Lesson 7: The Bramble King and the Merciful God

Teaching Outline — Self-Rule, Righteous Judgment, and Mercy
Passage: Judges 9-10 | **Suggested teaching time:** 45 minutes

Lesson objective

- Class will see:
  - Self-rule brings ruin
  - God remains righteous in judgment
  - God remains merciful toward repentant sinners

Introduction (2 minutes)

From Gideon to Abimelech

- Judges exposes the cost of doing what is right in one's own eyes
- Gideon: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you" (8:23)
- Gideon's compromises and large household left Israel ready for his son to seek rule for himself
- Abimelech: not a judge raised by God, not a Spirit-empowered deliverer
  - A man who grasps at authority

More than a cruel man's cruel end

- Sinful power creates a world of suspicion, betrayal, and bloodshed
- The LORD sees violence people try to normalize or forget
- Ch. 10 turns from Abimelech's collapse to:
  - Israel's many idols
  - A surprising note of divine compassion

Not detached biographies

- Events follow as Israel's spiritual condition worsens
- When a people refuse the LORD's rule, the vacuum isn't left empty
  - Someone will fill it — sometimes impressive, sometimes plainly destructive
- Abimelech is destructive from the start, yet people think he'll serve their interests
- The searching question
  - Not only "Would I be Abimelech?"
  - "Would I provide the money, approval, silence, or political cover that makes an Abimelech possible?"

Godly authority vs. self-seeking rule

- Scripture doesn't condemn every form of human leadership
  - Parents, civil rulers, pastors, and other servants have real responsibilities under God
- The issue: authority received as stewardship, or seized for self-exaltation
- Abimelech: Gideon's truth displaced by a family name, a local faction, and a promise of advantage

Watch for appearance vs. reality

- Abimelech receives a crown-like title — but he's no shepherd
- Shechem has religious language and covenant associations — but acts treacherously
- Israel cries to the LORD — but must also put away its idols
- Not merely identifying bad people elsewhere
  - Submit every claim of power, worship, and repentance to God's searching word

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Context and reading (4 minutes)

Read Judges 8:33-35

- **Read aloud**
- Israel "went a whoring after Baalim," "remembered not the LORD their God"
- Abimelech: son of Jerubbaal by a concubine in Shechem (8:31)
  - His name may sound royal; the narrative gives no approval to his kingship
- Shechem, once associated with covenant renewal, now funds murder from "the house of Baal-berith" (9:4)

Read Judges 9:1-6

- **Read aloud**
- Appeal is political and personal: “remember also that I am your bone and your flesh” (9:2)
- Seventy pieces of silver from the men of Shechem
- Hires “vain and light persons”
- Murders his brothers “upon one stone”; made king
- Jotham alone escapes
- Self-rule in its clearest form: ambition turns relatives into rivals and people into instruments

Abimelech’s hollow argument

- Little about justice, service, or Israel’s good
- “Seventy men or one?” — a question arranged to benefit himself
  - The seventy aren’t presented as competing rulers
  - No one asks whether God chose him
- Kinship appeal is hollow — he’s preparing to kill his father’s house
- Sin uses good words — family, unity, safety, efficiency — while pursuing a very different end

Shechem’s genuine guilt

- Silver from the house of Baal-berith, a name tied to a covenant god
- Money devoted to idolatry finances murder
- Can’t claim it was merely Abimelech’s private crime
- Its leaders make him king knowing what he’s done
- God will judge the violent ruler and the community that knowingly empowered him

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Exposition: A bramble offers shade (9 minutes)

Read Judges 9:7-21

- **Read aloud**

Jotham’s parable

- From mount Gerizim — the first extended parable recorded in Scripture
- Olive, fig, and vine refuse to leave fruitful work merely “to be promoted over the trees”

- Jotham pictures unworthy rule as a [BLANK: bramble], which eagerly accepts
- “If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow” (9:15)
  - Absurd — a low thornbush offers little real shelter
- Its threat is more believable than its protection
  - “let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon”
- The bramble promises safety but threatens [BLANK: fire]

