

Big Bad Abimelech

Toxic...Pt. 3

We're in a series on toxic church culture – how to spot it, how to avoid it. There seem to be so many church and pastor scandals in the news these days. Social media is shining a brighter light in dark corners than ever before – and thank God for it. I meet people all the time who have been wounded by toxic church culture in their past. Somebody asked me last week if we were going to talk about healing from it? That's a great question actually. I've honestly been focusing on prevention more than cure in my sermon preparation, but I'm going to see if I can't fit some of that in.

We're going to focus on the marks of a healthy church starting in a couple of weeks – but before we can offer a cure, we have to diagnose the disease. And so that's how we've started. If it seems negative, it will *get* positive, I promise. But we have to deal with these uncomfortable realities. The stakes are just too high. The credibility of the gospel is at stake when toxic churches are able to muddy the good news of Jesus.

Which of course is nothing new. Even in the earliest days of the church, the Apostle Paul was constantly writing churches to be on their guard, lest they slip away into fleshly power games and false theology and downright sin.

So we've started out talking about the nature of church culture – how these are the “vibes” that make a church unique from other churches, even in a similar denomination or geographic area. It's more than written statements – although those can certainly reflect it – but often times culture comes out in the unspoken boundary markers, the way things are “instinctively” done. Maybe what's *not* talked about as much as what *is*.

And we said shaping and maintaining a church culture is the responsibility of all of us in the congregation, and *yet*, because of the authority given to leaders, there's an even greater responsibility there. So last week we talked about how to spot rogue pastors. You know how spoiled milk doesn't pass the sniff test? How do you test someone like me? So we laid out some warning signs – if you missed it, you might want to go back and give it a listen or watch on one of our streaming platforms.

And so I want to sort of continue in that theme today, but less with didactic teaching, and more with a story, a parable, or example, of what toxic leadership looks like. I learn a lot through my own mistakes, I can tell you, but I much prefer to learn from the mistakes of others. A lot less painful. This is one of the reasons I like history so much, it's like watching game film on the human race. How are we going to avoid getting beat by the same enemies and mistakes this time around?

And that's a big reason for why we have the Bible actually – especially the Old Testament. Many of the things that are recorded there are *not* to be emulated. That actually causes loads of problems in the church and in many cases is actually responsible for toxic culture. But it's not the Bible that's the problem, it's an improper handling of the Bible. We have to learn how to study well. We have to learn to discern what's there as a positive example, and what's there as a warning.

The Apostle Paul is referring to a story from the book of Exodus when he says, (**1 Corinthians 10:11**), *“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.”* So I have a leadership fable that I want to share today that intends to be a warning. In fact, when I read it a couple of weeks ago – it was just part of my daily Bible reading plan that I stumbled upon – the parallels between this and a particular contemporary story of toxic church culture and leadership sprang to mind.

And the more I thought about it, the more I felt I was supposed to walk you all through the story as well. And honestly, while our context is spiritual leadership, this particular story is actually not about *spiritual* leadership, but just leadership in general.

There are lessons for all of us to learn from this tragic story. So while I am comparing and contrasting it with my own profession – a pastor – please don't think any of us are off the hook. It's a good “example” and “warning” for all.

Ok, let me just read you the opening of the story and then I'll begin to fill in the context and make some application. But this introduces us to the main character of Judges chapter nine. (**Judges 9:1-6**)

“Abimelech son of Jerub-Baal went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and said to them and to all his mother's clan, 2 “Ask all the citizens of Shechem, ‘Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerub-Baal's sons rule over you, or just one man?’ Remember, I am your flesh and blood.”

3 When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, “He is related to us.” 4 They gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, and Abimelech used it to hire reckless scoundrels, who became his followers.

5 He went to his father's home in Ophrah and on one stone murdered his seventy brothers, the sons of Jerub-Baal. But Jotham, the youngest son of Jerub-Baal, escaped by hiding. 6 Then all the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelech king.”

