

Title: The Failure of Success, pt.2
Text: Judges 8
Theme: Power reveals what is in the heart
Series: Judges
Prop Stmtnt: God took absolute power and used it to die for us.

Read text: Judges 8.33-35

He said one thing and did another. That is the deflating and devastating accusation that we can make about so many people who get into positions of leadership. Why is that? Why do so many people get into positions of influence and end up becoming someone else? In some cases, like Gideon, it is not that he just said one thing and did another, it is that he said one thing and did it, and then he said another thing and did that too. And he did it all at the same time. Some of you have moms like that. They are so nice to everyone else, but at home? It's a different story and you don't know what to think. Most of you know people like this. Some of you are like this. This is all exposed in this text. Gideon fights Baal in chapter 6, fights the Midianites in chapter 7 and now in chapter 8 he fights Israel.

I. Success and power reveal your heart.

We tend to think that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. That is not necessarily true. It appears to be true. But to be more precise we ought to say that power provides the opportunity for corruption to be displayed. This sad reality is set before us over and over in the Bible and is so evident right here, but we tend to overlook it with Gideon because of the incredible success that Gideon experienced. But, when you look at the entire story, this guy is not that great of a hero. In fact, taken as a whole we do not really know what to think.

By the way, as an aside, this text is another reason why I absolutely trust the Bible. It would be so easy to present Gideon as a hero and gloss over his flaws, but the author of Judges does not do that. He tells us the whole story, leaving us with a very complicated and tortured view of his life.

Chapter 7 ends in the middle of a battle. Gideon and his 300 men watched as the Midianite army turned on one another and like a major league baseball brawl, the benches and bullpens emptied and everyone was fighting one another. 120,000 Midianite soldiers were killed, mostly by one another. Those who were not killed (15,000) in the self-inflicted brawl, started running for home. (map) At this point, Gideon doesn't want anyone to escape, so he gets word to the tribe of Ephraim to help out, which they did. The men of Ephraim defended a couple of crossing points of the Jordan River and successfully cut off many of the Midianites from getting across and in so doing they caught and killed two of the Midianite princes. They even named the sites after the event. This was an enormous victory. When Gideon gets there a bit later, they start accusing Gideon of playing tribal favorites. Why did you not call us to join you at the beginning of this? Were we not good enough? Is there something wrong with us? Why are we called to help mop up, but we get no glory in the beginning? Gideon artfully defuses the situation, but that entire ordeal took precious time that could have been spent chasing the rest of the Midianites. Gideon and his men take off again and by the time they get to Succoth (map), they need refreshment, which the people of Succoth are reluctant to give for obvious reasons. What if you don't kill the

Midianite kings? We will get punished for helping you out. The people of Succoth are displaying a lack of complete faith in Gideon, aren't they? Well, that shouldn't surprise Gideon, because for this entire story up until now, Gideon had no faith in Gideon. However, apparently forgetting all of that, Gideon then lashes out at them and promises revenge (against his own people). He goes on to Penuel and is met with a similar response. The people of Penuel are afraid to help Gideon lest Midian hear about it and come back and punish them for it. This time, Gideon's promise of revenge is worse. The situation is not a clear sense of right and wrong, is it? The cities were wrong for not supporting their own. They were thinking only about themselves instead of about being a people and doing their part and of course trusting God. By claiming neutrality, they sided with the enemies of God's people and so in one sense Gideon treated them as such. However, they also acted just like Gideon who was himself shown mercy. So, yes, they "deserved" justice, but one who has been shown mercy, should also show mercy. (time to apply?)

Eventually Gideon catches the two Kings of Midian. How many times in does a story of armies come down to the battle between 2 guys? You see it in Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, the Marvel movies, etc. No matter how big and epic the battles are on one level, they all come down to a personal contest between two people. That is what is happening here, only it involves three guys. And what we learn makes us go back and re-think some of the other stuff that we read earlier.

Gideon has his trophies. He has captured the two kings of Midian. Two princes are already dead. What will Gideon do with these guys? In his conversation with them, we find out that in addition to plundering the land of its produce, that these Midianites were cruel and murderous and that they killed Gideon's brothers. And now we see why Gideon was so intent on catching them and killing them. This was revenge. The two kings, Zebah and Zalmunna were defiant and mocked Gideon who responded by ordering his son to kill these kings. His son was too fearful so these men mocked Gideon again, who killed them himself. Now, his name Gideon ("hacker") takes on a new level of meaning. He then takes their ornaments and wears them as trophies of his conquest. Last Monday, as the staff was reviewing the sermon, a couple of them noted that Gideon told the 300 to shout, "For the LORD and for Gideon." Why did Gideon add that last part? Now, I think we know. Gideon was looking to settle a score. This was a personal vendetta, which is why he was so intent on catching these kings. It also explains why Gideon was so angry at the people of Succoth and Penuel. They did not help him accomplish his goal. This is no longer the sword of the Lord, but now, just the sword of Gideon.

Again, stop and think about it. The people of these two cities responded exactly like Gideon did. They were not sure that this was going to work, and they were hesitant to join in the cause. There is no difference to how they responded and how Gideon responded and yet Gideon has no empathy at all and instead responds to their hesitation with violent threats that he made good on.

Then comes a very confusing scene. The people of Israel want to make him a king since he was so successful in defeating their enemy. Gideon refuses and says that he won't, his son won't (do not forget that line) but that the LORD is their king. All of that sounds good, but he then demands to be treated as a king and he acts like one. He makes a request which looks more like a tax. They give him so much gold that he makes an idol with it. What are we supposed to do with

that? It obviously becomes a huge problem, and he then takes a whole slew of wives and ends up fathering seventy sons. That is what cult leaders and kings do.

So, let's read the ending of chapter 8 again. The ending of chapter 8 sounds just like the beginning of chapter 6. Did anything really change? Did Gideon leave anything better?

Things we admire about Gideon.¹

- 1) His name, Gideon means "hacker of wood" because he was willing to destroy the altar of Baal that his dad had set up on the family property.
- 2) Gideon destroyed the image of Baal knowing that the community would be incensed.
- 3) We meet him when he is trying to provide for his family and is working hard to do so.
- 4) The angel of the Lord calls him a "mighty man of valor."
- 5) The angel also tells him to deliver Israel from Midian "in this might of yours."
- 6) Gideon responds with what appears to be humility.
- 7) The angel of the Lord agrees to Gideon's request to show him a sign that would confirm that Gideon has really found favor with God.
- 8) Gideon responds to this sign by building an altar to Yahweh and worshipping.
- 9) God gives Gideon evidence that confirms his success (fleece and dream)
- 10) "The Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon" which was evidenced in the response of so many men who came to fight with him and for him.
- 11) Gideon did not protest God's thinning down his troops but participated in the process.
- 12) Gideon's victory over Midian is used as an illustration of how the Messiah will be victorious (Isaiah 9.4).
- 13) Gideon exercises great restraint and finesse in diffusing the near civil war with the Ephraimites.
- 14) Gideon refuses to be king when the nation wants to make him one.
- 15) The land had rest for 40 years during the days of Gideon.
- 16) Gideon's son is named, Abimelech which could mean – "The (Divine) King is my Father" which could be a reference to Yahweh.
- 17) Baalism did not return until after the death of Gideon which sounds as if he was a restraining influence while he was alive.
- 18) Gideon is credited with doing many good things for Israel (8.35).
- 19) His son Jotham praises his father for his willingness to sacrifice his own life in order to take on the Midianites.

But, there is more to Gideon's story. All of these things happened, but the book of Judges shows us another side as well. Things we do not admire about Gideon.

- 1) Gideon is pretty snarky with the angel of the LORD. He's right that God has abandoned Israel and given her to the Midianites, but it is not because the problem is with God. The problem is obviously with Israel.
- 2) Why does this guy keep asking for signs? Is God's Word not enough?
- 3) What is the deal about the community shrine sitting on his family's land? And yes, Gideon takes it down, but he sure is hesitant about it.

¹ The following list is revised from an article that Darrell Block wrote in JETS 40/3 (September 1997, 353-366).

- 4) Even after 32,000 men show up to fight with Gideon, after Gideon has been clothed with the Spirit of the Lord, he still tries to find a way out of obedience.
- 5) Why does Gideon need another sign after being told again that the battle is as good as over?
- 6) Why does Gideon add his own name to the battle cry, when up til this point there really isn't all that much heroic about him.
- 7) Why did Gideon call for reinforcements when God told him that more than 300 was too many?
- 8) Why does the name of God all but disappear from the story following 7.23?
- 9) Why is Gideon so ruthless to his own people when their doubt in him, was no different than his doubt in God and in what God said would happen through him?
- 10) Gideon's mission for God turns into a mission for personal revenge.
- 11) Gideon rejects the title King of Israel, but then turns around and demands that people treat him like one and he then acts like one.
- 12) In fact, naming his son Abimelech could mean, "The King is my Father" or even "Melek (pagan deity) is my father."

Success and power reveal your heart and it usually isn't very pretty. So, who is this guy, really? And how are we supposed to think about him? Gideon's life reveals the dilemma of leadership.

II. The Dilemma of Leadership.

- We need leadership. This is obvious from the fact that we are born from the biological union of a father and mother and are intended by God to be raised by parents. It is also obvious from creation that we were made by, for and under the authority of the Creator.
- Leadership is designed by God to be a reflection of him.
- Godly leadership is an amazing gift to a kingdom, nation, family, company, business or church. (2 Samuel 3b-4) and we should view it as such, cultivate it, encourage it and esteem it.
- Good and godly leadership is so rare. Even David almost destroyed everything that he had achieved. So many guys who start out with promise, end up in failure. Therefore,
- We are generally jaded and cynical about leaders and trust no one but ourselves, which means that we now become the leader and become the thing we resented or we poison others around us so much that we promote "trust issues" with many.
- This was Israel. Israel had "trust issues." Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

III. How are we to think about leadership?

We need to be theological and therefore realistic about leadership. The tension is, we need leaders. This is what Israel was crying for. Give us a leader who will protect us from our enemies.

