

Main Idea: In Judges 7:1-15, God prepares His people to see His greatness by dealing with two problems in their lives.

- I. The problem of self-sufficiency (1-8)
  - A. God identifies the problem (1-2).
  - B. God takes steps to remove the problem (3-8).
    1. God sent home the fearful (3).
      - To be a good leader, you must first be a good follower.
      - God is *the* Leader.
    2. God sent home those who knelt to drink (4-8).
      - God works in unexpected ways.
      - God uses unlikely people.
- II. The problem of fear (9-15)
  - A. Gideon experienced God’s patience (9-12).
    1. God told him what to do (9).
    2. God enabled him to do it (10-12).
  - B. Gideon experienced God’s sovereignty (13-14).
    1. We see it in the timing.
    2. We see it in the dream.
  - C. Gideon experienced God’s transforming power (15).
    1. He worshiped God.
    2. He returned ready to obey God.

Application: Four lessons to consider...

1. Little is much when God is in it.
2. God doesn’t need big numbers to do something big.
3. God hates self-sufficiency.
4. God wants us to trust Him.

We’ll be returning to Judges 7 this morning in our series, “*Ordinary Man, Extraordinary God.*” But to prepare for what we’re about to see the Lord do in Gideon’s life in this Old Testament passage, let’s first read from a New Testament passage that explains very clearly what God is looking for in a leader.

*Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 5:1-11*

God hates pride. At least three times in His Word He says explicitly that He opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (in Proverbs, in James, and in 1 Peter). Pride is a thief. It robs God of the glory He deserves, and it robs us of seeing God work through us for His maximum glory.

Where there is sin, there is pride. Always. What’s the solution for pride? Grace. In His grace, God deals with pride. Sometimes He even takes steps to eliminate pride before it happens. As He did in Judges 7.

A word about Judges 7 before we even look at it. This passage has been greatly misused in the past. God’s intent has been missed, and men and women have used their imaginations to create all kinds of interesting applications. Sometimes it is hard to understand the purpose of a passage, particularly a narrative like this. Why did God include this story in His Word? In this case, however, it’s not hard, for He makes the purpose of this story, a story about Gideon reducing his troops from 32,000 to 300 by picking the lappers instead of the kneelers, very clear at the outset.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the Gideon series at WBC in 2000.

Notice verse 2, “The LORD said to Gideon, ‘The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”

There’s the purpose for everything that follows. God is taking steps, by His grace, to eliminate pride from His people even before it ever rears its ugly head. He doesn’t want His people “vaunting” themselves against Him (the word the AV uses), saying, “My own hand has saved me.” He didn’t want it then, nor in our lives today.

So when God tells Gideon to send home the fearful troops, and choose the ones who lap the water, and all the other rather interesting things we’re about to see, this is the point the Lord is making. I oppose the proud, but I give grace to the humble.

Now to the story! Gideon was a very ordinary man who saw God work in very extraordinary ways. And some of these extraordinary ways included instructions that didn’t make sense. In Judges 7, Gideon heard God say something that made no sense from a human vantage point. God told him that he had *too many people* to win the battle. And His solution was to send home 93% of the troops!

That doesn’t make sense, does it? If you want to defeat an enemy you recruit soldiers, not discharge them, don’t you?

Some people find it hard to trust a God they can’t figure out. Perhaps I’m describing you, or someone you care for deeply. I’m convinced that what God did with Gideon in Judges 7 can help us.

Two weeks ago we met Gideon in Judges 6. There he was threshing wheat in a winepress (11). Things were bleak for his people, the Israelites. They’d disobeyed God, so God judged them by handing them over to experience the oppression of the Midianites (1).

But God had mercy on His chosen people, and raised up a deliverer for them, a judge, just as the book of Judges indicates He did time and time again. In this case, the deliverer would be an unlikely man by the name of *Gideon*. Why did God choose Gideon? As Judges 6 makes clear, it wasn’t because of his courage (11-12), and it wasn’t because of his convictions (13), and it wasn’t because of his connections (14-15), but it was because of his God (16).

So the Lord told Gideon in Judges 6:14, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” And then in verse 16, “I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.”

Then, after a period of initial doubt, Gideon believed God and availed himself for service. The Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon (in verse 34), and Gideon recruited an army of 32,000 men to overthrow the Midianites.

It was at this point, when Gideon was just starting to build some confidence, that the Lord said, “Stop right there, Gideon. You have too many men for this battle.”