Now, *that's* how you start a story! What the heck is going on here? Let me paint the context for you. The Book of Judges is an interesting placeholder in Scripture of a time when Israel was like the wild, wild West. There was a crisis of leadership that occurred on and off for about 400 years. The story of the Exodus had a number of crises, but leadership wasn't one of them. Moses was a powerful leader in Israel.

And when he died, his apprentice Joshua took over and things went well under his leadership. But after Joshua's death...well, there was a leadership vacuum. This is all recorded in the Book of Judges. Following that, 1 Samuel, will describe the rise of the Davidic kingship and Israel will be a monarchy for several centuries – with varying levels of effectiveness.

But there is a refrain that is repeatedly used to describe the time period of the Book of Judges. These centuries that stretch between the icons that were Moses and David. I referenced it last week, (**Judges 17:6**), "*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*" Now that is a recipe for chaos. And Judges is a picture of chaos. But every now and then, a leader would rise up to rescue Israel from her neighbors or from herself. Some were even women, Deborah. Some were morally suspect, Samson. But my favorite was a man named Gideon.

When I was young, I identified with Gideon. Of course, when I was young I also identified with Richard Nixon – I am drawn to complicated leaders, I suppose. And Gideon was certainly complicated. He did some great things for God and he did some really destructive things as well. His is a mixed legacy. He's almost the embodiment of the New Testament picture of the internal war in human nature between "the flesh" and "the spirit."

Now, Gideon was known by another name, and it's a name that we have already seen in our text this morning, Jerub-Baal. It goes back to the start of his career when he smashed an idol to the false god, Baal. Now, as an adult, Gideon was doing his part to build the nation of Israel, he had 70 sons – don't worry ladies, it says he had "many wives", he was passing that responsibility around. But in addition to his legitimate sons, he had a bastard child with his mistress. And that catches us up to the central figure in our story, Abimelech.

Now, the story of power plays between the legitimate and illegitimate sons of royalty are littered through history and literature. The main antagonist in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Edmund, is the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester and he's throughout scheming to get the title away from his younger, legitimate brother. That's what's going on in Judges, chapter nine. Abimelech maneuvers to get himself situated into a position of power.

At this time – we’re talking middle 12th century BC probably – Shechem was a major city-state that served as the religious and political center for the Israelite tribes during the period of the Judges. It was a fortified walled city which would have made it unique – and secure – so it was prominent. But by the end of the century, it would be destroyed and the leadership of Israel would migrate to Shilo and eventually Jerusalem, which remains the spiritual center of Israel to this day.

So Abimelech went to the Shechem city fathers and says, “Hey, would you rather answer to one guy or 70?” Meaning there was probably a power struggle between all of his brothers and their families, so he was offering to step in and fill the void. You know, consolidated leadership, it just makes sense. “And of course, I share the bloodline from my father – the great hero - as well, so why not?” So he is taking matters into his own hands. Abimelech sets out to make a name for himself...and it works. They make him king. And probably that’s more like a regional prince – Israel didn’t really have a *true* king until Saul many years later. But he’s in charge.

*Except...*it’s one thing to have power on paper and quite another to have it in reality. And so Abimelech – like all kings – requires financial tribute from the people, in this case a bunch of silver.

And what does he do with it? He hires some muscle. Our text calls them “reckless scoundrels”. The Hebrew word literally translates “without discipline or principles.” These are thugs. And they will be the backbone of his claim to power.

And the first thing he and his bad boys do is go straight-up murder all of his brothers, 70 men in one day – well *almost* all, we’re told the youngest one escaped. But this is a bloody purge. It calls to mind Michael Corleone’s violent consolidation of power among the heads of the five families at the end of *The Godfather*. By the way, “God at the Movies Classics Edition” is coming up – might not be the last time this year you hear about Michael Corleone, hint-hint.

