

The Baddest People In The Bible

1. Warm-up question: Who is your favorite movie villain – and why?
2. There are a lot of bad people in the Bible – probably because we often learn more from negative examples than positive ones. When we encounter a really bad person, we instinctively say, “I never want to be like that.” Who’s the baddest person you’ve ever personally encountered, and what did you learn from their negative example?
3. In our new sermon series, we’re going to study six of the baddest people in the Bible. We began with Jephthah [JEP-thuh]. Jephthah was a political and military leader at a time we Israel was just a loose confederation of tribes. The elders of Israel recruited Jephthah to lead the nation when it was under grave threat from a powerful enemy state, the Ammonites. Read Judges 11:29-40, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. This is a horrific story. What word would you use to describe the person Jephthah is revealed to be in this story?
 - b. What word would you use to describe the person Jephthah’s daughter is revealed to be in this story? How do you imagine she felt when she learned her fate?
 - c. Verse 29 says, “For four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah.” Why do you think the women of Israel mourned for Jephthah’s daughter for years after she was sacrificed?
4. Jeff suggested we can learn two powerful life lessons from the negative example of Jephthah. **Lesson #1 – Never fall into the trap of trying to bargain with God.** Jephthah’s downhill slide began when, desperate for God’s help, he thought: If I promise to do something really big for God (sacrifice the first living creature that greets me upon my return home), God will be obligated to do something really big for me (give me victory over the Ammonites). In other words, he assumed that God operates on the same formula as human relationships often do – quid pro quo, I’ll give you something you want so you’ll be obligated to give me something I want.
 - a. Some modern examples of bargaining with God include: (a) If you will restore my health, I promise I’ll go to church every Sunday; (b) If you get me out of this legal trouble, I promise I’ll never drink again; or (c) If you’ll let me win the lottery, I’ll give a million dollars to the church. When in your life have you tried – or been tempted – to bargain with God? What happened?
 - b. Consciously or subconsciously, we’re always looking for ways to gain leverage over God. One of our most common assumptions is that if we work really hard to be good, God will be obligated to bless us with good things and prevent bad things from happening. Jeff gave the example of his basement flooding last week at the very time he was trying to do something good for God, i.e., preparing to move into a house with his elderly father. He found himself wondering, “At a

time when I am working so hard to do what God wants me to do, why would God let this happen to me? Did I do something wrong?” But the Bible says, “Time and chance happen to all.” Ecclesiastes 9:11. What are the implications of that verse for us, as people of faith?

- c. Jeff said, “God has put us here in a world where random things can happen – probably because by facing those random difficulties our souls have a chance to grow stronger and more beautiful and we can learn how to thrive even when under stress. It’s part of the process of beautifying, refining, and aging the soul. The test when bad things happen is how we react.” Do you buy that? Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?
 - d. Jeff said, “Never try to bargain with God. It’s fine to ask God for things we hope for. But whether those things happen or not is not dependent on whether we’ve earned it. It depends on a mysterious mixture of God’s grace and the randomness of life. Tell us about a time when something good happened to you that you felt you didn’t deserve. Why do you think that good thing happened?
 - e. Tell us about a time when something bad happened to you that you felt you didn’t deserve. Why do you think that bad thing happened?
 - f. With so much uncertainty and unpredictability in life, how should we cope?
5. **Lesson #2 – Never let yourself get trapped in religious rules.** Jephthah’s tragedy could have been averted if he’d just had enough common sense and courage to break the religious rule that says, “If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt.” Deuteronomy 23:21. Instead of listening to God’s voice inside him, Jephthah blindly, robotically followed the rule and actually killed his daughter!
- a. What are some religious rules that cause great harm in our culture today? Why do people so stubbornly insist on clinging to rules that cause harm?
 - b. Religious rules are helpful, generally speaking, but they’re not our ultimate authority. For followers of Jesus, our ultimate authority is the voice of God’s Spirit guiding us to act in accordance with the highest spiritual values. When in your life have you done harm to self or others by clinging to a religious rule contrary to the voice of God’s Spirit within? What happened?
 - c. When in your life have you had the courage to disregard a religious rule because God’s Spirit told you to? What happened?
 - d. Galatians 5:1 says, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. Listen, I, Paul, am telling you that if you [revert to the Mosaic Code], Christ will be of no benefit to you.” What are the implications of this verse for us?

Judges 11:29-40, selected verses

29 Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah [JEP-thah], and he led Israel's soldiers in battle against the Ammonites. 30 Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 31 then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt-offering." 32 So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. 33 He inflicted a massive defeat on them.

34 Then Jephthah came to his home – and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing! She was his only child. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow." 36 She said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites." 37 And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I."

39 At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. 40 So there arose an Israelite custom that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah.