

August 20/21, 2005

Using What You've Been Given

Judges 3:9-31

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If you're visiting with us this morning, you've joined us in the midst of our Ministry Fair, which has been going on last week and will finish up this week. We're also in the middle of a three-part series dealing with three areas of our lives that God has called us to steward or to manage for Him. Last week we talked about the issue of time. This morning we'll talk about talents, and next week we will talk about treasures.

You're probably familiar with the statement: the right tool for the job. There's a lot of truth to that. A job that may take hours and be highly frustrating can be made quite simple if you just have the right tool for the job. But what do you do if you don't have that tool? The answer is you do the best you can with what you have.

I think a lot of people stay out of ministry because we tend to compare ourselves with others and we see certain talents and certain gifts and certain abilities and we think, *If only I had that*. But we look at what we do have and we think, *Really I don't have much to offer*. The question I'd like to pose to you this morning is: Really what *do* you have? I'm not really interested in how you compare to anybody else. I'm not really interested in what you wish you had. What I *am* interested in is: What do you have and what are you going to do with what you have to accomplish God's purpose in the world?

One of my favorite passages that deals with this subject of those people whom God uses is Judges chapter 3. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Judges 3—Old Testament: Joshua, then Judges. The one thing we know for sure this morning is every single person in this room has been created *on purpose for* a purpose. You are the way God wants you, and He wants you to understand who you are, what you have, and surrender it to Him.

The best way to understand the book of Judges is to think in terms of cycles. The nation of Israel would sin against God, rebel against God, and God would allow an enemy nation to come, to conquer them, to discipline them. Then in the midst of that slavery, they would repent of their sin. They would cry out to God, and God would raise up a deliverer—a hero of the faith whom He called a judge. Now judges in the book of Judges are not what we think of today. They were both military and political leaders. They were heroes of faith that God would raise up to lead them to conquer the enemy nation and God would give them their freedom back. And typically as long as that judge remained alive, they would live in obedience and experience God's wonderful provision. But as soon as that judge would die, the next generation would rebel and sin against God and the whole cycle would start over again. The book of Judges is just one cycle after another.

It does raise the question then: What kind of people does God choose to be heroes of faith to deliver His people, to accomplish His purpose in the world? Well, that's what Judges chapter 3 is all about. Judges 1 and 2 and the first part of 3 cover some background detail that help us better understand the book, but in the last part of chapter 3 we're introduced to three specific judges. And I think the point of the text is to show us the kind of people God uses to accomplish things for Him.

The first one is introduced starting in verse 9:

When the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war,

the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. [*By the way, if any of you are expecting a child in the next few months, this would be a fine name for that child.*] **Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.** (Judges 3:9-11, *NASB)

The first judge we're introduced to is Othniel. This is kind of the knight in shining armor, highly gifted, highly skilled warrior. He comes from a godly heritage. You remember Joshua and Caleb were the two spies that had the courage to trust God by faith to go in and take the land. Well, this would be Caleb's younger brother. He had a strong, spiritual heritage—a family with a track record of courageous faith. As a matter of fact, if you look in Joshua chapter 15, there's an incident where Caleb as the military leader was asking for a volunteer that had the courage to lead the army to conquer the enemy. Whoever stepped forward for this assignment would get the girl and marry her and live happily ever after. Of course, Othniel is the one who steps forward and trusts God and wins a great victory, gets the girl, gets on his white horse and rides into the sunset.

Othniel's name means "force of God," and it's just a picture of this very unique, highly talented warrior whom God used to deliver His people. When we think of the heroes of faith whom God uses to do special things for His kingdom, we tend to think of people like Othniel: *Well, of course, those are the highly gifted people that God uses.* The problem is most of us don't put ourselves in that category. We say, "I know God uses those kinds of people, but that's not me." Well, the story goes on.

Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees. The sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak. He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. But he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he said, "Keep silence." And all who attended him left him. Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And he arose from his seat. Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out. Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.

When he had gone out, his servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room." They waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.

Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. It came about when he had arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the hill

country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was in front of them. He said to them, “Pursue them, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands.” So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan opposite Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross. They struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men; and no one escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years. (3:12-30)

This time God raises up a most unlikely hero. We’re introduced to Ehud, and one thing that we’re informed about right up front is that he was a left-handed man. The Hebrew says specifically he was “bound in the right arm,” which means he had some sort of a handicap in his right arm. Most people think he had a withered right arm and because of that had to function purely with his left hand. Now, in an ancient culture that would be a significant handicap, but to a warrior that would be a disqualifying handicap. Nobody can imagine an effective warrior who only has one good hand. Yet when God needed a hero to win a significant battle to set His people free, it was Ehud who stepped forward and said, “God, I’m willing.” And God used him to deliver His people.

