show by his actions his greatness, spirit, seriousness, and bravery. In governing the affairs of his subjects, he must make his decisions irrevocable. He ought to maintain such a reputation that no one would think of deceiving or cheating him.

The prince who earns such an opinion for himself has a great reputation. If a prince has a great reputation, it is difficult to plot against him or to attack him so long as he is thought to have great ability and the respect of his subjects. Therefore, a prince must fear two things: one from inside his state because of his subjects, the other from outside because of foreign enemies. He can defend himself from the latter with good weapons and good friends, and he will always have good friends if he has good arms. Conditions inside the state will remain quiet when conditions outside are quiet, unless they are already stirred up by a conspiracy. When attacked from outside, if he has ruled and lived as I have said, and if he stands firm, he will repel all attacks as the Spartan Nabis did. But concerning his subjects when external matters are stable, he still has to be wary of their plots. The prince can be quite safe from these if he avoids being hated and if he keeps the people satisfied, which will of course happen as I have already explained.

One of the most effective safeguards a prince can have against conspiracies is not being hated by the people, for every conspirator believes that he will please the people by killing the prince. But if he thinks he will offend them by doing so, he does not dare to carry out the action because the difficulties encountered by conspirators are very many. Experience shows that there have been many conspiracies, and few have turned out well because a conspirator cannot act alone. He can get companions only from among those who, he thinks, are discontented. And just as soon as you have revealed your plot to a malcontent, you give him the means to be contented.... He sees on the one hand certain gain and on the other an uncertain prospect full of danger. He would have to be a rare friend to you or a fierce enemy of the prince to keep his word to you.

To put the matter briefly, I say that a conspirator can know nothing but anxiety, jealousy, and fear of punishment, which terrifies him. But on the prince's side there are the prestige of his office, the laws, and the power of his friends and the state that defend him. When the good will of the people is added to all of these, it is impossible that anyone would be so foolhardy as to conspire. Whereas a conspirator usually has to be afraid before committing the act, in this case he also has to be afraid afterwards, for he will have the people for his enemy too, and he will have no hope of any escape.