But *Godfather* aside, Abimelech’s origin story actually reminds me of a *real-life* power grab that took place in the 1970’s. In fact, this is the parallel that inspired me to use this text in our *Toxic* series. One of the pastoral scandals that I have referenced a couple of times now is that of Bill Hybels and Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. And this is the one that personally hurts the most. I love Bill Hybels. There was a day I wanted to *be* Bill Hybels.

His vision of ministry has had an impact on our church that would be hard to overestimate. I counted 14 books on my shelves with his name on them, and I have read every single one. I attended an evangelism conference at his church in 1998 that had a direct impact on my own call to church planting. I've since been to more than a dozen conferences sponsored by Willow. Southwest Family Fellowship is a member of the Willow Creek Association. Or we *were*. It changed its name a couple of years ago to distance itself from Bill in a desperate attempt just to survive as an organization.

You see, in 2018, Hybels was accused by a number of women of sexual harassment and assault in incidents that stretched back for decades. He denied the charges fiercely and many of the church elders backed him up, attacking the accusers actually. We will talk about this story in more detail next week when we look at how to handle scandal in the church – and how to *not* handle it.

Bill refused to resign, but because of the unrelenting controversy surrounding him – the Chicago newspapers were all over it - he retired early. But as time went by and more allegations emerged, an independent investigation was conducted that determined the charges were in fact credible.

The picture that emerged was an entire culture of dysfunction. A toxic church culture. Both due to sexual impropriety and a broader culture of intimidation and abusive power – the kind of things we talked about last week.

In the end the entire board resigned, as did the two pastors who were set to take over leadership of the church. It's a real mess. This was a church that just a few years ago was the largest church in America – 20,000 people gathered for worship on a given weekend. Its future is still uncertain. The pandemic has thrown another layer of turmoil on things. But the *greater* disease was underneath – a toxic leadership culture.

And the roots go back to less well known events that took place in 1978 as the church was first finding its footing. You'll often hear Bill Hybels described as “the founding pastor of Willow Creek”, but that's not entirely true. At the time, there wasn't really a hierarchy of leadership. It was a bunch of Jesus People hippie-kids in the 70's that left a youth group in a more traditional church to start something innovative. And like any hippie kids, organizational charts were not high on their priority list.

In fact, it is generally understood that Bill Hybels and another man named Dave Holmbo were co-founders and co-leaders. Bill was the teacher-organizer and Dave was the worship leader-creative force. Kind of a John Lennon/Paul McCartney thing. And, like The Beatles, as the church began to have success, tensions were growing because of the ambiguity of leadership. Until finally Bill decided to take matters into his own hands.

I want to read you the account as Bill's own wife, Lynne, records it in the official history of Willow Creek. Bill calls everyone together – now she doesn't say this, but it's my understanding that Dave was not present – I have not been able to confirm that one way or another. But let me read you the story.

“In the spring of 1978, Bill rented a conference room in a local Howard Johnson and called the entire part-time and full-time staff together. ‘We’re falling apart,’ he said. ‘We are spinning off in too many different directions. We need a staff reporting structure. We can have any structure we all agree on, but there has to be somebody riding point. There has to be a designated leader.’ He suggested they choose the person according to giftedness. ‘Who has the strongest leadership gifts?’, he asked. Silence. ‘Well, I think I do.’”

“Then Bill drew up a possible organizational chart. There was some discussion, but no one presented an option that everyone could agree on. Some staff members signed on wholeheartedly with Bill’s proposal; others accepted it with a sullen silence...Clearly without a mandate, Bill left the Howard Johnson as the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church. Hindsight offers numerous and better ways in which Bill probably could have handled that organizational crisis.”
(*Rediscovering Church*, 75)

Even with the acknowledgment that probably this wasn't the best way to go, still, the origin myth of Willow Creek presents this as a key moment in the church's future. But can you see the parallels to our story from Judges? What did Bill do? “Are we better off to be ruled by a bunch of guys, or by one?” He took matters into his own hands. He made a name for himself – maybe not king, but senior pastor. Well, that's just strong leadership, right? According to this world, yes. But it also leaves bodies in it's wake.

