

Judges

Strength in Weakness

Poor Choices

- I want to try to tackle the story of Jephthah...
- It's a hard one, and I've always just shrugged my shoulders and thought, *"Well, you can't figure out everything..."*
- But, I think if we approach Jephthah with the theme of Strength in Weakness, we might get some help in understanding what his lesson is
- The title of the class is "Poor Choices"
- Jephthah is almost like the Poster Child for Bad Decisions
- If you've ever made a stupid decision in your life, and felt the painful consequences of that decision, then this story is for you...
- Let's quickly catch up on the history leading up to the time of Jephthah
- We get to the end of the Sin Cycle with Gideon, and the people have peace
- Judges 8:28
 - 28) So 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.**
- But, it never seems to last very long...
- Judges 8:33-34
 - 33) **As soon as Gideon died**, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god.
 - 34) And **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
- Abimelech rises to judge Israel

- But, his time is not very peaceful

- Judges 9:22-24

- 22) **Abimelech** ruled over Israel **three years**.
- 23) And **God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem**, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech,
- 24) that the violence done to the seventy sons of Gideon might come, and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers.

- The next judge is pretty easy...

- Judges 10:1-2

- 1) After Abimelech there arose to save Israel **Tola** the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim.
- 2) And he judged Israel **twenty-three years**. Then he died and was buried at Shamir.

- Tola judged Israel for 23 years – And that is all that is said about him...

- After Tola comes Jair..

- Judges 10:3-5

- 3) After him arose **Jair** the Gileadite, who judged Israel **twenty-two years**.
- 4) And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty **donkeys**, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-Jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead.
- 5) And Jair died and was buried in Kamon.

- Jair judged Israel for 22 years – And we read that he had he had 30 sons who helped him judge, and rode around Israel on 30 donkeys

- What does that tell us about the times?

- Horses are used for war – Donkeys are used in peacetime

- So, things are quiet again during the time of Jair

- But, not for long...

- Judges 10:6-7

- 6) The people of Israel **again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD** and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him.
- 7) So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites,

- Then something strange, and kind of unique happens in Israel
- Without a spiritual leader to guide them, they still repent on their own!
- Jair is gone, and the people are living lives of evil continually, and serving just about every God around them, and yet...

- Judges 10:10

10) And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, “**We have sinned** against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals.”

- Somehow, it must not be the same without a leader, because God doesn't accept it
- Go and cry to the Gods you have chosen! I will deliver you no more! He says...
- So, they repent **AGAIN** and cry to God one more time

- Judges 10:15-16

15) And the people of Israel said to the LORD, “**We have sinned**; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.”

16) **So they put away the foreign gods from among them** and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel.

- This time it works...
- I love how the King James says that God's soul was grieved over the misery of Israel
- Now the time is ripe for another Heroic Chapter in the history of Israel
- Enter Jephthah
- Let's begin with the strange life of Jephthah

- Judges 11:1-3

1) Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was **the son of a prostitute**. Gilead was the father of Jephthah.

2) And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “**You shall not have an inheritance** in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.”

3) Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and **worthless fellows collected around Jephthah** and went out with him.

- I said that Jephthah is the Poster Child for bad decisions...
- Just take a look at this history...

- The son of a prostitute
- Clearly, a bad decision on his Father's part
- The equivalent today would probably be the child of a mixed marriage
- In our culture, it's common for men to have affairs
- Marriages are destroyed, and often new marriages form
- And often, there are children involved
- A Modern Family has his children, her children and their children
- This is the reality of the world we live in
- We can't change it
- We have to learn to love and accept all children and help them come to learn about God and his ways
- That wasn't the case in the time of Jephthah
- He wasn't loved and accepted by his Brethren
- He was rejected by his own brethren
- A common theme amongst the righteous, you'll notice...
- So, Jephthah kind of becomes an outsider
- Worthless fellows collect around him
- The kind of men that your Mother warned you about...
- The kind of men that you probably shouldn't be hanging around with
- My Dad always used to say, ***"If you run with Dogs, you'll get fleas"***
- Jephthah has been driven into the Wilderness by his Brethren, and he has become kind of a Robin Hood, surrounded by a motley crew and probably up to no good
- You wonder what complications arose in his life because of these poor decisions he had made
- What compromises was he forced to make?
- What situations did he find himself in that he really wished he didn't have to be in?
- The Ammonites come up and begin to literally crush the Israelites

- The Israelites have no one to help them, so they call to Jephthah for help
- The same Brethren who kicked him out of the Ecclesia, and told him he would have no part in their religion... Now needed his help...
- His response is as would be expected:
- Judges 11:7
 - 7) But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “**Did you not hate me** and drive me out of my father’s house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?”
- Notice how Jephthah really doesn’t hold a grudge for too long...
- He negotiates **FOR THEIR OWN GOOD**, “*Make me your permanent leader, and I’ll agree to help you out.*”
- This is a good example for us
- Sometimes we can find ourselves “on the outs” with the Meeting, or our family, or the people at work
- There is no value in holding a grudge
- It hurts you much more than it hurts them
- Do what you can for the good of others, and don’t worry so much about yourself
- With no options left, the people of Israel agree
- Look at what kind of man Jephthah is...
- Judges 11:11
 - 11) So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And **Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD** at Mizpah.
- He takes them to the sanctuary at Mizpah, and ratifies this covenant before the Lord
- Consider a bit the character of a man who when treated HORRIBLY, and despised and rejected by his own Brethren, is able to live in such a way that they still respect him, and call him back to be their leader
- And then instead of rubbing it in their noses and watching them suffer the consequences of their actions... he accepts!
- His love and concern for them was greater than his pride, or his desire to get revenge for the poor way they had treated him

- If you had driven me out, I would have spent my whole life making your life miserable, and become your enemy forever

- And I never would have agreed to help you out in your time of need
- Jephthah wasn't like that...

