A Lack of Instruction

Devotional Reading: Deuteronomy 6:10–16
Background Scripture: Judges 17–18
Today's Scripture: Judges 17:1–6; Judges 18:18–19, 27

I. Misguided Worship
Judges 17:1–6

1 And there was a man of mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

2 And he said unto his mother, The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from thee, about which thou cursedst, and spakest of also in mine ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it. And his mother said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son.

3 And when he had restored the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a graven image and a molten image: now therefore I will restore it unto thee.

4 Yet he restored the money unto his mother; and his mother took two hundred shekels of silver, and gave them to the founder, who made thereof a graven image and a molten image: and they were in the house of Micah.

5 And the man Micah had an house of gods, and made an ephod, and teraphim, and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.

6 In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

1. *Mount Ephraim* does not refer to a specific mountain peak but rather to a hilly, forested region that extends from Bethel to the plain of Jezreel. The name is associated with the tribe of Ephraim, named after one of the sons of Joseph.

The name *Micah* means "Who is like the Lord?" There is more than one individual named Micah in the Old Testament, and we should not get confused about which one the text refers to here. The Micah of today's lesson is not the Micah of the biblical prophetic book that bears that name; that Micah won't come on the scene for another five hundred years or so.

2a. Micah's story begins midstream with a verbal response to a spoken curse. A large sum of *silver* was stolen from Micah's *mother*, and in reaction, she condemned the person who took it. She harbors a desire for retribution and wishes injurious harm on the thief—whoever he is.

The sum of *eleven hundred shekels of silver* represents remarkable wealth. It is one hundred ten times more than the annual stipend offered to Micah's priest in the next chapter. In terms of weight, 1,100 shekels weigh more than twenty-three pounds!

Micah admits that he heard his mother's curse and that he is the thief. Presumably, he does so because he wants her to withdraw the denunciation. Otherwise, he fears it spells his doom. People throughout the ancient Near East

understood such declarations as effective in revengeful power.

2b. Micah's mother quickly blesses him, hoping to reverse the curse she previously pronounced. As with curse formulae, residents in the ancient Near East believed declarative blessings like this to be effective in power. She invokes the name of *the Lord*, suggesting her devotion to the God of Israel.

3. To further avoid the repercussions of the curse, Micah returns the money, and his mother claims that it was *dedicated* to *the Lord*. In the process of making idols, it was considered necessary to first dedicate (or sanctify) the materials used. They were consecrated, or set apart, for this particular use. Micah's mother's words are confusing because they twist the idea of things declared holy *unto the Lord* with an action expressly forbidden by the law. Silver can certainly be sanctified for the Lord's purposes, as with offerings for use in the tabernacle. But the law prohibits making idols. Nevertheless, the Israelites frequently struggle against forming idols—or worse, they *don't* struggle against doing so (Exodus 32).

While idols of various types could be either *graven* or *molten*, the description of the image made here denotes both a sculpting process and the overlay of molten metal. Ancient idol makers often carved an image out of wood and covered it with bronze, silver, or gold.

4. After Micah returns the funds, *his mother* moves forward with her plan and uses a portion of *the money* to make the idol. The difference in sums is confusing. Although the woman claims she's dedicated the full amount to making an idol, she ultimately uses only *two hundred shekels*. The remaining nine hundred units disappear from the story.

The term *founder* signifies a worker who specializes in refining metal. These craftsmen purified, poured, shaped, dipped, and cast metals.

The metal worker specifically makes a *graven image* for Micah's family. The creation of this idol goes directly against God's second command to Israel: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). The specific form of this image is unknown, but idols in the region often take anthropomorphic (human-like) shapes. The family not only commissions the creation of the false god, but then they set it in a prominent place in Micah's *house*!

5a. A *house of gods* was a sacred space in an ancient Near Eastern home that was designed for the residence of a deity. A shrine like this one, on a family's property, is thought to be a way to secure divine favor. The Hebrew phrase translated *house of gods* here is the same as is used to refer to the tabernacle at Shiloh (Judges 18:31).

The Lord prohibited setting up sanctuaries like Micah's as alternatives or even supplements to His designated place of worship (Deuteronomy 12:1–7). There was to be a single place of worship for the Israelites as a protection against the pagan worship practices of the surrounding nations. Despite his family's relative proximity to Shiloh and God's instructions, Micah creates a personal shrine.