In the case of Willow Creek, nobody got *literally* murdered – all though it did take place in Chicago, so never say never – but the spiritual blood letting was real. In 1979, Dave resigned, citing “philosophical differences” – although there was actually some kind of murky moral failure going on with him as well – but the result was what has come to be known in church lore as, “the train wreck”.

What they didn't count on was the backlash they received from the church that resulted in two years of open conflict. The church was split into the Dave camp and the Bill camp. Eventually 1/4 of the staff, 1/3 of the lay leadership, and 20% of the congregation left. But the weekend services continued to attract new people, so before long those loyal to Bill were firmly in leadership. Dave Holmbo was kind of written out of the story.

Where once there had been a more open-ended management style, the church began to emphasize strict lines of authority, accountability and business management. One staff member from this time explained, "the church became more institutional." And once it became clear that Bill would be the one to remain, an authoritarian spirit emerged among the staff, along with the expectation of loyalty above everything else.

Loyalty became the most prized virtue in the church and disloyalty one of the greatest vices. According to an investigative report on Willow conducted in the 1990's, the staff feared being labeled disloyal above all else. The independent investigation following the latest scandals revealed the same culture of fear. As one staffer said, the church leadership valued loyalty more than honesty. We'll do a whole sermon on the necessity of a truth-based culture later in the series.

But do you remember the warning signs of a toxic pastor from last week? It starts with a pastor leaning into narcissistic tendencies – "I'm indispensable around here." - that drive him to maintain power through fear. See, when you take matters into your own hands to *get* leadership, you have to continue to put your hands on things to *keep* leadership.

You would see this kind of thing through the years at Willow Creek. According to multiple sources in the investigative report, "fear of Bill" was a common phrase at Willow. The thought of there being a "fear of Anthony" culture at SWFF frightens me to my core. But Bill actually bragged about it.

In 2008, Bill wrote a book of "powerful leadership proverbs" called *Axiom*. We used to read one at every SWFF staff meeting! And most of them are still gold by the way. I really don't like cancel culture. The Bible is clear that we can learn an awful lot from flawed people. And I will *always* be grateful for Bill Hybels impact on my life. But the more I know about the underlying culture at Willow, some of these just hit me different. On of the chapters on communication systems, he titles, "Develop a Mole System."

Let me read you a bit: “I strike an intentional arrangement wherein they [the moles] provide me regular feedback on weekend services or conference sessions or how we are really doing in a department we have recently re-organized... With all these folks – whether they know they’re operating as my ‘moles’ are not – the lines of communication are wide open.”

Now, on one level that just seems like smart management. Find conduits to keep you informed on what’s going on in your organization. But then he says: “My direct reports need to know that I have other sources than the one sitting right in front of me week in and week out. If they are working hard and keeping me informed along the way, then the conversations I have [with moles] should be of no concern. And if they have been painting a rosier picture than the truth, I don’t mind their knowing that I’m likely to find that out over time.” (Axiom, 145-146)

What does that sound like? Fear induced control. The very use of the word “mole” conjures up images of a spy or undercover agent. What is the purpose of a mole? To secretly report information. That’s how the secret police worked in Communist East Germany. Is that really a model we want to emulate in the church? But these are the results of holding on to leadership through power.

You always see things like this. You see it back in Abimelech’s story. We’re told that after he’d been ruling for about three years, the people started to push back on his leadership. Interestingly, the text says God did it, **Judges 9:22-23**, *“After Abimelech had governed Israel three years, God stirred up animosity between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem so that they acted treacherously against Abimelech.”* We’ll come back to why God would do that at the end.

So Abimelech made a name for himself, violently put his hands on things to consolidate power, and now there’s dissension in the camp. Specifically, one guy and his tribe started talking loud and making trouble. **V.28-29**, *“Then Gaal son of Ebed said, ‘Who is Abimelech, and why should we Shechemites be subject to him? ...If only this people were under my command! Then I would get rid of him. I would say to Abimelech, ‘Call out your whole army!’”*

Big talk! But here’s the thing, Abimelech had developed a mole system. The governor of the city turned informant and secretly sold out Gaal. So Abimelech gets his bad boys and they set up an ambush just outside the city gates. And the governor alerts them when Gaal and his men head out one morning. And they pounce, and it’s a blood bath. And then, Abimelech and his thugs turn on the people of the city for sheltering his critics. Oh the loyalty game is a dangerous one – guilty by association! And it says he destroyed the city. A toxic leader will eventually destroy the organization.

Now, a number of people saw what was happening and locked themselves up in a strong fortified tower in the center of town. They figured they'd ride out the storm until the thugs left. But Abimelech instructed his men to go out and gather a bunch of branches which they laid at the base of the tower and set them on fire. And it says, (v. 49) "*So all the people in the tower of Shechem, about a thousand men and women, also died.*" A culture of leadership violence leaves all kinds of collateral casualties.

And, as always happens in toxic culture, the damage magnifies. Because when you've been abusive once and gotten away with it, it just makes it all the easier to be abusive again...and again...and again. Ladies, if a guy will beat you once, he'll beat you twice. You've heard the Maya Angelou quote? "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time."

Well Abimelech has left no doubt about who he really is. He's an abusive leader who will run over anybody and everybody to maintain his hold on power. By the way, there's no indication in the story that Abimelech ever even considered sitting down with his critics and trying to resolve things peacefully. No, once he sees how effectively his army can silence his critics, he just marches on to the next town.

Apparently the neighboring city of Thebez wasn't falling in line either, so he captured it. And just like at Shechem, there was a fortified tower in the center of town and the folks locked themselves in and fled to the top for safety. But Abimelech had solved that strategic puzzle, hadn't he? "Alright boys, go round up some kindling." He was the power broker and nobody – but *nobody* – was going to defy his authority.

Judges 9:52-53, "*Abimelech went to the tower and attacked it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.*" Oops! I believe Jesus would later say something along the lines of "those who live by the sword shall die by the sword." Maybe those that kill *on* a stone get killed *with* a stone. And this next part appeals to my dark sense of humor actually. Don't tell me the Bible isn't funny. *Tragically* funny sometimes, but still...

V.54, "*Hurriedly he called to his armor-bearer, 'Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can't say, 'A woman killed him.'*" So his servant ran him through, and he died." Talk about your misogynist, macho, "insert cuss word here"! What a piece of work! But isn't it poetic justice? The violet bully get's brought down by a little old woman. That's some *Thelma and Louise*, right ladies?

I find it interesting that so many power-abusing men – Bill Hybels included – have ultimately been brought down by the #MeToo movement. Throughout history, women and children have been more vulnerable and more exploited than any other social sub-group. You say what about racial or ethnic minorities? Yes, but within those groups, it's the racial and ethnic *women and children* that have it even worse.

Scot McKnight, in the book that has inspired this series, says, "How the church treats women is a barometer of its culture and how it will treat people in general." (Tov, 104) One of the things that stands out about the Jesus narrative is how well he treated women and children. Too many times, the churches in his name have not followed his example. But make-no-mistake justice is coming. I happen to believe that the #MeToo movement is the prophetic shining of God's light on injustice. The marginalized victims are dropping stones on the heads of the powerful abusers.

That may be the headlines, but God is behind the scenes. Look how the Abimelech story concludes, **Judges 9:56**, "*Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers.*" A woman may have dropped the stone, but it was God that passed the judgement. It was then, it is now.

