

8.13.06 **If A Good Tree Won't Lead, A Bad Tree Always Will** Judges 9.7-15

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As we all watch the news unfold each week with wars raging in several places in the middle east, terror plots being planned and thwarted, natural disasters and diseases taking place – whatever ones political views, whatever ones views of the end times, I think most of us could probably agree that we live in a desperate time in history that cries out for the very best leadership possible at every level of society.

Leadership is always important but it is even more important at critical moments. The people we remember as great leaders such as Washington, Lincoln, Churchill, and Martin Luther King Jr. rose to greatness because they led well at a critical time. They provided stability, vision, courage, energy and hope to people who desperately needed it. The book of Judges is largely about leadership and it spans a period of several hundred years telling the story of a desperate and violent period for the tribes of Israel. There is a repeated pattern in the Book of Judges. When a good leader or judge is present, and all good leaders have their flaws, the people worship and serve God. When a good leader dies or is absent; people turn away from the Lord and serve other gods or themselves. Trouble follows disobedience as the people become vulnerable to enemies from without and within. When the situation gets desperate then the people cry out to God for a leader to deliver them from their situation and God sends the Spirit upon someone to deliver the people. Some of the best known judges are Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Under the guidance of an anointed leader the community is victorious and walks faithfully in God's ways. Eventually the leader dies, the people revert back to their former ways and the cycle starts all over again.

It's kind of, *"Who's God? Help God! Thank God! Who's God?"* over and over.

In June we talked about a judge named Gideon. Gideon appears to be obedient in saying to the people in Judges 8:23, *"I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you."* However, Gideon named one of his sons who was born to a slave woman Abimelech which means, "my father [is] king!" And this son's legacy would be disastrous.

When Gideon died, Abimelech, moved swiftly into the leadership void. In a desire to seize power, he hired a bunch of thugs from his mother's hometown of Shechem and killed the 70 other sons of Gideon who would have contested his grasping for leadership and authority, only the youngest brother Jotham, somehow escaped his terrible plot and hid himself.

Today's passage from Judges picks up with Jotham responding to the tragic news of all his brothers having been murdered by their own half-brother.

⁷ When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and cried aloud and said to them,

"Listen to me, you lords of Shechem, so that God may listen to you.

⁸ The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves.

So they said to the olive tree, '*Reign over us.*'⁹ The olive tree answered them,

'Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and go to sway over the trees?'

¹⁰ Then the trees said to the fig tree, '*You come and reign over us.*'

¹¹ But the fig tree answered them, '*Shall I stop producing my sweetness and my delicious fruit, and go to sway over the trees?'*

¹² Then the trees said to the vine, '*You come and reign over us.*'

¹³ But the vine said to them, '*Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals, and go to sway over the trees?'*

¹⁴ So all the trees said to the bramble, '*You come and reign over us.*'

¹⁵ And the bramble said to the trees,

*'If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'*¹⁶

"Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and honor when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal (Gideon) and his house, and have done to him as his actions deserved—¹⁷ for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and rescued you from the hand of Midian; ¹⁸ but you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his slave woman, king over the lords of Shechem, because he is your kinsman—¹⁹ if, I say, you have acted in good faith and honor with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; ²⁰ but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the lords of Shechem, and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the lords of Shechem, and from Beth-millo, and devour Abimelech."²¹ Then Jotham ran away and fled, going to Beer, where he remained for fear of his brother Abimelech.¹

Jotham's parable is one of the first examples in the Bible about the danger and foolishness of desiring a king, a leader, a ruler other than God. Even good leaders have

¹*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989 . Thomas Nelson: Nashville

flaws, and the bad ones can be truly horrendous. God's desire is to be acknowledged as ruler and leader by the people God has created and with whom God wants to be in relationship. In our personal lives, our families, our church, our nation, and the world – God longs to be recognized and followed as the leader.

Abimelech's plan was to use murder, violence, and fear to seize and hold power. This is still a common tactic used by some who desire power in the world today, some of whom will claim they are acting for God or in God's name. While Abimelech was being made king, Jotham stood on Mt. Gerizim and told a story about leadership. Mt. Gerizim is a very important place because it was traditionally associated with covenants and proclaiming a blessing.