He made this eighteen-inch dagger, and there’s a great emphasis on the fact that he put it on his right thigh, which is basically saying that his right arm was so dysfunctional that no enemy would have expected a weapon on his right side. And that’s how he managed to sneak it into the presence of the king.

There is an emphasis on the fact that Eglon was a fat man. In the Old Testament, fatness is symbolic of blessing or provision. It’s the idea that the Moabites were experiencing what should have belonged to the Hebrew people, but because of their sin they were struggling in slavery, and the Moabites were prospering in the land of promise. That’s symbolized by Eglon being a big, fat king.

Ehud gets alone with the king and he stabs him in the belly. Eglon dies. Ehud rallies the troops. And because of his courage and faithfulness the troops are rallied. At the end of the day, they’ve won a great victory. The Moabites are defeated, and the Israelites have eighty years of peace and prosperity. If you track the cycles through the book of Judges, you find that the longest period of time that they went in peace and prosperity was eighty years. So this was a significant victory brought about by a most unlikely hero.

We look at Othniel and we say, “Well, yes, those are the kind of people that God uses.” But Ehud, he seems ill-equipped to be a hero of faith but is simply willing to use what he had to accomplish God’s purpose.

There’s one more judge or hero, and he only gets one verse. Verse 31:

After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

We don’t know much about Shamgar; he just gets one little verse. His name is Hurrian, which is a surrounding pagan nation to the Hebrew people. That’s significant because it tells us that Shamgar’s family was much more dedicated to the pagan religions around them than they were to the God of the Hebrew people. Very different from Othniel who came from a very godly heritage, Shamgar came from what we would refer to today as a non-Christian family. He came from the wrong side of the tracks. He was a very unlikely hero.

Also, when you look at what he held in his hand, at least Ehud had a dagger. Poor Shamgar is equipped with a garden hoe. Basically an oxgoad was a stick that had a pointy end on one end to prod the oxen along and kind of a garden hoe implement at the other end. Shamgar comes from the wrong family, from the wrong side of the tracks. All he's got in his hand is a garden hoe, but he says, "God, whatever You want to do with this—this is what I have." God uses him to defeat six hundred Philistines, and the closing statement is: "He saved Israel."

It is interesting in that statement that it says, "**and he also saved Israel.**" The "also" there is the writer's reminder that he wants you to compare Shamgar with Ehud with Othniel. It's his way of saying, "You know, God uses the exceptionally gifted. God uses the limited and handicapped. God uses those who have nothing to offer but a garden hoe, if you're willing to offer it to God and trust Him by faith." And that sets the tone for the rest of the book of Judges. As you read through the cycles and the heroes God raised up, you realize God used the most unlikely, unexpected heroes to deliver His people and accomplish His purpose.

The reality is it really doesn't matter how my talents compare with your talents or anybody else's talents. What matters is: What do I have, and what am I willing to do with what I have? One thing we must understand is we must be willing to give our best—to do what we do with excellence. Now this word "excellence" is tossed around especially in Christian circles, and has been over the last several years, and is a dangerous term. We need to make sure that we're defining this term correctly and we're not misleading people. If by "excellence" we mean that God uses those people who on the basis of comparison are the best of the best, then we have defined that term incorrectly. As a matter of fact, what we've done is we've taken a page out of the performance-based value system of the world. And I guarantee you God doesn't think that way.

What it must mean is that I am willing to do the absolute best with what *I* have been given. It's irrelevant to me how I compare with anybody else because that's irrelevant to God. I just must understand that I cannot give God a half-baked, half-hearted effort. That's not acceptable. I take what I've been given, whether it's exceptional or whether it's a garden hoe, and I'm still willing to discipline myself and give my best with what I have been given. That's what we mean by that terminology.

But this question still arises: "I still don't quite understand what this means. Help me understand this." I want to make this as practical as possible, and I think the best way to do that is to give you some examples. It's always dangerous when you use real people with real names. There's a certain risk in that. But I'm going to take the risk and do it because I think it helps clarify what we're talking about.

