

Judges: The Seduction of Power

Sermon 8-5-18

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Judges 9:1-25, 46-57

Now Abimelech son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's kinsfolk and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family,² "Say in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh."³ So his mother's kinsfolk spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem; and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother."⁴ They gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the temple of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him.⁵ He went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone; but Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, for he hid himself.⁶ Then all the lords of Shechem and all Beth-millo came together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

⁷When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you lords of Shechem, so that God may listen to you.⁸ The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves. So they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'⁹ The olive tree answered them, 'Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and go to sway over the trees?'¹⁰ Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.'¹¹ But the fig tree answered them, 'Shall I stop producing my sweetness and my delicious fruit, and go to sway over the trees?'¹² Then the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.'¹³ But the vine said to them, 'Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals, and go to sway over the trees?'¹⁴ So all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us.'¹⁵ And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'¹⁶ "Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and honor when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done to him as his actions deserved—¹⁷for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and rescued you from the hand of Midian;¹⁸ but you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his slave woman, king over the lords of Shechem, because he is your kinsman—¹⁹if, I say,

you have acted in good faith and honor with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; ²⁰but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the lords of Shechem, and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the lords of Shechem, and from Beth-millo, and devour Abimelech.” ²¹Then Jotham ran away and fled, going to Beer, where he remained for fear of his brother Abimelech.

²²Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. ²³But God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem; and the lords of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. ²⁴This happened so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be avenged and their blood be laid on their brother Abimelech, who killed them, and on the lords of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. ²⁵So, out of hostility to him, the lords of Shechem set ambushes on the mountain tops. They robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was reported to Abimelech. ⁴⁶When all the lords of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the temple of El-berith. ⁴⁷Abimelech was told that all the lords of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸So Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the troops that were with him. Abimelech took an ax in his hand, cut down a bundle of brushwood, and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. Then he said to the troops with him, “What you have seen me do, do quickly, as I have done.” ⁴⁹So every one of the troops cut down a bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand men and women.

⁵⁰Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and encamped against Thebez, and took it. ⁵¹But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the lords of the city fled to it and shut themselves in; and they went to the roof of the tower. ⁵²Abimelech came to the tower, and fought against it, and came near to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head, and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴Immediately he called to the young man who carried his armor and said to him, “Draw your sword and kill me, so people will not say about me, ‘A woman killed him.’” So the young man thrust him through, and he died. ⁵⁵When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they all went home. ⁵⁶Thus God repaid Abimelech for the crime he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers; ⁵⁷and God also made all the wickedness of the people of Shechem fall back on their heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal.

Message:

In 2001, the Boston Globe broke a story that has dramatically changed, for the foreseeable future, the churches' work with children and youth. The church was once deemed as the righteous centerpieces of American communities that could do no wrong. The Boston Globe's ugly discovery reinforced an already growing skeptical view of the church: We can't be trusted. The clip I'm about to show you from the movie, "Spotlight" is a movie based on the Boston Globes research story and discovery of Catholic Priests molesting children. Watch what they find out. (Play video at <https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/spotlight/90-priests>) From the clip, the news team believes there are only 13 priests in the Boston area that are participating in child molestation. From a metric standpoint, they find out that it's probably more like 90 priests. And as you saw in the clip, it took the news teams breath away. And that's just Catholic priests. That doesn't include all other clergy. It's horrifying to think that we live in a world where "holy" men are participating in such sinful and despicable acts. These are the leaders that we have come to trust. And to find out that they have broken our trust in this way is an act of betrayal. How does this happen? We give away our power without much or any accountability to those in leadership. And as someone once said, "absolute power, corrupts absolutely." When someone receives a lot of power without much or any accountability, it's easy for that power to corrupt any individual. To withstand the corruption of power, they would have to have incredible moral character. The temptation for those who have great power is always, "what can I get away with?"

We see this with Abimelech today. Abimelech is the son of Gideon. Except, as stated in verse 18, Abimelech is the son of a "slave woman." So that makes Abimelech an illegitimate son of Gideon. Therefore, he has less status and right to be the ruler over the Israelite people. So let me lay out this scene for you. Abimelech has next to no chance of becoming ruler over the Israelite people. Not only because he's an illegitimate son, but because he has seventy brothers, many of whom would be in-line to rule before him. Imagine what his lifestyle was probably like as an illegitimate son. He probably was treated like a slave, just as his mother. He probably rarely received gifts from his father. Not to mention, with seventy brothers, Abimelech probably wasn't his Father's top priority for quality time. He was probably virtually fatherless and without much of a moral compass. A young man who has no hope for the future of his father's and his brothers probably constantly rubbing it in his face that he will not inherit this future, what do you think he's going to do? He's feeling pretty powerless. Well...let's find out. "Now Abimelech son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's kinsfolk and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's

family,²“Say in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?’ Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.”³ So his mother’s kinsfolk spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem; and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, “He is our brother.”⁴ They gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the temple of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him.⁵ He went to his father’s house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone; but Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, for he hid himself.⁶ Then all the lords of Shechem and all Beth-millo came together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.” I’m not sure why these Lord’s of Shechem thought that Abimelech was better to follow than all the others, but they did. It appears as if the Lord of Shechem never thought of this issue before, of being ruled by seventy sons, but I’m sure they’ve thought of it plenty and the disaster that it would be. But then Abimelech offers them an easy solution to the problem: kill them all. And of course, in his lust for power, that he was never going to be able to get otherwise, He kills them all except for Jotham, who gets away.