In Deuteronomy 27:11-12, Moses commanded the people, once they had crossed the Jordan River, to have some stand on Mount Gerizim for blessing while others would stand on Mount Ebal for curses.

In Joshua 8:33, Joshua does just that, reading all the words of the law and blessing the people. Now Jotham stands in this same place of blessing and proclaims a curse on Abimelech and the residents of Shechem in the form of a parable.

In the parable about the trees, the olive tree, fig tree, and the vine all turned down the responsibility of leadership, so the bramble accepts.

A key point of the story is this: **There will always be leadership.**

If a good leader won't lead, a bad leader always will.

If a good tree won't lead, a bramble always will.

In the parable the trees that turned down the responsibility of leadership were qualified, they had something positive to offer, but they were unwilling to serve. Eventually the trees end up with the bramble or thorn bush, a worthless and often parasitic plant with nothing to offer and everything to gain by becoming the leader. The thorn bush invited all trees to take refuge in its "shade" (v.15), a promise it couldn't possibly fulfill or else face destruction by fire.

Jotham told this to the people of Shechem as a warning. They were about to crown Abimelech, a bad tree rotten to the core, as their leader.

In a situation where the able are unwilling, people may end up being led by the willing, but unable.

Regardless of the ambition or skill level of a potential leader, if he or she is lacking in character, he or she is lacking, at least from a spiritual point of view.

Abimelech was not a good tree and God would not allow him to stand for long. Many years later the Lord said through the prophet Ezekiel 17:24,

“All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree.

I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.”

The trees mentioned in the parable – the olive, fig, and vine that produced grapes, were three of the most important trees to the people of Israel. They are still highly prized in the Middle East today. The bramble produces nothing but a pretty blossom in the spring, but even this is difficult to pick because of the thorns. For those in ancient times, the bramble seemed virtually good for nothing compared to the gifts offered by the others. Deuteronomy 8:8 described the Promised Land as, *“a land of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.”* Stroll with me among the trees for a moment.

The fruit of the olive tree in antiquity was the fruit par excellence; either the fresh fruit or its oil found a place at every meal. With its characteristic gnarled trunk and bluish green leaves and white undersides, the olive tree can survive for a thousand years. The olive tree was a symbol of **fertility** (Psalm 128:3), **beauty** (Jeremiah 11:16; Hosea 14:6), and **divine blessing** (Deut. 7:13). The olive tree was used for **food** (Numbers 11:8), for **fuel** for lamps, as a **medicine** (Isaiah 1:6, Luke 10:34), as an **anointing oil** (1 Samuel 10:1; 2 Kings 9:3; Isaiah 61:10), **in sacrifice** (Leviticus 2:4; Genesis 28:18), and its wood was used for **furniture** (1 Kings 6:23, 31-33). The olive branch was the first vegetation seen by Noah after the flood (Genesis 8:11) and to this day the olive branch remains an emblem of **peace and bountifulness**.

The Fig Tree is a beautiful shade tree whose large palm shaped leaves were first used to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The pear-shaped fruit, which is produced more than once during the year, has a high sugar content and is very sweet when ripe. It is eaten fresh or dried into cakes which can be stored and are an ideal food for travelers (1 Samuel 25:18). The fig also has medicinal properties and was applied to wounds and boils (2 Kings 20:7; Isaiah 38:21). The fig tree is also associated with the grape vine as a symbol of peace and prosperity, providing shade and sustenance for the family it protects (1 Kings 4:25).

The Grape Vine is a plant whose long trunk grows along the ground or fastens itself to other objects by means of tendrils. The vine was noted for its luxuriant foliage,

intertwining branches, and trailing or climbing shoots (Psalm 80:11; Ezekiel 19:10-11). Its fragrant blossoms are recalled in love poetry (Song of Solomon 2:13), but it was the fruit that produced wine (Isaiah 65:8; Matthew 26:29) that gave it a place of honor among the trees. Its wood was useless, fit only for burning (Ezekiel 15:2-8).

