

“Everyone Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes”

The one hundred and fifth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 17:1-18:31; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Several hundred years have passed since Israel entered Canaan and their leader Joshua had died. Generations of Israelites have come and gone, with each succeeding generation more Canaanized than their parent’s generation. Six times, we have read how the people of Israel forgot all about YHWH, how they found themselves threatened by their pagan neighbors, only to cry out to YHWH for deliverance. Six times, YHWH took pity on his people and raised up a “judge” or a deliverer who rescued the Israelites from those nations who sought to conquer or drive them from the land which YHWH had given to them. But now as we turn to the closing chapters of the Book of Judges, it becomes crystal clear that the true enemy facing Israel has little to do with the armies of Israel’s godless neighbors. Israel’s true enemy is Israel. We can see how far Israel has fallen when we consider that in the final five chapters of Judges, YHWH is hardly mentioned. In fact, what characterizes this closing section of Judges is the repeated declaration that *“there was no king in Israel, so everyone did what is right in their own eyes.”* These chapters of Judges depict a people whose religion is reduced to mere tradition, and who profess one thing but then do another. Having forgotten all about YHWH, the Israelites have become a law unto themselves.

As we resume our series on the Book of Judges, we will quickly finish up the final chapters of this troubling book. I say troubling because as the book unfolds, the people of God fall to ever deeper levels of depravity. By the time we reach the final chapters, Israel’s behavior is indistinguishable from that of their Canaanite neighbors. Long ago, the Israelites stopped determining whether something was right or wrong based upon YHWH’s law. Long ago, the people of Israel forgot all about those miraculous things which YHWH had done to deliver them from their bondage in Egypt. Long ago, the Israelites forgot God’s covenant promises, as well as YHWH’s command to drive the Canaanites from the land which he had given them. Long ago, the Israelites became so comfortable living along side their pagan neighbors, that they openly welcomed Canaanite sons and daughters into their families. In fact, things were so bad that the Israelites actually enjoyed attending religious services in which Canaanite practices were the norm. In other words, long ago, the people of God, forgot about God. The deplorable spiritual condition of Israel depicted in these final chapters (chapters 17-21) is nothing less than a national apostasy.

The Book of Judges opens with the declaration that Joshua has died with Israel settled in the land of promise. Judges ends with the declaration that *“in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* This tells us that Israel’s struggle throughout this period of redemptive history was to remain faithful after God had given them their inheritance, after the people were living well in the promised land, and during a time when Israel did not have a covenant mediator (such as Moses and Joshua). Soon, the bond between the twelve tribes was fractured, the nation was unable to defend itself from external threats from those nations they had previously defeated, and who were now seeking revenge. YHWH’s people had become as pagan (if not more so) as the Canaanites around them. At the heart of the problem was the complete failure of the Levitic priests to instruct the people of Israel in the ways of the Lord. Instead of catechizing Israel, the Levites merely emulated the Canaanites.

All of this makes the Book of Judges a very tough book from which to preach because the basic storyline is such a downer—having forgotten all that YHWH had done for them, having forgotten YHWH’s word, having neglected YHWH’s covenant—the people of Israel engage in all kinds of gross and sinful

behavior. But this downer of a message is exactly what we need to hear, precisely because Israel's condition reminds us—as it should have reminded Israel—that apart from Christ, we can do nothing. Israel's condition should also remind us, that as Christians, who are well-satisfied with all the wonderful things God has given to us (our church, word and sacrament, our Christian friends, etc.), that the battle with sin is not over. Israel's behavior and struggle during the era of the Judges is much like our own struggle today. How do we remain faithful to Christ, while living in the midst of the pagans around us? How do we not become just like them, when paganism now dominates popular American culture? How do we not take for granted the countless blessings that God has given to us once we become used to those blessings? How do we not forget Christ, and all that he has done for us? And more to the point, how do we carry on in the Christian life without losing interest in the on-going fight against indwelling sin?

Israel's decline—as depicted in Judges—should serve then as a graphic warning to Christ's church whenever the church forgets Christ, or loses interest in his word. This is an account of the fruits of complacency. Just as the Levites failed to instruct the people of God in the ways of YHWH, so too, lazy and unbelieving ministers and elders in our own day and age do the same thing to Christ's church when they are not faithful or are indifferent to their duties. All of that is to say, there is much here in Judges which relates to us, even if we don't see it at first glance.

As we turn to our text, Judges 17-18, we begin with an incident in the first six verses of chapter 17 which frames what follows through to the end of chapter 18.

