

“Deborah: Breaking Down Stereotypes”

I'm continuing this series of messages on Old Testament personalities. We've looked at Rahab, then last week at King Solomon. Today I want to talk about Deborah, *Deborah the Judge*. To talk about a lady who is a judge is not strange today. There are a lot of female justices. Judge Judy! And Judge Jeannine on Fox News. But in the Old Testament a “judge” was not a person in a black robe in a court of law. Yes, sometimes judges would hear cases and render decisions. But primarily a judge was a *charismatic military leader!*

Deborah lived during the period of the judges in the Old Testament, roughly 1200-1060 B.C. Israel was not really a nation at all, but rather a loosely knit collection of tribes. There was no central government or organization. When an enemy nation would harass or threaten the Hebrews, God would raise up someone to unify and rally the Israelites around the common threat, some magnetic personality, some warrior, who would lead them into battle. That's what Deborah did!

At one point Israel was harassed and victimized by Canaanite troops and their leader Sisera. They had 900 chariots of iron (the new war technology of the day!). The Canaanites had been bullying and attacking the Hebrews 20 years. This is where the remarkable woman Deborah comes into the picture. "At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment" (Judges 4:4-5). Deborah is described as a "prophetess", but she also held court as a judge, “judging Israel” (vs. 4). She would sit under this palm tree (no doubt named for her) and settle disputes that arose.

One day she senses that God wants Barak, the Hebrew's seasoned army commander, to follow a certain battle plan to overthrow Sisera and the Canaanite army. She offers to be part of this: "I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand" (Judges 4:7). Check out her courage! I'll draw him out for you, she says! While others sat around and griped about the oppression of the Canaanite troops or worried about their future, she had the inspiration and drive to *do something!* Look at verse 8. This is one of the most unusual things in the Bible that a man ever said to a woman! "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'" (Judges 4:8). Barak says, "I won't go unless you come with me!" And Deborah replies, “Sure I'll go with you! But you won't be the one to capture the enemy commander, General Sisera. That glory will go to a woman!

Later on, when Sisera gets wind that the Israelites are planning to attack, he mobilizes all 900 iron chariots. Apparently as the threat intensifies, Israel's Barak gets cold feet. Look at what Deborah says: "Then Deborah said to Barak, 'Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you.' So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him" (Judges 4:14). Deborah has tremendous faith even as the enemy mobilizes all their strength.

Well, the Hebrew people *do* win the battle, and in chapter 5 of the Book of Judges we have a song Deborah wrote about it, in which she takes no credit herself, but gives all the credit to God!

This talented prophet, settler of disputes, and soldier, was also a song-writer!

There are a number of things we could talk about when we look at Deborah: her faith, her courage, her humility, her godly wisdom and insight. But the thing I want to point out today is that ***Deborah breaks the mold!*** She dismantles stereotypes that we might have for women. We're talking about "General Debbie"!

Women's rights have come a long way in our lifetime. We have women in the military, female officers. A little over 3 years ago the Navy commissioned its first female four star admiral - an African American woman named Michelle Howard. But isn't it true that at least some of us still have this stereotype of what an Admiral, or General, ought to be like – someone like George C. Scott in the movie *Patton* - some macho guy with hair on his chest, who can bark commands and make tough decisions without fretting over whether he's stepping on any toes, or hurting anybody's feelings. But God selects a sweet-voiced lady, Deborah, to lead the Israelite troops into the heat of battle! ***Commander Debbie!*** Why she ought to be home knitting or making supper!

Don't we stereotype people a lot? Do you know what I mean by "stereotyping"? It's when we lump people together, when we have a fixed image of what people are like or should be like. We *pre-judge* people: *prejudice and stereotyping go hand in hand*

There's still a lot of stereotyping regarding male and female roles. We insist, that's women's work!" Or we sigh and say, "Oh, you men are all alike!"

There's this thing on the internet, "Because I'm a Guy". "Because I'm a guy, I don't think we're all that lost, and no, I don't think we should stop and ask someone directions. Why would you listen to a complete stranger? How the heck could *he* know where we're going?"

"Because I'm a guy, you don't have to ask me if I liked the movie. Chances are, if you're crying at the end of it, I didn't."

"Because I'm a guy, I think what you're wearing is fine. I thought what you were wearing five minutes ago was fine too. Either pair of shoes is fine. With the belt or without it looks fine. Your hair is fine. You look fine. Can we just go now?"

"Because I'm a guy and this is, after all the 21st century, I will share equally in the housework. You do the laundry, the cooking, the cleaning, and the dishes and I will do the rest."

We've seen many changes in the last 30 years or so in male-female roles. Some years ago, I was aboard a commuter plane out of Chicago. It was one of those where you could see up into the cockpit, and I noticed the copilot was a woman. I'm ashamed to admit, my first thought was: "I hope she can fly this thing". But then began to think how unfair and biased this was. Give me a big boo for that one! I love airplanes. My latest thing is to look at aviation videos online. I especially like it when you can get a view from the cockpit and see what the cockpit crew is

doing. And today a number of airline captains and first officers are women, flying these big commercial jetliners like the Airbus, or Boeing 757's, 767's, and even the new 777 Dreamliner. Isn't that awesome!

I admit, it's taken me a while to get used to having a lady in the car dealer's service department tell me what maintenance work needs to be done on our car, especially if she's describing in detail some mechanical part of the vehicle and I have no idea what she's talking about!

I've had the pleasure of having some root canals done over the past few years, and my endodontist is a lady. She's extremely qualified and competent, but it's been a switch from my male regular dentist to have my dentist talking the whole time she's working in my mouth with her female dental assistant, and hearing all about her husband and her kids' school activities.

Part of the changes in gender roles is seeing men do what traditionally women have done. Stay at home dads, while the wife works at her career, for instance. In my family doctor's office one of the receptionists is a man. It still seems a bit strange to see this.

Now who's to say that all of this is bad, and harmful to society? Yet, often these changes in gender roles are met with anger and heated debate. Remember the fuss when women first broke into the ranks as sportswriters and sportscasters? Should they be allowed in locker rooms? Well, life has gone on, and I guess the male athletes just had to learn to keep their sweaty uniforms on a bit longer! Every once in a while we see in the news where women in a previous all-male military school still endure harassment. Ladies, that battle is not won yet!

Then there is the church! Still some Christians, some congregations, some denominations, don't accept women in the ordained ministry. *Now I know*, they quote a few Scriptures written by the Apostle Paul that on the surface appear to forbid women in certain leadership roles in the church. But when you study these passages in depth and keep in mind their historical context, and when you compare these verses with other Scriptures, I truly believe that the argument against women being ordained doesn't hold water. Remember, the Apostle Paul also wrote that women should keep silent in the church. I haven't been to any church yet, no matter how conservative they are, where that Scripture has been literally followed! We have female prophets in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Women were leaders in the house churches in during the New Testament period. These women were spiritual leaders, yet some today still want to deny a woman the chance to answer this kind of call to leadership in church today.

Not long ago I was told about a church I know, where after a long history of allowing women in key leadership areas of the church, decided after getting a new pastor that women now would be forbidden to hold certain offices simply because they were females. The member of that church who told me about this said that this was causing quite a split in the congregation. Well, I would guess! I hear things like this and I think, if I weren't already a Christian, I'm not sure I would want to have anything to do with the church. No wonder an increasing number of young people feel animosity toward the church, or simply write it off as if it doesn't exist!

Deborah, the Judge! Can't you just imagine as Deborah put on her armor and headed for the battlefield, some of the guys saying, "How is *she* going to save us! We're scraping the bottom of the barrel if she's going to command this army! This is *man's* work! But God raised her up to be a warrior and lead God's people over their enemies!

We can stereotype people of different races and cultures. Don't we sometimes make assumptions about black people...Hispanics...Jews...American Indians...other ethnic groups, that may or may not be true? We lump everyone together..."Oh, they're all like that!" I grew up learning prejudices about black people. I'm sorry that this happened. I also believe *black people* can make assumptions about *white people* that aren't true. But this *reverse racism* is not politically correct to talk about, and you won't find it mentioned much in most of the news media. *Racial prejudice is a terrible thing, no matter from where it comes!*

We can stereotype rich people and poor people. Rich people are snobs. Everybody getting food stamps is lazy. I'm basically a blue-collar guy. My dad was a machinist who spent almost all of his working days at Armstrong. I developed an impression of what rich people are like. Then I served a suburban Philadelphia congregation, where most in that church were more wealthy than me. We had many engineers in big companies, and a number of corporate executives. And while, to be honest, I never felt as comfortable in that socio-economic strata, I came to realize that these people of wealth were in most ways no different from me. They had the same joys and the same kind of pain.

Just a little note here: ***people often stereotype clergy/pastors!*** According to some lay people we clergy types are super religious people who aren't quite as human as you are. We think of church all day long. We always feel like praying. We never have a lustful thought or never get ticked off at anybody, especially at the people in our churches. We wear pajamas that have the Lord's Prayer, or a picture of Jesus, printed on them! *None of which is true!*

Stereotyping, holding on to prejudices. We all do it, to some degree. I know I've got prejudices, and I'm to rise above that stuff.

Why is stereotyping people so bad? Well, we are judging people without giving them a chance. We offer generalizations about people that prevent us from seeing *each person as a unique creation of God*. Can you think of times when you've really gotten to know a person, and realized he or she wasn't at all what you imagined them to be? In the earlier years of my life, I had pre-set notions of what ***gay people*** are like. I've had to unlearn a lot of that stuff. Some of my attitudes changed when I developed some friendships with gay people.

We can prejudge all types of people. I remember a construction worker in one of the churches I served. Now my image of a construction workers is that of very masculine, muscular guys who probably don't have much on ball up top (in their head). This guy looked the part in terms of his physical appearance. But once I got to know him, I was flabbergasted at his keen mind and intellect. In some ways he was a deeper thinker than I was.

If we've ever been on the receiving end of prejudice or stereotyping, we can get a feel for how hurtful this can be. Have you ever had someone prejudice you simply because of your background, or your job, or your looks, or your family, or nationality? It doesn't feel very good, does it?

Jesus was able to break through the prejudices of His day, the stereotyping that was done, and treat people as individuals. He valued *women* and enlisted them as disciples, in a culture that held women in low esteem (similar to the way women are treated in some Arab nations today). He looked on *Simon Peter* not just as a smelly fisherman with no brains or little charisma, but as a man on whom He could build His church. Jesus associated with *Samaritans* when other religious Jews lumped them all together as half-breeds, and people who should be avoided.

The *Apostle Paul* was a brilliant Jew who got converted to Christ. As a male Jew, Paul had built-in prejudices. He had been conditioned to stereotyping Gentiles as people outside of God's concern, and women as having virtually no rights. He would pray the morning prayer that Jewish men prayed: "I thank you that you have not made me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman!" But when he met Jesus, the Lord began to force him into facing his prejudices. He writes in Galatians: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26,28).

Commander Deborah! General Debbie!

Aren't you glad that God sees each of us as unique individuals, with amazing potential! We're not just a nondescript part of a herd, all lumped together. And God may have surprising ways of using you and me for His purposes if we only will give our lives over to Him!

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