A. The power to kill the enemy is the power to kill your own people.

Gideon was given military power that destroyed the Midianites, relieved Israel, but also punished Succoth and about destroyed Penuel. His son Abimelech, whose story we will look at next week, arises to power and immediately uses that power to kill all his brothers because once you get into

power, it is easy to become a monster in order to do everything you can to hold on that power. This is Saul's story and Stalin's story.

So, there is this polarizing debate about the use and misuse of guns. Why did the framers of the constitution provide us with the 2nd amendment that guaranteed the right of every citizen to own guns? They feared and many rightfully fear the misuse of power by the government. So, the solution is, let's put guns into the hands of the people, but what happens when the people misuse the power that has been given to them? The problem is obvious. If you give someone power to protect themselves (or their people) you also give them power to attack themselves or their people. And if you give guns to the people to protect themselves, you give them the power to kill one another too. The solution is beyond us.

In so many ways, our situation is just like Israel. We need leaders, but so much of the time, empowering leaders gives them the authority to use us, not help us. And we look like fools when we think that we can elect one person or party into office and they will do everything right. It is a hard reality to face. Our leaders will consistently fail us, and even the good ones will either get run out of office or will die. This is our present reality. Lenin was going to bring Utopia to Russia. Hitler was going to make Germany the glory of the world. And while both of those ended up in colossal failures with devastating consequences, the same themes are replayed in every election in our country. We the people demand a president who has all of the answers, has the skill to solve economic, cultural, social, health, education, infrastructure, political and international problems including peace in the Mideast. This person reduces all of this down to a slogan and is voted into power on a wave of optimism that this person will finally do it. Obama would get rid of racism in our country and make us liked again in the world. Trump would fix the economy and make us great again. Oh, we can certainly find all sorts of reasons why these leaders are not what they claimed to be, but who is?

The story of Gideon is in the story of the Judges and the Judges is all a set-up for the monarchy. People want a king who will protect them. They want and need a warrior. But, people want a leader who will care for them and provide for them. They also want and need a shepherd. Gideon was a warrior when he had to be, but he was no shepherd. Gideon was a preview of Saul. His leadership was so disappointing. But, there is another story line in the OT. Starting with Abel, then Jacob, the Moses, we are introduced to men who are shepherds. By the time we meet a boy named David who is watching sheep and protecting them, we like him. When this shepherd takes on the role of a warrior and stands in the valley between Goliath and the people of God, we love him. Here it is! A shepherd and a warrior. It is an amazing picture of leadership. But, this leader, as amazing as he is, has such a catastrophic failure that he almost loses the kingdom. In fact, 4 of his sons die in direct relationship to his sin and failure. The shepherd and warrior needs to be rescued. He needs a priest. This brings us to another thread in the story of the Bible, which you know by now that all of these events are helping us see what kind of a leader we all desperately need.

The story of the Old Testament is the need for a leader who comes to us from outside of us. The story of the New Testament is, he has come. Following Jesus protects you from putting your hopes in man even while you remain pre-eminently hopeful. We need Jesus.

4. Only Jesus can be trusted with ultimate power.

Gideon did not aspire to power, but when it was thrust upon him, he abused it. As we will see next week, his son did aspire to power and abused it as well. What happens when you give a little guy a big truck? What happens when an insecure person is put into a position of power?

This is what makes Jesus so unique. He does not aspire to power; he is power. He is not threatened because he is not trying to get to power; he is power. And yet, what does Jesus do with his ultimate power. He disguised it. In the weakness of a baby he came to us as one of us. He surrendered this infinite power to the humble frame of a man who placed himself not only at the mercy of a body, but at the mercy of our social structures, political power plays and religious manipulations. These all contributed on a surface level to what he came to do on the ultimate level and that is to humble himself and die for us. Even at the height of his humiliation, his taunters spoke to the heart of it when they said, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and we will believe you." In other words, if you really had the power that you claim to have, then you would use that power the way we would use that power. You would use that power to get your own way, to protect your own skin, to avoid dying and certainly avoid humiliation. But, here is what they could not see and what is so difficult for so many of us. Christ does not use power the way we are tempted to use power. He set it aside in order to die for us. It was because he was the Son of God that he would choose not to come down from the cross, but instead to pay the penalty for our sin by dying in our place.

Point – Israel's problem (they think) is that they don't have a king. It's not that they don't have a king, they don't have a heart to follow God. If most of their judges were a problem what do you think will happen when they get a king?

3 things: 1) Trust in him for salvation 2) Keep on trusting him. You do not know better, he does. 3) Look to be a leader and cultivate and encourage leaders who look like Jesus.

v.28 – the land had rest for 40 years in the days of Gideon. The last time this phrase is used in Judges. Jesus provides a rest that will never end.