This text is so vital, so timely, that we’re going to devote two weeks to Judges 7. In reality, God performs two significant works in Judges 7. First, He deals with *His people* (1-15a), and then in section two He deals with the *enemy* of His people (15b-25).

That’s often how God works. First He does something *in* us, before He does something *through* us. And there’s no more significant work that He must do in us, by His grace, is to deal with our pride, even before it shows up.

In Judges 7:1-15 God prepares us to see His greatness by dealing with two problems in our lives, and they are both expressions of pride.

## I. The problem of self-sufficiency (1-8)

Self-sufficiency is a big problem. As sinners we enter this world with an antonymous, self-reliant bent. We want our own way. We go our own way. “I can do it all by myself!” I can still hear one of my daughters saying those words at the age of about two years old.

In verses 1-8 we’re going to see what God thinks of self-sufficiency. First...

**A. God identifies the problem (1-2).** In the NIV, “Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her...”

It all started *early* in the morning. In response to Gideon’s call, 32,000 men reported for military duty and camped at the spring of Harad (about 15 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee). Just north across the valley of Jezreel was the Midianite coalition army, just five miles away from the Israelite army.

Notice Gideon is referred to by his new name, Jerub-Baal, the name the townspeople gave him after he demolished Baal’s altar. He’s now known as “the Baal fighter.” And the Baal Fighter has his troops up early, dressed and ready for battle.

Then came a surprise. God spoke to Gideon—the first of five times in this section that God spoke to Gideon. And He said, “You’ve got too many men, Gideon.”

What? Too many men? Look at verse 12. “And 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.” So the Israelites are severely outnumbered by the enemy, but God says, “No, too many men.”

That doesn’t make sense. From a human perspective, how do you beat a big army? You get a bigger one, right?

So *why*. Why did God tell Gideon he had too many men? Lest His man miss the point, He answers the question for him in verse 2 (as the ESV puts it), “Lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”

Does it bother you when you do something and somebody else takes credit? “Hey mom, I cleaned our room like you said!” But you didn’t. Your brother did the cleaning, while you were playing. What does your brother think of your claim? He’s not too pleased, is he?

Neither is God. The truth is, He is offended when people take credit for what He did. Obviously, He’s not at all pleased when the so-called self-made man says to himself, or to others, “Look what I’ve done with my life! I really am something.”

And while we may not say those words, do we ever think them? My friend, who gets the glory for the accomplishments in your life? Do you consciously give *God* the credit for what God does in your life?

That’s what a church worship service is all about. We gather each week to praise God for what God has done. “Lord, You saved me. Lord, You provided for family this week. You deserve the credit for all the good in my life, and I’m here to give it to You.”

We would do well to remember Paul’s questions in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

Let this sink in, beloved, for it goes contrary to the humanistic notions that bombard us day after day. “You are a good person,” we’re told. “You can do anything you set your mind to, and you deserve the credit when you do! So take some pride in yourself.”

Oh, how we need Judges 7. God opposes the proud. In Gideon’s situation, the first thing God did was to identify the problem of self-sufficiency.

**B. God takes steps to remove the problem (3-8).** Drastic steps, two of them.

1. *God sent home the fearful (3).* “Announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.”

It reminds me of an episode from the *Andy Griffith* show when an ex-con that Andy had sent to prison returned to Mayberry. Barney rounded up some extra, potential deputies to help protect Andy—Gomer, Floyd, and Otis the town drunk. When Barney explained their mission, they became squeamish about the possible danger. Barney replied in dramatic fashion, “Listen! This is no job for cowards. If any of you are afraid, then you can just walk out that door right now.” And every one of them headed for the exit!

Can’t you picture this scene? Gideon says to his troops, “Listen, men. There’s an army five miles from here. How many? I don’t know, too many to count, and we’ll be attacking them soon. So any of you who are afraid may leave right now, no questions asked.”

And for every man that remained in position, *two* headed for the exit! The text says that 22,000 men went home, and only 10,000 stayed. You can understand the 22,000. They did the sensible thing. Gideon’s “army” was a rag-tag bunch of novices with no military training and experience, and facing them was a huge army that’s preparing to do what’s been happening yearly for the previous seven years. And so, 22,000 reasoned, “Why risk my neck? I’m going home.”

They did the smart thing, didn’t they? No. Actually they did the foolish thing. These 22,000 men chose to miss out on seeing God work. They just didn’t believe God could do what He said He’d do.

