

JUDGES || The Rollercoaster of Sin
Judges 17–18 || *Right in Their Own Eyes*
North Center || December 17, 2023
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Today, we enter the **final section** of our series through the book of Judges. Over the past several months, we have seen the people of God on a **rollercoaster ride** when it comes to their relationship with Him. They follow God’s Words and live according to His commands, and God blesses them at every turn. But then they engage in moments of compromise. And that compromise leads to more compromise until they eventually turn their back on God completely and rebel against Him. This rebellion is called “**sin**”, and sin always destroys people. Since God loves His people too much to leave them alone in their sinfulness, He fights against their sin by raising up pagan nations who oppress His people. Eventually, the oppression gets so bad that the people finally turn away from their sin and cry out to their God, and He responds by raising up **deliverers** (called **judges**) to rescue them from their oppression. And then, during the lifetime of the judge, they follow the loving commandments of God, but as soon as the judge dies, they revert back to their sinful ways and rebel against God all over again.

And this rollercoaster continues until we get to the story of Samson (**13–16**), and then (*as our brother Steve said last week*) the rollercoaster goes off the tracks and crashes in a swamp.

- Instead of seeking to rescue God’s people, Samson is almost always thinking only about himself.
- Instead of rallying behind their deliverer, God’s people actually turn him over to the enemy.
- Instead of crying out for help, God’s people don’t even seem to care anymore. They have lost the will to fight. They are oppressed by their enemy, but they would rather betray God’s deliverer than go to war.
- When Samson dies, that’s the end of the deliverers. The people don’t cry out for help. They don’t repent of their rebellion. It’s as if they decided that they don’t need God anymore. And **they made up their own religion**: one with ***no judges, no rules, no king, no accountability, no repentance, and no God.***
 - It’s as if they said, “*We want to continue being religious; we just want a religion that lets us do whatever we want to do.*”

This attitude is the theme of the final five chapters.

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

~ *Judges 17:6*

We read that sentence 4 times in these final chapters (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). By the time we get to the end of Judges, these people had rejected any form of spiritual authority over their lives, and everyone simply did what was right in his own eyes.

How many of you have seen the Disney movie, “Frozen”? That’s probably been the most-watched movie in the Knoop house over the past couple years. It’s a movie about a snow queen named Elsa who spent her life concealing the fact that she had magical powers to freeze everything around her. The most emotional moment in the movie comes when Queen Elsa is singing about her desire to be free from all the rules her parents had imposed on her as a child so that she could do whatever she wanted to do with her magical abilities. The movie builds to this moment when she sings,

*“It’s time to see what I can do,
to test the limits and break through [the limits].
No right, no wrong, no rules for me.
I’m free. Let it go...”*

Did you know that the people in Judges were singing that song long before Elsa ever came along.

“No right. No wrong. No rules. No limits. We don’t need anyone telling us what to do or how to live. You do what feels right to you. I’ll do what feels right to me. And we will be **FREE** to live however we want...”

- Authority...*let it go*. Commands...*let it go*.
- Accountability...*let it go*. God...*let it go*.
- And let’s see what we can do...¹

These final chapters (17–21) are what it looks like when people do what is “*right in their own eyes*”. And without question, these chapters are some of the darkest and most disturbing chapters in the entire Bible.²

Some of you might be wondering why we are looking at something this dark on the Sunday before Christmas. Why aren’t we talking about angels and shepherds and wise men and the virgin birth? That’s a good question. I have two answers (a *logistical* answer and a *spiritual* answer):

¹ **Illustration:** Climbing the tree higher than I was allowed... “*No rules for me. I’m free.*” And my arm still bears the scars of my freedom. Sitting cross-legged on my bike going 20 mph down the hill... And my leg still bears the scars of my freedom. God’s people wanted to be free of God, and these final chapters (17–21) are the scars of their freedom.

