

TEXT: Judges 9:1-21

TITLE: LORDING IT OVER THE SHEEP—THE ABIMELECH/DIOTREPHE'S MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

BIG IDEA:

ONE MAN RULE THAT LORDS IT OVER THE SHEEP USURPS GOD'S PREEMINENT ROLE AND RESULTS IN A REIGN OF FUTILITY THAT CULMINATES IN DESTRUCTION

INTRODUCTION:

If most Christians were asked to identify the first king of Israel, I am sure that the answer would be Saul. Anointed by Samuel at the direction of the Lord, he proved to be a disappointing king in contrast to David who would come after him. But generations before in the book of Judges we have this sad tale of Abimelech, a self-made king. He stands for everything that is wrong with ambitious, one man rule. His counterpart in the NT church paradigm would be Diotrephes.

You remember John's rant against his ruthless behavior in taking over the eldership and lording it over the flock: (**vv.9-10**)

*"I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who **loves to be first among them**, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church."* Abimelech and Diotrephes – the antithesis of the servant model of leadership advocated by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week's message laid the foundation for Abimelech's grasping at the throne:

OT Principle: The Invisible God wants to rule over His chosen people as a theocracy rather than appointing a visible king who will end up lording it over the people, exacting burdensome taxes, making their life miserable rather than serving under the righteous rule of God

NT Application: The Invisible Christ wants His chosen church to submit to His Headship as the Chief Shepherd with authority at the local level delegated to a plural group of godly undershepherds who function in accordance with their differing spiritual gifts rather than elevating someone to an unbiblical hierarchical position who might lord it over the flock or deflect the dependence and preeminence away from Christ. Eventually the kingship model will work – but only when the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, returns to reign in justice and righteousness.

Last week we saw the people try to make **Gideon** the first king. But he rejected their offer in theory while compromising in his behavior and in some key respects acting like a king. Now Gideon has departed from the scene. He leaves behind seventy sons from his many wives (a king type lifestyle) and Abimelech, the son of his concubine in Shechem.

James Jordan: The true godly system is one God, but many diversified human rulers. The pagan system is one statist rule, but as many idols and gods as you wish.

ONE MAN RULE THAT LORDS IT OVER THE SHEEP USURPS GOD'S PREEMINENT ROLE AND RESULTS IN A REIGN OF FUTILITY THAT CULMINATES IN DESTRUCTION

I. (9:1-6) CORONATION OF A WORTHLESS, DESTRUCTIVE KING – PREEMINENCE PURSUED FROM SELFISH AMBITION –

WRONGLY ESTABLISHING ONE MAN RULE USURPS GOD'S RIGHTFUL POSITION OF PREEMINENCE

A. (:1) Initiative for One Man Rule is Selfish Ambition

“And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives, and spoke to them and to the whole clan of the household of his mother's father, saying,”

Shechem = important from both a religious and economic standpoint; site where Joshua had recited the blessings and cursings of the law (**Josh. 8:30-35**); strategically located at the crossroads of important highways: east to west – from the coastal highway to the Jordan River; north to south along the central ridge from Jerusalem in the south to the northern accesses to the Jezreel Valley-- **F. Duane Lindsey**

Inrig: Near the city, Joshua had led the people to commit themselves to God's covenant, as they recited the blessings and cursings from Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. But when the people refused to obey God and drive out the Canaanites, Shechem became a mixed city. Canaanites and Israelites lived side by side, and together they worshiped Baal-berith, in the house of Baal. The city was saturated with Baalism . . .

Abimelech was raised to feel like an outsider – never on an equal footing with Gideon's other sons; always with the stigma of his mother being just a concubine rather than a wife with full privileges and respect. Given his personality and desire to have the preeminence, he was always looking for an opportunity to go to the head of the class. He ended up presenting his case for leadership to his mother's relatives – a relatively easy sell! He had no concern for God's program for leadership or for discerning and implementing God's will. He was driven by selfish ambition.

B. (:2a) Rationale for One Man Rule is Human Wisdom / Expediency

“Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?’”

“Which is better for you?” What about God's plan?? Think about how often we disappoint God because we make decisions independently of seeking His will. We decide on the basis of what we think is the best course for us.

God calls upon us to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. We must come to the Word of God and submit to His Spirit to determine His will.

Certainly Human wisdom will make sense to us. Arguments from expediency (what works) seem to be practical and productive. But God's thoughts and ways are not our thoughts and

ways. Here Gideon offers subjugation to one ruler – and a close relative at that – to being ruled by many – and those with no special ties to Shechem.

C. (:2b-3) Support for One Man Rule is Blind Loyalty

“Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh.” And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem; and they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, ‘He is our relative.’”

