

Don't Be Like Abimelech
Judges 9; Matthew 20:21-28
Bellevue Baptist Church
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Today, I invite you to open your Bible to Judges chapter 9 as we continue our series, *The Search for the King*.

Did you know that a strong start can't make up for a poor finish?

Years ago, the story broke about world-famous cyclist Lance Armstrong. Here was a man who had survived cancer, raised millions of dollars to fight the disease, and won the Tour de France seven consecutive times. Many considered him the greatest cyclist who had ever lived.

And then the truth came out. Armstrong had been cheating for years. He used banned drugs and even had his own blood drawn, stored, and transfused back into his body to boost his endurance. At one point, his team reportedly pulled their bus over on a remote mountain road and pretended it had broken down. While the driver acted like he was working on the bus, Armstrong was inside receiving a blood transfusion.

And for years, he denied it all.

Eventually, the evidence became overwhelming. Armstrong confessed, was stripped of all seven Tour de France titles, and was banned from sanctioned competition for life, and ultimately separated from Livestrong, the cancer foundation he had founded and become the face of.

A strong start can't make up for a poor finish.

It's easy to throw rocks at Lance Armstrong. But every one of us should ask: Where am I in danger of not finishing well? Did I start my marriage with passion, but now I'm coasting? Did I once dream of passing a strong faith on to my kids, but now we rarely talk about the things of God? Was there something God called me to do, but I got distracted along the way? Did I once walk closely with God, but lately I've just been going through the motions?

Starting well is a gift. Finishing well is a choice we keep making.

And this brings us to Abimelech in Judges 9, the son of Gideon. Here, we see the ripple effect of Gideon finishing poorly. He may have been a great warrior, but as we studied last week, he failed to follow God's commands for his family. And the compromises he made late in life didn't die with him. They spilled into the next generation.

I've titled this sermon "Don't Be Like Abimelech." As we look at his life today, the application is pretty simple: whatever he does, go the other way.

Let's study the story together.

Abimelech son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem and spoke to his uncles and to his mother's whole clan, saying, ² "Please speak in the hearing of all the citizens of Shechem, 'Is it better for you that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you or that one man rule over you?' Remember that I am your own flesh and blood." Jdg 9:1–2

Abimelech wants to be a king, and now that his dad is out of the picture, he's ready to force it into place. He hasn't asked God what He thinks. He isn't being sought out by his people because of proven character. He isn't humbly accepting a responsibility that has been placed upon him. He's an example of what not to be. What do I mean?

Don't Be Like Abimelech

1. He craved power.

Abraham Lincoln is often credited with saying, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." Handling power is like handling electricity—you've got to know what you're doing. The same current that lights up a city can kill a man.

Leadership is a form of power, and as long as the heart is surrendered to the Lord, the desire to lead can be a very good thing. Paul even says in 1 Timothy 3:1, *"If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work."*

So leadership is a good and necessary calling. But beware when the shift takes place, when your desire moves from serving people to ruling over people. That was Abimelech's problem. He didn't want to lead because of what he could give; he wanted to lead because of what he could get. So he plotted and schemed his way into power, determined to secure the position for himself.

The healthiest leaders I've known rarely spend much time thinking, *How can I become more powerful? How can I get a fancier title? How can I get more people to subscribe to me?* Godly leaders aren't asking those questions because they are too busy trying to add real value to the people's real lives?

In our day, we've seen the rise of what social media calls an "influencer." And apparently, a lot of people want the job. One national survey found that 57 percent of Gen Z said they would become a social-media influencer if given the opportunity. More than half of people in the US, ages 14-29, are dreaming about becoming full-time post-ers.

And I sometimes wonder if this age of the "influencer" is shaping the church more than we realize. We're being trained to ask, "How many people are paying attention to me?" while Jesus teaches us to ask, "Who am I paying attention to?"