Each plant fits the point

- Olive: oil
- Fig: sweetness
- Vine: wine that cheers God and man
- Value expressed in fruitfulness; they won’t leave useful calling merely to wave above the trees
- Not a command for capable people to avoid public office
- Exposes status pursued for status itself
  - One can be busy, visible, influential, and give little life, protection, wisdom, or service

The bramble is different

- Thorns, not nourishing fruit
- Low, its shade scarcely a credible refuge
- Offer contains a threat from the start: accept my rule, or fire consumes even the cedars
- The logic of tyrannical power
  - Can’t persuade by demonstrated goodness
  - Demands loyalty; punishes resistance
- Abimelech’s reign follows the parable exactly
  - Danger to the very people who promoted him

Jotham’s explanation

- Did Shechem act “truly and sincerely” toward Jerubbaal’s house?
- They repaid the man who risked his life by supporting his sons’ murder
- If just, rejoice; if not, fire will consume Abimelech and Shechem alike
- Not a magical formula — a moral indictment rooted in what they’ve done

Why Mount Gerizim matters

- A place connected with covenant blessing

- Shechem used an idol temple's money to install a murderer
- Courageous, but more than brave protest — it calls the city to measure itself before God
- Whether they have "done truly and sincerely" is more penetrating than "Did the plan succeed?" or "Did our side win?"
- God judges by truth and righteousness, not merely visible results

Examine our idea of leadership

- Fruitful people needn't abandon God-given responsibilities to prove their importance
- The bramble, having little good to give, is eager for the title
- [BLANK: ambition] without service becomes destructive
- Christ came not "to be ministered unto, but to minister" (Mark 10:45)

In ordinary settings

- A church chooses a leader because he's forceful
- A workplace rewards quick results
- A family yields to the loudest voice because resistance is tiring
- None is wise simply because it reduces immediate conflict
- Ask what fruit the person bears
  - Does he tell the truth when it costs him?
  - Does she protect the weak?
  - Is authority used to serve, build, and accept accountability?
- A title can't create character
- Where character is absent, more authority magnifies the harm

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Exposition: God judges guilty partners (9 minutes)

Read Judges 9:22-24

- **Read aloud**
- "When Abimelech had reigned three years over Israel, Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem."
- Purpose: "That the cruelty done to the threescore and ten sons of Jerubbaal might come."
- Don't soften what Scripture says — God is sovereign even over this judgment

The three years matter

- The crime wasn't immediately answered
- King and city may have thought the alliance succeeded
- Delay isn't indifference — don't mistake patience for approval
- God may give sinners time to repent; He's never confused about what was done
- The blood of Jerubbaal's sons hasn't left His sight because the perpetrators enjoyed power

What "evil spirit" means

- Scripture never makes God the author of moral evil
- Abimelech and Shechem already chose murder, treachery, and violence
- Sent as judicial judgment, bringing enmity between wicked allies
- Personal evil spirit, or chiefly divinely sent discord? Either way the central point is secure:
  - [BLANK: God] righteously turns their evil alliance toward judgment
- Compare 1 Sam 16:14; 1 Kgs 22:19-23 — God's sovereignty doesn't excuse human sin

Sovereignty and responsibility

- The Bible is unembarrassed: God sent judgment
- The men aren't innocent puppets
  - Gaal is proud
  - Zebul is calculating
  - Abimelech is violent
  - The citizens turn from scheme to scheme
- God gives their wicked partnership over to the distrust and hatred already suited to it
- Resist two errors
  1. God's sovereignty makes human responsibility unreal
  2. God is unable to govern history
- Judges 9 teaches both truths without apology

Gaal, Zebul, and an unstable coalition

- Gaal mocks Abimelech, invites Shechem to reject him
- Zebul secretly sends word
- Abimelech drives Gaal away, then massacres Shechem
- Each man acts for his own advantage

- Common enemy or profit may hold sinful people together briefly
  - It can't produce covenant faithfulness
- Those willing to betray righteousness will find reasons to betray one another

"And sowed it with salt" (9:45)

- Say no more than the text warrants
- Sowing Shechem with salt certainly marks severe [BLANK: devastation]
- Likely a symbolic sign of desolation or curse
- Don't claim he made the site permanently infertile — the verse doesn't explain the agricultural result
- Certain lesson: a ruler who gained power by blood destroys his own supporters
- Dreadful — no license to delight in suffering or treat violence as entertainment
- Careful speech honors Scripture
  - Not weaker faith to say "The text does not tell us that"
  - Refusing imagined details lets the actual warning stand

El-berith and Thebez

- Leaders flee to the hold of the house of El-berith
- About a thousand die when he burns it
- At Thebez the pattern reverses — he assumes the same tactic of fire
  - "a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to brake his skull" (9:53)
- His armor-bearer kills him at his request
- The narrator preserves what he wished to hide: a woman struck the fatal blow
- The mighty self-made king undone by an unnamed woman at a tower
- People may manage appearances; they can't rewrite God's verdict
- Humbles those who trust reputation
- Comforts those who wonder whether brutal power gets the last word

Read Judges 9:56-57

- **Read aloud**
- "Thus God rendered the wickedness of Abimelech"
- "all the evil of the men of Shechem did God render upon their heads"
- Delayed [BLANK: judgment] is not absent from the LORD's sight

- Neither chance nor permission for private vengeance — God's public answer to bloodguilt

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Exposition: Repentance is more than a cry (8 minutes)

Read Judges 10:1-5

- **Read aloud**
- Tola and Jair briefly named
- Brevity cautions against inventing details
- God continued to provide order, though little is recorded

Read Judges 10:6-16

- **Read aloud**

Israel's catalogue of gods

- Baalim, Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, Zidon, Moab, Ammon, and the Philistines
- "forsook the LORD, and served not him"
- Sold to Philistines and Ammonites — eighteen years vexed and oppressed
- A long list: idolatry isn't a small lapse
  - Not a lack of religious interest — very religious, but divided and false
  - Want the LORD's protection; reserve loyalty for gods offering prosperity, security, fertility, or political advantage

The searching command

- Israel confesses: "We have sinned against thee"
- The LORD recounts former rescues
- "Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation" (10:14)
- False gods can't save
- Exposes emergency-minded religion that wants relief without allegiance
- If those gods deserved devotion, why can't they deliver?

More than speech

- “They put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD.”
- Confession joined by a changed direction
- “his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel” (10:16)
  - Language accommodates our understanding without weakening God
  - The holy God isn’t indifferent to His repentant people’s suffering
- [BLANK: repentance] turns from idols to serve the living God
  - Not sinless perfection or a way to earn grace

Regret over pain vs. repentance from sin

- Can hate the consequences of drunkenness while loving drink
- Can hate the loneliness of dishonesty while protecting the lie
- Can hate anxiety while treating money and control as saviors
- Israel’s first cry is true as far as it goes; the narrative presses further
- Real repentance includes a turning
  - Not sinless performance before God can hear
  - We stop defending the idol and return to the God we offended

Holy mercy

- Don’t separate God’s compassion from His holiness
- He rebukes honestly, remembers accurately, refuses to flatter shallow confession
- Yet He is grieved for their misery when they turn
- Neither a harsh deity who enjoys refusing help
- Nor an indulgent deity who calls idolatry harmless
- Right response to rebuke: not despair, but honest confession and obedient return

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Application (5 minutes)

1. **Reject the bramble’s version of greatness**
   - In homes, churches, workplaces, public life: influence to serve others or to secure ourselves?
   - The desire for recognition quietly turns brethren into competitors
2. **Do not make peace with an evil cause because it benefits you for the moment**
   - Shechem didn’t wield the sword at Ophrah, but it supplied the money

    - Supporting another's wrong makes one morally [BLANK: complicit]
    - Those who share responsibility even when another performs the visible wrong
3. **Treat God's warnings seriously**
    - 10:14 isn't a denial of mercy — it's mercy exposing idolatry before it destroys
    - Where do we look first when trouble comes?
    - What "strange gods" must be put away: control, money, approval, pleasure, self-reliance?