The familiar story of Samson—which precedes this episode—reminds us of how spiritually destitute Israel had become. Like all of the other judges, Samson was a very flawed man, who believed YHWH's promise to save sinners, and yet who struggled mightily the lusts of the flesh. The rather shocking account of Micah and his mother which is recorded in Judges 17, continues this basic theme, yet with a major difference. In these final chapters, Israel's enemy is not external. The enemy lay within. There is not even a hint of faith in the promise. In Judges 17, we witness people openly rebelling against the commandments of YHWH, in the name of worshiping YHWH! This is as clear a picture of Israel's spiritual health as anything we've seen yet, and that picture is anything but flattering.

The account of Micah and his mother, is the first of three distinct episodes in chapters 17-18. The introduction of Micah is followed by the account of the Micah and the Levite (vv. 7-13), which is, in turn, followed by the account of the tribe of Dan (and their dealings with Micah and the Levite) spelled out in chapter 18. In these three scenes we see individual apostasy (Micah), as well as tribal apostasy (Dan), as well as a levitical priest who sells his services to the highest bidder. This section of Judges then, is anything but an account of sinners trusting in YHWH's promise. It is a picture and a warning to us of how sinful we really are, and how prone all Christians are to imitating Israel's behavior.

Judges 17:1 opens with a well-to-do Ephraimite family living in the hill country of Israel. The reason as to why this family is significant to the story will soon become clear. The author simply tells us in verse 1, *“There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.”* The name Micah means “who is like YHWH?”—a question which demands the rhetorical answer, “no one.”¹

As the story unfolds, we are given a glimpse into the character of those involved. *“And [Micah] said to his mother, ‘The 1,100 pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and*

¹ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 478.

also spoke it in my ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it.” Apparently, Micah’s mother noticed that 1100 pieces of her silver (a very sizable sum of money) were missing, and she placed a curse upon whomever took it. Once Micah learns of the curse, only then does he confess to his mother that it was he who stole her silver. Micah is a thief. Yes, he returns the silver to his mother, but only because he’s afraid that he’ll be cursed. This is hardly an endorsement of his character.

Upon hearing that her son had confessed to taking the silver, Micah’s mother proudly pronounces a blessing upon her son, as though he had engaged in some sort of noble behavior by admitting what he had done. *“And his mother said, ‘Blessed be my son by the Lord.’*” Micah’s mother is thankful that her wealth has been recovered, so she undoes the curse. Then she blesses her son in the name of YHWH. This indicates that Micah’s mother thinks that she is a worshiper of YHWH. And so we read in the first part of verse 3, that Micah *“restored the 1,100 pieces of silver to his mother.”* If we quit at this point, we would think all’s well that ends well. But if we’ve learned anything from the Book of Judges, we know that the story will take a major turn.

In the last half of verse 3, we see the deplorable condition of this family. *“His mother said, ‘I dedicate the silver to the Lord from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image. Now therefore I will restore it to you.’*” The list of violations of God’s law in these few verses is not a short one. Micah is a thief, and has not honored his mother. He returns the money, only because he is afraid of suffering the curse she placed upon him. As for Micah’s mother, she should have dedicated the returned silver to YHWH by giving a portion of it to the priests at Shiloh, where the tabernacle was then located (cf. 18:31). But no, she gives a portion of the silver to her son (tainting all of it). Even worse, she gives the silver (about five pounds worth) to her son for the express purpose of creating an idol! Here is a Hebrew woman, blessing her thief of a son in the name of YHWH, and then instructing that some of her own silver be used to create an idol in direct contradiction to the law of God. Apparently, Micah’s mother sees no problem whatsoever in doing this. *“In the name of YHWH, make an idol.”*

Meanwhile, Micah establishes a pagan shrine in his own home. Like the religious hucksters of our own age, Micah creates his own ephod (priestly garment) and then ordains one of his own sons to be a priest. According to verses 4-5, *“So when he restored the money to his mother, his mother took 200 pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a carved image and a metal image. And it was in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and household gods, and ordained one of his sons, who became his priest.”* This is not only an open violation of Deuteronomy 12, but just as Gideon had done Micah establishes his own religious center—the church of Micah, with his own son as its first priest. What is truly remarkable in all of this is that no one even seems to think they are doing anything other than honoring God.

The author of Judges obviously intends readers to see that this is the case based on the tragic summation found in verse 6. *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* Israel had no military-political leader, no prophet-king, who discerned God’s will and led the nation as a whole in the direction they should go. Israel did not have priests who taught the nation the law of God, nor did the priests remind the people of YHWH’s track record of mighty deeds and keeping his covenant promises. To put Israel’s situation in contemporary terms, Israel had split into a number different denominations. The people attended worship services that reflected the pagan culture rather than what was commanded in Scripture. Israel’s priests (ministers) did not preach God’s word, nor did they instruct the people in the great doctrines contained therein (no catechesis). Since there was complete ignorance of YHWH and his will, people made it up as they went along. One group did one thing. Another group did another. In the absence of both political and religious leadership, people

simply did what seemed right to them. In this sense, ancient Israel is just like modern America. People see no problem with worshiping God through means he has condemned in his word. They see no problem with this because they don't know any better, or else they just plain don't care.

