

A Wicked Ruler

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[0 : 0 0] You may be seated. 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 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. Now, we're continuing our series in the book of Judges, and you'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things. It's about the need for constant renewal and revival among God's people. It's about the need for a faithful and true 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, and it's about God's mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me. Last week, we finished what we'd been going over for several chapters, the story of Gideon, which took us from chapter 6 through chapter 8, and we saw, unfortunately, last week, the danger of success that Gideon, despite all of God's work with him and his grace to him, did not end well. He knew the right things to say, but his words and his actions didn't line up.

He said, on the one hand, God is the king, but on the other hand, he acted like he was the king. Now, in a one sense, it is true that we finish with the Gideon story, and it's true in the sense that Gideon is dead. On the other hand, it is not true that we finish with the Gideon story. This week is, in a sense, a follow-up to that, because not only do we get to see Gideon's son, Abimelech, who you'll remember his name means, my father is king, but Gideon's name is brought up, because the question is raised, you know, have you been faithful to Gideon and his interests?

And so this week, we're going to look at the root and the danger of wicked rulers. What's our involvement as followers with them? We see the temptation, again, to be loyal to ourselves above all else, and the temptation to choose leaders based on self-interest and not what actually honors God. Now, we have a little bit of a strange, interesting episode today as we begin Judges chapter 9, and so I'm going to do what I've done recently, which is I'm going to tell you the story, and then we're going to draw out a few principles from it. With that, I invite you to turn with me in God's Word to Judges chapter 9. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn on your phone. 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's sweeter even than honey. Honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. And so that's why we read now Judges chapter 9, starting at verse 1. Now Abimelech, the son of Jerobel, went to Shechem to his mother's relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, which is better for you? That all 70 of the sons of Jerobel rule over you, or that one rule over you. Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh. And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother. And they gave him 70 pieces of silver out of the house of Belbereth, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows who followed him. And he went to his father's house at Aphra, and killed his brothers, the sons of Jerobel, 70 men on one stone. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerobel, was left, for he hid himself.

[4 : 16] And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Bethmillo. And they went and made Abimelech king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem. Verse 7. When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and cried aloud, and said to them, Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, rain over us. But the olive tree said to them, Shall I leave my abundance by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees? And the tree said to the fig tree, You come and rain over us.

But the fig tree said to them, Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go hold sway over the trees? And the tree said to the vine, You come and rain over us. But the vine said to them, Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men, and go hold sway over the trees? Then all the trees said to the bramble, You come and rain over us. 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. Verse 16. Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jeroboam and his house, and have done to him as his deeds deserved, for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and delivered you from the hand of Midian. And 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 female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative. If you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jeroboam and with his house then to this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the leaders of Shechem and Bethmila.

And let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Bethmila, and devour Abimelech. And Jotham ran away and fled, and went to Veer, and lived there because of Abimelech, his brother.

I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we praise and thank you again that you have given us your word, and you speak to us through it and by it. And we also come asking for your help. We know that we cannot understand it by ourselves, that we need your spirit to come and help us to see clearly. So we ask that you would do just that, that you would send your Holy Spirit to open up our eyes and our ears to clear our minds, to soften our hearts, that we would be able to see and hear and believe and understand everything that you have for us in your word. We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week, we left off on a sad note, and we left off on a sad note, not just in the story of Gideon, that Gideon did not end well. He acted like a selfish pagan king rather than a godly king.

[7 : 44] But we also left off on a sad note when it came to the entire people of Israel. If you have your Bible with you, you can look at the last two verses from last week. How did things conclude with Gideon?

Well, we were told, verse 34, the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God. That's the primary problem. And then we're told a secondary problem, verse 35.

They did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam, that is Gideon. And so Abimelech is going to come here and take advantage of those two failures. You may remember that Abimelech was Gideon's son, and it was his Gideon's son, not by one of his wives. Remember, he had 70 sons with his wives. That's in verse 30 from chapter 8. But this was with his concubine. And this is the one, for whatever reason, Gideon decided to give the name, my father is king. This helps us understand why Abimelech is running to Shechem. That is where this concubine is from, his mother. And he goes to take advantage of the situation in Israel with these two groups that we see at the very beginning.

