

The Danger of Success

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here.

And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we've become convinced that there's no one so good they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word.

This morning, we're picking back up in our series in the book of Judges, which we were last at right before Christmas. And you'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things.

It's about the constant need for renewal and revival among God's people. It's about the need for a true and faithful king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men.

It's about the power of spirit-filled leadership among God's people. And it's also about God's mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me.

[1 : 13] Now, you may remember that we've been in the story of Gideon for some time now. The story of Gideon takes up chapters 6 and 7 and 8, and now we're at the very end of chapter 8, where we get to see how everything concludes.

Last time, we saw Gideon after he had had his victory against the Midianites. And unfortunately, it was a commentary on the sorry state of Israel, that they were loyal.

Groups and individuals were loyal to themselves and only themselves. And so we saw, for example, the men of Ephraim were concerned not for God's victory or success, but that they did not receive the honor or glory they thought they deserved.

Gideon goes and asks for help from the men of Succoth and the men of Penuel, and they say, No, we're not interested in helping you. We'd rather save our own skins. And then Gideon himself shows his self-centeredness when he goes and murders his own fellow Israelites, the men of Penuel.

And so it highlights the problem we're going to see again this week, that we need a faithful and true king. As Gideon's story ends, it doesn't end well, and so we're going to look again at the dangers of success, the very dangers that God had warned his people against all the way back in chapter 7.

[2 : 35] So with that, I'm going to invite you to turn with me in God's Word. We are in Judges 8, starting at verse 22. You can turn with me in your Bible. You can turn on your phone.

You can turn in your worship guide. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word. And God tells us that his Word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold, and it is sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb.

And so that's why we read now Judges 8, starting at verse 22. Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.

Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. The Lord will rule over you. And Gideon said to them, Let me make a request of you.

Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil. For they had golden earrings because they were Ishmaelites. Verse 25. And they answered, We will willingly give them.

[3 : 44] And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels.

And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city in Aphra. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more.

And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon. Verse 29. Jeroboam, the son of Joash, went and lived in his own house.

Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine, who was in Shechem, also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech.

And Gideon, the son of Joash, died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash, his father, at Aphra of the Abizrites. As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-Bareth their god.

[5 : 03] And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side. And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and we thank you again for bringing us here together on this cold and chilly morning.

And we thank you for coming again to speak to us through your word. We ask that you would do that very thing that you promised. You promised us in Isaiah chapter 55 that your word will not return empty, but it will accomplish great things in the lives of your people.

And so we ask for that this morning, that you would grow our understanding of our sin, and you'd also grow our understanding of your mercy and your grace. That you would change us because of our time here, that we would look more and more like Jesus.

We thank you that we don't have to worry about whether we've earned or deserved these things. We know that we haven't, and so we ask for them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Robert Caro is a name some of you may recognize.

[6 : 26] He's a famous biographer known for his multi-volume work on President Lyndon Johnson. In fact, Caro is in his 90s right now, and the question is whether he's going to be able to finish the final volume before his death.

And so there's this race because there's one volume left in his magnum opus. Caro tells us that Johnson concealed his real motives, his real purpose, his intentions for decades.

Between 1937 and 1957, Johnson voted against every single civil rights bill that showed up on the floor of the Senate.

He convinced other leading Democrats, especially Richard Russell, who is the senator from Georgia, that he was firmly opposed to civil rights. And so because of this, they helped Johnson move his way up the ranks.

They thought, okay, he's on our team, and so we're going to let him continue to advance. During this time, Johnson just waited. And then November 22, 1963 comes, and President Kennedy is assassinated.

[7 : 32] That same day, Johnson is sworn in as President of the United States, and not four days later, Johnson goes to Congress and says, guess what?

Now it is time to put equal rights into law. And so that very next year, 1964, the Civil Rights Act is passed.

When Johnson announces this, it's a great shock to all of these men who had helped him advance through the years. They thought, Johnson is on our team. He's our man. And then he gets in front of them and says, actually, surprise, guys, I'm not.