Personal before political

- Easy to spot an Abimelech in public life and miss the bramble impulse in our own hearts
    - Manipulating a conversation
    - Nursing resentment when another is recognized
    - Using spiritual language to gain influence
    - Quietly enjoying another's failure
- We can confess our desire to be important because Christ secured our standing
- No need to grasp, threaten, or compete for an identity He gives by grace

Repentance has concrete fruit

- Money an idol → wise accountability, practice generosity
- Approval rules → tell the truth even if it costs esteem
- Control replaced trust → pray specifically, obey the next clear command, release outcomes
- These don't purchase forgiveness; they're the direction of one who has turned

Corporate application

- Don't lend voice, resources, or platform to a cause just because its leader protects your interests
- Ask what was done to obtain power and what will be required to keep it
- Refuse to call cruelty wisdom, dishonesty strategy, or vengeance justice
- May be costly short-term; God sees faithfulness vs. mere success

Receive a warning as mercy

- Jotham gave Shechem an opportunity to reckon with its guilt
- Ch. 10 exposed false worship before it was too late
- A rebuke from Scripture, a friend, or a mature member feels unwelcome because it threatens a protected idol
- Don't defend the idol

- Ask where self-rule has taken root; turn to the King whose rule gives life

Patient hope when injustice is unanswered

- We're not told to take God's place or repay evil
- He has seen, He judges truly, and His mercy is open to the repentant
- Freedom to pursue truth and justice without bitterness or revenge

Neither gullible nor cynical

- Don't assume every confident leader is trustworthy
- Don't despair when leadership fails
- Test claims by the character and fruit Scripture requires
- Pray for those in authority
- Speak truth with humility
- Serve faithfully in the responsibility God actually gave you
- The LORD's rule isn't an excuse to withdraw from duty
    - It's the foundation for doing it without grasping for a throne

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Christ and the gospel (3 minutes)

False king, true King

Abimelech	Jesus Christ
Takes life to secure a throne	Gives His life for rebels
Gathers worthless men to destroy	Receives sinners to save them
Spreads fire and death	Bears judgment at the cross; gives life to all who repent and believe

Longing for a righteous King

- Israel's problem isn't solved by a stronger bramble or more skillful judge
- We need the LORD's promised King — righteous rule, real mercy
- In Christ, God remains just while justifying the one who believes in Jesus (Rom 3:26)
- [BLANK: Christ] is the righteous King self-rule cannot produce and sinners desperately need

Justice and mercy at the cross

- God's justice against sin and mercy toward sinners meet without compromise
- Jesus doesn't excuse evil, conceal it, or merely warn us to improve
- He bears the judgment deserved by all who repent and trust Him
- He rules not as a bramble demanding fearful submission, but as the Shepherd-King who gave Himself
- His authority is good because His character is perfectly good

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Discussion (3 minutes)

Discussion questions

1. What makes Jotham's bramble parable an accurate picture of Abimelech?
2. How does Judges 9:23 teach both God's sovereignty and human responsibility?
3. Why should we be cautious about claims beyond what Judges 9:45 says about salt?
4. What difference does Judges 10:16 show between crying in pain and repenting from sin?

Closing prayer (2 minutes)

> **Closing prayer:** "Righteous and merciful Father, forgive our self-rule and hidden idols. Keep us from the ambition that harms others and from partnership with evil. Grant us true repentance, hearts that serve Thee, and faith in Thy righteous King, Jesus Christ. Amen."