Just because narcissistic, fear-based, power culture seems to work in our world – even the prophets cried "How long will the wicked prosper?" – it is counter to the values of the Kingdom of Heaven, and God's way will win out in the end. A new way is coming. In the Christmas story, an angel visited Mary to tell her about her coming son who would usher in this new kingdom. Mary is a powerful example for all of us – men and women alike. Mary is my hero. Men, be a Mary! And after the angel departed, she began to sing a song of praise to God, and part of it said, (**Luke 1:52**) "*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*"

This is a prominent theme all throughout the Bible story. One of Jesus' closest followers, Peter, he knew a thing or two about arrogance. You read the gospels and he's just putting his foot in it over and over. Bragging, talking about how great and faithful he is. But somewhere along the line he learned his lesson. Because he is able to write in **1 Peter 5:6**, "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*"

How different is this from our "tick-tok influencer" culture? We're all trying to make a name for ourselves. "Notice me, notice me!" Build our platform.

I think this is one reason we are seeing so many pastoral scandals these days. The social media revolution has made it easier than ever for young pastors to get noticed – to build a religious empire. But while celebrity happens fast, character develops slow. And like a triangle with a narrow foundation, the higher it goes just means that an eventual collapse is inevitable.

Be very, very careful about putting your hands on things. Do I mean take *no* initiative? No. That's an overreaction. Leadership and influence is *not* a bad thing. There are plenty of influential leaders in the pages of the Bible. It's always about *how* you get there. Be wary of shortcuts. Especially when they involve coercive power plays.

Let me tell you a quick story. Do you know how the church wound up on this property? We're just two weeks away from the 18th anniversary of SWFF. For the first six of those years, we met at the AMC movie theatre over in Barton Creek mall. We set-up and tore-down every Sunday for six years. I still sweat thinking about it! And that whole time, we were looking for other, more permanent, places to meet.

Geographically we chose to plant a church in the most environmentally sensitive spot, in the most environmentally sensitive city in Texas. Which means that it is incredibly difficult to build *anything*, in Southwest Austin, much less a church. So everything was either unavailable or way out of our price range. I looked at every empty building south of 290 and west of Brodie.

Meanwhile, there was this Assemblies of God church here that had split off another church in the late 70's – strangely enough, the church my wife attended as a young girl. The pastor got sideways with the board and he left with about 100 people, bought three acres out here on Hwy 71 – outside the city limits at that time – and built a little log-cabin tabernacle building, weekend warrior style, on the back of the property. And a couple of portable buildings for offices and Sunday School.

Well, he left after a few years, I think the next pastor had a fling with the organist – Why is it always the organist? That's why we don't have an organ! But, long story short, 35 years later the church had dwindled down to a handful of people and the physical buildings were in horrible shape. The denomination would get calls from neighbors complaining, 'What are you going to do about that eye-sore of a church?'"

Also, the pastor who was there at the time was always fighting with the District officials. Didn't play well with others. And I remember my Presbyterian asked me to accompany him out here one day as a witness because he had to confront the pastor about the neglect to the property. And it wasn't a very pleasant meeting. So as we drove away, the Presbyterian was a little perturbed. And he said, "You'd never let a church look like that, would you? I'll tell you what I'm going to, I'm going to get rid of that guy and give the property to your church!"

Now, my Presbyterian was just the sweetest guy you ever met. Much nicer than the Presbyterian that followed him – that guy is a jerk! But I knew that he tended to be a patient leader and that even though he was annoyed in the moment, that moment would pass and no conflict would result from it. *Unless...* I chose to stir the pot.

He kind of looked at me as his bulldog sometimes and knew I didn't mind being more directive when the situation called for it. And he trusted me. So we made a good team – the sugar and the spice. So the temptation arose, would I put my hands on this thing? Would I nudge the leadership to follow up on his threat? And there was loads of justification. After all, that church was dying and here we were, reaching people with the gospel, growing every year, and yet we were stuck without a building. We'd be good stewards of the Lord's property. This could be just the boost we needed to really take off.

