

Judges 4-5
Soccer Style Leadership
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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In the case of Dunder Mifflin, it may or may not pay to actually know where you're going. But that's the exception, not the rule.

According to a recent Amazon.com search, there are nearly 130,000 books available on the subject of leadership. 130,000!

The tale of leadership, no matter what the sphere, is a cautionary one. Long lines of innovative thinkers have experienced a failure to thrive because they haven't known how to manage and lead effectively. Whether you're in a business or a church or an exercise class at the YMCA, leadership – godly leadership – recognizes that the call to lead is a call to selflessness. Author Jim Collins says effective leaders always give the team highest priority, even over their own success and image.

Now in order to be a leader, you also have to have a team around you. I read a story this week about a high school student who was beginning to fill out college applications. Her heart sunk when she got to the short answer section. The question that was asked was "Are you a leader?" This was an honest and authentic student, so she wrote, "No, I'm really not," and turned in the application—expecting the worst. Later she heard back from the University. Their response read like this: "Dear Applicant, a study of the applications reveals that this year our college will have 1452 leaders. We have chosen to admit you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

This morning, we are going to look at one of the great leaders and prophets from the Bible, a woman named Deborah, who has the entire nation of Israel following her guidance. Turn with me to the book of Judges, chapter 4. We're starting in the first verse.

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time.

The history of Israel has this all too familiar pattern: faithful living for a while, only to be lured away from God by competing deities and petty distractions, resulting in a spiral into disobedience and destructive behavior. The result? A rival nation would swoop in and take captive the people of God, and then they'd begin their climb back out.

We find Israel this morning in a difficult place, oppressed by their arch rival Canaan, the people of the land God had promised them.

Now what happens when we find ourselves in a compromised position, in a place where we can't get free, when we get in over our heads? What do we do? We cry out. Like my 3-year-old son Christian who recently found himself at the top of a playground set that was too big and too old for him, we cry out for our dad to help us. It's then that we realize is that God who is faithful and just is always willing to come and restore his people. Israel is captive, so God sends a leader. He sends a woman named Deborah who is one of the Judges who leads Israel, and is also a prophet.

The text continues: **She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?'" Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.**

Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

In times of peace, Israel's Judges would wait, and as people came with their issues, they would issue judgments in disputes. So just like Judge Judy has her court room, Judge Debbie has her palm tree. But these are not good times for Israel, and Deborah's role changes. Now, we don't know how God called Deborah, but he did. And it's the Lord who is waiting, ready to save his people once again through Deborah.

In times of war, the Judge would rally all the tribes of Israel together for the same purpose: to defeat the enemy together. And that's what Deborah does. But as the great leader she is, Deborah goes throughout the tribes and finds the best commander in all Israel, and that's Barak. Great leaders always have a great supporting cast. And Deborah, whose name in Hebrew means "Bee," comes up with a plan that convinces Barak to help lead and Sisera the enemy leader to fall into her trap that's going to sting the enemy.

Deborah is able to inspire and convince most all of the tribes of Israel to go along with her plan, because they trust her. In times of peace, she dealt justly and wisely with the people, so that now in times of conflict they will trust her, as well. Interestingly, the two Judges who came immediately before Deborah, Othniel and Ehud, who led Israel in very similar circumstances both used power and might to defeat the enemy, Deborah, on the other hand, used wisdom, and it's Deborah who is seen as a model of godly leadership.

You see, Deborah realized that authentic leadership seeks to inspire and equip those around you. Barak wants to go along with Deborah's leadership. It says in verse 8, "If you will go with me I will go, but if you will not go, I won't go." Barak didn't believe he was capable of doing it on his own; he doubted his own calling.

How many times in our lives have we been faced with a new challenge, one for which we lacked in experience and confidence, and we worried that we weren't up to the task? Maybe we said to our parent or our teacher, "If you stay with me I'll do it, but I won't do it alone."