I've been for civil rights all along. His speechwriter asked him at one point, hey, are you for real on this? And Johnson said, I swore to myself when I was teaching those kids in Texas, early in Johnson's career, he was a high school teacher, that if I ever had the power, I was going to help them.

Now I have the power, and I mean to use it. The point is this. Success reveals the heart.

[8 : 38] Success allows people to show what it is they wanted all along. It reveals their plans. Because now, and this is what Caro points out, they have the power to make it actually happen.

They don't need to worry about whether people are going to help them advance up the ranks. They're all the way. They're already at the top. And so it reveals the heart for better or for worse. For Johnson, for the better, of course, it's good that he opposed racial discrimination and put an end to Jim Crow.

For Gideon, for the worse. Because we find out what's actually been in his heart all along. We had some foreshadowing back in chapter 7 about what was actually going on inside Gideon.

Remember, he leads these 300 men against the people of the east. And what does he tell them that they're going to yell out as their battle cry? They are supposed to say, for the Lord and for Gideon.

And so what do they do when they charge out? That's in verse 18. He gives them those instructions. And then verse 20. That's what they say, for the Lord and for Gideon. But the second half wasn't necessary.

[9 : 50] They're only there to fight for the Lord, not for Gideon. That small hint then continues in this story. We see verse 22.

People of Israel are so pleased with Gideon that they come to him and say, guess what? We would like to make you a king. Not just a king. We want a dynasty. Verse 22.

Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also. For you have saved us from the hand of Midian. And Gideon here, the very next verse, he gives them the right answer.

Gideon gives them the spiritual answer. He knows what he's supposed to say. I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.

Gideon here provides them with a wonderful, pious answer. No, I'm not going to do that because, of course, I'm not worthy. Right? And God is the one who is the king of Israel.

[10 : 50] The problem with the right answer, though, is this. And this is on page 7 of your worship guide. We'll often say one thing and do another. Or more precisely, we'll say what we think other people want to hear.

And then in private, do what we want. Thus the old saying, don't listen to what people say. Watch what they do.

Gideon's words and his actions do not line up. Gideon says, no, God is the true king. Let's not listen to what Gideon says.

Let's watch what he actually does. And as we watch him, we learn quite a lot. Gideon quickly pivots from lip service to God to outright idolatry.

In verses 24 through 27, he says, on the one hand, God is king. And on the other hand, let's set up an idol. The first thing he does, though, is he receives an offering from these people.

[11 : 52] So verse 23, hey, I'm not going to rule over you. God's the king. Verse 24, but while we're talking about this, about how much you appreciate me and how great it was that I saved you, let's just pause on that for a moment.

How about we take up a love offering? You guys could bring me, I won't become the king, but you could give me all your golden earrings right now. I mean, while you're feeling all this emotion and this gratitude towards me, how about the people of Israel put their money where their mouths are?

And that's exactly what happens. They come forward. They give him all their golden earrings. By the way, if golden rings sound familiar, this happened with God's people earlier in the Old Testament when they set up the golden calf.

That was made out of golden rings. We're not meant to miss that. They bring him. Not just that. Sounds like verse 25 and 26 here. There's also crescent ornaments and pendants.

And there's purple garments. So yeah, God's going to be the king. Again, also, it would be nice if I could finally cash in on all these risks that I've taken. People of Israel here, they play along.

[13 : 07] And so he collects all this gold. The next thing he does is he, verse 27, makes an ephod and puts it in his city. Now to understand what's happening here, we have to track with what an ephod is exactly.

An ephod was a tunic that would be worn by the high priest. And it's important to know there's only one high priest. It's an article of clothing that he would wear. On the breastplate of the ephod, there was the urim and the thumim, which were used to discern God's will for his people.

Okay, so he's setting up, building something that is meant to only be worn by the high priest, who's in the city of Shiloh at this time. And this article that the high priest has is used for discerning God's will.

In other words, he is setting up an alternate location for people to come and worship God. Gideon is saying this, You don't have to go to the temple to worship God.

You can come to me instead. You don't have to go to the high priest and to the temple to discern God's will. You can come here instead. You know, the tabernacle in Shiloh is great.

