

Doing Our Own Thing in God's Name

Judges 17-18

Luke 6:46 records a penetrating question from the lips of Jesus. He says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?" He means it as a question primarily, not as a rebuke. He is asking us to think through why it is that we so often quickly say, "Lord, Lord," as we pray to Him with our requests, honor Him with our words, and sing His praise-yet don't do what He says.

There are a few Christian charlatans out there who deliberately use the name of Christ, knowing they are really just out for themselves. They put a Christian façade over a self-centered life to take advantage of others. But I am not primarily talking to deceivers like that.

Today I want to talk to other hypocrites, including the person at whom I look in the mirror every day. People like me, who too often say, "Lord, Lord," and yet treat Him as if He weren't Lord at all. What makes that reality our experience? The section we've come to in the book of Judges will give us some insight into this.

We are coming to end of our study of Judges. The history of Judges extends over 300 years, beginning with the death of Joshua after conquering and dividing the Promised Land, and ending just before the rise of the first divinely appointed King in Israel, Saul. The main character of the story is God, and the supporting characters in the story are His judges.

The theme of Judges is summed up in 17:6 and 21:25, **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** We have seen the devastating results of that philosophy played out in the repeated cycle of sin in Judges: Israel sin by rebelling against the Lord and serving the false Gods of the other nations; God sells them into the hands of oppressors who afflict them; Israel cries out to God in their distress; and God responds by sending a judge, a deliverer who rescues them from their enemies so they enjoy a time of peace as long as the judge is alive. We have seen 12 different judges, men enabled by God to save His people—but most of them, terribly flawed men who reflect the evil of the times in which they lived. The overall theme of Judges is that men are unfaithful, yet God is still faithful.

The last five chapters of Judges serve as appendices to the narrative, added supplements to help us understand what happened and why—they are like a prequel to Judges—that explains exactly HOW Israel fell. The FIRST appendix (17-18) focuses the destruction of man's relationship with God. The SECOND appendix (19-21) focuses the ensuing destruction that results from that broken relationship, namely, people destroying one another.

Today's text does not follow the story of Samson as much as build on it; explaining to us just how God's people went from being free and feared to enslaved and humiliated. And how, at the heart of all of it is not an external problem, but an internal worship disorder.

Let's pray together as we begin to study God's Word:

I. Micah and his mother (Judges 17:1-6)

1 Now there was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

2 And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you, and on which you put a curse, even saying it in my ears--

here is the silver with me; I took it." And his mother said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, my son!"

3 So when he had returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, "I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the Lord for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you."

4 Thus he returned the silver to his mother. Then his mother took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to the silversmith, and he made it into a carved image and a molded image; and they were in the house of Micah.

5 The man Micah had a shrine, and made an ephod and household idols; and he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.

6 In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Our story begins in the hill country of Ephraim, with a man named Micah and his mom. Apparently, mom found her purse a bit lighter and declares a curse on whoever robbed her. In one stroke, Micah violates two of the Ten Commandments: he steals and he dishonors a parent (Exodus 20:12, 15). The amount stolen connects with chapter 16 showing us that just as Samson was betrayed for money, God will be betrayed too. Fearful of the curse, her son confesses he is the thief.

When Micah brought the money back to her, she replied, "**May you be blessed by the Lord, my son!**" She utters a blessing to counteract the curse on her son. She continued, "**I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the Lord for my son ...**" This appears to be a great expression of worship, devotion to God; to dedicate all eleven hundred shekels of silver!

But, then she went on to say, "**...to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you.**" What appeared to be a solemn consecration and devotion to the LORD turned out to be nothing more than "deviation to self-serving idolatry and demon-worship" according to Matthew Henry. She hired a silversmith to make the image and the idol with two hundred shekels of silver; she pocketed the rest.

The name Micah means "Who is like YHWH (the Lord)?" The answer, of course, is no one, which should lead those who hear of the name into worship. It is more than a little ironic, and especially disappointing, then, that the man who bears such a name turns to idolatry. Who (or what) is like the Lord? Not a two-hundred-shekel silver idol, that's for sure.

St. Augustine pointed out "Idolatry is worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that ought to be worshiped."

Verse 5 tells us that the carved image, the cast idol Micah's mother made along with an ephod and other idols, household gods, were all placed in a shrine in Micah's house. Micah then installed one of his sons as his priest.

Micah and his mother disregarded the clear instructions of God not to make any graven image according to the second commandment (Exo. 20:4,23; Lev. 19:4). He made an ephod just like Gideon did again against God's laws; he also made idols, teraphims, which were used for inquiring the will of gods, not the God of Israel; he also installed someone other than a descendent of Aaron as a priest, his own son (Exodus 29:9; Num 16:10).

All this took place in Micah's home in the hill country of Ephraim, not too far from Shiloh, which was the legitimate place for worship where tabernacle was placed during the period of Judges.

What was going on with this family? Verse 6 tells the story, **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."**

There was an appearance of doing what was right; confessing sin and returning the stolen money, consecrating the returned money to the Lord... but really everything they did was for themselves. As verse 6 says, they did what was right in their own eyes, not according to God's word or God's will.

