

Israel's False Religion

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 17-18; John 4:19-25

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Congregation of Christ: We come now to the last two sermons on the Book of Judges. In Chapters 1 and 2, the book opens with an introduction to how Israel went spiraling down into idolatry and unbelief after Joshua died. The second major part of the book, Chapters 3 through 16, tells the stories of the twelve judges appointed by God for Israel, and how even the behavior of these judges also went into a downward spiral.

After studying all the judges of Israel, from Othniel to Samson, the writer switches to the next page in Israel's history. From hereon in Chapter 17, Israel had no judges, and idolatry, sexual immorality and violence reigned. Four times in these last five chapters, the writer interjects at strategic places the tragic summary of Israel's existence as God's people between the death of Joshua and the appointment of Saul as King: *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* Anarchy reigned. And their oppressors were not foreign nations, but they oppressed one another.

In our text today, we will see how idolatry and false religion spread from one family to a whole tribe of Israel. And this unbelief led to the massacre of another people in the land.

Today, we will meditate on the theme, **"Israel's False Religion"** under three headings: first, **False Worship**; second, **False Success**; and third, **False Kings**.

False Worship

Chapter 17 is about a man named Micah in the hill country of Ephraim. He stole a huge amount of silver, 1,100 pieces, from his mother. This is the same amount of silver that each of the five rulers of the Philistines gave to Delilah for betraying Samson. But Micah returned it in fear, because he heard his mother pronounce a curse on the one who stole her money. Most surprisingly, instead of being angry, his mother offered a prayer of blessing to the LORD for Micah after he returned it. Her reason was that she has dedicated her silver for the making of a carved image made of metal.

So she gave 200 pieces out of the 1,100 pieces of silver to an idol-maker. Because Micah had a shrine—literally, "a house of gods"—he put the idol there, together with an ephod and other "household gods." These "household gods" were used for divination to inquire of God about one's future. Micah then ordained one of his sons to become his priest in his house of gods.

The next act in Micah's story is that of a young Levite who left Bethlehem in Judah and was looking for a place to stay, maybe for greener pastures. So he came to Micah's house, and upon learning that the man was a Levite, he offered him a salary, clothes, and a place to stay in his house if he would become his priest. The offer was irresistible to the Levite.

This story reeks of the false religion of Micah and his household. And this religion is probably the religion of most of the Israelites in those days. This false religion has all the elements of false worship, because it violated all the Law of Moses regarding worship.

First, Micah and his household violated the First and Second Commandments: no other gods except YHWH, and no carved images. And before Israel entered the Promised Land, the LORD warned them, "Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD" (Deut 27:15). The words here for "carved or cast metal image" are the same words

used in verse 4 of our text. The religion of Micah's family is a syncretistic mix of Israel's religion and pagan religion, mentioning YHWH in the same breath as pagan idols.

Second, Micah also violated the location of the house of the LORD. In those days, the tabernacle was in Shiloh, not too far from where he lived. After Canaan was conquered and settled by Israel, the tabernacle in the wilderness was placed at Shiloh. And it was there for over 300 years until the Philistines defeated the Israelites and captured the Ark of the Covenant when Saul was king.

Third, in assigning his son and then the Levite as his priest was again a violation of the Law. No man was qualified to be a priest, except if he was from the tribe of Levi (Exo 29:9; Num 16:10). Also, Levites were not to be used as a personal priest. They were to serve the people only as priests in the house of the LORD. And the making of an ephod for the priest was also wrong. Gideon made one for himself, and he was not a priest.

Micah and his household were in outright violation of God's Law: dishonoring and stealing from his parents; worshiping other gods; making carved idols; building a "house of gods"; and installing his own priest.

In what ways do evangelical worship today mirror the false worship and false gods of Micah? Churches today believe and practice many things in worship that are "right in their own eyes," not right in God's sight. Churches today make idols of their beautiful worship team, loud and unbiblical music, dynamic funny pastors, unbiblical preaching and teaching, and fun-filled youth groups. They have lost sight of Biblical worship that is joyful, reverential, and pleasing to God. They have filled their minds with human innovations, just as Calvin has said, "The human mind is a factory of idols." According to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 96 and 98, when they "worship Him in any other way than He has commanded us in His Word," they are "wiser than God."

Do evangelicals today worship the God of the Bible? Many do not, as seen in a recent survey of American evangelicals.¹ An astonishing 71 percent believe that "Jesus is a created being." According to 56 percent, The Holy Spirit is a "divine force but not a personal being." Other false doctrines believed are: (1) "God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam" (48 percent); (2) "Heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones" (64 percent); and "God will always reward true faith with material blessings" (37 percent). Like Micah, evangelicals today have made their own image of God in their "factory of idols."

The same survey found that more than 70 percent of evangelicals do not attend church regularly. Like Micah, they say they can worship in their own homes, and that churches are filled with hypocrites. They question why they have to be members of any church, since they are members of Christ's church. They have lost sight of Biblical teachings that all believers ought to be in communion with the saints wherever they are (Rom 12:4-8), and that they ought to be under the spiritual oversight of the elders of the church (Heb 13:7). How can they obey these commands if they are worshiping alone or with their family in their homes?

Many churches also teach that every church member can be a "minister."² Anyone can administer the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. They have a very low regard for the Biblical teaching that only ordained pastors and elders in the church are qualified to

1 Ligonier Ministries, "The State of Theology," September 2016, <http://thestateoftheology.com/>.

2 One of the slogans of Saddleback Church in California, pastored by Rick Warren, is "Every Member a Minister." 8/19/2016. <http://saddlebackworship.com/kidschoir/blog/2016/8/19/every-member-a-minister>.

perform these sacraments. So it is very common for unordained youth pastors who are but high school or college students baptizing or administering the Lord's Supper in summer camps. This is a desecration of the sacraments consecrated by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Micah and his household worshiped false gods in false ways.