This brings us to the next part of the story (verses 7-13) wherein we see a representative example of the corruption of the Levitical priesthood.

In verse 7, a new character is introduced. *“Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there.”* In the next chapter, we learn that his name is Jonathan. That the levitical priesthood is now completely corrupt can be seen in several ways. Priests were not supposed to be consecrated until age thirty (so this man was too young to be serving in this capacity). Priests were to serve where directed, but this young man is wandering around on his own. And then in verses 8-9, we read that *“the man departed from the town of Bethlehem in Judah to sojourn where he could find a place. And as he journeyed, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. And Micah said to him, ‘Where do you come from?’ And he said to him, ‘I am a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to sojourn where I may find a place.’”* Basically, Jonathan is acting as a free agent without a call. Hardly what you should be looking for in a Levitical priest.

Having founded his own “church of Micah,” Micah now makes Jonathan an offer he cannot refuse. *“And Micah said to him, ‘Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes and your living.’ And the Levite went in. And the Levite was content to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, ‘Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest.’”* This is about as bad as it gets. Not only does Micah hire Jonathan to replace his son—it wouldn't look right for an Ephraimite to be a priest—but even though the levitical priesthood is centered in Shiloh, where the tabernacle was established, Micah sees nothing wrong with establishing his own church, creating his own priestly ephod, filling his house with idols, and hiring his own personal priest, and then claiming YHWH will bless him for doing so! This is what I mean when I say the people of Israel are thoroughly Canaanized. If we don't see the parallels between Micah's actions and the entrepreneurial spirit of much of modern American evangelicalism, we are missing the obvious.

This brings us to chapter 18—the account of the tribe of Dan and the depths of their corruption.

If chapter 17 depicts the consequences of the Israelites doing what is right in their own eyes, chapter 18 shows us the consequence of Israel not having a king. To understand what is going on in this chapter, we need to recall that Joshua had assigned each of the twelve tribes a particular land in which to settle. To possess their divinely-appointed inheritance, the Canaanites who dwelt there needed to be driven out. In this chapter we see that the tribe of Dan (the Danites) never did take possession of the land assigned to them, and that they had settled to the south, and were only now (several hundred years later) attempting to possess the land originally given them by YHWH. The chapter recounts two groups of Danites journeying to their land (a group of spies, mirroring what Moses did when he sent spies into Canaan before the conquest), and a group of soldiers. On the way to their land, the Danites pass through the hill country of Ephraim, stopping at the house (church) of Micah where a comedy of idolatry follows.

In the first ten verses of chapter 18, we read of the Danite spies searching out the promised, but unrealized inheritance. *“In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for until then no inheritance among the*

tribes of Israel had fallen to them. So the people of Dan sent five able men from the whole number of their tribe, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to explore it. And they said to them, 'Go and explore the land.' And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there. When they were by the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. And they turned aside and said to him, 'Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What is your business here?'" We are not sure how, but the Danite spies knew that Jonathan was a Levite, and that he was out of place in Micah's house.

If truly Jonathan had been properly called, he would have said "YHWH brought me here, and I am fulfilling my God-given mandate." Instead he gives the answer recorded in verse 4. *"And he said to them, 'This is how Micah dealt with me: he has hired me, and I have become his priest.'" The church of Micah had no authority until he hired a real Levitical priest, so too the scouts from the tribe of Dan have no directive from YHWH to do what they were doing. If this priest was willing to work for Micah, maybe he would do something for them. "And they said to him, 'Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether the journey on which we are setting out will succeed.'" Jonathan gladly obliges them. "And the priest said to them, 'Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord.'" It is obvious that the one person mission from all of this is YHWH himself! And so the five spies moved on and reported back to their people as recorded in verse 10, "the land is spacious, for God has given it into your hands, a place where there is no lack of anything that is in the earth."*

According to verses 11 and 13, a number of Danites then made their way to Laish, the land originally promised to them. Once again, a group of Danites stop at Micah's home. *"So 600 men of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol . . . And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah."* One more time, Micah and Jonathan figure prominently in the story. In verses 14-20, we read of the Danite soldiers encounter with the Levite. *"Then the five men who had gone to scout out the country of Laish said to their brothers, 'Do you know that in these houses there are an ephod, household gods, a carved image, and a metal image? Now therefore consider what you will do.' And they turned aside there and came to the house of the young Levite, at the home of Micah, and asked him about his welfare. Now the 600 men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate. And the five men who had gone to scout out the land went up and entered and took the carved image, the ephod, the household gods, and the metal image, while the priest stood by the entrance of the gate with the 600 men armed with weapons of war. And when these went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household gods, and the metal image, the priest said to them, 'What are you doing?' And they said to him, 'Keep quiet; put your hand on your mouth and come with us and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel? And the priest's heart was glad. He took the ephod and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people.'" With that the Danites loot the church of Micah, take the implements of his church for themselves, and even convince Micah's personal priest (Jonathan) that he should go with them. Six hundred soldiers make a pretty compelling case.*