And by the way, remember that these 22,000 had originally volunteered for service. They weren’t coerced, but came to the battlefield when Gideon called. But now their enthusiasm is gone. They’re operating on the basis of *fear* rather than *faith*. Which means, sadly, they’re going to miss out, for the person who lives by fear always does.

Now, put yourself in Gideon’s shoes. What do you think he thought of God’s order to send home the fearful? What’s he thinking as he sees two-thirds of the men he recruited for battle now heading home? He must have thought, Lord, what are you doing?

What is God doing with Gideon? He’s teaching him two important lessons.

•To be a good leader, you must first be a good follower. God told Gideon to do something that made no sense to him. And what did Gideon do? By God’s grace, he believed the promise of God (“I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man,” Judges 6:16), and he obeyed the instructions of God. He did exactly as God commanded.

It’s true. To be a good leader you must first be a good follower. Who must you follow? God. Why? Because of lesson two...

•God is *the* Leader. God is teaching Gideon a non-negotiable for victorious Christian living. There's only *one* Commander-in-Chief, only *one* who gives the orders. It's God. And if you want to be a good leader, the first thing you must do is resolve to be a good follower, to follow *Him*.

Men, I'd like to speak to you for a moment. Do you want to be a good leader at home? If so, you must start right here. Resolve to be a good follower. Give your allegiance to God as *the* leader. What He says, goes. Resolve to obey Him, not just when His Word makes sense to you, and not just when others support you. Always. Make this resolve, "I will follow God. I will obey God's Word *always*."

You say, "But that's my problem. I'm too weak. I can't obey God. How can I follow Him when I'm so prone to go astray?"

The answer is *grace*, my friend.

*Oh, to grace how great a debtor  
daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,  
bind my wandering heart to thee:  
prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,  
prone to leave the God I love;  
here's my heart, O take and seal it;  
seal it for thy courts above.*

So the solution isn't to look within. It's to look above, to say, "Come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace."

This is the first drastic step God took to deal with the problem of self-sufficiency. He sent home the fearful. But He wasn't done yet.

2. *God sent home those who knelt to drink (4-8)*. Here's how it happened. Verse 4, "But the LORD said to Gideon, 'There are still too many men.'"

What? Still too many men? If you're getting the impression that God's not into numbers like we so often are, you're right. He's not. God doesn't measure success by counting bodies, bucks, and buildings, as we so often do. In Gideon's case, He whittled down the army and said it was too big. That may not make sense to us, but it makes perfect sense to the omnipotent One.

He doesn't need anything. He is the *Almighty*. He's the One who in Isaiah's day killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers without using even one human soldier (Isa 37:36). So yes, while at times He chooses to use human instruments, it's not because He needs help.

So He told Gideon, "Still too many men." And then came this proposal (4), "Take them down to the water, and I will sift [KJV, "try"] them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

Remember, now, these 10,000 men are *not afraid*. They're ready to fight. They *want* to fight. They're motivated, eager, willing, and loyal.

Yet God told Gideon, "No, still too many. Take them down to the water, and I'll sift them for you there." Again, Gideon obeyed God, as verse 5 states, "So Gideon took the men down to the water."

Then what happened? Verse 5 continues, "There the LORD told him." By the way, notice that when more information is needed, God gives it, but not before. So often we

ask God, “What do you want me to do?” God’s method is very simple. Obey what you *know*, and then He’ll *show*. Gideon obeyed, so God gave him further instruction.

He told him (5), “‘Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.’ Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.”

Again, visualize the scene. God told Gideon to separate the army into two groups. So he did. Group one contained those who lapped, and group two consisted of those who knelt. And he tallied up the “lappers,” and there were 300 men, which meant there were 9,700 who knelt.

So what’s Gideon thinking now? Perhaps, “Well, that wasn’t too bad. I only lost 300 men. We’ll be okay.”

If it was, Gideon is in for quite a surprise. “No Gideon, the 300 are not the ones you lose. They’re the ones you *keep*.”

Verse 7, “The LORD said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.” Surely, Gideon must have thought, “But this doesn’t make sense. I was already outnumbered when I had 32,000 men. The odds were even worse when I had 10,000. But 300 men? What can I do with 300 men?”

But that’s the point, isn’t it? Gideon is learning a vital lesson. This is God’s battle, not Gideon’s.

