

The Danger of Success

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 8:4-35

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In our text this morning, we come to the second part of the Gideon cycle. Last week in Judges 6-7, we saw Gideon defeat the Midianite army against all odds, with only 300 men. That story taught us that when we're weak, God is strong, and God gets the glory. But the battle in Judges 6-7 wasn't the end of the story. After the defeat at the Midianite camp, the battle wasn't over. The kings of Midian fled across the Jordan River. We pick the story up this morning in chapter 8.

We pursue what we prize.

In verse 4, we see Gideon pursuing the kings of Midian. This idea of pursuing is the key idea in the passage. In Dave Harvey's great book, *Rescuing Ambition*, he says that we're all pursuers. We all go after the things we value—the things that truly matter to us. Even if that means great risk and sacrifice, we pursue what we prize.¹ You've heard of storm chasers. As tornado season approaches, you'll see these crazies on the news. Storm chasers chase storms no matter how dangerous. They prize the storm, so they pursue the storm. We all pursue what we prize. More specifically, we're glory chasers. Or as Paul Tripp says, we're glory junkies.

Admit it. You're a glory junkie. That's why you like the 360-degree, between-the-legs slam dunk, or that amazing hand-beaded formal gown, or the seven-layer triple-chocolate mousse cake. It's why you're attracted to the hugeness of a mountain range or the multi-hued splendor of the sunset. You were hardwired by your Creator for a glory orientation. It is inescapable. It's in your genes.²

We pursue what we prize. We're glory chasers. The question is what do *you* prize as glorious? What's worth pursuing for you? We were created to pursue God's glory—that's the chief end of man. It's okay to pursue glory and even to receive glory. But so often we're content to receive the glory that comes from man, rather than the glory that comes from God (Jn. 12:43). Instead of wanting God to be great and glorified in us, we want to be great and glorified on our own. What about you? What do you prize? What do you pursue?

Judges gives us two sketches of Gideon. Last week, in the first sketch, we saw a humble and weak man who relies on God's strength. Gideon pursued God's glory in Judges 6-7. But in Judges 8, we get a very different Gideon.³ He's pursuing his own glory. If you just look at the basic plotline of the story, everything looks the same. In verse 4, the basic crisis of the story is introduced. Gideon is pursuing the kings of Midian to finish the job (v. 4). In verse 21, we have the climax of the story. Gideon defeats the kings of Midian. Then in verse 28, we see the resolution. Then, the land had rest for 40 years. But when you look at the details, you see that Gideon isn't chasing the kings of Midian to save God's people and to pursue God's glory. He's pursuing his own glory. The key verse in the passage is verse 23. After Gideon finally defeats the kings of Midian, Israel comes to him and says, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian." Gideon replies, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." This is certainly the right answer. He has his theology right! God's people are meant

¹ Harvey, David T. *Rescuing Ambition*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010, p. 18.

² Harvey, p. 22.

³ Webb, Barry G. *Judges and Ruth: God in Chaos*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway 2015.

to live under God's rule. But did he really believe it? I don't think so. Tim Keller says, "He knew something intellectually which had not gripped his heart." He knew the right answer. But what he pursued showed what his heart prized. He was pursuing his own rule and glory, not God's. The details of this passage bear this out.

Judges 8:4-35⁴

⁴And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over; he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. ⁵So he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." ⁶And the officials of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" ⁷So Gideon said, "Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers." ⁸And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way, and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. ⁹And he said to the men of Penuel, "When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower."

¹⁰Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. ¹¹And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. ¹²And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic.

¹³Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. ¹⁴And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. ¹⁵And he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?'" ¹⁶And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. ¹⁷And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

¹⁸Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?" They answered, "As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king." ¹⁹And he said, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you." ²⁰So he said to Jether his firstborn, "Rise and kill them!" But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man. ²¹Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength." And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels.

²²Then 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." ²³Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." ²⁴And Gideon said to them, "Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil." (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) ²⁵And they answered, "We will willingly give them." And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. ²⁶And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels. ²⁷And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. ²⁸So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more. And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.

⁴ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] unless otherwise noted.

²⁹Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. ³⁰Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. ³¹And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. ³²And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

³³As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. ³⁴And the people of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, ³⁵and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

This is the Word of the LORD.

This is my sermon in a sentence: We're called to pursue God's glory, not our own. Gideon believes this in his head, but not in his heart. He says the right thing with his mouth, but he doesn't do the right thing with his life.

This passage is divided into four sections.

1. All of the details that lead up to the climax of Gideon defeating the kings of Midian (vv. 4-17).
2. The actual climax of the story (vv. 18-21).
3. All of the details that follow the climax of the story (vv. 22-28).
4. And the epilogue (vv. 29-32).

These four sections teach us four negative lessons about pursuing God's glory. They show us what it looks like when we pursue our own glory.

PUNISHMENT (4-17)

Let's start with the first section. We pursue our own glory when we punish others for not giving us what we desire. This comes out in all of the details that lead up to climax of Gideon defeating the kings, in verses 4-17.