[14 : 18] It's time for a satellite campus. Okay, this is going to be great for our city. It'll be great for the economy. And we find out very quickly what happens.

Same verse, verse 27. Which is a graphic language to say Israel was cheating on God.

Israel was not offering true worship to the true God. They were offering false worship to this false God. Not only did Gideon lead them astray, he also, it tells us, led his family astray.

And himself, it became a snare to Gideon and his family. Gideon is pulling these people in the opposite direction from where he's supposed to be leading them.

It's not just idolatry that is his problem, though. Gideon, while he says, on the one hand, I'm not going to be king. God is going to be king. He then proceeds to do exactly what we would expect from a king.

[15 : 24] This love offering that he takes in verses 25 and 26 is more than enough gold than he needs to put together this ephod. And so what we're finding out here is that Gideon becomes extremely wealthy.

And what is it that a wealthy king is going to do with his resources? Well, verse 30, he's going to use his resources to have many, many wives. In case the point is not clear, he then spells it out for us literally.

Verse 31, he calls his son Abimelech. What does Abimelech translate to? Abimelech means my father is king. Not only does he act like a king, he names his son in such a way that it is clear he thinks he is a king.

Some have pointed out that he has already been acting like this. Back in chapter 7, beginning of chapter 8, as he's going on this rampage of revenge, he's doing exactly what we would expect of an ancient king.

The passage teaches us many things. One of them is this. Many people, especially in the church, know the right thing to say.

[16 : 49] Many people know the right thing to say, and their hearts are worshiping something else. The person with an enormous ego knows enough manners to thank their team for success.

But internally, they're congratulating themselves for how smart and talented they are. Externally, they're smart enough to say, hey, you know, it's all God.

God was the reason this was successful. Internally, they remind themselves of how much brilliance and foresight and work ethic they have. It's easy for us to talk a big game about our Christian witness.

And then when we're more out in the world, we disguise the fact that we believe basic things about the Christian faith that would offend our culture.

And we downplay our faith in conversations with non-Christians. It's easy for us to talk about how indignant we are about the morality of the world around us.

[18 : 04] And then when the magnifying glass comes to find we found our own ways to cheat and gossip and cut corners.

It is easy for us to say one thing and do another. And that's what Gideon does here. Why is there such a disconnect?

Well, it's because blessing and success in service to God do not make us immune to idolatry.

Blessing and success in service to God does not mean that we no longer have to keep watch over our hearts. That we're no longer at risk of the temptation to believe it's not God that's great, but it's us.

We're not going to be able to believe it's us. In fact, success can put us at even greater risk. If we think that we are somehow now the good guy, we're beyond temptation. And yet not everything we do is right and blessed.

[19 : 18] And so the walk of faith is every day looking to God, reminding ourselves it is him and him alone who gives us blessing and success.

It is God and God alone who put us in the family that we're in, gave us the talents that we have, opened the doors that were open, provided opportunities where there were none.

In other words, we have to remind ourselves every single day of what we're told in Psalm 127. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. Christian author Corrie ten Boom became famous for the time she spent in a Nazi concentration camp.

And after that, she had a long career of speaking and writing. And that sort of career was the one where she received often praise and thanks from all sorts of people telling her how great she was.

[20 : 31] And so at one point she spoke on what it was she did to protect herself from this danger of success. How it was that she reminded herself of this truth that everything comes from God.

She said this, When people come up and give me a compliment, Corrie, that was a good talk. Or, Corrie, you were so brave. I take each remark as if it were a flower.

At the end of each day, I lift up the bouquet of flowers. I have gathered throughout the day and say, Here you are, Lord. It is all yours.

Every day, she reminds herself, in praise to God, that he is the one who establishes all things.

He's the Savior, not her. He's the Savior, not Gideon. He's the Savior, not us. Which gives us our final sobering reminder of Gideon's life, which is that beginning well does not guarantee that we end well.

[21 : 47] That life is filled with snares and temptations, and the world is constantly speaking lies to us.

And we're constantly speaking lies to ourselves, and so we have to be reminded week after week, day after day, that it is God and God alone.

At the end of his life here, Gideon sets up this idol in Aphra, his father's city. That's his last act, essentially.

Do you remember what the first thing Gideon did was? God called him and said, You need to go tear down an idol. Where? In Aphra.

Gideon sets up an idol in the very same place where he tore one down. God has brought Gideon on this journey of faith.

[22 : 47] He was a man who began, who was fearful. God assured him over and over again. Why did God allow him to fight with only 300 people?

For this very reason. Remember, the very beginning of chapter 7, verse 2, he says, I'm afraid if you have too many people, you're going to say, My hand has done this.

And what does Gideon do? He says, My hand has done this. Now, I want to give Gideon a fair shake. We find out here, not everything that Gideon does is bad.

He has some positive legacy. Verses 33 and 34, we find out when he dies, the idolatry gets even worse. So, in his imperfect leadership, Gideon, at some level, is restraining the people from even worse idolatry.

There is something positive here in the midst of a sad ending. And, in fact, Gideon shows up in Hebrews chapter 11. He's listed as one of these members of the hall of faith.

[23 : 56] And so, Gideon is, in one sense, faithful. On the other sense, compromised in his integrity and his legacy. And so, we're reminded, once again, of one of the major themes I've been telling you about over and over.

What does the book of Judges teach us? It teaches us of our need for a faithful and true king. It teaches us of our need for a king who can do what no human can do, change the hearts of men.

In Deuteronomy chapter 17, Moses provides God's word to the people and he tells them, here's what the ideal king of Israel should look like.

And this ideal king does the exact opposite of what Gideon does here. The ideal king does not amass wealth for himself. The ideal king does not amass wives.

And the ideal king obeys God. I told you at the beginning that Gideon says the right thing. He says the spiritual thing.

[25 : 03] That's only half true. When they come to him at the very beginning, they say, Rule over us because you saved us.

They say not one wrong thing, but two wrong things. Gideon only corrects one. He says, I won't rule over you. He corrects them with that. He does not correct the second statement because you saved us.

Who was it that saved Israel? It was not Gideon. It was God. And what do they say should be done for the one who saves them?

That is the one who rules over them. And so here, the author of Judges is reminding us of why it is that we look to God as our leader and our ruler.

Why it is that God is the one we praise for success and not ourselves. Because he and he alone is the one who saves. We know even more in the New Testament, our salvation is not something that comes from ourselves.

[26 : 13] It's not something we praise or congratulate ourselves for. No, our salvation comes by the king and the king alone. Our salvation is what comes from our Lord Jesus Christ.

That he is the one who provides not a small salvation like saving Israel from the people of Midian. He's the one who provides the great salvation. The salvation that we've seen in our Lord and Savior, our Lord Jesus.

That he came and lived the perfect life that we should have lived. He died the death that we deserved. And so we have nothing to praise ourselves for.

The heart of the passage is this. The problem of this passage is this. Confusion about who is the true Savior.

Confusion between our role and Jesus' role. Confusion between our Lord and Savior. Confusion between our Lord and Savior. In Luke chapter 10, Jesus sends out 72 of his followers to go out and to preach and to heal.

[27 : 18] And they come back, having done many great things. And they tell Jesus how excited they are that the demons have been subject to them. And they've accomplished so much. Do you remember what Jesus says to them?

Luke chapter 10, verse 20, he says, Do not rejoice that the demons are subject to you. Rejoice that your name is written in heaven.

Remember, God is the Savior and you are not. Remember, God is the one who establishes we are not.

Our salvation is our treasure. So we do not have to seek after other things. Whether it's gold or success or power or honor.

We can say what Gideon didn't say. Not just that God is the king, but God is the one who saves. Let's pray.

[28 : 25] Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you for your word, where you tell us what we need to hear, even when it's hard and challenging and unpleasant.

And we ask that you would use the example of Gideon to remind us of our need to praise you and you alone for all success and all blessing. That we would have lives characterized by daily faith and trust in you.

Praising you rather than ourselves. We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I invite you to stand for our closing hymn. Amen.