Here are a few interesting tidbits that enhances the story. Abimelech is the first person in the Old Testament to claim for himself the title of “king” in verse 6. Abimelech’s name, literally means, “my father is king.” The father in his name is Father God who is truly king. So, here’s the irony, God is supposed to be the true king and Abimelech names himself to be king. Sound familiar? Related to that is this question that scholars are still in debate about, “Was Abimelech a judge?” Abimelech names himself to be a “king,” not a “judge.” Even though he is the descendant of a judge. And, another difference in this story is that Abimelech asserts his leadership by his own hand by killing his brothers. No where in the text do we see God call him to be a judge over Israel. Before, the other judges were all called by God to deliver the Israelite people. Yet, as we will see, Abimelech actually becomes the one who terrorizes and enslaves the people. Some scholars say that Abimelech was a judge, even though he’s a bad one, because he fits the description of “tribal warrior chieftain.” Others say he’s not a judge, but one forcefully asserting kingship. To these scholars he’s not a judge because there is no mention of God ordaining him to such a task. Another interesting tidbit is that Abimelech kills all of his brothers with “one stone.” That’s an important fact that comes back onto the scene by the end of Abimelech’s story.

Next, Jotham, the only one left from all the brothers Abimelech killed, finds the Lords of Shechem and tells them a fable. And here’s Jotham’s interpretation of the fable, “¹⁶Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and honor when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have

done to him as his actions deserved—¹⁷for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and rescued you from the hand of Midian; ¹⁸but you have risen up against my father’s house this day, and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his slave woman, king over the lords of Shechem, because he is your kinsman—¹⁹if, I say, you have acted in good faith and honor with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; ²⁰but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the lords of Shechem, and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the lords of Shechem, and from Beth-millo, and devour Abimelech.’ ²¹Then Jotham ran away and fled, going to Beer, where he remained for fear of his brother Abimelech.” Jotham leaves the scene entirely and it’s interesting what happens next. Abimelech rules for three years. This is where God, finally, gets involved. “²³But God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem; and the lords of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech.” Things didn’t go so well for those three years and it comes to a head in this scene. “...out of hostility to him, the lords of Shechem set ambushes on the mountain tops. They robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was reported to Abimelech. ⁴⁶When all the lords of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the temple of El-berith.⁴⁷ Abimelech was told that all the lords of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. ⁴⁸So Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the troops that were with him. Abimelech took an ax in his hand, cut down a bundle of brushwood, and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. Then he said to the troops with him, ‘What you have seen me do, do quickly, as I have done.’ ⁴⁹So every one of the troops cut down a bundle and following Abimelech put it against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them, so that all the people of the Tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand men and women.” A terrible end to the Lords of Shechem. But if you remember from Jotham’s fable, if their cause and actions were unrighteous, “...let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the lords of Shechem, and Beth-millo...” That’s exactly what happens. I guess their actions weren’t so righteous.

And then, remember the second half of that interpretation of the fable, “...and let fire come out from the lords of Shechem, and from Beth-millo, and devour Abimelech.” Well...Abimelech goes to another town, Thebez and takes it except for a tower. “⁵¹But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the lords of the city fled to it and shut themselves in; and they went to the roof of the tower. ⁵²Abimelech came to the tower, and fought against it, and came near to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. [He tries to do the same thing that he did to the Lord’s of Shechem.] ⁵³But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head, and crushed his skull.” Remember that “one stone” that Abimelech used to kill his seventy brothers? He, too, was killed by one

stone. And his death echoes the story of Sisera being killed by the tent peg into his temple by Jael. Abimelech doesn't want to suffer the same humiliating end and therefore asks his fellow soldier to kill him before he dies by the millstone thrown by a woman. Do you see how this story comes full circle? It's essentially a "you reap what you sow" story. While we can understand Abimelech's frustration with being an illegitimate son of Gideon, the end of his actions don't justify the means. And again, we see God get involved at the end of this story, "⁵⁶Thus God repaid Abimelech for the crime he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers; ⁵⁷and God also made all the wickedness of the people of Shechem fall back on their heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal." God's involvement comes to disrupt what Abimelech and the Lords of Shechem are doing, not to ordain or justify their actions.