The first group that appears in verses 1 and 3 are his mother's relatives, or the whole clan of his mother's family. And then we hear this other phrase, all the leaders of Shechem. Abimelech, being shrewd, decides he's going to start a whisper campaign. He's going to start building a coalition.

He's going to go from the smaller group and use them to infiltrate and influence the larger group. And so he works up his personal relatives, the people who know his mother, their clan, and he sends them to go whisper in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem so that he can have his way.

[9 : 35] And we see, unfortunately, what this coalition is built on. He gives them two reasons. The first one is, hey, do you want to be ruled by 70 men or by one man? But then we find out next what the real reason is. This is verse 2. Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.

And that is what actually convinces these people to follow after him. Verse 3, when the whisper campaign starts, his mother's relatives say, remember, he is our brother. The same thing shows up in Jotham's speech.

Verse 18, he says, you have risen up against my father's house this day and have killed his sons, and then skip to the end there, because he is your relative.

In other words, Abimelech is able to launch this campaign and succeed, not merely because he is shrewd, but because of the sorry state of Israel. We've talked about this before. Israel has gotten so bad that they are loyal and only loyal to themselves and their group.

They are only interested in what will serve them. Remember the beginning of chapter 8, Gideon was looking for help. The men of Ephraim tell him, sorry, we don't want to get involved.

[11 : 04] He then goes to the men of Succoth and Penuel, asking them for bread. And they say, we don't want to help you. Sorry, the men of Ephraim don't want to get involved. They want the honor and the glory. It's the men of Succoth and Penuel who say, we don't really want to help you. And so we see this downward spiral in God's people that culminates in chapter 8 with Gideon actually killing fellow Israelites. Remember, he goes and kills the men of Penuel. That same pattern, that same instinct is repeating itself here. Why is nepotism so tempting? Why is it such a good thing to give favors to your family and your friends simply because they're your family and your friends? Well, the assumption is they will treat us better. They will do what is best for our clan. They will make sure that we receive the cream of the crop. They will look out not for what's best for everyone, not what's fair and what's right, but what will help us. They show favor to Abimelech because they expect favor in return. And so we're seeing the same pattern that we've seen before, this downward spiral of the people of Israel as they sink deeper and deeper into sin. So the pattern that we were told at the very beginning, remember

Judges chapter 2 verse 19, it says, every time they became more corrupt. They did not remember the ways of their fathers. Instead, they proceeded to sink lower and lower. Now, Abimelech doesn't say this out loud, but when he asks them, hey, do you want 70 or 1? And they choose the 1, not the 70. The implication is this. It's not stated. Something's got to happen to the 70. They know that. And so verse 4, they give him these 70 pieces of silver out of the house of Belbareth. They take money from this pagan temple. They give it to Abimelech. He knows what he's supposed to do with it, and they know what he's supposed to do with it. If he is going to rule over his brothers, it's time to hire some hit men.

And so that's what happens. Verse 5, he takes the money. Verse 4, he hires worthless and reckless fellows, and they're all killed on one stone.

Now, it's helpful to pause just for a minute. Don't miss how gross and ridiculous this is. It was bad enough in chapter 8 when Gideon killed the men of Penuel. It is even worse now when Abimelech kills his brothers.

This is not run-of-the-mill Israelite behavior. This is not the low-level idolatry we saw at the beginning of Judges. No, this is God's people acting no better than the nations around them.

[14 : 23] We are getting to the point where things are going to drop and drop fast. One pastor puts it this way, Gideon killed fellow Israelites. Now Abimelech murders his own family.

That's how bad it is. That's how far off track the people of Israel have gone. There's a critical detail though here and a critical mistake that Abimelech makes.

He is able to kill all of the 70 except the youngest. We see in verse 5 that Jotham escapes. Perhaps Abimelech should ask for one piece of silver back. Maybe he needs a refund.