Maybe that's part of why churches struggle to find people willing to serve. Everybody wants to be seen. Fewer people want to serve. Many people want to be noticed, but few want to do the unnoticed work of serving others.

This was the problem with Abimelech. He didn't want power because of what he could do for people. He wanted power because of what power could do for him.

Abimelech is the opposite. He's not interested in growing and demonstrating character. He's not interested in accumulating wisdom that he can share with the perplexed. He's not interested in serving anyone—he wants one thing, the status and the resources of sitting on the throne.

That's what we see in vv.1-2, and when we move in in the story, our suspicions are confirmed. V.3...

³ His mother's relatives spoke all these words about him in the hearing of all the citizens of Shechem, and they were favorable to Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." ⁴ So they gave him seventy pieces of silver from the temple of Baal-berith. Abimelech used it to hire worthless and reckless men, and they followed him. ⁵ He went to his father's house in Ophrah and killed his seventy brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, on top of a large stone. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, because he hid. ⁶ Then all the citizens of Shechem and of Beth-millo gathered together and proceeded to make Abimelech king at the oak of the pillar in Shechem. Jdg 9:3–6

There's a lot of information there, so in case you missed it, four things happened there.

- The extended family were persuaded to support his campaign. Abimelech convinces them that they should hop on board.
- They pool their money together, to fund his political exploits.
- He takes that money and hires a band of hitmen who slaughter all his brothers on a stone.
- The baby brother, Jotham, is the sole survivor. He escapes while they make his diabolical sibling the king.

What happens next is one of the most fascinating moments in the Old Testament. Jotham, the lone surviving brother, climbs to the top of Mount Gerizim and calls out to the people of Shechem, the very people who had just crowned Abimelech king. And from the mountainside, Jotham tells what is widely recognized as the first parable in the Bible.

Long before Jesus told stories about lost sheep, prodigal sons, and good Samaritans, Jotham tells a story. And strangely enough, it's a story about trees.

And inside this little fable, Jotham exposes what he sees in his brother's heart: a desire for status, not service.

2. He wanted status, not service.

Abimelech doesn't want power because of what he can give. He wants power because of what it can give him. Jotham climbs up a mountain and raises his voice: Listen to me, citizens of Shechem...

**⁸ The trees decided
to anoint a king over themselves.
They said to the olive tree, "Reign over us."
⁹ But the olive tree said to them,
"Should I stop giving my oil
that people use to honor both God and men,
and rule over the trees?" Jdg 9:8–9**

So the short story starts with an olive tree. If you went home today and opened your kitchen cabinet, there's a good chance you'd find a bottle of olive oil. In the ancient world, olive oil was incredibly valuable. It was used for cooking, for lamps, for medicine, and for anointing kings and priests. The olive tree looked at the invitation and essentially said, "Why would I stop doing something so useful just to have a title?"

Then Jotham introduces the fig tree. The fig tree produces sweet fruit that nourishes people. Then comes the vine. The vine produces grapes that become wine, a symbol throughout Scripture of joy and celebration.

Do you see what these three trees have in common? They're all productive. They're all fruitful. They're all quietly making life better for everyone around them. They're not obsessed with status. They're content with service.

If these trees were people, they'd be the men and women who quietly get up every morning, go to work, raise their families, love their neighbors, serve in their churches, and use their gifts to bless others. They don't need applause to feel significant because they've discovered the joy of simply being faithful.

That reminds me of Paul's words to the Thessalonians—a verse that should challenge us all:

Seek to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands... 1 Thessalonians 4:11

What a countercultural verse. Our culture says, "Build a platform." Paul says, "Build a life." Our culture says, "Become famous." Paul says, "Become faithful." Our culture says, "Get people to notice you." Paul says, "Quietly add value wherever God has planted you." That's exactly what these first three trees are doing.

They're too busy bearing fruit to spend their lives chasing a crown.