There are many things that are troubling about our passage, but what is most troubling to me and may be applicable to our world today, is that God sends an "evil" spirit upon Abimelech and the Lords of Shechem. It begs the difficult theological question, "If God is the author and controller of all, is He also the author and controller of evil?" It's a question that I, honestly, can't answer for you. But it's a question worth being asked. There's another theological question that's similar to it, "Does God disrupt unity so that we don't become gods unto ourselves?" Biblical scholar Dennis Olsen says this on his reflection of this question, "...some conflict and disagreement within a community are normal and even desirable for a vital and creative group. However, a given community can reach a point when conflict becomes so hurtful and deep that it paralyzes rather than energizes the community or groups within the community. Then it's time for soul searching and serious evaluation of the community's mission and its relationships to God and to other communities with whom it relates." Another Biblical example of God sowing division is in Genesis 11 when God sees that the people are capable of erecting a building so tall that it can reach the heavens. He sees that their unity will cause them to believe that they are gods themselves. And therefore, he makes them all speak different languages in an effort to disconnect the people. To sow division among them. I found this thought very provoking as I witness the Church of the Brethren being sown with division mainly over theological differences. I find it provoking as we witnessed extreme and hateful division in our latest Presidential Election. I find it provoking as we witness division among our brothers and sisters in Christ over topics of human sexuality. Are we living in a time where God is intentionally sowing division among us? Is God the author of declining church attendance because He wants us to see again how much we need Him? Over the centuries, have we become so self-reliant to believe that we are gods unto ourselves? That God needs to sow division among us so that we can re-unite under Him rather than ourselves?

Abimelech isn't the first person in human history to be tempted by power. The temptation for power can go as far back as Adam and Eve. And it's even a temptation among the most righteous of people. Remember, that story of Jesus in the wilderness. Where the devil tempts Him. Matthew 4, verse 8, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him." Even Jesus was tempted by great power and He was the son of God. This temptation of power also reminds me of all these mega-church pastors. How many mega-church pastors have we adored and admired, we put them up on a pedestal, to only find out that they were part of some scandal and had to resign? It's not confirmed yet because it's in the middle of litigation, but Bill Hybels the founder of Willow Creek has been accused of sexual harassment in the work place. 6 months before his planned retirement, he resigned from Willow Creek to avoid putting Willow Creek through further pain. Did he do it? We don't know. He denies the allegations. But if it's true, it serves as another example of a great Christian leader being seduced by power.

One of the most compelling things about Jesus is that He is the Son of God and yet he continually throughout the gospels humbles himself before the people. He takes the posture of servant. A bleeding woman stops Him in the large crowd. He could have ignored her because of His great ascension to power among the people. But he didn't. "Jesus turned and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.'" And she was healed. At the last supper in John 13, Jesus humbles himself in washing the dirty feet of the disciples. In verse 16 he says, "Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them." Even upon His pain and death on the cross, the people mock and tempt His divine power in Luke 23:35-36, "And the people stood watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'" One of the criminals on the cross beside him said the same. Even among pain, death and mockery on the cross, Jesus served all of humanity. Not succumbing to the temptation to hoist himself off the cross and display his power. But that He could show them that the most powerful force known to man, death, could not hold back the Son of God.

Where as Abimelech's story was a cautionary tale of what not to do with power, Jesus is the example of what to do with power. Power and influence are inevitable in this world. Whether we ask for it or not. Our passage reminds us, the

dishonorable ascension to power brings dishonorable outcomes upon our lives. Jesus' influence among his disciples and the people did not come by dishonorable means, but by serving those in need. By humbling himself. Even when we ascend to positions of power, honorably, we have to remind ourselves that we are not the ones in charge. That we are not gods. The minute we believe that we can attain power, for good reasons or not, for our own glory, is the minute we give God reason to sow division among us. Power isn't bad in and of itself, but it can corrupt. And absolute power, corrupts absolutely. We saw this in the video earlier in the discovery of 90+ clergy engaging in acts of child molestation in Boston. We saw this in Abimelech killing 70 brothers to be king. The power we have, in social influence, in money, in politics, can be used to destroy, hurt and build our own glory. Power used in such a way will ultimately come back to haunt us. Power given by God, used to glorify God, by serving His people will lead God to say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Believe it or not, you may not be wealthy and you may not be leaders of big organizations, but you have power. Compared to the rest of the world, we are wealthy. We have influence. We have power among our family and friends. We have power among our co-workers. The question isn't, "Do you want power or not?" The question is, "What are you going to do with the power God has given you?" "What are you going to do with the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus, inside you?" Are you going to use such power to glorify yourself and become a god to yourself? Or are you are going to humble yourself and become a powerful servant to others in the name of Jesus? As Jesus said to Pilate in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." God's kingdom is not of this world. God's kingdom is so much different than the world we live in. God's power is not the same as the power-hungry people of this world. If we want to glorify God and see His kingdom come to this earth, then we need to live kingdom-oriented lives: using our power to serve others. To serve in the name of Jesus. Amen.