

The Bad Judge by Jeff Strite

Judges 9:1-9:6

OPEN: In Clay County, Kentucky there was a judge named R. Cletus Maricle. He was one of the rare judges I could find online who had been permanently disbarred.

You might ask: "Jeff, why was he disbarred?"

I'm glad you asked.

R. Cletus Maricle was disbarred because he and 7 other Kentucky officials were found guilty of voter fraud. Basically, they bought votes for candidates that were from their party. In the election years of 2002, 2004 and 2006, the group spent about \$400,000 to bribe 8,000 voters to vote for their candidates.

And of course... Cletus (love that name) was disbarred.

(<http://www.law360.com/articles/579812/ky-judge-permanently-disbarred-for-vote-buying-scheme>)

You could say Judge R. Cletus Maricle was a BAD judge.
And he got disbarred.

By contrast, in our story today we find a man named Abimelech was also a BAD judge. But if you read the rest of the 9th chapter of Judges you'd find that he didn't get disbarred. He died.
Somebody killed him!

Now technically Abimelech wasn't really even a judge to begin with. A Biblical judge was one who was appointed by God to protect Israel from her enemies. But God had NOT appointed Abimelech to do anything. And Abimelech wasn't into protecting anybody's interests but his own. All Abimelech wanted power and prestige for himself. So he was a bad judge.
Someone once even called him the "Anti-Judge" (Robert Leroe)

As I was preparing the sermon today, I got to wondering why Abimelech would want to seize power to begin with? Well, I believe he wanted the power because he felt ENTITLED to it. I suspect he believed he was destined to be the ruler of Israel. And I think the person who put that thought in his mind was his momma.

Judges 8:30-31 tells us that "Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech."

In the society of that day, concubines were second class citizens. They weren't really REAL wives, and their children weren't really REAL sons and daughters of the father. The Bible doesn't excuse that... it simply tells you what happened here.

So Abimelech wasn't really a REAL son to Gideon.
But – for whatever reason - Gideon named him Abimelech, which means “My father is king.”

I personally think Abimelech’s mother seized on that name because she wanted Abimelech to know that not only was Gideon (one of the greatest judges of Israel) his father... but that his daddy was a King. And thus Abimelech was born to greatness.

There’s only one problem with that notion: it wasn't true.
Gideon WAS Abimelech’s daddy... but he’d never been a king.

Judges 8:22-23 tells us: “the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.
Gideon said to them, “I will NOT rule over you, and MY SON will NOT rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.”

So, I believe that Abimelech’s mother planted a lie in her son’s mind. A lie that his daddy was a King, when that wasn't true at all. But from her lie came the belief that he (in turn) was destined to be King of Israel. He was of “royal blood”. And I suspect he believed in that so strongly he was willing to do whatever was necessary to fulfill his destiny.

1. First he enlisted people to his cause.

Judges 9:1-3 says he “went to his mother’s brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother’s clan, “Ask all the citizens of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you: to have all seventy of (Gideon’s) sons rule over you, or just one man?’ Remember, I am your flesh and blood.”

When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, “He is our brother.”

2. Then he lined up with whoever he could get to come to side. He essentially bought votes. Judges 9:4 tells us that The citizens of Shechem “gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and Abimelech used it to hire reckless adventurers, who became his followers.”

3. And then, to get rid of any competition he might have to being king, he executed almost every one of his 70 brothers (one brother, Jotham, escaped)

4. Then he engaged in a series of power struggles that ended up in his being killed

AND THAT’S IT.

That’s essentially the whole story. And the question that came to my mind as I prepared to preach this sermon was: why on earth would God tell us this story?

ILLUS: I work with a few other preachers developing sermon series, and this series wasn't really my idea. But when they mentioned preaching on the judges, I thought: why not? But last Monday I read this text and it suddenly occurred to me that I didn't really want to do a sermon this guy. I seriously began wondering if there wasn't another judge I could preach

about instead.

I didn't want to preach about Abimelech. He wasn't a hero, he wasn't a man of faith. He was a loser. A thug. A tyrant. A murderer. God could easily have skipped over this story... and I would never have missed it. It doesn't add anything to the story line in Judges as far I'm concerned.

And yet, God gave this guy an entire chapter in Judges. 57 verses were completely dedicated to this evil man. Why would God do that?