Micah seeks to stop them, but the Danites are too powerful for him. According to verses 21-26, *"So they turned and departed, putting the little ones and the livestock and the goods in front of them. When they had gone a distance from the home of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house were called out, and they overtook the people of Dan. And they shouted to the people of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, 'What is the matter with you, that you come with such a company?' And he said, 'You take my gods that I made and the priest, and go away, and what have I left? How then do you ask me, 'What is the matter with you?' And the people of Dan said to him, 'Do not let your voice be*

heard among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and you lose your life with the lives of your household.’ Then the people of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home.” The irony in all of this is remarkable. When Micah cries out “you took my `gods’, my priest, and all the goodies from my church” we see the absolute spiritual blindness of Micah as well as that of the Danites. Micah only possesses this stuff, because he stole silver from his mother. Micah should be thrilled that the Danites took from his home those items which rendered him guilty of the death penalty according to Deuteronomy—a theological truth completely lost to him. While Micah laments his loss, there is no way he should be pitied. The church of Micah has been closed! This is a graphic picture of this man’s personal apostasy.

But now the apostasy of a whole tribe comes into view, when the church of Micah is soon re-opened as the church of the Danites. This episode comes to a sorry end verses 27-31 with a description of what followed once the Danites finally settled in their land. *“But the people of Dan took what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, and they came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, and struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire. And there was no deliverer because it was far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-rehob. Then they rebuilt the city and lived in it. And they named the city Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was Laish at the first. And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.”* This is exactly what the author of Judges means when he repeatedly declares, *“in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* In this we see how widely and deeply apostasy has spread throughout Israel. If the story of Micah is a picture of an individual’s apostasy, then chapter 18 gives us a picture of apostasy of a whole tribe (Dan), along with the corruption of the Levitical priesthood. The church of Micah has become the church of the Danites, which amounts to a pagan religious shrine for a whole tribe, presided over by an opportunist priest who can trace his family tree back to Moses.

What application do we take with us from this passage?

Throughout the Book of Judges, but especially in these chapters, we see the tragic consequences of what happens when the people of God forget the ways of the Lord and do what is right in their own eyes. The closest example of this kind of behavior in the New Testament is the church in Corinth, where a man was sleeping with his father’s wife, where Christians were suing each other in the secular courts, and where men in the church still made use of temple prostitutes. One of Paul’s pointed directives to this church is found in our New Testament lesson. *“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?”* Not only must God’s people be characterized by their allegiance to Jesus Christ, we must realize the corrosive effects of paganism (darkness, Belial, “unbelievers”) upon on us. In fact, Paul warns us to keep our distance from the pagans around us, lest we become just like them. No doubt, Israel’s spiritual condition as depicted in the Book of Judges is probably in the back of Paul’s mind when he rebukes the Corinthians.

If Israel had a national covenant with YHWH, then we must remember that we are members of a much better covenant—the new covenant. We are members of Christ’s church. We are living stones of that temple which is Jesus own mystical body. This is why Paul goes on to say, *“For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their*

God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.’ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” Because we too are prone to do what is right in our own eyes, Paul reminds us of the importance of realizing who we are (the temple of the living God), so that our conduct is appropriate to our profession of faith. Paul does not ask us to become hermits, or shun all our non-Christian friends and family. But he does remind us that because we are Christ’s temple, we cannot do what Micah, Jonathan and the Danites did—do what is right in our own eyes, especially when it comes to the worship of God. Because we are Christ’s, and because he has revealed to us how we are to worship him, we must never create a “church of Micah” in our midst, in which we blaspheme God in the name of worshiping God!

Notice too that even as we struggle with sin and the pagan temptation all around us, Paul reaffirms God’s wonderful covenant promise—“I will be your God and you will be my people.” Despite our sins, God is our father, and we are his sons and daughters because of Christ’s death for our sins, and because of his glorious resurrection. This is why we are to cleanse ourselves—not to *become* clean, but because in Christ we already *are clean*! It is because of what Jesus has done for us, that we must now turn our backs upon unclean things (like the idols in Micah’s house), and why we must seek that holiness which is brought to fruition in us through the work of Christ. For if we do what is right in our own eyes, we will quickly forget all about the good news of the gospel, we’ll ignore word and sacrament, and eventually create a “church” which puts the “church of Micah” to shame. For we too are idolaters at heart, and unless we keep Jesus Christ at the center of all our thinking and doing, we’ll quickly become just like Israel in the day of the judges.