- Consider also how he patiently tries to reason with his enemies the Ammonites

- Instead of attacking right away, he sends a delegation to negotiate

- Judges 11:12-13

- 12) Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "**What do you have against me**, that you have come to me to fight against my land?"
- 13) And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; **now therefore restore it peaceably.**"

- He patiently tries to explain to them the truth...

- Israel asked permission to pass through the land, but they were refused, so the only recourse they had was to conquer the land

- And by the way, it was the Amorites that we took the land from, not you Ammonites...

- And we've had this land for over 300 years, why do you come up now?

- And remember what we did to Balak, king of Moab, when he tried to take the land, are you sure you want to try yourself?

- Oh, and one more thing... we have Yahweh on our side

- Judges 11:24

- 24) Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And **all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess.**

- One thing clearly comes out in verses 13 – 27

- Jephthah knew his Bible!

- He had the history of his people hundreds of years before he was born at his fingertips

- He had a deep sense of reverence for what God has done with His people

- He understood God's plan for his people

- And more importantly, the part he was playing in that plan

- But, the king of Ammon wasn't really interested in diplomacy...

- Judges 11:28

28) But the king of the Ammonites **did not listen** to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.

- So...

- Judges 11:29

29) **Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah...**

- As it had Othniel and Gideon before him, the Spirit of the Lord clothed itself in Jephthah

- Jephthah crosses through Gilead and Manasseh (on a recruiting trip), and stops again at the sanctuary in Mizpah

- There he makes a vow to the Lord, and from that vow comes our lesson...

- Little is said of the victory, except that the Lord gave a great victory to Jephthah

- Even though we see later on that Jephthah had a very small army, the Ammonites were routed and pursued many miles

- Like in many of the stories in the Judges, it's not about the amount of men in the fight, it's about the amount of faith in the men

- Jephthah was a faithful man, and God worked through him to accomplish a devastating victory against the Ammonites

- Jephthah is able to return to Mizpah fully satisfied that he had accomplished what he had promised to attempt

- And now his vow is due...

- Let's take a look at the story:

- Judges 11:30-40

30) And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand,

31) then **whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me** when I return in peace from the Ammonites **shall be the LORD's**, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

32) So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand.

33) And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities,

and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

- 34) Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, **his daughter came out to meet him** with tambourines and with dances. **She was his only child**; besides her he had neither son nor daughter.
- 35) And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For **I have opened my mouth to the LORD**, and **I cannot take back my vow.**”

- What is the first thing that comes to your mind after reading this?
- **WHAT were you thinking?**
- Who knows?
- We obviously don't know what he was thinking, but this is definitely the most discussed problem in Judges
- I've heard all different kinds of theories, and I suppose that you have as well
- To my mind, it is clear that Jephthah was expecting to give to God, in fulfillment of the vow, a **PERSON** and not an animal
- Look what he says in the very beginning:
- Judges 11:30-31
 - 30) And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand,
 - 31) then **whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me** when I return in peace from the Ammonites **shall be the LORD's**, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”
- What kind of animal would you expect to come out of his house to meet him? The only thing that even comes close **TODAY** would be a Golden Retriever
- And Dogs didn't live in the house back then as they do now
- The only acceptable offerings to God were sheep, goats, bullocks or pigeons...
- Do you really think that he expected one of those to “come out to meet him?”
- So, what was he thinking?
- I don't think we can understand it
- We do know that he only had one child
- Judges 11:34

34) Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, **his daughter came out to meet him** with tambourines and with dances. **She was his only child**; besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

- But, he was a wealthy man, so maybe he fully expected a servant to be the first one out of the house...

- **We just don't know...**

- What we do know is what kind of person that he was...

- He might have spoken foolishly, flush with the success of the battle

- But, he's a faithful man

- Look at his response when she comes out:

- Judges 11:35

35) And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For **I have opened my mouth to the LORD**, and **I cannot take back my vow.**"

- That last phrase shows what a sterling character Jephthah had

- ***"I cannot take back my vow"***

- No matter what happens, his vow to God must be performed

- To me, I think that this is the strongest lesson that can arise out of bad decisions

- We all make bad decisions from time to time

- Often it's because we are wanting something we can't really afford, and we make a bad decision and have to live with the financial consequences

- Sometimes it's because we want to show off to someone to impress them with how great we are, and we agree to something that we never should have in the first place

- And sometimes it's not a sinful thing at all, but simply just plain stupid

- Whatever the circumstances, when we find ourselves in the same position as Jephthah, and out of the house comes bounding your only daughter with her

arms out to greet you... And your heart drops into your stomach...

- What really matters is what you do next
- We all say stupid things
- We've all made commitments that we don't want to live up to
- David was familiar with the concept
- Take a look at what David says in Psalm 15

- Psalm 15:1-5
 - 1) O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?
 - 2) He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart;
 - 3) who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
 - 4) in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who **swears to his own hurt and does not change**;
 - 5) who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent. **He who does these things shall never be moved.**

- Keeping your word when it's easy is... Easy
- Keeping your word when it hurts is what defines you as a person
- What is the reward for the man who keeps his oaths even when it hurts?
- They get to dwell in the Lord's sanctuary
- They get to live on the Lord's holy hill
- They will never be shaken
- The lesson from Jephthah for me is quite eye-opening...
- It's not about how bad your decisions are, it's about how you deal with them after
- We all make poor choices, but **THEN** what happens?
- Are we honorable and faithful to live up to what we have said?
- Or do we scramble around trying to get out of what we committed ourselves to?
- I'm quite experienced at making Bad Decisions...

- Some of them were just stupid decisions
- Some of them were outright sins
- But, you know, a lot of them were not necessarily outright sinful, but they weren't actions that you would be proud of either...
- But, then when it all goes pear-shaped, THAT'S when I can turn it into a sin faster than you can blink an eye
- The actual Poor Choice that you've made may not be that big of a deal in the end
- But, when you go through all kinds of machinations to avoid the consequences of your poor choice, that's when sin comes knocking at your door
- Remember David and Bathsheba?
- His poor choice was adultery
- No one defends it, no one thinks it's right, no one would ever encourage it
- But, we're also not blind enough to realize that it happens all the time
- David made a poor choice and fell to a very common sin
- But, it's all that he does AFTER the sin to cover it up that really hangs him
- Jumping through all these hoops to try to get Uriah to sleep with his wife, and finally giving up and effectively ordering Uriah's assassination
- If a man is blessed for swearing to his own hurt and not changing...
- Then think of what the punishment is for a man that swears to his hurt, and then does everything possible to try to get out of his responsibility
- My thoughts come to a very common item in our society today: Bankruptcy
- Now, I can fully understand a Brother and Sister who make honest commitments, and then have terrible circumstances befall them outside of their control, and in desperation have to turn to a legal vehicle like Bankruptcy for help
- I don't think it's right, but I do understand it
- But, in California for the past five years, the situation has been worse than that
- In California, people who haven't lost their job, haven't got sick, or haven't had any unforeseen large financial responsibilities put upon them... Have been filing for Bankruptcy

- Our housing market went south, and people realized that the house that had pushed them to reach way beyond their means for, and they paid \$800,000 for has sunk in value, and is now worth \$480,000...
- They are still working in the same job
- They still have the same expenses
- They can still make the mortgage payment
- Sure, it's tough, because they were reaching too far when they bought the place, and they didn't leave themselves enough room in their budget
- The numbers are still the same
- But, they claim "economic hardship", stop making payments on the loan, declare bankruptcy and walk away from their mortgage
- Now, think of what that says...
- You made a commitment
- You effectively swore an oath that you would pay back the money that you borrowed
- But, because it hurts, you change
- That is not the kind of person that God calls us to be
- That is not the kind of person that Jephthah was
- What kind of person was Jephthah?
- The kind of person who made a bad decision once or twice in his life? Sure!
- But, he was also a Faithful person
- Did you ever notice that Jephthah is in Hebrews 11?

- Hebrews 11:32

32) And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, **Jephthah**, of David and Samuel and the prophets...

- Wow... Hebrews 11?

- The Faith Chapter?
- When I say Jephthah to you, is your first thought faithful?
- Now be honest... Isn't your first thought "Foolish Decision"
- We've all made Poor Choices in our lives
- We've all shown an incredible lack of faith at times and made decisions that didn't reflect our true beliefs, our true commitment to our Heavenly Father
- But, what happens next?
- That is what really matters
- That is what God cares most about
- God doesn't get too worried about us being stupid and making poor choices
- God is concerned about what we do next
- Do we live up to our word?
- Or, do we find ways to twist our own words, renegotiate on our commitments, cheat, steal, lie and beg our way out of our problems
- Or, do we "swear to our own hurt, and change not"
- Jephthah was faithful
- Jephthah was a man on his word
- Sure, he was a man
- He did things that he realized later on that he shouldn't have
- He said things in the heat of moment that he dreadfully regretted later
- Just like you
- Just like me
- But, when the problem came walking out of the tent to literally face him...
- He didn't go back on his word
- He said, "I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow."
- That's what I want to do next time I find myself having made a Poor Choice in life

- I don't want to compound the problem by making it worse and filling my life with even more sins in a vain attempt to get out of the consequences of my first sin
- I want to be known as a man of Faith
- I want to be like Jephthah
- I pray that God works through each one of us to show ourselves true in the moment of our greatest mistakes
- That is the example of Jephthah... Not Foolishness... Faithfulness