What are his **qualifications for leadership**?? Family loyalty

Interesting that one of the main charges against Abimelech is going to be his lack of loyalty towards the household of his famous father. Yet he uses family loyalty as his rallying cry to gain a following in Shechem.

D. (:4-5a) Implementation of One Man Rule is Ruthless

“And they gave him seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him. Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone.

Abimelech's campaign was financed out of the treasury of Baal money – interesting match that the seventy pieces of silver correspond to the number of sons that will be slain. This was the bounty money that would be used to entice the wicked mercenaries to carry out his mission of extermination.

Preceptaustin.org:

“Worthless” literally means empty or vain and indicates something that has nothing in it. Here it is used figuratively to describe the moral character of these men as "empty", as are all who are still in Adam. The Septuagint translates "worthless" with the Greek word "kenos" which conveys the idea that these men were without usefulness or success (our modern day slang term might be "losers"). They were men in whom there was nothing of truth, who could not be depended upon, whose deeds did not correspond to their words, who were boasters and imposters. These hired scoundrels were willing to do anything for silver, even murder.

"Reckless" (pahaz) means to be undisciplined, wild, insolent. "Reckless" and its derivatives are used elsewhere of turbulent water (Gen. 49:4) and prophets who abused their office (Jer. 23:32; Zeph. 3:4) No fear of God

These **worthless** and **reckless** fellows were not holding down any productive jobs in the community and were available for this campaign – an interesting point in light of the upcoming parable.

Gideon had torn down the altar to Baal; here we see human sacrifices to Baal; the sons were lined up and had to watch in horror as one by one they were dragged to the stone and decapitated. What a bloody mess – this was a horror show. Yet the rest of Israel stood by and did not respond or try to right this wrong.

E. (:5b) Opposition to One Man Rule is Precarious

“But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself.”

What could one young man do without any support against such a rabid mob of blood-thirsty thugs? Providence of God at work to preserve Jotham alive.

Lonely existence to stand in opposition to Satan's program for world dominion

F. (:6) Acceptance of One Man Rule is Widespread

“And all the men of Shechem and all Beth-millo assembled together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar which was in Shechem.”

Charles Pfeiffer: It was appropriate that Abimelech be proclaimed king at a spot with religious associations. The coronation took place *by the terebinth of the pillar*. Jacob had buried the idols which his family had gathered under a tree at Shechem (Gen 35:4), and there Joshua had set up a monument as a witness to the covenant between God and Israel (**Josh 24:26**).

**II. (9:7-15) CARICATURE OF A WORTHLESS, DESTRUCTIVE KING –
PARABLE OF THE BRAMBLE KING --**

WAVING IT OVER EVERYBODY ELSE IS ULTIMATELY A FUTILE ROLE THAT NEGATES YOUR OWN GIFTEDNESS AND STIFLES THE GIFTEDNESS OF OTHERS

A. (:7) Parable Introduced in a Bold Setting – Calling the Men of Shechem to Account

“Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and called out. Thus he said to them, ‘Listen to me, O men of Shechem, that God may listen to you.’”

Wiersbe: Perhaps the coronation celebrations were still in progress when Jotham interrupted with his parable from Mount Gerizim, which was adjacent to Shechem at the oak of Moreh.

The people's only hope is to respond to this message of warning from Jotham and seek God's mercy and forgiveness for their reprehensible actions. They have acted in a manner that is godless and reckless and now they are going to be called to give an account.

This is the first parable recorded in Scripture – a very powerful medium for communicating a simple message.

B. (:8A) Parable Illustrates the Incongruity of the Human Initiative in Anointing a King -- What Happens When the Inmates Try to Run the Asylum

“Once the trees went forth to anoint a king over them”

Back to the problem of the creation trying to wrest control away from its Creator

The trees had direct accountability to their Creator ... but now they want a visible ruler.

C. (:8B-13) Parable Interrogates Various Candidates for One Man Rule -- Three Examples of Leaders Who Reject the Opportunity to Lord it Over Others

not willing to forsake productivity for the allure of preeminence but the reality of futility

Matthew Henry: When they had it in their thoughts to choose a king, they did not offer the government to the stately cedar, or the lofty pine, which are only for show and shade, and not otherwise useful till they are cut down, but to the fruit-trees, the vine, and the olive. Those that bear fruit for the public good, are justly respected and honoured by all that are wise, more than they that affect to make a figure.

1. The Case of the Olive Tree

“and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us!’ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my fatness with which God and men are honored, and go to wave over the trees?’”

Adam Clarke: The olive was the most useful of all the trees in the field or forest, as the bramble was the meanest and the most worthless.