The first sign that Gideon is on a different path than the one he was on in chapters 6-7 is when he comes to Succoth and Penuel. As he's pursuing the kings of Midian, his 300 men become hungry. So he asks the people at Succoth and Penuel for bread. They refuse him because they're afraid. If he doesn't defeat the kings of Midian, maybe the Midianites will punish them for supporting Gideon (vv. 5-9). Clearly Succoth and Penuel are in the wrong. But for our purposes, Gideon's response is more important. He tells the men at Succoth that he's going to beat them with thorn bushes. He tells the men at Penuel that he's going to tear down their tower. And after he captures the kings of Midian, that's exactly what he does. And even more. He also kills the men at Penuel (vv. 13-17).

What's going on with Gideon? Why is he so angry? I don't think it has to do with the bread. Gideon wants glory from Succoth and Penuel for what *he's* accomplished.⁵ He's forgotten the lesson of the 300 men. The army of 300 was meant to show beyond a shadow of a doubt that the LORD secured the victory. The LORD pruned the army, so that Israel wouldn't boast over the LORD (7:2). But now, Gideon seems to have forgotten this. So he wants glory and honor from Succoth and Penuel for what *he's* accomplished. And when he doesn't get the glory and the honor he desires, he's ready

⁵ Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013.

to punish the people at Succoth and Penuel. He basically says, “You dare to doubt me? That I can defeat the kings of Midian? I’ll show you my power when I get back. You’ll learn to respect me.”⁶ Gideon’s rage and vengeance are driven by his demand for respect and honor. He doesn’t get what he thinks he deserves, so he kills. This reminds me of James 4:1-2. “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.”

There’s nothing wrong with having desires, even desires for respect and honor. But when our desires for respect and honor become demands, we know that we’re hanging on to an idol. And when we then punish others for their refusal to give us our demands, we show that we’re assuming the place of God. For vengeance belongs to the LORD, not us. There are many ways that we punish other people for not meeting our demands for honor and respect. It *can* go as far as murder. But it can also simply involve giving someone the cold shoulder, or passive aggressive behavior. Regardless, when we begin punishing others for not meeting our demands for honor and respect, we show that we’re not pursuing God’s glory; we’re pursuing our own.

SUCCESS (18-21)

Let’s look now at the second reason we know Gideon was pursuing his own glory. We pursue our own glory when we rely on our own success. This is seen in the climax of the story, where Gideon kills the kings of Midian, in verses 18-21.

In verses 18-19, we see that Gideon’s relentless pursuit of the Midianite kings is being driven by his desire for personal vengeance more than a desire to complete the deliverance of God’s people for God’s glory.⁷ He’s pursuing them because they killed his brothers. Look at verse 18. He says to them, “Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?” And they answer by saying, “As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king.” They have no shame. They knew Gideon’s brothers were leaders. They looked like princes. Killing them was like claiming the scalps of the chief’s sons. In verse 19, Gideon replies by saying, “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you.” Gideon is going to punish these men for killing his brothers. So far, that’s similar to what we saw in the last point. But in verse 20, a new idea is introduced. In verse 20, Gideon commands his firstborn Jether to kill the kings. But Jether wouldn’t because he was afraid, because he was still a young man. This is interesting. Jether is a foil for Gideon. He’s a picture of what Gideon was like in chapters 6-7—young, weak, humble.⁸ When Gideon was young, weak, and humble, he was forced to rely on the LORD’s strength. But now all of his success has gone to his head. This is also highlighted in verse 21. The kings mock Gideon for asking his son to kill them. They say, “Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength.” These kings didn’t realize how profound this statement was. Gideon had become a man who relied on his own strength.

Success is dangerous.⁹ It certainly was for Gideon. When Gideon was weak, he looked to God and his strength. And he worshiped God. When he was successful, he relied on his own strength and he worshiped his own success and honor. The same is true for us. When we’re aware of our weakness, we know we need God’s strength and God’s grace. And when God provides his grace, we know we

⁶ Keller

⁷ Keller

⁸ Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

⁹ Keller

need to worship God and give him the glory. But success is dangerous. It can obscure the reality that we need God. When we experience success, we can easily forget God's grace. We can forget that we're dependent on the LORD and that everything we have is a gift from God. I think this especially applies to us at First Free. Most of us here experience a tremendous amount of success, at least compared to the rest of the world. I think it's hard for us to be aware of our dependence on God. And without an acute awareness of our dependence on God, it will be difficult for us to give God glory! Tim Keller says, "We need to remember we're saved by grace when we fail. But we need to remember it much more when we succeed." If we don't understand our need for God's grace, we'll never pursue God's glory.

NEEDED (22-28)

Let's now look at the third reason Gideon was pursuing his own glory. We pursue our own glory when we need to be needed. This is found in the details that follow the climax of the story in verses 22-28. I've already mentioned the fact that after Gideon is asked to be king (v. 22), he gives the right response in verse 23 by stating that the LORD is king and he will rule over his people. But what he says with his mouth is not supported with what he does with his life. If the previous two sections of the passage haven't proved that, I'm confident the third will.