Let's start with those that I would consider to be Othniels—people that have been exceptionally gifted in a certain arena in order to accomplish God's purpose. Whether it's business, whether it's athletics, whether it's academia, whatever it might be, let's start in the world of athletics. I want to give you an example of two people, whose names you will immediately recognize, who I think exemplify exactly what we're talking about. That would be Ron Brown and Turner Gill.

Ron Brown and Turner Gill both would be in a category that I would consider to be exceptional athletes, and over the years they have become exceptional coaches that by God's grace were allowed to be part of an exceptional program. Through the decade of the 90s, the case could be made that Nebraska had the finest college football program in the country, including three national championships. And Ron and Turner were significant players during that period of time. During that time period they did what they did with excellence. And I know for a fact it meant a lot of discipline, a lot of long hours, a lot of effort. But they understood that this is about more than

winning football games. This is about if we do what we do with excellence, it provides a platform by which we can proclaim the message of Jesus.

I remember once entering into a conversation with Turner where he said to me, “If all of this discipline, all of this effort, all of these hours were just about winning football games, I would be very discouraged. But when I remember this is ultimately about affecting people’s lives for eternity, I can get encouraged and excited about it.”

That is right on track—understanding that it would not be effective to be a half-hearted coach so that they can pass out tracts at the end of practice, but to use the exceptional ability in a very exceptional environment to the best of their ability to provide that unique platform to accomplish an eternal purpose. Today Ron is with FCA and Turner is with the Green Bay Packers, but I have no doubt both of them are still doing the same thing: taking every opportunity as a platform to proclaim the message of Jesus.

Let’s move it from the world of athletics into the world of the marketplace. If I were a businessman, I would seek to be as diligent, as disciplined, as hard-working, as effective as I possibly could be. Just knowing the way I’m wired, I would seek to be a visionary and to build the company into everything that I possibly could build it into. That would mean a growing company; that would mean probably a significant profit. There’s nothing wrong with that; I just have to steward that correctly. But the ultimate motivation cannot be making money. The ultimate motivation cannot be trying to build my kingdom on earth. The ultimate motivation cannot be trying to prove that I’m somehow significant. The ultimate motivation is to realize that the talents and gifts God’s given me can provide for me a very unique platform to proclaim Jesus Christ to people who otherwise probably wouldn’t listen to the preacher.

This past week I had a meeting with three executives that I would consider to be Othniels. They are exceptional in their field. They understand that God has given them exceptional ability. They understand that God has given them a unique platform, and their desire is ultimately to use that, to steward that to proclaim the message of Jesus. That is exactly on track.

Let’s move to a little different world. I have a friend in the church. His name is Tom. Tom is successful in the marketplace, but I don’t think that’s what distinguishes Tom. Tom is very quiet; he’s very unassuming, very gracious, very humble. But Tom is a world champion duck carver. Now I can’t imagine being a world champion at anything—to be the best in the world—but that’s what Tom is. Now is that just Tom’s hobby? Is that just something Tom does after work to relieve his stress? Is that just something that happened to come about in Tom’s life? Or did God create Tom with exceptional ability in order to create a unique platform from which he could declare the message of Jesus?

Now obviously when Tom moves in those duck carving circles, he’s got a platform to speak—because he’s highly respected; he’s the best. But I think it goes well beyond that. Don’t you think it’s true that when Tom’s neighbors, when Tom’s work associates, when Tom’s friends learn that he is a world champion, don’t you think they probably will listen just a little more? Don’t you think they’d probably watch his life just a little more? Don’t you think they might consider what he has to say just a little bit more? I think the obvious answer is yes, they will. God has given him a unique ability with a unique platform to make a difference for eternity.

The problem is: these are Othniels. And most of us don’t put ourselves in that category. We say, “You know, I feel more like a one-armed warrior. I feel like I’m standing there holding a garden hoe. What am I supposed to do with that?”

Well, I also have a friend whose name is Rick. Rick wouldn't consider himself to be an Othniel, and neither would I. Rick's got a garden hoe in his hand, only his garden hoe is a framing hammer. He's a construction guy. When he and Chuck partnered up and decided to run this business, they committed early on that the purpose of the business would be to provide a platform to introduce others to Jesus. And over the years their track record has proven that to be exactly the case—one person after another coming to faith in Christ out of that business environment.