Then I remembered a verse from Romans that had caught my attention way back when I was in Bible College. It was Romans 15:4. And it declared that "EVERYTHING that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

So, what does God want to teach us here?
Well, a couple things occurred to me.

1st – God wants to teach us that there are evil people out there. The Bible is very clear that there are nasty folks out there who do nasty things. Many of us grew up in a Disneyland kind of world where everything was sweetness and light. But as we grew older, we realized that there are people out there who would hurt us and our families. Those are the Abimelechs of our times. And there have been men like Abimelech in just about every age of history. There have been power hungry people in every generation who have hurt others because they wanted to dominate and control the world around them. And often, when these wicked people rise to the top, they are often exactly what a culture deserves.

Notice what the Bible tells us just a few verses before it introduces this evil man:
"No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. They also failed to show kindness to the family of... (Gideon) for all the good things he had done for them." Judges 8:33-35

The story in Judges tells us of how God used Gideon to save Israel from the hands of the Midianites. But no sooner did Gideon die than the people forget all about Gideon and what he'd done for them. He becomes ancient history. As far as Israel was concerned, there were more important things to focus on in their lives than a has-been like him. And as soon as they forgot Gideon... they forgot all about God as well. They went back to worshiping the pagan gods that got them into trouble to begin with. Baal was a particularly evil god that required human sacrifice. And since he was also the god of fertility there was a lot of sexual stuff going on in his worship. So as Israel bowed before this pagan god, they were just asking to get punished by God for their idolatry and perversion.

And Abimelech - and what he did - was exactly the kind of leader the nation deserved.

Every other punishment God brought on Israel during the days of the judges involved an outside nation or people who would come in and make their lives miserable. But Abimelech was the first one of their number - the first and only Israelite - that God used to punish His people when they went astray.

Because he was exactly what they deserved.

And they even voted for him!!!

They followed him, and they subsidized his evil with their evil.

They used the money from the Temple of Baal-Berith to pay him to lead them. And those 70 shekels of silver were what he used to pay evil men who helped to kill his 70 brothers.

Now, I'm going to get a political here.

When are we supposed to vote next week?

That's right - November 4th.

We live in a great nation where we've been permitted the privilege of electing our officials, and that has been a privilege our people have enjoyed for a couple hundred years. But, something has always puzzled me. And that is the tendency of Christians, of regular church goers, to vote for some of the most wicked of people down through our history.

And they often vote for such folks because those people are share their particular party affiliation.

- Richard Nixon said "I'm not a crook". But he was. He was as crooked as a dog's hind leg. And yet, if he were alive today, there would be people who would STILL vote for him for president. And do you know why? (wait for a response)

Because he was of the party they've always voted for. They're like the people of Shechem who voted for Abimelech because "he is our brother". He was part of their group, therefore they embraced his evil.

- LBJ was a wicked man who was an enemy of the church (because the church opposed him). He engineered legislation that essentially attempted to neuter the influence of the churches on national politics because of his hatred for them. And yet there are Christians who remember him and would STILL vote for him for President. And you know why? Because he was of the party they've always voted for. He was part of their political party, and therefore they'd continue to embrace his evil.

Down through the years Christians have voted for crooks, and thieves and sexually immoral leaders. They've voted for politicians who've embraced abortion, homosexuality, and all forms of sexually impurity. And they've voted for men and women who were enemies of God.

And the reason they voted for them was because they were part of the party they've ALWAYS voted for.

(PAUSE)

That ought to never happen. That ought NEVER to be done.

We are a holy people. We've been bought with a price. And for any believer in Christ to go to the ballot box and leave God outside is an abomination.

If you're not voting for the principles of God, you might as well be voting for Abimelech, because that's who you'll ultimately end up with. A nation gets the leaders it deserves. And a nation who leaves God out of their politics will end up on the wrong side of God's wrath.

As William Penn said "If we are not willing to be governed by God, we shall be ruled by tyrants"

Have you ever heard someone say:

"Well let's just vote all the bums out and that will fix the problem?"

That's got to be the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

If you vote the bums out, what do you end up with?

That's right – you get a whole new set of bums!

And the bums are often there because God wants to get our attention. And they're often there because God's angry, and he's giving us what we deserved. Thus, you can vote in whatever bums you want and the problem will still exist. Because the real problem has been our nation's endorsement of immorality. And the real problem is we keep voting for politicians that embrace that immorality.

Then, what's the solution?