And that leads us to this parable. We see in verses 7 through 15, Abimelech having to stay away from Shechem gets up on Mount Gerizim and he shouts out to give this parable to the people of Israel.

He says, look, think about the trees and these trees are going to go pick a leader and they have all these different options. The trees first, they go to the olive tree. Olive tree though is actually trying to do good for the community. It's trying to serve those around it. So the olive tree says no.

[15 : 42] And he goes to the fig tree. Fig tree is also trying to do good things and serve the community. Fig tree says no. They go to the vine. Maybe the vine will rule over us. The vine says no.

Finally, they choose the worst option of all. Let's go and talk to the bramble about this.

And the bramble says this surprising and ironic statement. If you look with me, verse 15, the bramble says, then come and take refuge under my shade.

What kind of shade do brambles offer? None. There is no way that brambles are going to be able to protect the trees. And so Jotham here is making two basic points for these people. First one is reminding us that they forgot what Gideon had done. He said, look, you have not shown good faith to Gideon.

Remember all the things that he did. This is how you repay him. You go and you kill 69 of his sons. Even more than that, instead of honoring Gideon for the right reasons, you've honored Abimelech for the wrong reasons.

[17:05] But it's even more than just a point of honor. You have chosen the wrong type of leader. You had all these good options. There were other avenues to pursue. You could have spent more time talking to the olive tree and the fig tree and the vine. And what do you choose? The worst leader possible.

And so, yes, what we see here in this passage is about Abimelech's selfishness, about his violence. And it is also about the foolishness and selfishness of the people.

Remember, I told you I'm going to tell you the story and then we're going to draw out a few principles. In this passage, this story teaches us a couple of things. First, we often get the leaders we deserve.

We often get the leaders we deserve. There's the old parable that says that politics is downstream from culture, which means if we look at the leaders we have, they're a reflection of the culture we've already embraced and promoted.

This is not just a principle in politics in the world, though. It's also a spiritual principle. There's a few many examples we could give. One of them is going to come later in the story of Israel.

[18:30] You may remember 1 Samuel 8. The Israelites say, we want a king like the nations. We want to be like all these other pagan gods that we see around.

We want to have a leader who comes just like that. And what does God give them? He gives them Saul. Saul's name in Hebrew literally means asked for.

God gives the people of Israel what they asked for. He gives them a king like the nations. And if you're familiar with the story, you know that Saul on the outside has all the trappings of the king, but in the inside, he's characterized by selfishness.

The same thing happens here. They are not, the bramble is not thrust upon them. No, they choose the bramble. We often get the leaders we deserve.

We choose leaders who give us what we actually want. Show me leaders who act like celebrities and lack substance, and I'll show you a people who worship celebrity and have no patience for substance.

[19:49] Show me leaders who laugh off their sexual escapades, and I will show you a people who indulge every sexual desire.

Show me pastors and elders who avoid hard truths, and I will show you a congregation that loves to have their ears tickled.

Show me leaders who mortgage away the future. I'll show you a people who only care about pleasure and comfort now.

That's the question Jotham's asking them. Have you chosen this bramble in good faith? Now, you'll notice a couple key words I used there.

I said we often get the leaders we deserve, and I told you this was a principle, which means there are exceptions, right? There are times we get leaders who are better than what we deserve.

[20 : 54] We're going to see that at the beginning of chapter 10 in Judges. We see that with Moses leading the Israelites in the Old Testament. Sometimes there are leaders who are worse than we deserve. We see oppressors like Pharaoh over Israel.

But it is too easy, it is too quick to simply say, when we see corrupt leadership, that they are the source and not the symptom.

And yet the reality is often very different. Politics is downstream of culture. Leaders reflect the people they lead.

Every election, right? We're in election year. There's this hope that if we can just get the right people in office, then things will change. Because we don't like the current people we have.

Well, who chose those people? We did. The men of Shechem choose the bramble.

[22 : 01] And so first, we see the principle that we often get the leaders we deserve. And so the second principle is related. It is a warning about what we look for.

It is a warning to be the type of people who choose leaders based on their character and their righteousness. We don't choose leaders based on how they might serve our selfish interests.