Rick is very good at what he does and that gives him immediate credibility with those who work for him. But it's more than that. Rick has an uncanny, God-given ability to talk to people about Jesus. As a matter of fact, Rick does that more effectively than any person I have ever known personally. There are a lot of people that claim they have the gift of evangelism, but it's hard to find who are these people that you're witnessing to. That's not the case with Rick; he's like the Pied Piper. There's a whole line-up behind him of people with whom he has shared Christ, who have come to faith in Christ, who are growing, dynamic Christians.

Rick's not an Othniel; Rick's a construction worker. He's got a hammer for a garden hoe. But he's willing to say, "God, this is what I have. And if You're willing to use it, I'll surrender it to You." One other interesting thing about Rick is that on the weekends Rick teaches the three-year-old Sunday School class. If you have young children, ask them about Teacher Rick, and I'm sure they know who you're talking about. Currently Rick's learning to play the banjo so he can be more effective in his ministry to three-year-olds.

You know, I'm really not interested this morning in how your talents compare with anybody else's. All I'm asking is: What do you have? You were made *on purpose for a purpose*. What do you have? And what might God do with it if you were willing to surrender it to Him?

I want to introduce you to two friends of mine as I close this morning: Dan and Bev Morgan. I'm going to have them come up and join me here on stage. Dan and I have been friends now for quite a few years. Don't let his ornery appearance scare you. He does have a twisted sense of humor, but that's probably why we're friends. And I have to tell you, he is married to a saint. God knew what He was doing when He partnered these two up.

One thing I've learned about Dan is that the wheels are turning. He's got a deep, very strong faith. He's a man of prayer and he trusts God. Bev is a godly woman who has been Dan's partner. If I were to list those people whom I consider to be heroes of the faith, Dan and Bev would certainly make my list.

Dan's really got quite a story. When he was eighteen, he went to Vietnam. He was there about a year when he was diagnosed with multiple malignant brain tumors. He came back to the United States and went through serious radiation and chemo. As a matter of fact, a little sidebar to this story is because of the chemo and the radiation, the doctors told Dan and Bev they would never have children. But God gave them two beautiful daughters, and this week for the first time they became grandparents. So we're excited for them about that.

Over the years Dan has had twelve brain surgeries just to try to keep him alive and functioning. It hasn't been an easy road. In 1998 I preached a message very similar to this. At the end of the message I was standing right down here and Dan came across the front and said to me, "You know, God has given me this ability to paint. I don't feel like I've ever used this to build up the church. What can I do?"

So we met several times and we talked about this. As we processed it, we came up with this idea: Wouldn't it be impressive if we could bring LBC's seven core values to life on canvas? And so we

agreed that would be the project. Dan immediately started on the first of those seven paintings, which was *worship*. But during the process of trying to paint that painting, Dan had three strokes. With each one he had to rehab his way back to get the ability to hold a brush and to paint. I remember during those days that Bev and I talked about whether or not Dan would even be able to finish the one painting. Here we are now seven years later, and this year God and Dan finished the final of the series of seven core value paintings. Outside in the hall you see them up on the walls as you enter and exit the auditorium.

If there was anybody that had reason to sit on the sidelines and feel sorry for themselves and become angry and bitter at God, it would be Dan and Bev. But that's just not who they are. They trust God. They've accepted their circumstances, and the question is: "God, what can You do with what I have?"

Now be honest with me here. When you see Dan, kind of wobbling and struggling through the hallways, is the first thing that comes to your mind, *I'll bet that guy's a great painter?* About as much as you would look at Ehud and think, *I'll bet that guy's a great warrior.* But you take what you have and you surrender it to God and you let God do the most amazing things with what you've been given.

The next time you look at those paintings, not only will you be reminded of our core values, but hopefully you'll be reminded that God can use anybody—even armed with a garden hoe—if you're just willing to surrender what you have to God for His eternal purposes. So let me ask you one more time this morning: What *do* you have? What do you have? And are you willing to surrender that to God that He might use it for His eternal purposes?

Our Father, we're thankful for Your faithfulness. Lord, there are some among us this morning who are Othniels—they're highly gifted; they're highly skilled. You've put them in unique environments to provide for them a platform to proclaim the message of Jesus. Lord, most of us feel more like Ehud or Shamgar. Lord, give us the courage to trust You and step out by faith and give You what we do have and allow You to take it and use it to accomplish Your purpose in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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