In Jotham's story the bramble offers a security and protection it is unable to give. The absurd claim made by the bramble is that the other trees can come and take refuge in its shade which was impossible. The bramble also threatens those who don't accept its promises which it clearly can't keep. Like a lousy leader, the bad tree promises what it can't deliver and uses fear to threaten those who don't follow, trying to intimidate or scare them into going along. Through Jotham, God speaks against the leadership of "bad" trees, who are characterized by irrational claims, empty promises, and the threat of repression against those who don't give into or agree with the one in power. There have always been "bad tree" leaders throughout history right up to the present.

Jotham's words proved to be prophetic. Within just three years, Abimelech destroyed the city of Shechem, over a thousand people were killed, and Abimelech was killed in the battle. Bad leadership has awful consequences that extend far beyond the leader often for years to come.

What does this ancient story and all this stuff about trees have to do with you and me today? I'd like to leave you with a couple of points to ponder.

I trust none of us are as depraved as Abimelech who murdered 70 of his brothers in a bid to seize power and gain a leadership position, but we can all look at our own lives and **reflect on the ways we may have seized power from God.**

Are there ways we have rejected the Lord and said, *"You will not rule over me. I will be in charge. I will make the decisions. I will wield the power and control over my life the way I want."* Are there aspects of our life we are reluctant to give to God? This ancient story still challenges us today by asking us like the people of Shechem whether we will forget what God has done for us and turn aside to our own desires. In what ways can we give God the freedom to lead us in our personal lives and in the church? What difference might that make?

This story also asks us, **what kind of leader we are.**

Are we like **an olive tree**, growing for the long term and seeking to be an instrument of peace and blessing in a host of ways?

Are we like **a fig tree**, providing others comfort and a place to rest, adding beauty and sweetness to the lives of those around us?

Do we desire to be like **the vine**, adding joy and life to a community that is as close knit as the branches, leaves, and grapes on the vine?

All three of these trees are fruit bearing trees, if they don't bear fruit; they are cut down to make room for something that will.

Interestingly, all these trees are also connected with Jesus.

The olive tree became associated with Jesus who prayed for God's will to be done on the Mount of Olives the night of his arrest (Mark 14:26, John 8:1). It was among the olive trees Jesus wrestled through his destiny to die for the sins of the world on the cross, accepting the judgment that should have been ours so that we might be forgiven and have eternal life.

During those final days in Jerusalem Jesus cursed **a fig tree** that failed to bear figs (Matthew 21:18-19), perhaps out of frustration that he wasn't seeing the kind of spiritual fruit he expected to find among his own people. In Luke 13 **Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree that bore no fruit** that we heard earlier. The gardener said, *"Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."* None of us wants to be found wasting soil in God's vineyard.

Stuff happens to all of us in life, but even when the worst things happen, we can choose whether it permanently stinks up our life and our outlook, or whether we will use it as fertilizer that produces in us greater spiritual fruit.

In John 15:5 and 8, Jesus said, *"I am **the vine**, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."* Apart from our connection to the life that flows from Jesus we can do nothing of lasting value. The image of the vine and branches teaches us we are made for union with and dependence upon Jesus.

If a good tree won't lead, a bad tree always will.

What kind of tree do you want to be?

Psalm 53:8 gives us an image, *"But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God, I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever."*

A tree can handle a great deal of hardship as long as the roots are intact. Job 14:7-9 says, *"There is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grows old in the earth, and its stump dies in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant."*

If we have been damaged, broken or cut down by life, there is still hope if we are like a green olive tree trusting in the steadfast love of God. We began the service with Psalm 1 which describes those who trust in God this way,

“They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do they prosper.”

The thing about trees is a lot of the growth takes place unseen, underground, just as a lot of our growth happens internally and it isn't noticed until it produces the fruit of Christ-like behavior. A wise friend told me many years ago, **“Never forget; the reach of our branches can never exceed the depth of our roots.”**

In Acts 5:30-31, Peter says to the ruling council in Jerusalem,
“The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

The real tree of life is not the one in the Garden of Eden,
It is the tree on which Jesus died that you and I might live.

Jesus hung on a tree so he might be the Savior who forgives our sins and the Leader of our lives.