² Stealing from your own family, Curses, Deception, Idol worship, Prostitution, Homosexuality, Child abuse, Spousal abuse, Gang rape, Human mutilation, Mass abduction of women, Civil war, Genocide.

1. **Logistically**: we are preaching expositionally through the book of Judges, and I had planned to be done with the book of Judges several weeks ago. So, I had planned on preaching a more “Christmasy” message today, but this series took longer than I anticipated, and so (in God’s sovereign timing) this is where we are today. And I am trusting that God has something in these final chapters that He wants for us to see before we turn our eyes to Christmas.
2. **Spiritually**: the darkness that we are going to see in these chapters is the reason that Jesus was born into our world. We will never understand the glory of Christmas (when God took on human flesh and walked among us) if we don’t first see how dark this world is without God. The darkness in Judges prepares our hearts for the light of Christmas.

PRAY

The book conclude with 4 stories of what this world looks like when people do what is “*right in their own eyes*” ...

1. A thief & his self-made religion (17)
2. A bully & his priest for hire (18)
3. A coward & his wicked brothers (19)
4. A civil war & the death of over 85,000 people (20–21)

We are going to look at the first story this morning, and then we’ll look at the final stories after Christmas.

STORY 1 || A THIEF & HIS SELF-MADE RELIGION

~ Read **17:1–13** ~

What do we see?

1. This story opens with a grown man name Micah returning the money that he **stole** from his own mother. And he returned it because he was afraid of the **curse** that she had spoken over the stolen money (17:1).
2. She responds by speaking a **blessing** over her thieving son in the covenant name of “***the LORD***” (17:2). Now, that might make her sound like a godly woman, but we are going to find out (in the next verse) that, although the name of the LORD is on her lips, His law is not in her heart.³

³ “*These people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips but have removed their hearts far from Me...*” (Isa 29:13; cf., Matt 15:7–9).

3. After Micah returns her silver, she tells him what she had supposedly planned on doing with the money: “I had wholly **dedicated** the silver from my hand **to the LORD** for my son, [for what purpose?] **to make a carved image and a molded image...**” (17:3).

Do you remember the very first commandments God gave to His people after rescuing them from Egypt?

“I am the **LORD** your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
You shall have no other gods before Me.
You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of *anything* that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;
you shall not bow down to them nor serve them...”
~ *Exodus 20:2–5*

Micah’s mother says that she has dedicated this money **to the LORD** ... for the purpose of making a carved image – which is directly against the heart of the LORD.⁴

You know a culture has lost their way when people are setting up idols in their lives – and doing it in the name of **the LORD**.

4. So, she has the local silversmith make a couple of **idols** for her son, and then Micah puts them in the **shrine** that he had in his house (17:4–5). *This is the first time that shrine is mentioned in the Bible.* A shrine was like a sanctuary, a place of worship. However, almost every time we hear of a shrine in the Bible, it’s a place of idol worship (e.g., 2 Kings 17:29; 23:19; Acts 19:24).⁵
5. And then he makes an **ephod** for himself (*which was something that only belonged to the High Priest*⁶). He makes even **more idols** for his shrine. And then he took one of his sons and made him a **priest** (17:5). *What’s this guy doing? **He’s building his own home-made religion!*** Clearly, he likes the idea of being religious, but he wants to do it his way and on his terms. And so he’s just making up everything as he goes along (*and **all of it is against the heart of God***).

⁴ We also glimpse deception in her words because she claims to have “wholly dedicated” the money, but then she only gives less than 1/5th of it (17:3–4).

⁵ There are at least two problems with this shrine: (1) he’s taking something that belonged to the gathered community and making it something that he does in isolation. He was removing the need to go with others to the communal spaces because he could just worship at home; (2) he has a designated space in his life that was devoted to the worship of idols.

⁶ Exodus 28:1–14; 29:5.