John Gill: by "fatness" oil is meant, pressed out of the fruit of the olive tree, and which was much made use of both in the burning of the lamps in the tabernacle, and in many sacrifices, as the meat offerings and others, whereby God was honoured; and it was also made use of in the investiture of the greatest personages with the highest offices among men, as kings, priests, and prophets, as well as eaten with pleasure and delight by all sorts of men, and even by the greatest, and so men are honoured by it

Block: Olive oil was the most valuable agricultural product in the ancient world, being used every day as cooking oil, medicine, laxative, lubricant, leather softener, fuel in lamps, an ingredient in perfumes, and as in sacred rituals as a sacrificial offering and in anointing ceremonies. In a context involving an invitation to kingship, the olive appropriately cites its ceremonial value. The olive would rather honor others than be narcissistically anointed with its own oil.

“wave over” – look at how the function of one man rule is mocked here – What are **the legitimate functions of leadership?**

- To protect the godly and punish the wicked
- To stimulate productivity
- To lead and guide
- To nurture and develop

Instead leadership is presented here as an empty ritual of waving it over others – making a show while enjoying the perks of being number one

2. The Case of the Fig Tree

“Then the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come reign over us!’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over the trees?’”

Adam Clarke: The fruit of the fig tree is the sweetest or most luscious of all fruits. A full-ripe fig, in its own climate, has an indescribable sweetness; so much so that it is almost impossible to eat it, till a considerable time after it is gathered from the trees, and has gone through an artificial preparation.

3. The Case of the Fruitful Vine

“Then the trees said to the vine, ‘You come, reign over us!’ But the vine said to

them, 'Shall I leave my new wine, which cheers God and men, and go to wave over the trees?'"

You probably have heard of **The Peter Principle** in the business realm:

The Peter Principle is the principle that "**In a Hierarchy Every Employee Tends to Rise to His Level of Incompetence.**" While formulated by Dr. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull in their 1968 book The Peter Principle, a humorous treatise which also introduced the "salutary science of Hierarchiology", "inadvertently founded" by Peter, the principle has real validity. It holds that in a hierarchy, members are promoted so long as they work competently. Sooner or later they are promoted to a position at which they are no longer competent (their "level of incompetence"), and there they remain. Peter's Corollary states that "in time, every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out his duties" and adds that "work is accomplished by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence".

(Wikipedia)

I don't want to necessarily take my most productive sales rep and promote him to the position of inside sales manager. Likewise I don't want to take my best technician and make him the service manager. Requires a different skill set. Just because you were successful in one realm doesn't necessarily equip you to take the next step up the ladder.

D. (:14-15) Parable Indicts the Self Promotion of the Worthless Bramble

"Finally all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!' The bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.'"

I'm happy to do it (since I am not all that productive anyway); but you must then be loyal to me.

Adam Clarke: The bramble or thorn, which, however useful as a hedge, is dangerous to come near; and is here the emblem of an impious, cruel, and oppressive king.

John Gill: this respects Abimelech, and describes him as a mean person, the son of a concubine, as having no goodness in him, not any good qualifications to recommend him to government, but all the reverse, cruel, tyrannical, and oppressive; and this exposes the folly of the Shechemites, and their eagerness to have a king at any rate, though ever so mean and despicable, useless and pernicious.

promising protection to them as his subjects, requiring their confidence in him, and boasting of the good they should receive from him, as is common with wicked princes at their first entering on their office; but, alas! what shadow or protection can there be in a bramble? if a man attempts: to put himself under it for shelter, he will find it will be of no use to him, but harmful, since, the nearer and closer he comes to it, the more he will be scratched and torn by it: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon;

signifying, that if they did not heartily submit to his government, and put confidence in him, and prove faithful to him, they should smart for it, and feel his wrath and vengeance, even the greatest men among them, comparable to the cedars of Lebanon; for thorns and brambles

catching fire, as they easily do, or fire being put to them, as weak as they are, and placed under the tallest and strongest cedars, will soon fetch them down to the ground

Wiersbe: Abimelech considered himself to be a stately tree of great value, but Jotham said he was nothing but a useless weed. What a blow to the new king's pride! When they chose Abimelech as their king, the men of Shechem didn't get useful olive oil, tasty figs, or cheery wine; they got only thorns – fuel for fire.

III. (9:16-21) CURSE FROM JOTHAM DIRECTED TOWARDS A WORTHLESS, DESTRUCTIVE KING AND THE MEN OF SHECHEM – PRIORITY ON TRUTH AND INTEGRITY

WARNING THE WICKED OF THEIR IMPENDING DESTRUCTION

Josh. 24:14 Serve God in truth and integrity –

A. (:16-19) Actions Based on a Life of Truth and Integrity Lead to Rejoicing

“Now therefore, if you have dealt in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have dealt with him as he deserved-- for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian; but you have risen against my father's house today and have killed his sons, seventy men, on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your relative-- if then you have dealt in truth and integrity with Jerubbaal and his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.”

People tend to get leaders they deserve

You can never go wrong following a course of truth and integrity; you must learn what it means to live a life of conviction – you can't just follow the crowd as the men of Shechem did – you will end up without joy and on the path to destruction

B. (:20-21) Actions Based on a Life of Deception and Disloyalty Lead to Destruction

“But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem and from Beth-millo, and consume Abimelech. Then Jotham escaped and fled, and went to Beer and remained there because of Abimelech his brother.”

CONCLUSION:

T. S. Eliot: “most of the troubles in the world are caused by people wanting to be important.”

ONE MAN RULE THAT LORDS IT OVER THE SHEEP USURPS GOD'S PREEMINENT ROLE AND RESULTS IN A REIGN OF FUTILITY THAT CULMINATES IN DESTRUCTION

Adam Clarke: The condensed moral of the whole fable is this: Weak, worthless, and wicked men, will ever be foremost to thrust themselves into power; and, in the end, to bring ruin upon themselves, and on the unhappy people over whom they preside.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Why were the Israelites so quick to dismiss the model of the theocracy and seek to embrace the kingship model of the surrounding nations?
- 2) What qualifications for leadership should we insist upon in the church of Jesus Christ?
- 3) How should our giftedness protect us against seeking some other exalted status?
- 4) How valuable is the shade of a bramble bush to a tall cedar tree? How ludicrous is the desire of men to encourage someone to lord it over them?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Constable: Abimelech that predicted the effect of his rule. Jotham (lit. Yahweh is perfect, honest) stood on the same mountain where six of Israel's tribes had declared the blessings of abiding by the law of Yahweh and denounced the Shechemites for their foolish and wicked actions. The contrast between the Israelites' commitments in Joshua 8 and 24 and this passage must be one reason the writer included Abimelech's story in Judges.

Jotham's fable was a parable with a moral (cf. 2 Sam. 12:1-4; 2 Kings 14:9-10). It is the first parable in the Bible. The olive and fig trees and the grape vine represented productive human beings, oil, figs, and wine being among the most important products of Canaan. Brambles bore no fruit and offered no shelter or protection. They only injured those who got too close to them. Moreover they spontaneously burst into flames in hot weather and sometimes caused much damage consequently (v. 15). Obviously the bramble represented Abimelech, the trees and vine more noble individuals, and the cedars of Lebanon the upright leaders of Shechem.

Inrig: Verse 15 is filled with sarcasm. Imagine a bramble king! It was the most worthless tree imaginable, but it had delusions of grandeur. It willingly accepted the offer and loudly called the other trees to take refuge in its shade. What shade can a bramble bush offer a cedar of Lebanon?

Jotham's point is obvious. When they crowned Abimelech, they were choosing an absolutely worthless man. He could not give them the protection they wanted. Besides, he was dangerous, and he would destroy them.

F. Duane Lindsey: The major point of Jotham's parable was that only worthless people seek to lord it over others, for worthy individuals are too busy in useful tasks to seek such places of authority.

Gary Inrig: We need to remind ourselves at this point of the basic lesson of Judges 9. If God is not King, a usurper will arise in His place. If God had been kept in His place as King, Abimelech would never have been successful. But when there is a spiritual vacuum, Satan will rush in to fill it

Preacher's Commentary Series: Church history has provided us with examples of what can happen when anyone—even well-motivated and apparently godly men—moves beyond personal accountability to anyone else. None of us is immune from the corrupting influence of power and position. We can all too easily lose our perspective on ourselves, and with it our moral and spiritual balance. As pastors, we need faithful friends who will pastor us and bring us down to earth from some of our wilder flights of fancy. It is not for nothing that the pulpit is sometimes caricatured as “six feet above contradiction,” or “cowards’ castle.” In a chapter full of irony, we must be careful to see that we do not succumb to the supreme idolatry of worshiping at the shrine of our own infallibility, or power, or pride. The more “successful” a ministry is perceived to be, the greater will be the danger that we start to believe our own press releases! Many a pastor has allowed himself to be “made king” in his little corner of God’s world-wide field, by an enthusiastic band of supporters, and those people have lived to rue the day.

(**Jackman, D., & Ogilvie, L. J.** The Preacher's Commentary Series: Judges, Ruth
. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson)