

Judges: Who should we follow?
Sermon 8-19-18
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Judges 13:1-5, 24-25; 14:1-9; 15:1-20

¹The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years.²There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children.³And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son.⁴Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean,⁵for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”

²⁴The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and the LORD blessed him.²⁵The spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

¹⁴Once Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw a Philistine woman.²Then he came up, and told his father and mother, “I saw a Philistine woman at Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.”³But his father and mother said to him, “Is there not a woman among your kin, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?” But Samson said to his father, “Get her for me, because she pleases me.”⁴His father and mother did not know that this was from the LORD; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.⁵Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah. When he came to the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion roared at him.⁶The spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart barehanded as one might tear apart a kid. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.⁷Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she pleased Samson.⁸After a while he returned to marry her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey.⁹He scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion.

¹⁵After a while, at the time of the wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife, bringing along a kid. He said, “I want to go into my wife’s room.” But her father would not allow him to go in.²Her father said, “I was sure that you had

rejected her; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?"³ Samson said to them, "This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame."⁴ So Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took some torches; and he turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails.⁵ When he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.⁶ Then the Philistines asked, "Who has done this?" And they said, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken Samson's wife and given her to his companion." So the Philistines came up, and burned her and her father.⁷ Samson said to them, "If this is what you do, I swear I will not stop until I have taken revenge on you."⁸ He struck them down hip and thigh with great slaughter; and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

⁹Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah, and made a raid on Lehi.¹⁰ The men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" They said, "We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us."¹¹ Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then have you done to us?" He replied, "As they did to me, so I have done to them."¹² They said to him, "We have come down to bind you, so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines." Samson answered them, "Swear to me that you yourselves will not attack me."¹³ They said to him, "No, we will only bind you and give you into their hands; we will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes, and brought him up from the rock.¹⁴ When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands.¹⁵ Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down and took it, and with it he killed a thousand men.¹⁶ And Samson said, "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have slain a thousand men."¹⁷ When he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and that place was called Ramath-lehi.

¹⁸By then he was very thirsty, and he called on the LORD, saying, "You have granted this great victory by the hand of your servant. Am I now to die of thirst, and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?"¹⁹ So God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came from it. When he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore it was named En-hakkore, which is at Lehi to this day.²⁰ And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

Message:

In a Thom Rainer article in October of 2014, he names “Fourteen Symptoms of Toxic Church Leaders.” As I read over them, I invite you to think about them as we review the Samson Story. Here they are:

1. **They rarely demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.** Paul notes those specific attributes in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control. You won’t see them much in toxic leaders.
2. **They seek a minimalist structure of accountability.** Indeed, if they could get away with it, they would operate in a totally autocratic fashion, with heavy, top down leadership.
3. **They expect behavior of others they don’t expect of themselves.** “Do as I say, not as I do.”
4. **They see almost everyone else as inferior to themselves.** You will hear them criticizing other leaders while building themselves up.
5. **They show favoritism.** It is clear that they have a favored few while they marginalize the rest.
6. **They have frequent anger outbursts.** This behavior takes place when they don’t get their way.
7. **They say one thing to some people, but different things to others.** This is a soft way of saying they lie.
8. **They seek to dismiss or marginalize people before they attempt to develop them.** People are means to their ends; they see them as projects, not God’s people who need mentoring and developing.
9. **They are manipulative.** Their most common tactic is using partial truths to get their way.
10. **They lack transparency.** Autocratic leaders are rarely transparent. If they get caught abusing their power, they may have to forfeit it.
11. **They do not allow for pushback or disagreement.** When someone does disagree, he or she becomes the victim of the leader’s anger and marginalization.
12. **They surround themselves with sycophants.** Their inner circle thus often includes close friends and family members, as well as a host of “yes people.”
13. **They communicate poorly.** In essence, any clarity of communication would reveal their autocratic behavior, so they keep their communications unintelligible and obtuse.
14. **They are self-absorbed.** In fact, they would unlikely see themselves in any of these symptoms.”