Deborah recognized Barak's God-given potential. But Deborah also had a trump card; she trusted that it was God who was sending them. Four times she has to remind him, "Barak, God is calling you; Barak, God is going to win the day; Barak, God is going ahead of you; Barak, God is with you." Deborah went with Barak. And you might think to yourself, well she's going to go and then she's going to do it for him. But that's precisely what she doesn't do. Look at verse 9. Deborah says, **Surely I will go with you. Nevertheless the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman** (not Deborah).

What kind of a leader are you?

You might think to yourself, *Well, I'm not a manager in a business, or an administrator of a school. I'm not a coach or a councilperson.* But every one of us has opportunities that we are being called to have influence over someone. It could be as a parent, it could be as a child who is now taking care of a parent. It could be as a part of a small group, or leader of a committee. Every one of you is a leader in some way in your own life. So what kind of leader are you?

Here are a few of Deborah's keys to effective leadership.

Do you hoard success when something good happens or do you build a culture of success sharing? **Leaders are those who share the fame.** Did you notice that when Deborah told Barak that it wasn't him, but another woman—who we later learn is named Jael—who would win the day, she reminded Barak that the victory was going to come from a team effort. When we give credit to others, when we elevate others by highlighting their gifts, the team wins. Certainly God gives tremendous gifts to his people, but more importantly, God sees the value in the people that you lead.

Recently, there was a David Brooks article in the New York Times that caught my eye, mainly because it had baseball in the title. The article was called “Is life more like Baseball or Soccer?” His hypothesis was a little surprising to me. On the baseball field, you have a team of players all working together, but for the most part, each of those players acts individually (hitting a home run, or throwing a 96 mph fastball, or making a spectacular catch). So really, baseball is much more individual than it might appear.

Almost nothing like that happens in soccer. It takes the team being in the right formation on the field to approach the goal. A decision is made to go one way and the team adjusts, then maybe you can score a goal. In soccer, almost nothing happens individually. Brooks says that while we think that life is a baseball life, it’s really a soccer life. I’m not sure if you realize how difficult it is for me to acknowledge the premise, let alone the validity of that statement. It is October, after all. But I concede. What we do and how we live are intricately connected to the people we have around us, how we live, what choices we make. Innovation and great achievements almost always happen in collaboration, not in isolation. Leaders have the chance to celebrate soccer culture and not baseball culture.

The other attribute that makes Deborah such an inspiring leader is that ultimately Deborah knew where give credit. **Faithful leaders give credit to God.** With the victory under her belt, Deborah and Barak give credit to God. Just like David did in Psalm 20:7, **some trust in chariots and some in horses but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.** Deborah could have wrung her hands in worry, she could have fretted. But she knew that God was in control, and she wanted the people ultimately to come back to God, so she gave all the credit to God.

In my first few years of ministry leadership, one of the areas I struggled with was knowing when to ask for help. You see, asking someone else for help implied that I didn’t know how to do something, and that’s not a good quality of leadership right, not knowing what to do? But really what I was saying is, “God, I don’t need your help. I’ve got this on my own”—which is the very definition of foolishness. You see, God gifted all the people around me, all around you, and when we refuse to listen to others, not only are we pushing them away, we’re really pushing God away, missing out on the opportunity to grow closer to him.

God draws flawed, insecure, ill-equipped, under-resourced people to be his witnesses. Remember this global phenomena that we call church started with a band of 12 thoroughly unimpressive people. But they had a leader whose message was life changing and who said, “I’m not going to do it, but you are.” He equipped them and sent them not with my will, but with thy will, to the Glory of the Father. **Godly leadership shares success and ultimately gives glory back to God.**

And because he knew that we would doubt, we would forget, we would lose sight of the goal of His kingdom come, he gave us a reminder of his in-breaking kingdom: a banquet, set before us today. A banquet for those who come from east and west, north and south to sit with our leader, our Lord, the one who doesn’t hoard grace and love, but is constantly giving it away. And this victory is never ceasing. Amen.