

"LESSONS FROM GIDEON"

(excerpt from *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*)

(Robert B. Chisholm)

Exegetical Idea: *Israel's persistence in sin created a climate of spiritual blindness and insensitivity, but God once more showed compassion to his people and accomplished a great victory through hesitant Gideon. The Lord patiently developed Gideon's faith. However, God's purposes were compromised when Gideon lost focus of his mission, made naïve and unwise leadership decisions, and allowed his lifestyle to contradict a theologically correct message.*

Theological Principles

The book's recurring theological principles are present in this literary unit: (a) Sin brings divine discipline and makes God's people vulnerable to their enemies. (b) God confronts his people's sin, but he also intervenes on their behalf when they cry out to him. (c) God utilizes human instruments, sometimes in unexpected ways, to accomplish his purposes.

God's kingship, a prominent theme in Judges 4-5, is apparent here as well. Through Gideon, the Lord attacks Baa's altar. Gideon's father challenges Baal to defend his interests, but Baal remains silent throughout the story as Gideon wins a series of victories against overwhelming odds.

Theological Idea: *Persistence in sin creates a climate of spiritual blindness and insensitivity, but during such times God continues to show compassion to his people and can accomplish great things through unlikely instruments. In such dark times the Lord can patiently develop hesitant people into heroes of faith. However, God's purposes can be compromised when his chosen instruments lose focus of their mission, make naïve and unwise leadership decisions, and allow their lifestyle to contradict a theologically correct message.*

Homiletical Trajectories [Preaching Applications]

(1) God is the compassionate king. Even when his people continue to drift from him, he remains active in their experience and seeks to win back their allegiance. He shows up their false gods for what they really are and demonstrates his ability to protect his people. He is superior to all other so-called gods and is deserving of his people's undivided loyalty and worship.

(2) When the covenant community becomes assimilated to the surrounding pagan culture, it can develop an irrational attachment to false gods and fail to see God's hand at work. When God acts in the world, the covenant community is apt to bestow honor on God's human instruments rather than the One who is truly worthy of their praise. As the community becomes more pagan in its outlook, it loses its sense of unity and common purpose. Petty self-interest and pride can threaten to tear the community apart.

(3) Even in less than ideal conditions God chooses to accomplish his purposes through human instruments. Potential leaders raised in a pagan environment are susceptible to cynicism and likely to possess deficient faith.¹ Yet God is willing to work with such people and mold them into effective instruments through whom he accomplishes great things. However, such individuals may be prone to put personal honor first and to make unwise decisions that foster paganism and threaten the community's unity (see the sequel to Gideon's story in 8:33-10:5).

Preaching Idea: *Even in times of spiritual darkness, we should realize that God is accomplishing his purposes, often through hesitant, weak people. We*



¹ It should be apparent to the reader, in light of our comments above on 6:36-40, that we interpret Gideon's test with the fleece in a negative light as a symptom of his weak faith. If this is the case, his fleece test should not be viewed as a model or pattern for us to following in seeking to discern the will of God!

should be willing to carry out God's purposes, trusting him to develop our faith in the process. When we achieve God-given success, however, we must be careful not to undermine God's work by losing focus, making unwise decisions, or acting inconsistently with our profession of faith.

Because the Gideon story is so lengthy, the exegetical, theological, and preaching ideas encompass several related themes and may seem overly long and unwieldy. It is certainly valid and probably desirable to preach a sermon over the entire story, highlighting its interrelated themes. But prior to or after doing so, one may also focus on each of the homiletical trajectories and develop a preaching idea for each one:

- (1) *In spiritually dark times, when God may seem absent, we must remember that our compassionate and incomparable God remains concerned for his covenant community and committed to accomplishing his purposes through us.*
- (2) *In spiritually dark times, when God may seem absent, we must make sure that we do not (a) grow cynical about his concern for his people, (b) embrace the gods of our culture, (c) glorify God's human instruments, rather than God himself, or (d) succumb to self-interest and pride.*
- (3) *In spiritually dark times, when God's people tend to be cynical and lack faith, we should be willing to carry out God's purposes, trusting him to develop our faith. When we achieve God-given success, however, we must be careful not to undermine God's work by losing focus of our purpose, making unwise decisions, or acting inconsistently with our profession of faith.*

Since Gideon's journey of faith is so prominent in the plot line of the story, one could develop a sermon series around it, with God's patience being an important subtheme. This series is rooted in the third trajectory above.² The preaching ideas for such a series might be formulated as follows:

- (1) *Faith awakened: In spiritually dark times, when God may appear to be absent, cynicism can become a barrier to faith, but we must be willing to carry out God's purposes, because he assures us of his enabling presence (6:1-24).*
- (2) *Faith challenged: God may challenge us to demonstrate our faith by asking us to risk opposition (6:25-32).*
- (3) *Faith needing assurance: When our faith wavers and we prefer to walk by sight, God may patiently give us added assurance, but he will still require that we trust in him alone for success (6:33-7:14).*
- (4) *Faith blossoming: When in faith we carry out God's purposes, we experience his enabling presence in remarkable ways (7:15-23).*
- (5) *Faith unappreciated: When in faith we experience God-given success, we may face opposition and criticism from those who fail to appreciate what God has accomplished (7:24-8:3).*
- (6) *Faith compromised: When in faith we achieve God-given success, we must be careful not to undermine God's work by losing focus of our purpose, making unwise decisions, or acting inconsistently with our profession of faith (8:4-32).*

² The hermeneutical basis for developing this sermon series is as follows: (1) The plot line of the story focuses on the development and compromise of Gideon's faith. (2) This plot line is related to the book's third major theme, focusing on leadership (cf. the third homiletical trajectory). (3) In the corporate thinking of ancient Israel, the nation's leaders represent the nation and, as such, become a model (whether positive, negative, or somewhere in between) for the nation. The model of Gideon's faith, first developed and then compromised, becomes instructive for the nation. (4) For the nation to succeed as a corporate entity, it must, like Gideon, carry out God's purposes in faith, and, unlike Gideon, not compromise its faith and success in the afterglow of victory. But a corporate entity is comprised of both leaders and other individuals, who must in faith obey God and avoid the pitfalls of Gideon. Once we think in terms of the Gideon story being a model for the covenant community, its leaders, and its other individual members, we can justify holding up Gideon as an example (both positive and negative) for the new covenant community (the Church), its leaders, and its other individual members