Almost immediately after he makes this profound theological statement, he contradicts himself.¹⁰ In verse 24, Gideon asks the people to give him all of the gold they plundered from the Midianites. And with that gold, he makes a golden ephod that he sets up in his hometown at Ophrah. Sounds a lot like Aaron and the golden calf, doesn't it. What is an ephod, by the way? It's like a vest that the high priest wore in the tabernacle, which at this point was located at Shiloh (cf. 18:31). The tabernacle was the place where God dwelt and where the people came to worship. Where the ephod was, God's glory was. But having God's glory at Shiloh wasn't good enough for Gideon. He wanted a symbol of God's glory at his house. He's basically setting up an alternative place of worship in his backyard. And it works. The people of Israel start to worship the golden ephod. In verse 27, we're told that "all Israel whored after it, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family." In the very place where Gideon had once torn down the altar to Baal and the Asherah pole, he now places a golden ephod.¹¹ The judges were called to turn people away from worship of false gods. But now Gideon sets up an object of false worship in his own hometown.¹² Why did he do this? I think it's because he wanted to be the center of attention. This is certainly consistent with all that we've seen so far in chapter 8. He says that only God should be king. Only God should be worshiped. But his theology and his life are not consistent. Does that sound anything like your life?

Another thing to remember about the ephod is that the Urim and Thummim were on the ephod. These were used by the high priest to discern God's will. Requesting the ephod meant to ask for God's direction by the Urim and Thummim.¹³ I believe one of the reasons Gideon set up the golden ephod in his hometown is he wanted people to come *to him* to seek guidance. Not only did he need honor and respect. He also needed to be needed. What about you? Do you need to be needed? Tim Keller applies this to people in ministry, but I think it applies to all of us. He says,

It's very easy for us to use church leadership not to serve and honor God, but to win influence and honor for ourselves. Of course, Gideon-like, we still say that God is King; but we want people to

¹⁰ Keller

¹¹ Webb, *The Book of Judges*

¹² Keller

¹³ Davis, Dale Ralph. *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007.

*look to us for guidance, for answers, for salvation. We need to be needed. We make an ephod and wear it ourselves. How subtle. How deadly.*¹⁴

When we seek to be the center of attention, we show that we're not pursuing God's glory but our own. Again, it's okay to want to be useful. But when that desire becomes a demand?! When we *need* to be needed?! That's idolatry. And it's even worse when the leaders in the church, who are supposed to be pointing people to Christ and leading them to worship God, are actually demanding people look to us.

IN CHARGE (29-32)

Let's look now at the fourth reason we know Gideon is pursuing his own glory. We pursue our own glory when we act like we're in charge. This is seen in the epilogue of the story, in verses 29-32.

Again, Gideon said God was king. But he's acting like *he* is king. In fact, he's acting like a Canaanite king. It's ironic. Gideon just killed two Canaanite kings. And this led to Israel having rest for 40 years. But now *he's* acting like a Canaanite king. The first clue is in verse 30. He had 70 sons by many wives. This is the way that Canaanite kings set up their family. It was a way to secure power. We also know that one of those sons was from a concubine (v. 31); another mark of a Canaanite king. And not only that, the son born to him by a concubine was named Abimelech. This means, son of a king." Why would Gideon name his son Abimelech if he wasn't living like a king?

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

Friends, most of you here know the right answers. You have orthodox beliefs. You know that God is King. You know that Jesus is LORD. You know that your life is meant to be lived for the glory of God. You're called to pursue God's glory by serving and submitting to Jesus. You're called to pursue God's glory by depending on the Holy Spirit's strength in your life. But does your theology match your living? Does your orthodoxy lead to orthopraxy? Does what you know in your head grip your heart? You'll ultimately pursue what you prize. Your beliefs will be proved by your behavior. Are you living as though God is in charge? Or are you living as though you're in charge?

Gideon *believed* the right things. And he *lived* according to those right beliefs in his early days. In his later days, he *said* the right things. He could still sign off on an orthodox Statement of Faith. But he didn't *prove* his faith by faithfulness. He didn't persevere in the faith. He didn't finish well. He said God was king. But he lived like he was king. Our faith will be proved by our faithfulness. Not only that, it will be proved by our long-term faithfulness. It will be proved by our perseverance in the faith. Hebrews 3:14 says, "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." Gideon is an example of faith. Hebrews 11 lists him as an example of faith. But he's not a perfect example of faith. And he's not an example of perseverance. Jesus is. Only Jesus ran the race with perfect endurance. He's the founder and perfecter of our faith. It was with the joy that was set before him that he endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Let us look to him. Let us not pursue selfish ambition like Gideon did in the end. Paul tells us to do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit. He tells us to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. This is what Jesus did. Let us not seek the glory that comes from man, like Gideon did. Let us seek the glory that comes from God. That's what Jesus did, all the way to the cross.

¹⁴ Keller