STORY: I recently met a lady who lives a couple streets down from my house. She was out walking her dog, and so we struck up a conversation. Eventually, she asked me what I did for a living, and I told her that I had the privilege of serving as a pastor. She then proceeded to tell me **how much we have in common** because she too is “*a very spiritual person*”.

- *Is she a member of a local church?* **No.**
- *Has she been baptized?* **No.**
- *Has she surrendered her life to Jesus Christ?* **No.**
- *Does she believe that the Bible is the living and active Word of Almighty God?* **No.**
- But she does appreciate “*spiritual experiences.*”

She and Micah have a lot in common. For them, it’s not about God or His Word or His ways; it’s about doing whatever seems “right in their own eyes”. The Proverbs has something to say about this kind of religion:

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”
~ *Proverbs 14:12*

6. Time goes by, and there comes a day when a **traveling Levite** decided to spend the night in Micah’s house [*hospitality like this was totally normal in that culture*] (17:7–8).⁷

In the course of conversation, Micah learns that this traveler is a Levite, and this information pricks his ears because he knows that priests were supposed to come from the tribe of Levi.⁸ So, Micah invites the traveler to stay there and be his priest. He offers him a little salary package, and the guy agrees (17:9–12).

Now, Micah has no authority whatsoever to make this man a priest, but when has God’s law ever stopped him before? He *consecrates* the Levite and then says, “*Now I know that **the LORD** will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!*” (17:13). He talked himself into believing that God would bless his self-made religion because *some* of the things he was doing had *something* to do with *some* of what God had said.

This is the kind of “religion” you get when you embrace a “**Let it Go**” worldview: no rules, no right, no wrong, no limits, no commandments, no expectations, and no accountability. We think that as long as we are doing some “*religiously things*”, we can just make the rest up as we go along.

⁷ We learn later that the Levite’s name is Jonathan (18:30).

⁸ Exodus 28:1–4.

This kind of “**Buffet Religion**” is just a rampant in our Western world today as it was in Israel in the time of the Judges. How often do we view God’s Word as a buffet line where we can take what we like and leave the rest:

- “God is love”.⁹
 - *Ooo, that sounds yummy. I’ll grab that.*
- “All things work together for good.”¹⁰
 - *I like that.*
- “And my God shall supply all your need.”¹¹
 - *Yes.*
- “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”¹²
 - *Lots of that.*

- “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”.¹³
 - *Nah...*
- “Confess your sin to one another.”
 - *Oh, that sounds terrible.*
 - *Plus, my plate is already full anyway...*

And we effectively make our own religion. We fill our spiritual plate with all of the fun things and pass over all of the hard things.¹⁴ We live in one of the most entertainment-driven cultures in the history of the world, and many people have decided that also want an entertainment-driven religion.

- Church life should be comfortable & convenient.
- Our pastor should be entertaining & his sermons should be short.
- Ministry should require minimal time & effort.
- God should be fun.¹⁵

We like the idea of having some sort of “spiritual experience” in our lives, just so long as it doesn’t require too much of us and so long as we remain **totally** in control. And when we can’t find something that caters to all of our personal wants, we blame the church and then go make up our own thing.

⁹ 1 John 4:7.

¹⁰ Romans 8:28.

¹¹ Philippians 4:19

¹² Philippians 4:13

¹³ Matthew 16:24–25.

¹⁴ Like the **Burger King moto**: “*Have it your way.*”

¹⁵ Guess how many times the word “fun” shows up in your Bible. *None!* God’s grand plan for creating this universe was not for you to have *fun*. God’s plan for creating this world (and for creating you) was for you to **know** Him. To **love** Him. To be in **relationship** with Him. To **serve** Him. To **surrender** your life to Him. To **obey** His Word. To **glorify** Him. And to spend **eternity** with Him. To live in the presence of God (now) and experience a kind of happiness that is infinitely better than fun (Psa 16:11).

But here's the thing about this kind of "*designer religion*." When your faith is something that you created, it's also something that you can lose. When the god that you serve is a god of your own making, it is also a god that this world can steal away from you.