II. Micah And the Levite (Judges 17:7-13)

7 Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there.

8 The man departed from the city of Bethlehem in Judah to stay wherever he could find a place. Then he came to the mountains of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, as he journeyed.

9 And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" So he said to him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am on my way to find a place to stay."

10 Micah said to him, "Dwell with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten shekels of silver per year, a suit of clothes, and your sustenance." So the Levite went in.

11 Then the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him.

12 So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah.

13 Then Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!"

Here the author introduces to us a young Levite. He is said to be from Bethlehem, but left Bethlehem in search of some other place to stay. From 18:30, we learn that this young Levite was Jonathan, son of Gershom who was the son of Moses. Joshua 21 lists specifically designated 48 Levitical cities where Levites were to live. Bethlehem was not one of these 48 cities. The way God intended was for the Levites to live by what people offered to God. But, because the Israelites failed to obey God's laws, the support system for the Levites failed as well. This explains why this young Levite was in search of some place to live.

This young Levite, whom we learn later is Jonathan a grandson of Moses, came across Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim. And, Micah having learned Jonathan was a Levite offered him a yearly pay, clothes and food to become his spiritual father and priest. Verse 12 tells us that the Levite became Micah's priest and lived in his house. And, verse 13 tells us how this made Micah feel, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest." It felt so right for Micah to have this Levite as his own priest at his own home for the worship of the carved images and the idols; he was convinced that the LORD was going to bless this arrangement.

You get a feel for Micah's orientation in life in the final sentence in verse 13. Everything he's done up to this point has been for his own prosperity. He stole the money from his

mother to gain prosperity. He's created a priest in his son, knowing he was really cheating when he did that. Then a good deal comes along in the Levite, one of the people who are supposed to be priests, so he throws his son out of the priesthood and installs this man, saying, "Now that I have a Levitical priest [magic dust] serving at my [idolatrous] shrine in the back yard, God will be forced to prosper me." Prosperity was his great desire in life.

What about the Levite, the third person in the story? He is a man who has the mantle of spiritual leadership because of his heritage. The Levites were the tribe in Israel who were not given a territory to inherit; they were to be sown throughout the nation to serve as spiritual leaders for their people. Some would serve in the temple and take care of the sacrificial system. Others would live out in the countryside and be a pastoral encouragement to people. This man, whose name we will finally uncover at the end of this story, has absolutely no sense of serving God. He has the religious vocation, the name Levite, the opportunity, and the standing to do it, but all he is interested in is finding a place of security for himself. He has not been called by God to act; he also is acting in his own self-interest. He jumps at the opportunity to live in Micah's house: "Oh sure, I'll run your idol worship in the back yard. No problem. I'm glad to do that." But you can imagine him striking for higher wages later on if the opportunity that is about to come up were not to present itself. He's there for the money. He will abandon Micah at the drop of a hat, steal all of his religious articles, and take off with the group that offers him a better deal in chapter 18.

III. The Levite and the Danites (Judges 18)

Chapter 18 begins with all too familiar saying, "*In those days Israel had no king*" in verse 1. Chapter 17 was an illustration of what happened at the individual level when Israel had no king. Now, chapter 18 addresses the broader impact at the tribal level when Israel had no king. Having no king meant that they didn't live under God's kingship.

- 1 In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for itself to dwell in; for until that day their inheritance among the tribes of Israel had not fallen to them.**
- 2 So the children of Dan sent five men of their family from their territory, men of valor from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and search it. They said to them, "Go, search the land." So they went to the mountains of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there.**
- 3 While they were at the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. They turned aside and said to him, "Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What do you have here?"**
- 4 He said to them, "Thus and so Micah did for me. He has hired me, and I have become his priest."**
- 5 So they said to him, "Please inquire of God, that we may know whether the journey on which we go will be prosperous."**
- 6 And the priest said to them, "Go in peace. The presence of the Lord be with you on your way."**

The problem that the Danites faced is not that they weren't given an allotment of land. Instead, they had failed to take possession of the land that God had given them. They were not up to facing the Ammorites and the Philistines. Instead of seeking God's help to conquer their allotted territory, they instead went looking for land elsewhere.

So in verse 3, they stop in Micah's house and recognize the priest's voice - most likely his southern accent. They discover that Micah has a personal priest." But this wayward Levite couldn't see how wrong it was for the Danites to seek validation on their sinful adventure. God already revealed to Danites what they were to do; they were to go and take the land God had given them as their inheritance. God didn't give them Laish or Leshm as their inheritance in Joshua 19:40-46. This Levite wasn't speaking on behalf of God; he was speaking as he saw fit.

A little later, they return with a bit of an army to try to take some land.

7 So the five men departed and went to Laish. They saw the people who were there, how they dwelt safely, in the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure. There were no rulers in the land who might put them to shame for anything. They were far from the Sidonians, and they had no ties with anyone.

8 Then the spies came back to their brethren at Zorah and Eshtaol, and their brethren said to them, "What is your report?"

9 So they said, "Arise, let us go up against them. For we have seen the land, and indeed it is very good. Would you do nothing? Do not hesitate to go, and enter to possess the land.

