



WALK BY FAITH, NOT BY FLEECE

SERIES: JUDGES: CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART

Judges 6:33-40

6th Message

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Throughout the summer we've been delighted to welcome to "big church" the younger folks of our body: our youth, high schoolers, and college kids back home for the summer. It's great to have you with us. These summer months may be a time of *transition* for many of you, thinking about going to college, choosing classes, activities for the summer, which friends to hang out with, etc. And for the rest of us, it may also be a *decision making* time: decisions with job, career, family; buying a car; starting a home remodel. There are lots of big and little decisions in life, both now and in the future. How do we make decisions according to God's will? How do we determine God's will in the first place? Some of us may have heard this phrase, "laying out the fleece," as a way to discern God's will when we're uncertain. This practice comes from an action performed by the Old Testament judge Gideon whom we're studying for three weeks this summer.

Last week, Shawn Reese preached on the calling of Gideon to lead his people against foreign invaders. Initially, Gideon refuses the call, but after God confirmed the calling with a miraculous sign, Gideon showed courage and removed the idols from his own home. Shawn's sermon demonstrated the need for us to remove idols from our own lives to live life to the fullest.

Today we pick up Gideon's story in Judges 6:33. Let's see how this Gideon fares as he steps into this role of a leader for the people of God.

Getting Set for Battle

Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them. (Judges 6:33-35 ESV)

The invading army settled in the valley south of Sea of Galilee in Northern Israel. The army is described in detail in Judges 7:12,

the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance.

There were a lot of fighting men against Israel! How does Gideon get set for battle?

Verse 34 states,

But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet.

This image of "clothed" is like a cloak fully wrapped around you, completely enveloped for protection. The Spirit of the Lord gave Gideon a new identity as a leader for his people. Gideon now had the courage and strength of will to loudly sound the trumpet and draw the men of Israel to him for battle. This is quite a contrast, isn't it? Last week, we saw a timid Gideon hiding in the threshing floor and fumbling in dark of the night. And here, we see him sound a trumpet, gathering all the men of 4 tribes of Israel. It goes to show how the Holy Spirit can indeed change you, strengthen and empower you to do God's work, if you'll let Him. This power is available to us to call upon and lead in confidence. But we must be careful to lead under the Spirit's guidance and bidding, not in our own strength in arrogance.

As Gideon is emboldened by the Spirit and an army gathers around him, you would imagine he is ready to charge out into battle; he seemed to be moving in the right direction finally. Yet, in the next scene, we see how insecure, fearful, and full of doubt Gideon remains. We come to Gideon's personal struggle with his faith and trust in God; we come to Gideon's laying of the fleece.

Gideon Lays out the Fleece

Then Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said." And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew." And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew. (Judges 6:36-40)

Here is where we get the saying *laying out the fleece*. In some conventional uses, this phrase has a positive connotation; it is used by Christians when they seek the will of God in making an important decision or facing a choice. You may ask God for a *supernatural* sign, and if God does this sign, then it means He is telling you to choose this way.

"If it's your will that I take this job, make the recruiter call me at 3pm on Thursday."

"If I'm supposed to buy this car, have someone mail me a check for \$600 this week."

"If I am to marry this guy, have him bring me 9 roses on the nine-month celebration of our first date."

The mentality behind asking for these signs is as follows: Gideon did this *fleece thing* twice! And God answered him both times! So it must be okay to make such a “deal” with God.

Is this right or not? To fleece, or not to fleece, this is the question. In my opinion, I think this is not a wise way to walk as a Christian; it is not the normative way to determine God’s will for our lives.

Determining God’s Will?

First of all, Gideon did not need to determine God’s will. He knew exactly what God wanted him to do, as the angel of the Lord told him in no uncertain terms, “Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?” and “... I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites ...” (Judges 6:14, 16). Gideon himself admitted that God has directed him to lead, “If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said ...” Gideon knew exactly what God’s will was; he did not need to discern or determine it.