And that's the story in **chapter 18**.

Five spies (**18:2**) and 600 soldiers (**18:11**) from the tribe of Dan are in the mountains of Ephraim looking for somewhere to live, and they end up at Micah's house (**18:13**). They discover his shrine (which is full of idols & religious things), and they decide to take everything...

READ **Judges 18:15–20**

Not only did they take all of Micah's idols (**18:18**), but they also took Micah's priest by giving him an even better deal (**18:19**) – which just shows what kind of priest he was. From the very beginning, he had only been serving as a priest for the money, and now he's being offered a way bigger congregation – and it made his heart glad (**18:20**).

How does Micah respond?

So he said,
"You have taken away my gods which I made..."
~ *Judges 18:24*

Micah lost his religion. He lost the substance of his faith. The world took it from him, and there was nothing he could do about it.

- He did what was "right in his own eyes," and (in the end) he lost everything.
- He stored up for himself treasures on earth "*where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal*" (Matt 6:19).
 - And that's exactly what happened to his religious treasures: the thieves broke in and stole it.

APPLICATION

At Christmastime, we celebrate the coming [advent] of Jesus. So, **why** did Jesus come?

"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.
I have come [Advent, Christmas] that they may have life,
and that they may have it more abundantly."
~ *John 10:10*

The book of Judges shows us what life is like when there is no King in our life and when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Jesus came to show us what life is like when God is your King and your treasure – and when you do what is right according to what His Word says.¹⁶

So, the question is: are there areas in your life where you are pushing against the Word of God so that you can do what feels good to you? Are you **handcrafting** your own **personal religion** with a little bit of **Hollywood**, a little bit of **TikTok**, a little bit of **ESPN**, a little bit of **culture**, a little bit of **tradition**, a little bit of **past experiences**, a little bit of **personal preferences**, but then feeling like God will bless it because you are also adding a little bit of Bible and a little bit of church?

The glory of **Advent** is that Jesus came to offer you something so much better than your man-made religion.

He came so that you might have something infinitely better than the trinkets of religion. He came to give you life. Life **abundant**. Not “*life fun*” – but “***life abundant***”. He came so that you might know a kind of happiness & joy that this world can never take away. He came to give you God.

1. If you are a child of God (*through faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior*), and God’s Word is convicting you of an area in your life where you have closed your eyes to His Word and are doing “what is right in your own eyes” instead... if that’s you, God’s Word calls you to **confess** this to God with the promise that He will **forgive** you (1 John 1:9). Confess this sin, and then ask for grace and strength and courage to get rid of that idol in your life. God has something so much better for you than whatever shrine you have set up in your own heart. Confess. Repent. And then by faith, receive the abundant life that Jesus came to give you as a gift.
2. If you are not a child of God this morning (*if you have never surrendered your life to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior*), **the good news of Christmas is for you!** Jesus came to give you a life that you will never find on your own. He came to fill your heart with a purpose and a happiness that you will never find in the things of earth. One day, your **health** will be **taken** from you. One day, you will be **separated** from your **money**. One day, your **strength** will be **gone**. One day, all of your **loved ones** will **leave you**. And in the end, you will lose even your life. But Jesus came to give you a life and a hope and a joy and a future and a reward that will never be stolen, never be taken away, never be lost, and that will never die. And He is calling you to receive that gift today. Right now.

¹⁶ **North Center’s Mission Statement**: *We exist to treasure God together...*

If that's you, I invite you to pray this prayer with me in the depths of your own heart:

God,

I come to you right now in the Name of Jesus.

I confess that I am a sinner. I've been living my own way and doing my own thing.

Oh God, Forgive me.

Jesus, I believe that You died for all of my sins.

And I believe that You rose from dead.

In this moment, I trust you as the Lord and Savior of my life.

Help me to live for you from this day forward.

I ask this in the Name of Jesus.

Amen