10 When you go, you will come to a secure people and a large land. For God has given it into your hands, a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth."

11 And six hundred men of the family of the Danites went from there, from Zorah and Eshtaol, armed with weapons of war.

12 Then they went up and encamped in Kirjath Jearim in Judah. (Therefore they call that place Mahaneh Dan to this day. There it is, west of Kirjath Jearim.)

13 And they passed from there to the mountains of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah.

On the way, the spies remember that Micah's house contains everything they need to set up a religious shrine, so they go to steal it.

14 Then the five men who had gone to spy out the country of Laish answered and said to their brethren, "Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod, household idols, a carved image, and a molded image? Now therefore, consider what you should do."

15 So they turned aside there, and came to the house of the young Levite man--to the house of Micah--and greeted him.

16 The six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the children of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate.

17 Then the five men who had gone to spy out the land went up. Entering there, they took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the molded image. The priest stood at the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men who were armed with weapons of war.

18 When these went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the molded image, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?"

When the priest protests, they make him an offer.

19 And they said to him, "Be quiet, put your hand over your mouth, and come with us; be a father and a priest to us. Is it better for you to be a priest to the household of one man, or that you be a priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?"

Look at how the priest responded

20 So the priest's heart was glad; and he took the ephod, the household idols, and the carved image, and took his place among the people.

Of course the Danites expect Micah to not be happy about this so they put the army behind everyone to protect them:

21 Then they turned and departed, and put the little ones, the livestock, and the goods in front of them.

Micah gets up an army of his neighbors and goes after the Danites:

22 When they were a good way from the house of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house gathered together and overtook the children of Dan.

23 And they called out to the children of Dan. So they turned around and said to Micah, "What ails you, that you have gathered such a company?"

24 So he said, "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and you have gone away. Now what more do I have? How can you say to me, 'What ails you?' "

25 And the children of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry men fall upon you, and you lose your life, with the lives of your household!"

26 Then the children of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house.

The Danite continue North to Laish and take the city.

27 So they took the things Micah had made, and the priest who had belonged to him, and went to Laish, to a people quiet and secure; and they struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire.

28 There was no deliverer, because it was far from Sidon, and they had no ties with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth Rehob. So they rebuilt the city and dwelt there.

29 And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel. However, the name of the city formerly was Laish.

The author is clearly sympathetic to the people of Laish, calling them an unsuspecting and peaceful people. The city of Laish was an easy target. The Danites met little to no resistance and easily overtook Laish. Rebuilding the city and setting there, they renamed it Dan. In this newly gained city of Dan, they set up the idols and had the

Levite, Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, as their priest. And, they had the Levite and his sons oversee the idol worship.

30 Then the children of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.

31 So they set up for themselves Micah's carved image which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.

You've got sons stealing from mothers, mothers building idols, priests for hire to the highest bidder, idolatrous worship, the slaughter of peaceful people. It's a mess. The corruption is at every level. There isn't a single admirable character in these chapters. It's clear that these people have a serious problem. It's not a problem of a person or a family or a particular pastor or a particular group. It's every person, every family, every pastor, and every group. And it's not just a problem of people who lived long ago and far away. It's our problem too.

The problem is idolatry. It has affected each of us. Idolatry happens any time we make good things ultimate things, when we value anything more than we do God. Ironically, idol worshipers often think they are worshiping God, and do not realize that, like Micah and the whole tribe of Dan, they have made a religion in which God revolves around them. Idolatry is the default mode of the heart, and it has affected all of us.

You may remember what English author G.K. Chesterton wrote in answer to the question, "What's wrong with the world?" He wrote, "I am."

Jesus asked, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" The answer suggested in this story in the book of Judges is that we have a very serious problem: Our hearts are more desperately wicked, more self-serving, more willing to use religion without encountering God than we will admit to ourselves.

We're often guilty of the very thing that we found in today's story. We do not act as if we exist to serve and adore God; instead, we use God as a means to an end. Instead of serving God, we want God to serve us, our dreams, and our requests. We still believe in God, but our lives don't revolve around him. We expect God to adapt to us.

Like the people of Israel, we have been squeezed into the mold of the world around us. We are preoccupied with materialism; we worship on our own terms; our values are similar to the world around us. We have reluctant to hear God's call into service. We are prone to pray, "My kingdom come" rather than "They kingdom come." We fight the Lord's battle with our own resources. We do not live God's priorities. Judges shows us that this is our problem, and it also shows us where it all leads. It's not a pretty picture.

The problem is that we need help, and that help has to come from outside of ourselves, because all of us have been affected. We have all fallen in the pit, as it were, and therefore nobody is able to lift us out. We need someone to help us who is not part of the problem.

There is a leader who eventually does come, who has not fallen into the pit, and he alone is able to solve the problem with this world. He is the Judge that Israel, a King who is better than David. His name is Jesus. Judges invites us to return to God in repentance, and the rest of the Bible comes in to tell us that God has provided a Judge, the Judge that these people never had, the Judge that we desperately need to deliver us not only from our enemy, but from ourselves.