We forget that so often, don’t we? We cry out, “God, the enemy is after me. Don’t you see the battle I’m in?” And God says to us in Judges 7, “Yes, I see. But you’re forgetting something. This is *My* battle. Remember, you’re *mine*. I bought you, and I’ll deal with your enemy in my way and in my time.”

The commentators often discuss the question, “Why did God keep the men who lapped the water, and send home the men who knelt?” Some suggest that the water drinking test was designed to show which men were really ready for battle.

It’s like God is recruiting a commando unit or “Swat Team.” The ones who lap the water are prepared for action, but the ones who knelt down proved they really weren’t prepared for action. The ones who cup their hands, bring the water to their mouths, and then lap it like a dog are demonstrating their alertness.

They’re not afraid to be different. They’re not sleeping on the job. They’re not going to get caught off guard. They are the best of the best so God keeps them.

I don’t think so. I think their actions show, if anything, that these are the flighty ones. The “lappers” are the unlikely ones, the minority, the surprising pick.

And here’s where I take you back to the purpose of the story in verse 2. Remember, God already made it clear He’s going to win this battle in such a way that no man or group of men can boast of their prowess.

So what’s happening here? It’s this. God is choosing an unlikely group to follow an unlikely leader. Why? So He can show the world what He can do with unlikely people by His sufficient power.

And as it turns out, all Gideon’s “commandos” will end up doing is blow a trumpet, smash a clay jar, and yell! No, they’re not going to win the battle because they are great fighters, but because they belong to a *great God*.

You have to wonder what Gideon is thinking at this point. You may recall that he was timid and unsure of himself back at the winepress, “Use me, God? I’ve never led an

army before.” Then God’s Spirit filled him, he blew a trumpet, and an army of 32,000 men responded to his call. “Hey, this isn’t so bad! Maybe God can use me!”

And then this happens. By the time the two tests in Judges 7 end, God has sent 31,700 of the troops back home. So how did that affect Gideon? Watch what he did in verse 8, “So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.”

Gideon obeyed God. Why? Because it made sense? No. It’s because, by the grace of God, Gideon is learning to believe and obey God.

“For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not by works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:8-9).”

There’s the source of faith. The grace of God.

Listen. If you’re a person who lives by your feelings, your hunches, by what *seems* right to you, rather than by a determination to obey God’s Word no matter what, you will live a frustrated life.

By the way, just because we obey God doesn’t mean He makes our problems go away. Notice the final words of verse 8, “Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley.” The enemy is still there!

We learn a couple of important things about God that we need to highlight at this point. The two are related.

- God works in unexpected ways. Like sending troops home before the battle. “God, this isn’t the time to be down-sizing!” Actually, it’s the perfect time, for until God eliminates our self-sufficiency, we won’t see His power.

- God uses unlikely people. Like Gideon. Like the 300 lappers. Like us.

Friends, this will certainly not be the last time we see God working in ways that do not make sense to the natural mind. They certainly didn’t one Friday about 1,200 years after Gideon died. On a hillside we call Calvary in Jerusalem, the Son of God incarnate was nailed to a cross. Why? It didn’t make sense. Why would God send His Son into the world, only to see a wicked crowd mock Him, and religious leaders jeer Him, and women weep for Him, and His own followers flee from Him. It just didn’t make sense.

Was it a blown plan, a waste of a life? It sure seemed like it. What it was this. It was a *sacrifice*, an intentional, predetermined, substitutionary sacrifice. In eternity past, God decided that His Son would die to redeem an undeserving people for His glory.

What happened on the cross is foolishness to the world, but it is salvation to all who, enabled by grace, believe. Do you believe? Have you admitted your desperate need as a sinner for the One God sent to die in your place, and have you placed your total trust in Him? If you have, and that by His grace, you have been saved and given the gift of eternal life. And you now have the opportunity to give Him the glory for what He has done for you, by serving Him, by giving your all to Him.

So in Judges 7, God is preparing His people to see His greatness by dealing with two problems, two expressions of pride. The first is self-sufficiency. Here’s the second...

## II. God dealt with the problem of fear (9-15).

By this point in the story, God has the army He wants, 300 men strong (or *weak*, since He’ll provide all the strength needed). But there’s something else needing attention, another problem. It’s fear, Gideon’s fear.

Watch what God does to deal with Gideon's fear. God allows his servant to experience three of His attributes.

**A. Gideon experienced God's patience (9-12).** Beginning in verse 9, God spoke again to Gideon. This time, rather than telling Gideon what to do, God gave him an option. Let's listen (9): "During that night the LORD said to Gideon, 'Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands.'"