**Then the trees said to the fig tree,
"Come and reign over us."
¹¹ But the fig tree said to them,**

**“Should I stop giving
my sweetness and my good fruit,
and rule over trees?”**

**¹² Later, the trees said to the grapevine,
“Come and reign over us.”**

**¹³ But the grapevine said to them,
“Should I stop giving my wine
that cheers both God and man,
and rule over trees?” Jdg 9:10–13**

So, you see, the first three trees are solid blue-collar trees. They are working class, non-pretentious, high-producing trees. One can look at each of them and see that they add value to people's lives, without drawing attention to themselves.

But then Jotham introduces a fourth tree. And suddenly, the whole story takes a dark turn.

**¹⁴ Finally, all the trees said to the bramble,
“Come and reign over us.”**

**¹⁵ The bramble said to the trees,
“If you really are anointing me
as king over you,
come and find refuge in my shade.
But if not,
may fire come out from the bramble
and consume the cedars of Lebanon.” Jdg 9:14–15**

The parable ends with a warning. The bramble was anything but a fruitful olive tree. It was a thornbush.

Here's what it looked like.

It produced no fruit. It offered no nourishment. It was little more than a tangled mass of thorns that spread across the ground. In the dry climate of Israel, it was infamous for fueling wildfires.

And did you notice the irony? The bramble says, "Come find refuge in my shade." What shade? A thornbush doesn't provide shade. It doesn't protect anyone. It's making promises it cannot possibly keep. That's the nature of ungodly leadership. It promises security. It promises prosperity. It promises to solve everyone's problems. But in the end, it wounds the very people who trusted it.

Jotham's point couldn't be clearer. If you choose a leader without a servant's heart, you're striking a match in a dry forest. Eventually, the fire spreads. And the tragedy of Judges 9 is that everything Jotham predicted comes true.

The rest of the chapter unfolds exactly as Jotham predicted. The fire spreads. The people who crowned Abimelech eventually turn against him, and total chaos results. In the end, while attacking another city, a woman drops a millstone from the wall, fatally wounding him. And this man who murdered his seventy brothers to gain a crown dies in disgrace, and the chapter closes with these sobering words:

In this way God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done... Judges 9:56

I want you to take notice of that summary—God always repays wicked people. While it may appear that corruption goes unpunished, in the end, all who lead with evil motives are repaid. And yet, all those who lead with a servant's heart are rewarded.

The story of Abimelech naturally leads us to one of Jesus' most important teachings on leadership. If Judges 9 shows us the wrong kind of leader, Matthew 20 shows us the right one. Let me take you there, to show you the picture of godly leadership.

In Matthew 20, Jesus is approached by the mother of two disciples, James and John. She comes with an audacious request.

“Promise,” she said to him, “that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right and the other on your left, in your kingdom.” Matthew 20:21

The request is clear. When you appoint your presidential cabinet, please name my two sons Vice President and Vice President. Make them your top two officials.

She doesn't mention here, perhaps she doesn't know, that her two sons have been nicknamed the Sons of Thunder, and they have a history of being reactionary. At one point, they are frustrated with some people they encountered and asked Jesus if they could call down fire from heaven and burn them up. That sounds emotionally healthy, right?

But you know how parents are—she wanted the best for her sons. What she didn't understand was that the seats nearest Jesus weren't cushioned chairs. They were costly callings.

²² **Jesus answered, “You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”**

“We are able,” they said to him.

Clearly, they thought the cup Jesus referred to was a drink. They were willing to consume the beverage of Jesus' choosing. “We are able” they say. Then Jesus goes on:

²³ **He told them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right and left is not mine to give; instead, it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”**

See here, the concept of calling so crystal clear. God in heaven has assigned each person on Earth a seat, a place of service. We have all been given a set of gifts and unique life experiences that equip us for the call. Your place is not secured through competition. This is God's initiation. And when we reach our Day of Judgment, an A+ on our report card is entirely dependent on whether we fulfilled the role God assigned—not whether we ruled over X number of people.

