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THE PARABLE OF THE BRAMBLE

Few are the parables found in the Law and Prophets section of the Bible, but one of these rare literary pieces is found in the tragic tale of Gideon's sons (Judges 9:8-15). The record of Gideon's achievements is dominated by his defeat of the Midianites (Judges 8), but he deserves notoriety for his paternal accomplishments as well: 70 sons, not to mention daughters and children born to his concubines! These 70 sons will later play a role in a tragic demonstration of ambition gone mad.

In the shadow of his successful attack upon the Midianites, the elders of Israel tempted Gideon with position, power, and prestige.

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."

But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you." (Judges 8:21-23, NASB)

Gideon's response gives a rare glimpse of the character of a man who was not motivated by the promise of position or power. It also reveals the unique leadership structure which seems to be God's preferred model for His people. I state this in the present tense since accountability to God through Jesus our priest and king is essential to the organization and structure of the early Christian church and by extension to our church today. It could be said of the early Christian period, "There was no central governance structure in those days and every man did what was right according to the Word, the admonition of the Apostles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

God Is Our Ruler

There was no centralized human leader in the time of the Judges and every man answered directly to the Creator as the leader of their

nation. Each person behaved according to his or her personal commitment to the covenant of obedience and faithfulness to God (Judges 17:6; 21:25). This seems like a risky approach to corporate faithfulness and even national order but it was clearly Gideon's understanding of the governance structure of Israel—no human king! National faithfulness was simply an aggregate of the faithfulness of each Israelite. Lest we mistake the judges for centralized leaders in possession of corporate authority, we should be reminded that the judges were charismatic figures who arose for specific deliverance missions or assumed civil mediation responsibilities but had no governance authority or power to tax.

The Treachery of Selfish Ambition

Gideon's response to the elders of Israel (we should note that Gideon is referred to as Jerubbaal) provides a critical predicate to the parable of Judges 9, which begins with a conversation between one of Gideon's sons, Abimelech, by a Shechemite concubine, and his maternal family. After struggling with the frustration of his ambition to become the principle leader, he asks the question of his audience and in it reveals the source of his frustration:

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?" Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh. (Judges 9:2, NASB)

His desire to achieve rulership over Gideon's family was blocked by the fact that he was not among the "seventy sons of Gideon" since he was the child of a concubine, not the offspring of a wife. In addition, there were at least 70 options for the position vacated at Gideon's death and all 70 were ahead of him. As long as any of these 70 sons remained alive he had no chance of becoming ruler. Thus he began his journey up the down path!

His appeal to the Shechemites was supported by the "flesh and bone" connection of family ties. His mother's family provided both political and financial support that resulted in an ambush of Gideon's sons at Ophrah wherein all 70 were murdered "on one stone" except for the youngest, Jotham, who hid himself and escaped the slaughter (Judges 9:5). The ascendant attitude of Abimelech reveals a ruthlessness toward his brothers that brings into question the "flesh and bones" argument he used to woo the Shechemites. It was flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones whom he murdered on the rock at Ophrah.

A dominance orientation is always rooted in an exaggerated opinion of self and a marginalization of others. It opens the door for coercive

behavior that engenders fear and force, limited only in terms of what the character of the person will allow. In his bid for dominance, Abimelech's character allowed the most extreme coercion—deception and murder. The reward was his coronation beside the “oak of the pillar which is at Shechem” and the title of king (verse 6).

The Parable of the Trees

Jotham's response was both creative and courageous. From Mount Gerizim, which faced Shechem from the southeast, his voice called Abimelech and the Shechemites to account before God for their treachery:

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

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?”

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?”

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.” (Judges 9:8-15, NASB)

The tree is a common metaphor for Israel and is here used in a most creative manner. The trees that go seeking a king are not identified as a species until the end of the parable, where they become the victims of the “bramble's” treachery. Knowing the species of the trees desiring a king is necessary for a clear understanding of Jotham's intended message. For the first tree approached is the olive tree, the second is the fig, third is a non-tree, the grape vine, and finally the bramble. All are significantly smaller than the cedar of Lebanon and thus incapable of fulfilling the request to “reign over” or “wave over” the cedar by virtue of their relative size.

The olive and fig both refuse the request for advancement on the basis of a clear recognition of their calling and personal satisfaction coming from the product their service provides. The move away from the realm of trees addresses Abimelech's lack of formal son-status, which disqualifies him from service as the primary leader to replace Gideon. The vine, though not a tree, reveals wisdom common to both of the previous candidates. All three knew what they were created for and

were not successfully tempted to covet a role that was not theirs in order to gain power and the glory of position.

Life-Starving Leadership

The bramble was a different sort of candidate. The bramble was lying in wait for an opportunity to dominate and rule. The bramble certainly has a legitimate purpose in the ecology of God’s creation, but that purpose is not attended by the prestige or public honor that is granted to the olive, the fig, the vine, or the Cedar of Lebanon. My southeastern United States heritage encourages a vision of the kudzu plant. While certainly not the species referenced in Judges 9, without doubt kudzu qualifies as a bramble of the highest order. It is opportunistic and voracious in its quest for dominance.¹ It can grow as much as 3 feet on a warm summer day and has the capacity to envelop and kill trees by dominating the source of sunlight so completely that the tree starves. The bramble (regardless of species) provides no possibility of symbiotic advantage to the tree.

The bramble readily accepted the offer of kingship and just as readily followed with a threat of coercive dominance. A paraphrase of the response might be, “Yes, I will do it. In fact, if you don’t allow me to wave over you and be king, I will personally destroy you by fire.” This eager acceptance and subsequent threat are both empty and shelter a tragic lie, for the truth is that dominant coercive leadership brings decay and death. The tree that shelters under the bramble would never have suffered the promised fire, but it would have entered into a leadership relationship resulting in death. There are thousands of trees in the southeastern United States that appear lush green and healthy, but actually stand dead beneath the leaves of the kudzu vine.

Abimelech ruled Israel for three years (Judges 9:22) but is appropriately not remembered as Israel’s first king. He was betrayed and died at the hands of his own “flesh and bones” relatives—the Shechemites. Jotham, who escaped into exile, does not reappear thereafter in the biblical record, but his brief appearance and the parable of the trees provides a powerful testimony and insight into the danger posed by the self-centered leader who aims at ascending to power and position via dominance.

¹ Forseth, I., & Innis, A. (2004). Kudzu (*pueraria montana*): History, physiology, and ecology combine to make a major ecosystem threat. *Critical Reviews in Plant Sciences*, 23(5), 401-413.