

Sunday December 4, 2022
Lesson 1: Reign Over Us
Scripture: Judges 9: 1-15

Context:

This winter we start a new series titled “Power and Love.” Each unit will look at the dynamics of power and how God invites us to understand the significance of how we treat and love one another. The first unit is titled “Power and Vulnerability,” focusing on how power works with people, particularly those who are vulnerable. The first lesson comes from the book of Judges in the Old Testament and examines the power dynamics in the story of Abimelech and the people of Shechem.

Judges is the book to act as a transition between the entrance of the Israelites into the Promised Land and the eventual rise of the kingship. The book is not a necessarily celebrated history of the country. Judges gives a sobering and appalling presentation of how the Israelites repeatedly failed to live up to the ideal by worshipping other gods, by refusing to come to each other’s assistance, and by intertribal warfare.¹ A pattern develops as the people rebel against God and cry for help, receiving a leader who guides them, and then they revert to their old behaviors and are invaded.

One of the narratives in the book of Judges focuses on the judge Gideon and his family. Gideon, whose given name was Jerubbaal, came from an insignificant clan in Manasseh.² Yet God did not care his father worshipped the Canaanite deity Baal (as Gideon’s name means “Let Baal contend.”) God focused more on the gifts Gideon could offer to the Israelites. God rose Gideon up to accost the Midianites and their allies with a significantly smaller group of troops. As a result of his victory, the people want to crown him king and start a dynasty (Judges 8:22-23). Yet Gideon is wise and refuses to accept the kingship.

After another victory though, Gideon and his family begin to slide. Gideon takes booty from the Midianites and forms an idol, both things against what God has given the Israelites to follow. His turn infects his household as when he dies, things become dire in the land. His son Abimelech has heard the people whisper of wanting a king and he goes to his uncles in Shechem with a plan.

Shechem was an important religious and political center at the time of Abimelech. The “oak of the pillar” is associated with the story of Genesis 33:20 where Jacob places a large standing stone, which later becomes a sanctuary.³ There, Abimelech is crowned king after he massacres his brothers, save one who escaped, Jotham. Following Jotham’s pronouncement on his brother, Abimelech has a rocky reign ended with a grisly demise as the Lord’s spirit seeks to punish him for fratricide and making himself king.

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 213.

² Ibid., 220.

³ Ibid., 207.

Application

The book of Judges is perhaps best known for the last verse after the fall of the judge Samson: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). The last line is meant to be ominous as it illuminates how the people had lost their way and were more focused on themselves instead of community. Our story today also points to the appalling ways in which the vulnerability of people can be exploited by one toxic person who preys on others. The question becomes what kind of leaders do we look to follow?

I was honestly given chill bumps as I read this passage and thought about the application. The focus on entitlement, secret meetings, and breaking covenant were major themes to catch my eye for the struggles we face today. We too find ourselves in a time of Judges, where people use power to exploit vulnerable people and lead them astray.

When we hear the word “entitled,” we often think of children or teenagers who always get their way and go through life thinking things are owed to them simply because they exist. Yet I have come to find in my own life and in watching others, entitlement can creep up in all sorts of ways. We think because of who we are related to, the titles we hold, or even our gender or race makes us somehow special. We use it to seek what we want. Yet the problem becomes we have missed how leaders are not owed things. Leaders are to seek respect and trust by serving others. Anytime a leader appeals to us based on their relatives, their titles, or how they hold power over others, our red flags should go up.

The second red flag is the secret meetings to get what one wants. In some ways, we all know there needs to be private meetings for confidential matters. Yet the problem in this case and the issues we see today is when decisions are made, and others are used as pawns. It’s the judicatory overseer who meets with church lay leaders to discuss a minister and then never talks to the minister about the issues. It is the meeting where people have “anonymous complaints” and demand a response be made to meet their expectations. Those who engage in secret meetings can exploit power and vulnerable people can be affected. Secret meetings often lead to distrust, low morale, and in the case of Abimelech, total breakdown of a society. Anytime a leader plans based on secret meetings, beware and seek to find truth.

The last and perhaps most sad part of this story is breaking covenant. Abimelech clearly breaks covenant in several ways as he seeks to establish power and get what he wants. For today, we see people break covenant when they say they will follow the rules and structures only to leave when they do not get their way. Often, they start their own organization with them at the top, revealing they never wanted to be a part of the team in the first place.

The second and more tragic aspect of breaking covenant is the murder of Abimelech’s brothers. Today, we have leaders in religious and political structures who have no problem taking over and then slaughtering or using other people to get their way. They may not actually murder them, but they sure do find ways to diminish others. If you have leaders who encourage division and attacking others, beware. They are not out to support the group as a whole and often the one to benefit in everything is themselves, whether it is through acquiring power or resources, or both.

While this lesson has not been the most cheerful, it reminds us of how power and vulnerability are so important for us to consider in leadership and life together. The time of Judges revealed how poor leadership could impact the people of God for the worst. It reminds us to pray for good leaders, to look for good leaders, and to watch ourselves closely so we may hold honor and integrity in our life with one another.

What is important for leadership today? Who are good leaders you have seen lead with integrity and honor? What are red flags in a leader? How can you support good leaders or be a good leader? What qualities should good leaders possess?

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