Now, we don't have as much control as we might like in the world around us. And so I want to bring this home for us here in the church. The most important application is actually for us inside of the church, not the world out there.

Because Israel in the Old Testament, we see that now as analogous and continuing in the church. We're going to talk about this for those of you who are in the new members class.

When we pick our leaders, we do not pick the person who's the richest, the most successful, the friendliest. We don't pick our buddy who's going to do our bidding.

[23 : 05] No, we look and we only look for men after God's own heart. We look for the most righteous and holy people we can find as our leaders.

This is on the back of your worship guide, which says something similar. God does not prize popularity, humor, or academic intelligence, being an extrovert, and so on.

He seeks men who hold to his truth, seek to lead their family rightly, are patient and self-controlled. He does not want well-mannered, well-dressed, 21st century equivalents of a Bimelech, chosen for the wrong reasons and the wrong qualities.

Jotham reminds the people of Israel, and he reminds us, choose your leaders for the right reason. The leaders you choose reflect the people you are.

Of course, the ultimate problem in this passage is not a Bimelech, and the ultimate problem is not that they chose the Bramble over the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine.

[24 : 24] The ultimate problem, we were told all before this story began, we were told at the very end of the last chapter, I mentioned this before, the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God.

They did not remember that God was the one who brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. They did not remember that God was the one who raised up judges, and it was this very sin that brought them into all the problems they experienced.

They did not remember what they were taught in Deuteronomy chapter 17 about the ideal leader that serves the people rather than themselves. They did not remember God's great saving acts and what that meant for them and for their lives.

For the people and judges, I told you this before, the great act of redemption in the Old Testament was God bringing his people out of slavery in Egypt. We in the New Testament have an even greater act of redemption that we look towards, often called the second exodus, was when we were delivered not out of slavery in Egypt, but were delivered out of slavery to sin.

We also must remember the Lord. Our solution is not simply to stop choosing bad leaders and start choosing good leaders.

[25 : 49] No, our problem is much greater and deeper than that. It is a problem of the heart. It is a problem we cannot solve on our own. No, we need to be reminded of the great acts of the Lord, that he is the one who's delivered us from the slavery of sin.

He's delivered us from the penalty of sin. He's delivered us from the power of sin. Why do we not need to choose leaders based on our selfish interests?

We don't need to choose leaders based on selfish interests because we believe there's not a hair that can fall from our heads without God knowing.

Because we know that God watches over our lives, and even though we go to sleep, he does not. We don't need to because we know what Hebrews chapter 1 tells us, that God holds the world together by the power of his word.

And so we can do what is right and choose what is right, no matter what, knowing God will honor. God will take care of us.

[27 : 07] We don't have to fight for it alone. God brings justice, so we don't take it into our own hands. God cares for his people.

We don't need to choose a bramble. We've already read Mark chapter 10 this morning, which tells us what changes the heart.

James and John come looking for power and influence, and they say to Jesus, hey, we want to sit at your right and left hand in the kingdom. They have this same heart that's in Abimelech.

They have the same heart that's in the people of Israel. Hey, we want to have what will benefit us. We want to make sure things are lined up for our glory and our good.

And Jesus tells them something very different. This is on page 4 of your worship guide. We already read this from Mark 10. But it shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

[28 : 14] For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. When we see the Son of Man serving us, that is what changes our hearts.

When we see the Son of Man protecting and caring for us, that is when we know we don't need to cut corners to watch out for our interests.

Giving himself as a ransom for many allows us to trust him to care for us and to choose leaders that are righteous and holy.

Leaders who serve God and not themselves. Leaders who follow after our Lord Jesus. Let's do the same. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you, and we thank you for positive examples and for negative examples.

We thank you for the warning of Abimelech, and we ask that you would be at work continuing to grow our knowledge and sight of Christ, that we would see him in all his holiness and beauty and power and glory and majesty and authority and mercy and love.

[29 : 41] That that would change us from the insides out. That we would know and believe and live as people who are cared for by you, watched over by you.

We ask these things in the mighty name, Jesus Christ. Amen.