"if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." 2 Chronicles 7:14

We err if we believe we can solve our political issues at the ballot box. Politics will always be a nasty business. And there are politicians will often make decisions that would break your heart and turn your stomach. But our hope is in God. It's not in the ballot box, but at the edge of our beds as we pray.

So, first, there are evil people out there. And often they are what a nation deserves.

The 2nd lesson I see here is this:

Wherever there's power to be had there will be people who will want to have that power. It doesn't matter if the power is in politics, or business, or marriage, or in the church. There will always be people who will seek to dominate and control.

And the thirst for power is the oddest thing. It makes people behave in some really bizarre ways.

ILLUS: In June 1974, Richard Nixon's he planned a trip to Russia and Italy. His two top aides, Alexander Haig and Ron Ziegler both were struggling for power in his administration, and their rivalry got so intense that each of them had a team that actually measured, down to the inch, how far their beds were from President Nixon's!

(Bruce Ball, Sermoncentral.com "#1 And Proud Of It")

Does that sound normal to you? Does that sound sane?
Of course not. That's about as bizarre and petty as it gets.
And yet folks who are into power will do stuff that normal folks wouldn't consider.

But you know that's the kind of thing I'd expect from pagans.
They don't love God. They don't have God in charge of their lives.
And if God's not in charge in my life, who is?

I AM!

It's the most logical thing in the world for folks who are pagans to seek to be the god in their lives. Somebody has to be in charge, so it may as well be them. Thus, pagans would be the most likely to seek to manipulate and dominate and to rule over others.
That's what you'd expect from Pagans.

That wouldn't happen in the church would it?
(Pause) Yeah it would!

Consider these words from Paul to the churches in Galatia. I'm going to leave some of his words out so I can focus on stuff that applies here. He writes:

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: ... enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy...."Galatians 5:19-21 ESV

These are the behaviors of those who seek to control and manipulate and dominate. But just in case you might be tempted to think that Paul was just making a list, he then says this:

"I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Galatians 5:21 ESV

He's warned the Galatians about this because they were doing just that. They were backbiting, into rivalries and dissensions and divisions etc. And it was endangering their very salvation!

And Jesus warned us about this as well.

"Jesus called (His disciples) together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—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.'" Matthew 20:25-28

Now, my point is this:

The Spirit of Abimelech can happen anywhere. It can happen in politics, the business world, in marriages and it can even happen in... the church. Wherever there's power to be struggled over... people struggle to gain that power for themselves.

They do this because they believe that power is important. And they even have a proverb

they use to justify their mindset. They believe that "God helps those who help themselves."
Now where do is that found in Scripture do you suppose?

It isn't.

It's not in the Bible. It's a pagan proverb.

God doesn't help those who help themselves.

God helps those who listen to Him and obey Him and trust Him.

Jesus said: You want to be GREAT in this world? Then you need to learn to be the best servant you can be. And the only way you can do that is if you learn to TRUST God. You cannot be a good servant if you don't believe God will have your back. If you don't believe God will be there for you, you will always believe you need the control in order to protect yourself.

But Jesus said – if you want to be great, you need to be the servant.

That's what made Gideon such a good judge.

He didn't want power... he just wanted to be a good servant of Israel.

Remember what he said when Israel offered him the throne?

"I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you."

Gideon had learned to trust God.

And because he trusted God he learned to give Him the glory.

And because he gave God the glory Gideon became one of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament.

The GLORY belongs to God and therefore the POWER belongs to God.

The struggle for power all boils down to who gets the glory

If I want the glory... then I'm gonna want the power.

But God said "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another." Isaiah 42:8

Glory belongs to God... and He's not sharing.

Someone wrote a poem about this:

"Have you been called to serve where others tried and failed?

But with God's help and strength YOUR efforts have prevailed?

Touch not the glory.

Has God appointed you to some great, noble cause?

Or put you where you hear the sound of men's applause?

Touch not the glory.

Have you some special gift? Some riches you can share?

Or have you learned the art of intercessory prayer?

Touch not the glory.

A watching world still waits to see what can be done,

Through one who touches not that which is God's alone...

Touch not the glory."

(Words by Erma Davison from the song, "Touch Not The Glory," (C) 1993 Ron and Patricia Owens.)

Only when we learn that the power and glory and the honor belong solely to our God will we enjoy the blessings that come from being His children. But you can't truly know those blessings until you belong to Him.