The sacrilege goes on: Micah makes *an ephod*. This is a garment the priests wear while serving in the tabernacle. Micah's replication of this priestly attire copies pieces of God's instructions but is a departure from God's stated intentions. The exact use of such an item outside of the tabernacle is unclear.

The exact nature of *teraphim* remains debated as well. It is a plural Hebrew word that elsewhere refers to idols. The

most common interpretation is that they were representations of ancestors who maintained a link with the family beyond the grave. This veneration of the dead was yet another prohibited practice.

5b. The word *consecrated* translates a Hebrew idiom also found in Leviticus 16:32. It refers to what may be called ordination; the same term also appears, with slightly different Hebrew spelling, in Exodus 29:9. The expression is literally "filling the hand," symbolizing endowing the person with authority. Either physically or metaphorically, Micah places the idol(s) in his son's hands, installing him as a *priest* over their household cult.

6. This verse summarizes the core problem: *Israel* lacks a central authority, and the people choose to dismiss God's laws in favor of personal options. It is the first appearance of a refrain that echoes throughout the book of Judges. God explicitly declared that the Israelites were not to live this way—"every man [doing] whatsoever is right in his own eyes"—after entering the promised land (Deuteronomy 12:8).

II. Misguided Engagement
Judges 18:18–19, 27

18 And these went into Micah's house, and fetched the carved image, the ephod, and the teraphim, and the molten image. Then said the priest unto them, What do ye?

19 And they said unto him, Hold thy peace, lay thine hand upon thy mouth, and go with us, and be to us a father and a priest: is it better for thee to be a priest unto the house of one man, or that thou be a priest unto a tribe and a family in Israel?

27 And they took the things which Micah had made, and the priest which he had, and came unto Laish, unto a people that were at quiet and secure: and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and burnt the city with fire.

18. The Danites are no more attentive to the commands of God than Micah. Instead, they approach Micah's house as pillagers. The word *these* refers to the five men who initially visited Micah's house and shrine. They observe the standard practice of conquerors in the ancient Near East as they strip the "temple" of its valuables. The Danites take Micah's idols as talismans of favor for their mission.

The Levite protests the theft and sacrilege, blind to the irony of his complaint. His question, *What do ye?*, could be asked of him too, as an illegitimate priest administering a household cult.

19. The offer the Danites make to the Levite is the same as the one Micah made—be *a father* and *a priest* to us. The position of a *father* means acting as an authoritative voice and advisor. They ask him to halt his objection and then offer him a deal, which the opportunistic Levite takes The Danites' offer amplifies the Levite's perceived influence.

27. Micah realizes his idols and priest are gone and calls his neighbors together, hoping to fight the looters. After catching up to them, the Danites easily convince Micah to return home, lest he suffer worse loss.

As the army arrives at the town of *Laish,* the men are well beyond the area designated as Dan's inheritance. Their position marks the northernmost part of Israel. The army's pillaging continues. The Danites overpower the people of Laish and eventually settle there themselves. At first glance, their actions toward the city resemble God's instructions regarding entering the land and taking possession (Deuteronomy 7:1–5). Yet the Danites act against the Law of Moses, as Judges 18:28–31 indicates.

Involvement Learning

A Lack of Instruction

Into the Lesson

What makes the game "Simon Says" challenging as an adult?

Following instructions may seem tedious at times, but if we don't pay attention, things can quickly become confusing and chaotic. In today's lesson, notice what happened when people neglected God's instructions.

Into the Word

Read Judges 17:1–6. How do you see Micah's response reflecting what he observed and learned from his mother?

What do you know about Micah's attitude toward God and God's instructions for worship?

Key Text

In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.
—Judges 17:6

Read the following texts and list the differences between God's intentions and Micah's implementation.

The Shrine (Exodus 25:8–9; 29:44–46)

The Ephod (Exodus 28:1–14)

The Idols (Exodus 20:1–6, 22–23)

The Priests (Numbers 16:1–5; 17:1–10)

What incorrect mindset or attitude did Micah have that led him to justify his actions as "right"?

Into Life

The people in this account lost sight of God and His commands. They went their own way. Sometimes, we also forget God's directions. Identify ways you have deviated from God's commands and write a prayer of confession.

Thought to Remember

Know Scripture
and put it into practice.