There's option #1. Gideon, get up and go against the enemy. But then God gave Gideon a second option, as follows.

Verses 10-12, "If you are afraid to attack [now there's an understatement!], go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp." So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp. The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore."

What's God doing with Gideon? He's demonstrating His patience. How? First...

1. *God told him what to do (9).* But then, and this is so beautiful...

2. *God enabled him to do it (10-12).* How? He told Gideon to take his servant, go to the Midianite camp, and listen. Once there he'd hear an encouraging message.

God is so good. As the psalmist put it, "He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust (Ps 103:14)." God knows how to encourage and bring along His people. He does it all the time with me. How about you? We can be thankful for His patience.

**B. Gideon experienced God's sovereignty (13-14).** We see it in two ways here:

1. *We see it in the timing.* And...

2. *We see it in the dream.* By timing, I'm referring to the timing of Gideon's arrival. Verse 13 states, "Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream."

Stop there. This was no coincidence. Just as Gideon arrives, he hears two Midianite sentries talking. And guess who they're talking about? Him!

Verse 13 again, "'I had a dream,' he was saying. 'A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.' His friend responded, 'This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.'"

That's quite a dream! The man saw a round loaf of barley. Barley was the staple crop of the poor farmer in Israel (being worth only half the value of wheat). It was a fitting symbol for Gideon, since he was leading the poverty-stricken Israelites.

The barley cake rolled into a tent. The tent obviously represented the Midianites, who were nomadic and lived in tents.

Then Gideon heard the second man's interpretation of the first man's dream, "This is Gideon! God has given our army over to him!"

What? How did this man draw *that* conclusion from this simple dream? The answer is *God*. God took the fear out of Gideon and put it into the Midianites. Oh, how marvelous to watch the sovereignty of God at work! Beloved, you can trust the One who is in control of the minutest details of life.

**C. Gideon experienced God's transforming power (15).** Verse 15 explains:

"When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God." Talk about a change! Because of the transforming power of God, Gideon is becoming a new



man. He's in the enemy camp, but he's not fearful any longer. The trip to the Midianite camp produced two actions in his life.

1. *He worshiped God.* Wait a minute. How can you worship God in a field? Don't you need a praise band and video projection? That's one way to worship. But fundamentally, worship is declaring God's worth.

So yes, we can worship God by singing "How Great Thou Art." But we can also worship by closing a business deal and giving God the glory. And by obeying His Word at school so our peers see something different about us.

Having experienced God's patience, sovereignty, and transforming power, Gideon is now worshipping God. In a field. In the enemy's camp, no less. That's not all he did...

2. *He returned ready to obey God.* Verse 15 concludes, "He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands."

Answer this. When Gideon left his camp, he was full of fear. When he returned the fear was gone. What had changed? Was the enemy still there? Yes. Did he still have only 300 men? Yes. Were the odds the same? Yes. Was he still outnumbered? Yes.

Then what had changed? He had. Gideon had just experienced the patience, sovereignty, and transforming power of God. So now he is seeing the problems of life from God's perspective, and he's ready for battle, as we'll see next time.

Application: Four lessons to consider...

1. *Little is much when God is in it.* You say, "I'm only one person. What can I do for God?" It's not what we can do *for God*. It's what He can do *through us*.

Are you available? Is your life surrendered to Him?

2. *God doesn't need big numbers to do something big.* He took Gideon from one to 32,000 and back to 300 to make that point. He sent people home to prove that point.

Beloved, do you know why I believe God has something great in store for this church? It's because He is a *great* God. If He wants to prune His church, He can do so. And if He wants to cause His church to grow, He can do that, too.

You see, God loves to bless people who will trust Him, people who will say, "Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way." And God loves to use people who will give Him the glory for what He does.

So our task is clear, isn't it? We must strive to have a God-centered ministry, a ministry that exalts His grace, His Word, and His Son. And leave the results up to Him. People may measure success by numbers, but God measures it by faithfulness.

3. *God hates self-sufficiency.* He is sufficient. We are not. We need Him. Sometimes God takes steps to uncover our self-sufficiency, as He did in Judges 7. Perhaps He's doing that in your life. Why?

4. *God wants us to trust Him.* "Be not dismayed whate'er betide. God will take care of you." He is trustworthy, so trust Him today.

**Closing Song:** #51 "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" (all three verses)