This was the problem with Abimelech. He was seeking after a seat he was never intended for. This was the problem with this mom—who thought her boys could eagerly apply for positions of authority. No, none of that. God decides. And here's the other side of the subject—those who are called to positions of authority will suffer more intensely than those who don't. So be careful what you ask for.

Now, all that I just said is merely the set up for what Jesus says next:

²⁴When the ten disciples heard this, they became indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. ²⁶It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mt 20:24–28

Here we have...

Jesus on Leadership

He has just two things to say.

1. Godly leaders do not lord it over people. Mt. 20:25

...the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them...

Back in Jesus' day, people were no different than they are today, in this way: human beings like to follow a top-down style of leadership. This is often called, “Command and control.” It goes like this: I bark out the orders. And you do carry them out. You have no say. You serve at the pleasure of the king, which is “me.” That's autocratic, arrogant leadership.

In his classic book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins makes an astounding result of his research clear. After studying companies that experienced sustained excellence, he concluded that the strongest organizations were usually led by remarkably humble CEOs. They resisted the spotlight, gave credit to their teams, and quietly devoted themselves to the mission instead of building their own personal brand.

Collins' research only confirms what Jesus said a long, long time ago. That the best leaders lift up the people in the lower ranks. They don't belittle them.

2. Godly leaders lower themselves and elevate others. (Mt. 20: 26-28)

²⁶ It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

One of my favorite stories to illustrate this truth relates to a boss I once I had. I spent two summers as a camp counselor, and Kris was serving as the director of the whole thing. He was the big kahuna, the boss-man, the guy with all the power. And I noticed immediately that Kris had an unusual way of wielding that power. He never paid attention to himself, he was constantly bragging about the work of others, and he was intentional about leading through little kindnesses. Two examples stand out. One night a group of counselors were taking a break and going out to dinner. Kris was invited but said he was unable to go. We enjoyed a great meal together, and when the waiter brought the check, he smiled and said, "It's already been taken care of." Kris had quietly called the restaurant ahead of time and paid for every one of our meals.

Another memory has stayed with me for years. Kris had an old barber chair sitting in his office. Because he led a large team of college-aged guys, he noticed how often we needed haircuts. So he learned to use a pair of clippers. During the afternoons, he'd spend an hour giving free buzz cuts while talking with us about life, ministry, and following Christ.

Looking back, I realize he wasn't really cutting hair. He was modeling Christ-like leadership. The greatest among you is one who serves.

When I served as president of Lifeway Christian Resources, I shared this story about Kris at a leadership gathering, with our team. And on my last day in the office, just before I came to Bellevue, a thoughtful employee handed me a wrapped gift. I opened it. And here it is.

Show image of the scissors.

If you ever come see me in my office, it's there on my bookshelf as a regular reminder of Kris' example to me. Sometimes the most important lessons we ever learn, we learn early on.

I've tried now, for 20+ years, to lead like Kris. I often fail, but I regularly try to notice the good work of others and shine the spotlight on them instead of myself. I don't always get it right, but I know that's the pattern Jesus modeled, and it's the kind of leadership that changes people.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

How do I serve joyfully when no one seems to notice?

One of the greatest tests we face in serving others is the test of obscurity. It's hard to pour your heart into people, give your best effort, and wonder if anyone even noticed. Most of us don't mind serving. We just want to know it mattered.

Years ago, when I was in the business world, I read a fascinating book *The Truth About Employee Engagement*. It's a book about employee satisfaction and what factors contribute to job misery. After solid research, the author reveals the three biggest reasons employees become dissatisfied with their jobs. Interestingly, salary wasn't at the top of the list. The three greatest frustrations were:

Anonymity, Immeasurement, Irrelevance image.

What do each of these mean? Let me say a few words about each of them.

Anonymity: People who see themselves as invisible, generic, or anonymous cannot love their jobs.

Immeasurement: People who feel like their success depends on the opinions or whims of another person cannot love their jobs.