I’m sure we can all think of toxic leaders. Leaders in churches. Leaders in the work place. Leaders of our nation. When you think of these toxic leadership

qualities, who comes to mind? Remember these toxic qualities as we review Samson.

The story of Samson starts out similar to the other Judge stories you've heard. What happened again? "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years." This is re-affirmed in chapter 14, verse 4, "At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel." So the Israelites are in slavery again. But what DOESN'T happen, is the Israelites don't cry out. They don't complain. Instead, God takes the initiative. ²"There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. ³And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son.'" Sound familiar? Remember Abraham and Sarah in Genesis who bore Isaac? Remember Zechariah and Elizabeth in the gospels who bore John the Baptist? Already, the story elevates the importance of this birth because of this miraculous conception after barrenness. Furthermore, the angel tells Manoah, the to-be father of Samson, "...be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, ⁵for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines." As you can see, a Nazirite is a very holy person. We'll see how Samson does with these enormous expectations.

Fast forward to Samson's older years. In Chapter 14, "Once Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw a Philistine woman. ²Then he came up, and told his father and mother, 'I saw a Philistine woman at Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.' ³But his father and mother said to him, 'Is there not a woman among your kin, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?' But Samson said to his father, 'Get her for me, because she pleases me.' ⁴His father and mother did not know that this was from the LORD; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel. ⁵Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah. When he came to the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion roared at him. ⁶The spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart barehanded as one might tear apart a kid. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done." Why don't you think he told his parents about this event? One of the Nazirite vows as outlined in Numbers 6, not explicitly told in our passage, is that a Nazirite is not to touch a corpse. By killing this lion, he's obviously done so. We see next that he breaks another Nazirite vow, "⁷Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she pleased Samson. ⁸After a while he returned to marry her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. ⁹He scraped it out into his

hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion.” Remember one of the vows the angel stated, to not eat anything unclean. By eating honey from this lion he touches a corpse again, continuing to break one of the vows. And then he eats the honey from the corpse, which is unclean. He breaks the second vow. Not only did Samson break the second vow, but unknowingly, his parents broke that vow as well. They have eaten what was unclean and therefore it taints the holiness of Samson. Samson isn’t living up to what the angel had imagined.

It get’s even more interesting though. Not included in our passage today is what happens before chapter 15. Beginning in chapter 14, verse 10, Samson at a feast, maybe similar to a rehearsal dinner before a wedding, is accompanied by 30 men of this woman he wishes to marry. In Samson’s arrogance, he tells them a riddle that essentially tells his secret of the lion and the honey. Well...the men can’t figure it out. So they beg Samson’s to-be wife to get it out of him. She does so and Samson agrees to explain it to her. She goes back to the 30 men and explains it to them. Instead of being impressed by Samson, they mock and make fun of him. In verse 19, “Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed on him and went down to Ashkelon. He killed thirty men of the town, took their spoil, and gave the festal garments to those who had explained the riddle. In hot anger, he went back to his father’s house. And Samson’s wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.” Do you see how this story just escalates and escalates? Samson doesn’t tell his parents about the lion, but wants to brag about it to these companions through a riddle. They aren’t impressed and mock him. So in his anger he kills them. And because of his murder, the father of the bride in spite agrees to let his daughter marry Samson’s best man. Which brings us to chapter 15 where Samson finds out that his bride to-be has been married off to his best man. The father-of-the-bride is sly in his response, “I was sure that you had rejected her; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?”³ Samson said to them, ‘This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame.’” Of course, Samson can’t control his anger and he retaliates. He burns all the grain, the vineyards and the olive groves by setting fox tails on fire and letting them run free across the village. He destroys their food supply. First of all, the kinsman of Samson’s to-be bride, blame the father and the daughter. So they kill them first and they know this will hurt Samson. And of course, Samson retaliates in-kind, “⁸He struck them down hip and thigh with great slaughter; and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam.” There is a lot of back and forth here. Each time getting worse than the previous action.

And it doesn't stop. In verse 9 of chapter 15, we see that the Philistines attack and take the Judah city of Lehi. The Israelites are enslaved by the Philistines. So they would rather cooperate than have to fight. ¹¹Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, 'Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then have you done to us?' He replied, 'As they did to me, so I have done to them.' ¹²They said to him, 'We have come down to bind you, so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.' Samson answered them, 'Swear to me that you yourselves will not attack me.' ¹³They said to him, 'No, we will only bind you and give you into their hands; we will not kill you.' So they bound him with two new ropes, and brought him up from the rock. ¹⁴When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. ¹⁵Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down and took it, and with it he killed a thousand men. ¹⁶And Samson said, 'With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have slain a thousand men.'" In one sense, this is incredible that he can burn off ropes and melt off bonds by the Spirit of the Lord. It's the kind of thing we would see in a superhero movie. In another sense, this is pretty awful that it has come to this point where he kills a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey.

Going back to the toxic qualities of bad leaders, what do we see in Samson in this story? His toxicity doesn't stop with our passages today. He reigns as a Judge for twenty years. Does He have the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control? I don't see any of these in the story. He certainly doesn't hold himself accountable to anybody. Not his parents. Not to his Nazirite vows. Not to the Philistines. And not even to his own people in Judah. Possibly, not even God. Samson certainly has frequent anger outbursts. That's pretty apparent. He's manipulative, doesn't allow for pushback or disagreement, lacks transparency, communicates poorly and is self-absorbed to name a few more. It's pretty apparent that Samson is not one of those leaders of the Bible that we should model our leadership after. He's not one we should follow. Then who should we follow?

Before we jump into that question, one of the significant pieces in my study of this passage that came up is how Samson serves as a metaphor for Israel throughout the book of Judges. From barrenness Samson was born. The Israelites came from wilderness and enslavement in Egypt. God brought Samson to the earth. God brought the Israelites to the promise land. The angel told Samson's parents to keep the Nazirite vows. God told the Israelite people to keep the commandments. The Israelites wanted the promise land. Samson wanted this woman. Samson broke his Nazirite vows and lost his holiness. The Israelites

broke the commandments by worshipping other Gods and became enslaved. Samson kills those who try to enslave him. The Israelites kill the nations that try to oppress them. The Israelites continuously cry out for deliverance in Judges. Samson cries out, he complains, for water from God, “¹⁸By then he was very thirsty, and he called on the LORD, saying, ‘You have granted this great victory by the hand of your servant. Am I now to die of thirst, and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?’ ¹⁹So God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came from it. When he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived.” God was merciful with Samson by bringing him water just as the Lord was merciful with the Israelites by bringing them deliverance time and time again.

If you remember back to the introduction video we watched in our first week of this series, the narrator in the video explained that just because the “Spirit of the Lord” is upon the Judge doesn’t mean that God approves of their actions. That is ever more obvious in the story of Samson. While the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson to kill a lion with his bare hands, to burn off ropes around his wrists and burn off shackles, it doesn’t mean that God approves of his actions against the kinsman of his wife-to-be or any other horrific action. It doesn’t mean that God approves of his anger and manipulative behavior. See, the Spirit of the Lord can be upon someone, but they can still lack spiritual maturity. And as we see, it’s an awful combination. We can’t put Spirit-led people in leadership who don’t have the spiritual maturity. Now I’m no saint and I’m not perfect. So don’t hear this as propping myself up. But how many spiritual leaders have risen to leadership in our day very quickly because of their charisma and dynamic stage presence to only fall just as quickly because of their sinful behavior off-the-stage? If you haven’t heard the most recent news about Bill Hybels and Willow Creek, the other weekend another person came forward testifying to sexual misconduct of Bill. To follow, Bill’s second successor resigned from her position. Bill’s first successor of Willow Creek had already done so. And in the months to come, their entire elder board is also going to resign. The evidence appears to be true of Bill’s misconduct. A man many leaders in the evangelical world have come to admire and maybe even worship is falling from grace due to what he has done behind closed doors and off-the-stage. In another story, remember, how we highlighted the other week of sexual molestation of children by priests in the Boston area reported in the early 2000s that has forever shaped child protection policies in churches nationwide. Well...this is closer to home, in a Pennsylvania grand jury report this past week, over 300 priests sexually abused more than 1,000 child victims dating back to 1947. The report includes six diocese: Allentown, Erie, Greensburg, Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Scranton. Philadelphia and Altoona-Johnstown dioceses were included in previous grand-jury reports that were just as damaging. Folks, the

stakes for not only Spirit-driven, but more importantly spiritually mature leadership are higher than they have ever been.

What the story of Samson is inviting us into is to not be seduced purely by the charisma or power of leaders, but to follow leaders of high integrity. Leaders who have incredible character. Leaders who follow Jesus. And of course, there is only one leader who truly has our allegiance and can lead us all, Jesus Christ. While Samson's birth story echoes many of the similar themes of Jesus' birth story, Samson is a type of Jesus gone terribly wrong. God sent himself to earth in the form of Jesus because it is only God who can make this world right. Samson was supposed to be holy and righteous and do the will of the Lord. But it is only Jesus who can truly obey the Lord and show us the right way to live. It is only through Jesus that God's kingdom can come. It is only with Jesus in our hearts and our posture positioned toward him, that His Kingdom can come through us. I'm not trying to take anything away from powerful Christian leaders and speakers, but they are not the ones we should be worshipping. We should be worshipping the only one who deserves our devotion, Jesus.

We are so susceptible to following gods. To idolize the profane. We are so susceptible to worshipping other things. God is a broken record in the book of Judges about the Israelites worshipping other gods. This is their demise. Football season is about to be upon us. And if you're following the news of the NFL over the past few years you know there has been hot debate about the National Anthem protests of players. I mention it, not to take a position on either side of the issue, but to help us see that the national debate around this is bringing to light what we worship. For NFL owners, it more than likely isn't about moral values, but about the bottom dollar. What moved them to try to stop these anthem protests was that viewership was down and ticket sales were waning. Do NFL owners worship money more than they worship the Lord? For those of you passionately upset with the players protest of the flag, take a hard look at what you worship. Do you worship the flag? Do you worship the military? Do you worship the nation called the United States of America? Even for those who are protesting, what do they worship? Do they worship justice? This whole debate is bringing to the surface the things we idolize in this nation. The gods that we worship. These things may have been hidden underneath the surface for some time, but now they're in the light and it's ugly. Even after our passages today, Samson worships this new woman in Delilah. Who eventually convinces Samson to tell her his greatest secret: that his supernatural strength comes from his hair. And because he worships the wrong thing, the wrong person, she cuts his hair, breaking the last Nazirite vow, which eventually leads to Samson's death as he kills all the Philistines.

Who should we follow? The only one worth following: Jesus Christ. We shouldn't worship people with incredible charisma. We shouldn't worship people

with incredible abilities and strengths. We shouldn't worship the almighty dollar. We shouldn't even worship the nations. Our worship is devoted to the only one who can truly lead us, Jesus Christ. If Jesus is not your first leader, your first worship, in your life, you need to make some serious changes. Check your heart. Check your motivations. In Samson, we see a toxic leader. We see the embodiment of a Judges system that has disintegrated. He is the last of his kind in the book of Judges. No other will be named a judge after him. But throughout the rest of the book different variations of this same phrase is used, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was in their own eyes." And as you will see in the chapters following Samson, chaos ensues between the people of Israel. They did what they wanted to do and it destroys many of them. I implore you one last time in this series, don't rely on your own power and don't worship other gods. It will corrupt you. It will deceive you. It will lead you down dark paths. There was no king in that day, but we know the true king today. We know the king of the Kingdom of God: Jesus Christ. Who died on the cross for our sinful behavior, for our sinful worship of other gods, who conquered death and calls us to new life in His resurrection. Let us follow the one who is truly worth following. The one who will not fail us or forsake us. The one who will not be a toxic leader among us. The one who we can submit to faithfully and know that He will lead us. Jesus is all that we need to be lead in this life. If we follow him, He will not disappoint. Amen.