False Success

After Micah had recruited the Levite priest as his own personal priest, he declared joyfully and proudly, *"Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest."*

Chapter 18 of our text also narrates the story of the Danites, the tribe of Dan, who were looking for a place to settle. Their tribe had no success in driving out the inhabitants of the land they inherited. They sent five men to spy the land, and they came to the hill country of Ephraim, where they found the Levite priest of Micah. The five Danites requested the priest to inquire of God so they may know whether they will succeed in their search for a homeland. So the priest told them, *"God in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the LORD."*

So the five Danites traveled about 100 miles in their search, finally arriving in a country called Laish. They saw that it was unprotected because it was far from Sidon their ally, *"quiet and unsuspecting... lacking nothing"* and wealthy. They then went back to their tribe and reported their finding, urging them to attack the land, "for God has given it into your hands."

When the 600 warriors of the Danites traveled to go to Laish, they again came to the house of Micah. The five scouts knew about Micah's "house of gods," where they saw the ephod, household gods, and the carved metal image. They coveted these idols, and took them. When the Levite priest saw them robbing Micah's shrine, he asked the Danites why they were taking the idols. So the Danites offered the priest more than Micah offered him, and "the priest's heart was glad," and he went with the Danites. When Micah saw what the Danites did, he offered no resistance since the Danites were far too strong for them.

From there, the Danites went to Laish and were successful in capturing it. They burned down the city, and rebuilt it and settled there. They renamed the city Dan. At the end of this episode, we learn that the name of the priest was Jonathan, a descendant of Gershom, one of the sons of Moses. So there is a contrast between the house of the LORD in Shiloh, and the "house of gods" of Micah and the Danites.

So there is a solemn warning for the modern church in this section. Many churches base their "success" on big numbers and budgets and so-called ministries. The youth ministry is one of the most important activity in churches today, with all its fun, games, entertainment and pizza. Most families with children base their choice of a church on its children's ministries. They never learn their lesson, because most of those who had been active in youth groups drop out of church after high school, even as early as middle school. Research shows that 70 percent of evangelical youth drop out of church after high school, most of them never to return.³

Their thinking is that if there are great numbers and big budgets, God must be blessing their church. Every little church today wants to become a megachurch. But great numbers, budgets and ministries do not always signify that these churches are pleasing or acceptable to God. Like Micah, the priest and the Danites, using the name of God and Christian-speak do not always

³ "Dropouts and Disciples: How Many Students are Really Leaving and What Can We Do About It." 5/14/2014. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/may/dropouts-and-disciples-how-many-students-are-really-leaving.html>.

translate to godliness and holiness. In fact, the Bible clearly teaches that faithful churches will always be a small remnant because of the love of the world and also because of persecution. Think of Jesus himself: after three years of his earthly ministry, what did he have to show? 120 true disciples.

False Kings

In our text, the refrain, *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* was repeated twice (17:6; 18:1). Was the writer saying that the problem of Israel's wickedness would be solved if they had a king?

In 1 Samuel 8, we read that when Samuel the prophet-judge was old, he made his sons judges over Israel. But his sons did not walk in his ways; *"they took bribes and perverted justice."* So they demanded of Samuel, *"Give us a king to judge us."*

The LORD then told Samuel to obey the voice of the people, but to warn them about the kings who would rule over them. So Samuel warned them that these kings will oppress them, burden them with heavy taxes, and make them slaves, just as their foreign oppressors did. When this happens, the people will cry out to the LORD, but the LORD will not answer them.

And when we read the chronicles of the kings, Samuel's prophecy was fulfilled. Almost all the kings of Israel outdid one another in wickedness. Beginning with King Solomon, in 1 and 2 Kings, the refrain became, *"[The king] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD... and in his sin which he made Israel to sin"* (1 Kgs 11:6). After Solomon died, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Jeroboam, a servant of Solomon ruled the northern kingdom. He then made two calves of gold, and said to his people, *"Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan"* (1 Kings 12:28-29). This is exactly what Aaron did and said to Israel at Mount Sinai. It is striking that one of the idol-calves was placed in Dan, who had set Micah's idols in the same place decades before them.

So a king was not the solution to Israel's wickedness. But there was one king who would be the type of the King who would come to redeem his people from wickedness. King David was a righteous king, "a man after God's own heart." Still, he was merely a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, his Descendant. He would come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Mat 5:17). He would fulfill the Law perfectly. Therefore, his Father declared, *"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased."* He did what was right in his Father's eyes, because he himself the was perfectly righteous Son of God. And he would make all his children, the Church in all the nations, follow him in righteousness through the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence.

Dear Friends, we cannot but see that our nation today is in the grip of the theme of Judges, *"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* What was evil in the old days according to God's Word is now good, and what was good is now evil. If this wickedness continues, God's righteous wrath is not far away. God did not hesitate to destroy the world by flood in Noah's day because *"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"* (Gen 6:5). He saw it fitting to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah by fire because he saw that *"their sin very grave"* (Gen 18:21).

Let this be a solemn warning to our nation today. Our only comfort these days is that after the election of our nation's leaders next month, our Lord Jesus Christ will still be King and will one day return to restore perfect justice and righteousness in all the earth.