Irrelevance: People who never hear that they matter, not even from their supervisor, cannot love their jobs.

In sum: people want to be seen, they want to know what the scorecard is, and they want to hear the magic words every once in a while: what you do matters around here. If not, they grow disheartened and they start looking elsewhere for employment.

This same thing happens in ministry. Some of you teach a class and it's been a while since a person in your class made mention of the preparation you clearly put in week after week.

Some of you change the diapers in the nursery, others prepare meals, or stack chairs, or sing in the choir, and you can go months without hearing someone say thank you. So, how can you stay encouraged? The answer has to be found in Scripture. You've got to be motivated by these words alone:

Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:4

Every unseen act of faithfulness is fully visible to Him. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine in Jotham's parable never stopped producing fruit because they weren't chasing applause. They were simply doing what they'd been put on the Earth to do. That's our calling too. The goal of the Christian life is not to become well known. It's to become well pleasing to the One who notices every cup of cold water given in His name.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:

Doesn't humility make people weak or easy to overlook?

While Jesus calls us to be humble, he certainly doesn't mean we never stand up for ourselves, that we should always lay down and be the doormat. That's a misunderstanding of his words. I

Famous preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones once preached a message on the beatitude, Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth." In it, he asks the question: is meekness the same thing as weakness? He replies with an emphatic no, and offers insight here.

What does it mean to be meek? Lloyd-Jones says:

When you are meek, you come to realize that nobody can harm you. John Bunyan puts it perfectly: "He that is down need fear no fall." When a man truly sees himself as a lowly sinner, he knows nobody can say anything about him that is too bad. You need not worry about what men say or do; you know you deserve it all and more. –Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Do you catch his drift? If you're secure in Christ, if you know that he took away all our sin, and you have received all his righteousness, then this becomes the foundation you stand on. It's no longer about you, what people think of you, because without the grace of God—there's not a lot to love in you.

But, if you are a new creature in Christ, the blood of the Lamb sprinkled over your doorpost, you are not free to make much of Him. The life you now live in the body, is for and through Him. None of us is worthy of much praise, or too lofty a reputation. If every person on this Earth could see everything we've ever said, thought, or done, they would adjust their glasses.

Humility isn't pretending we're worthless. It's simply refusing to build our identity on the opinions of others. When we are secure in the gospel, we don't have to spend our life defending your image. We are free to spend it serving people and glorifying Jesus.

And we live every day dumbfounded that God in heaven would choose to use us, and that people would be so kind as to include us in their lives. Lloyd-Jones one more time:

The man who is truly meek is the one who is amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat them as well as they do.

Do you see the difference?

A Student Asks:

What's one decision I can make this week that would make me more like Jesus instead of Abimelech?

The answer is surprisingly simple. Find something nobody wants to do...and do it without telling anyone. Clean every bathroom in your house. Wait until no one is around. Scrub the toilets, wipe the mirrors, vacuum the floor, empty every trash can, and leave it looking spotless.

Then...say nothing. Don't post it. Don't hint about it. Don't text the family group chat, *"You'll never guess what I just did!"*

Jesus once criticized the Pharisees because they loved doing good deeds in ways that attracted attention. He said they announced their generosity "with trumpets." They were happy to do the right thing as long as everyone noticed. Jesus said His followers should be different. *"Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."* In other words, let your service be so quiet that the only audience you care about is your Father in heaven.

Here's the real test. Decide before you begin that even if nobody notices...even if nobody thanks you...even if someone else gets the credit...it was still worth doing because you weren't serving for applause. You were serving Jesus.

If cleaning the bathroom isn't the right fit, try one of these:

- Wash and put away every dish after dinner.
- Fold and put away the family's laundry before anyone asks.
- Clean up the yard.
- Walk the dog on a rainy day.

Abimelech climbed over people to become great. Jesus knelt before people to make them great. This week, choose the towel instead of the throne. That's where Christ is found.