But...is that the pastor I wanted to be? The kind of guy that manipulates a situation for his own benefit? I mean, I used to work for the State House, I knew *how* to do it. But *should* I do it? Did I want the reputation as someone who would steal another pastor's church? Would we want that kind of reputation as a church?

And so I prayed about it – briefly – but it really wasn't a struggle. I knew that's not what we were going to do. Even though it was - *literally* - millions of dollars on the line, it wouldn't be worth the spiritual integrity cost. So I said, "Lord, this is your church and I leave this in your hands." And I didn't do a thing. For two years. Didn't say a word about it.

And two years later, we were looking to hire an associate pastor and we'd brought in a young couple name Curt and Dawn Davis for a visit from Minneapolis. And the weekend went so well that we offered and they accepted to come and join our church family. And as I was driving them to the airport on Monday, the phone rang in my car...and it was the Presbyterian. He said, "I wanted to let know that the Sectional Committee has just taken a vote and it affects you."

Apparently the pastor of the church on this property had landed in jail – the details are murky and I don't want to gossip – but the Presbyterian called him about it and was told that it was “none of his business”. To which the Presbyterian replied, “Well, when a pastor accountable to me goes to jail, that is absolutely my business.” And the pastor said, “Well if you want my resignation, you can have it!” And the Presbytery said, “Thank you very much, type it up and send it over.”

And so he was now calling me to say that the unanimous vote of the committee was to give the Oak Hill property to Southwest Family Fellowship if we wanted it. And a dozen years, and a bunch of headaches, and building campaigns, and *miracles* later...here we are. And I didn't put my hands on it *at all*. My conscience is clean. I have a good reputation with the other area pastors – in fact they elected me to be that new jerk Presbyterian. But we chose to humble ourselves as a congregation...and in due time God lifted us up.

It's always better to let God lift you up, than to do it in your own strength. It's always better to have God's hand on you, than to put your hands on the situation. It's always better to let God *give* you a name, rather than to make a name for yourself. It'd be a whole other sermon, but there is a theme of “making a name” that runs all through the Bible.

But early on a group of people gathered to build a tower – the Tower of Babel – so that they could “make a name for ourselves”. And God tore that tower down, confused their tongues and scattered them to the ends of the earth. God has brought down rulers.

But then God found a simple man named Abraham, who was willing to just put his trust in God and follow by faith without really knowing where he was going. And God made Abraham a promise that “I will make your name great.” God lifted up the humble.

And that's why, to this day, I've never met a Canaanite. But the children of Israel are still one of the key players in the human race. One of the biggest things you can do to avoid toxic leadership in your own life, is to humble yourself before the Lord and when the time is right, let *Him* lift you up.

And you know who modeled this better than anyone else? The Apostle Paul basically summarizes this whole sermon in his letter to the church at Philippi. He writes, (**Philippians 2:3-5**), “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, **in humility** value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*”

Now Jesus already had a name didn't he? He was a member of the eternal Godhead. The Creator of the Universe. But he chose to take his hands off his life and come dwell among us. Talk about humbling yourself. But he didn't stop there! (V.6-8), "*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*"

Nobody was greater than Jesus, and yet he didn't go around trying to make a name for himself. In fact, most of the time that he *did* do miracles and power encounters, he instructed people to keep it on the down low. Jesus didn't put pictures of the people he'd healed on Instagram! "Hashtag blessed!" So what happened? A life of mediocrity, right? Hardly.

V.9-11, "*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

This is the way of the Kingdom of God. I know it doesn't seem to be the way of the kingdom of earth. Students, this doesn't seem to be the way to get popular. Grown ups, this doesn't appear to be the way to get promotions and climb the vocational ladder. Pastors, this doesn't seem to be the way to grow a "relevant" church.

What can I tell you? God's ways are not our ways. But they're always the *right* ways. You want a name? You want a position? You want to be a difference-maker? *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*"

Let's pray...