

Gideon Sermon 3: Judges 8: Gideon the sinner

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most dangerous temptations we face is success. When we succeed and people begin to approve of us we can get an inflated view of our own importance thinking that our thoughts, plans, ideas, opinions and contributions are more important than anyone else's. When things go well for a preacher he may get the idea that God is blessing him and not blessing the gospel and that he can do no wrong. We often overlook the character flaws and even the unbiblical teachings of someone who is bringing about good results. We have the tendency of being pragmatists, that the right or wrong of the situation is proven by a good outcome not by testing whether things have been done in conformity to God's word. We tell ourselves that we must be doing alright if things are going well. Pride comes before a fall and on the heels of success, that is why the most important time to be vigilant is just after a success or breakthrough. Gideon has just had a success; God has used him and his 300 to overcome a great threat. In the cycles of the other judges we might have had a closing remark that Israel had peace for 40 years. However, the author wants to put more meat on the bone. We know that the cycles of the judges are going from bad to worse. The rest of the detail made available about Gideon's rule is evidence to support this downgrade.

Sinful conflict resolution

At the beginning of chapter 8 we see the reality that you can't please everyone. God has just used Gideon to help crush Israel's enemies and Ephraim are unhappy. They were one of the larger and stronger tribes and felt that they had missed out on the glory and the booty of the battle. We see in this attitude the truth when God said that Israel would seek its own glory through the success (7:2). Gideon plays the peacemaker. He seems to be an adept politician and diffuses the situation using flattery. Gideon underplays his victory against the fact that the Ephraimites were able to bag the leaders. Gideon did not preach to them of God's glory being magnified through weakness but rather appealed to their pride to placate them. He diffused the situation but did not progress the glory of God and help Ephraim understand His ways better.

This is something that we do often, and especially in our parenting. In our parenting, when we are seeking to motivate a child to honour God and do the right thing, we are often more concerned with right behaviour than right motives and this affects how we motivate them. Gideon diffused a situation by appealing to pride; we do the same with our kids. We say things like, 'you don't want to turn out like so-and-so do you?' Or, 'Do you want to be

known as a liar?' When we say this we are not saying God deserves your obedience; or think about how much God has done for you shouldn't you willingly do this for Him; or here is an opportunity to put God before your sin and show His worth and glorify Him. No we resort to pride and fear. We get them to assume with us that being like so-and-so is worse than failing to deliberately glorify God. We get them to fear to be badly thought of, we get them to evaluate things in a shallow fashion based on the perception by others not God, and we appeal to their pride to get them to do right behaviour.

Sinful justice

In v4-21 we see Gideon the judge administering justice and it is a sad sight indeed. Gideon and his 300 are exhausted and in need of supplies to pursue the Midianites (8:4-5). He comes to the town of Succoth and requests supplies from them. The town plays it safe because the Midianites will exact vengeance on anyone who helps Gideon if they happen to beat Gideon's tiny army of 300. For Succoth 15000 against 300 still seem like good odds. In v7 we see that Gideon is full of his own importance, 'So Gideon said, "Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers." He does not preach to them of the great victory given and that they should trust in God, but promises a torture for the affront. Penuel answered the same way as Succoth and Gideon promised to break down their tower.

This is a common trait in us all. God has been patient and gracious and gentle with Gideon. Gideon was a good doubter and needed much gentle encouragement to trust God and be enabled to do His will. God indulged Him over and over, He sent the Angel of the LORD to speak with Him, He performed a miracle of arising in fire to heaven, He allowed the fleeces, He granted the dream. God had been kind and gentle. Now Gideon is faced with the unbelief of Succoth, he does not sympathize with their unbelief, He does not make the effort to teach them all that He had to take so long to learn. Gideon is impatient with their unbelief and severe when they fail to believe. We too do not give as we have received from God. God is gentle with us we are harsh with others, God is kind to us we are cruel to others, God is longsuffering with us and we are short-tempered with others. If we were to recognise how much we have been forgiven, how long God puts up with our unbelief, how many times He has condescended to help us in our slow and dull state we would be better in our dealings with others. Those who have been forgiven much love much, not only are they rich in love towards God but towards other unworthy sinners.

In v10-12 we see God routes the Midianites again before Gideon's 300 and Gideon is able to capture the two leaders. Then in v13-17 we see he comes back for his revenge upon Succoth and finds out all the names of the elders and whips them, and when it comes to Penuel he not only breaks down the tower but kills all the men of the town. These unjust methods and excessive force reveal that the cowering Gideon has become a terror. He is not as patient with their unbelief as God had been with his own.

In 18-21 we see the killing of the Midianite elders. We might expect there to be a trial but instead it turns out to be the settling of a personal vendetta. Gideon's main concern is for

the family that died at their hands v18-19. The execution of the leaders was first sought at the hand of his firstborn who had the right as the avenger of blood, but he was too young a fearful. So the leaders insulted Gideon's manhood and asked to be killed by him.

These excessive means and selfish motives do not reflect well on Gideon and reveal him for the sinner he was.

Sinful rule

In the last section reporting the nature of Gideon's rule we see that the people of God request Gideon to be their king. God has just delivered the people from Midian and they are fixated upon the man He uses and do not glorify Him. This tendency to only see the human instrument is a failure common to all sinners. We value the jar of clay more highly than the glory God puts in it, and credit the successes to man and not to God. Celebrity Christianity has the danger of falling into this where we exalt men whom God has used greatly giving more credence to their teachings and actions than we ought.

To Gideon's credit he gives credit to God, v23, 'Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." Gideon's words are good and correct, but then his actions go on to contradict what he said. Although he said he wanted God to be king in Israel Gideon went on to act like sinful king. Gideon reminds us of Christ's parable in Matt. 21:28 where a man had two sons, when the father told the first son to do something he said yes and did not do it, but the second said no but ended up doing it. Words without deeds are sinful lies.

His first act was one that violated God's role for the priest. Gideon made an Ephod out of the gold earrings from the spoil of war. The original ephod was to be used only by the high priest. It had the Urim and the Thummim in it, likely two stones with yes and no on either side. Two no's or two yeses would give a clear answer with a no and a yes giving a non-answer. Gideon was corrupting the priest's role taking the role of discovering God's will to himself. It appears that his actions in hanging out fleeces laid a pattern for miraculous guidance as a rule and he set himself up as the decision man speaking for God. Gideon's motives were probably sincere seeking aid in being a judge and making right decisions. But instead of going to God's word he usurped a priestly function. Turning his house into the house where God meets and guides His people and himself into a priest.

We see that the people of Israel ended up whoring after it, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family (v27). This leader who started well enough ended up improvising his own guidance from God and led the people from oppression into idolatry. When Gideon is commended for his faith, it is not for these innovations with God instituted things that he is being commended. V28 gives us the typical summary of peace we would have expected in the place of this sad series of failures, '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.' We see that although there was 40 years of peace from war with Midian it was not a time of spiritual prosperity.

The section ends with the introduction of the next ruler Abimelech. Gideon had 70 sons by many wives in the typical ANE kingly fashion. He even had concubines and one child by a concubine was Abimelech which means, my father is king. What sort of a name is that to give a child born to a man who said he did not want to be king, it appears that his resolve faltered. After Gideon died we see the typical cycle of returning to idolatry, this Baal worship, but a syncretised version because they made Baal-berith their god, berith is the word for covenant and the way in which God related to Israel. The people forgot God and Gideon.

The lessons are these. God using you does not condone everything you do or think. God using someone in church history does not make all of their opinions or actions correct. God using you or another is a privilege and we should not fixate on the instrument but the musician who yields it. We must remember that when things are going well we are not to give up on our sanctification, but act towards others as God has acted towards us. We must be careful to see in a shallow fashion and forget that all victory and blessing comes from God. We must learn that improvising with God's ways and remaking things with good intentions can be fatal.