So why did he lay out the fleece? Perhaps he was fearful of the vast army, or maybe he felt inadequate for the task. Do you sometimes feel you’re inadequate to do God’s work? I certainly felt that way this past week. I felt woefully inadequate with the weight of sharing God’s Word with you. So, whether motivated by fear, inadequacy, or lack of trust or faith, Gideon asked God to confirm His words by doing a supernatural act. In response, God performed this miraculous sign of the fleece. Yet the timid Gideon asked again, this time for the reverse phenomenon. Gideon knew he had stepped over the line with this second request, “let not your anger burn against me... Please let me test just once more with the fleece.” He asks God to bend over backwards and forwards. It’s like saying, “God, let’s do best two out of three!” And all this was after the angel of the Lord appeared and met with him face to face. Such unbelief, such unwillingness!

Yet, the Almighty God heard when Gideon called out, “help me in my weakness!” God gave him a double confirmation of His will. What grace and mercy and patience!

Modern Day Fleece

So now we return to our contemporary usage of the *fleece*. When there’s uncertainty, we *lay out the fleece* or set up a test using some pre-determined sign that fits our rules. “God, If you show me this sign, then you’re telling me to choose this way...” Do you see how this is distinctly different from what Gideon did, since he already knew exactly what God’s will was for him? So *laying the fleece for decision-making* is not biblically supported.

There are several other reasons why I think this is not a wise or normative course of action when we need to make a decision.

Testing God

The fleece is a test of God, which Gideon himself admits in verse 39, “please let me test just once more.” Testing God is explicitly forbidden in Deut 6:16, “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.” Jesus Himself quotes this very verse when He was tempted in the desert by Satan (Matt 4:7). Jesus stood firm and did not test God. We as followers of Jesus also should not knowingly test God.

Putting God in a Box

By asking for or specifying a predetermined sign, we are placing God inside a box, manipulating Him to do our bidding according to our terms. “Lord, if you are going to work, then let me tell you

exactly how you have to work in my life.” Really? Telling God how to work? I don’t think so! Remember, “God is God. You are Not!”

Uncertainty and Confusion

Fleeing may lead to more uncertainty or confusion, if the signs are not shown in exactly the way you specified. What if the recruiter calls at 2:45pm instead of 3pm? What if the date shows up with only 6 roses instead of 9? What if someone sends a check for \$575 instead of \$600? More uncertainty remains, not less. Are we talking *ballpark* numbers here, or does it have to be exact? Are we going to *bend* the rules a bit here in order to help out God? You see the danger in this?

Responsibility

In laying out the fleece, we are shifting the responsibility of decision making from ourselves to God. Ultimately, we need to choose and take responsibility for our choice. If we make up some sign or fleece, we are attempting to have God decide for us. Then, when things don’t work out, we blame God and say it’s His responsibility. Fleeing reduces or even eliminates the need for our own wisdom and responsibility. We should not expect God to take the responsibility *from* us, and He won’t take responsibility *for* us. If I choose a college, a job, buy a house, it’s *my* signature on the letter of intent or acceptance or the closing documents. So *I* need to take responsibility.

Asking for Signs

Some people ask for signs to prove that God exists or that Jesus is the Son of God. I do realize that skepticism is unavoidable for an unbeliever and I can’t fault him for this attitude. My unbelieving father is like that, and it breaks my heart when I hear him state, “God has to do so-and-so first; I need to see some miraculous sign before I believe.” This is not a good attitude; Jesus Himself condemns this clearly in Matthew 12:38-39 and 16:1-4. Jesus addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees who asked a sign from heaven, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” This is a stern rebuke, to be called evil and adulterous!

But for believers, we should not depend on signs in order to do His will. Where is faith in that process if we have to see signs first? Isn’t faith the “assurance of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1)? Asking for signs doesn’t really increase your faith.

All believers go through points of doubt when their faith needs some prodding, and God is gracious to grant us such encouragements. Let’s take the example of the doubting Thomas from John chapter 20. Thomas did not believe that Jesus was risen from the dead and demanded proof. Jesus came, but He did not belittle Thomas’ lack of faith. He asked Thomas to reach out his hand and touch Jesus’ sides. “Do not disbelieve, but believe” (John 20:27). What a Savior! Jesus met Thomas at his point of weakness and ministered to him. Thomas responds with abandonment, “My Lord and my God!” Thomas was later to become the first evangelist to bring the gospel to India, and 2,000 years later, we have his legacy in many Indian believing families we have here in our midst. God met Thomas, and He met Gideon at his point of weakness and used signs to confirm his promises. So these signs can and do occur.

Let me ask, is depending on signs the normal way to live your Christian life? Suppose there are two Christians. One of them says, “Lord, you have to show me first. Do this sign for me, or else I won’t take a step.” Then the other Christian says, “Lord, you said it; I hear you. I don’t see any signs, but I’ll believe you.” Which Christian do

you want to be? Which is the better way? Jesus said to Thomas, and to us, in John 20:29, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That is the way of the Lord: have faith and believe.

Seeking the Will of God

So if *fleece* is not a mature way to discern God’s will, how *do* we determine God’s will? Clearly, this is a heavy topic that requires hours, if not days, to unravel. I feel the truest course to the will of God is found by faithfully walking close to the Lord and being conformed to his likeness. In this way, we have the heart of God and know what pleases him.

What if you were in the midst of making a decision right now? How would you approach the process? Here are some practical ideas to consider. I call it these the four *S*’s of decision making.

1. Seek Wisdom - ask God for direction without boxing Him in. Seeking wisdom includes many steps, some of which are:
 - a. Search the Scriptures
 - b. Seek wise counsel from mature believers, your parents, people who know you well.
 - c. Sanctified common sense - common sense that has Spiritual guidance.
2. Step at a time - Ask God to show you the next step, not reveal the entire future of your life. Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” This means let God guide your feet just down the path, step by faithful step. Do not demand that God show you the whole 500 mile journey before you start. Do not suffer from *paralysis by analysis* syndrome.
3. Seek Intimacy with the Lord. The closer you walk with Jesus, in tune with the Spirit, the clearer God’s will becomes.
 - a. This intimacy comes with prayer, intentional and delightful time spent with the Lord, in communion with the Spirit.
 - b. Intimacy comes with trust. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” (Prov. 3:5–6)
4. Seek God’s kingdom. “... seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”. If you have a Matthew 6:33 attitude toward life, then decisions and choices become aligned with God’s will, and you won’t need to lay out the fleece to find what He wants you to do.

Following God’s Will

Once we understand how God wants us to choose, how do we step out in faith? What examples might we follow? My Old Testament example is the prophet Isaiah. When God asked “whom shall I send, who will go for us?”, Isaiah said, “here am I, send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). In the New Testament, when Jesus called Peter and Andrew, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”, at once, they left their nets and followed him (Matt 4:19–20). Isaiah and the disciples stepped out in faith without laying a fleece or asking for signs, even though they did not know what dangers or suffering lay ahead of them.

What if you knew what suffering or pain lay ahead of you in following God’s will? What if your boss asked you to do something unethical and refusing put your job in jeopardy? What if you were called to stand up for Christ, but knew that you would be ostracized if you did? What attitude would you have then? Reluctance, hesitancy, dread? These are our natural responses. I can think of no better example to follow in this situation than our Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew exactly what God’s will was for Him: excruciating death on the Cross for the sins of the world. With that perfect knowledge of the impending suffering, Jesus did not ask for a sign. His words were, “not my will, but your will be done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus on His way to the Cross is the ultimate and perfect example for us to follow as we seek to do God’s will in our lives.

Whether you are sent to do His work or asked to follow His will, do so in faith, without manipulating God with fleeces. Paraphrasing 2 Cor 5:7, we want to be Christians who *walk by faith, not by fleece*.

“Let your kingdom come, let your will be done on earth” through each one of us. May God equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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