

March 26, 2017
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Judges 17:1-13.

1. How are Micah and his mother like “Christian” people you know?
2. Can you think of any examples of “Christian” people practicing the very thing God forbids, but not being able to see it as wrong?
3. Give some examples of error similar to Micah ordaining his son and then the Levite to serve as priests.
4. Is it possible for a pastor to become so ingratiated to individuals that he could conveniently “overlook” their sins?
5. How do we guard against falling into traditions that are in conflict with God’s Word?

“RIGHT IN YOUR OWN EYES” IS A FAULTY STANDARD
Judges 17:1-13

Maybe the most popular text book for philosophy classes in college at this point is *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth* by Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn. Like most of the philosophy text books before it, Louis and Lewis present an historical study of the efforts of philosopher’s past and present to discover or define truth. Often it is an exercise in futility. We who have endured philosophy classes in

college tend to agree with the frustration Pilate expressed when he retorted to Jesus, “What is truth?”

A typical dictionary definition of truth says that it is the quality or state of being true. Well now that’s helpful, isn’t it? Do you feel the need for more information? Read on in the dictionary and discover that truth is “that which is in accordance with fact or reality, or it is a belief that is accepted as true.” Okay, but who determines the facts? What if someone is able to convince the majority of people that a non-reality is actually true? When the majority believe the lie, does it somehow become the truth?

Actually “truth” was put on trial about 2,000 years ago by wicked men who rejected truth, denied truth, and refused to be governed by truth. Jesus said, “I am the truth” (John 14:6). John reminded us that God gave the law through Moses but that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Jesus promised that we can know the truth and that the truth will set us free (John 8:32). He prayed that God the Father would sanctify us disciples in truth, because His Word is truth (John 17:17). Jesus taught that the Heavenly Father who sent Him is true and that He simply taught the truth He heard from the Father (John 8:26). No wonder He prayed, “*And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*” (John 17:3).

All of this leads us to the conclusion that God is true, God is the source of truth, God has given us the truth in the Bible, and to reject the Word of God is to reject the God of truth. If people reject the only valid source of truth, how can they pursue truth? What could possibly be the ultimate standard of truth for people if they are at odds with God? The answer to that question is demonstrated for us daily. The teachers in High Schools, colleges, and universities pretty much agree as they teach their impressionable young people that truth is whatever they decide it means for them. They conclude there is no absolute truth, that no real standard for truth exists. What kind of a society will that conclusion build? Look around you and see.

That was the environment of the judges’ period in Israel. In the text before us, we read that everyone did what was right in his own eyes (v.6). Common sense tells us that attitude is going to lead to conflict, disagreements, and proliferation of sin. “Proliferation of sin” you say? “What makes you think you have the right to call what I do

sin?” That is the attitude that results when I am allowed to decide what is true. It was a difficult time in Israel when God’s people rejected God’s truth. The rest of the information included in this book we call the Judges, reveals how unstable a culture is when it refuses to listen to and obey God’s truth. You and I would not want to live there. “Right in your own eyes” is a faulty standard of truth. The text before us gives two examples of the foolishness that results from that standard.

“Let’s Use God’s Blessing to Make an Idol” (vv.1-6).

In an odd culture, we discover a mother was happy her son stole her money (vv.1-3). That really does seem to be the confused state of things in this time of Israel’s history. This guy named Micah confessed that he stole his mother’s money. *There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, “The 1,100 pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it”* (vv.1-2a).

The hill country of Ephraim was in the center of the people group who the writer of Judges often pictured as proud and incorrigible. All through that period of time, these people always seemed to push themselves to the forefront and put everyone else down. This event probably took place near the end of the period of the judges. It seems that this even took place sometime around the end of Eli’s reign as priest. Maybe the Philistines already had taken the ark of the covenant in battle. If so, Samuel was alive and maybe an adult by now.

The proper fear and knowledge of Yahweh seems to be something distant with only a thin veneer of worship of the true God. In that setting, an otherwise insignificant man stole a large amount of money from his mother. The text reveals that he stole 1,100 pieces of silver which is equivalent to 110 average annual wages (average annual wage being ten shekels of silver). We will notice at the end of this story, this same Micah employed a priest for ten pieces of silver annually.

Mom wasn’t too happy about that and issued a meaningful curse upon the culprit, not knowing it was her own son. The grown boy

heard the woman utter a curse on the thief, and it seems to have impacted him. Likely out of fear for the curse, not out of respect for the mother, he confessed and repented. And all the modern quasi-Christian people say, “Praise the Lord that the man was convicted of sin and confessed.” Okay, confession is a good thing. But before we get swept away in a revival, let’s look at the bigger picture.

Micah’s mother was so thankful that her son confessed his sin and returned the money that she decided to make an idol. What? *And his mother said, “Blessed be my son by the LORD.” And he restored the 1,100 pieces of silver to his mother. And 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”* (vv.2b-3).

These words convey the utter confusion of the day. Instead of reprimanding the son for his theft, dear old Mom changed her curse to a blessing. She asked for Yahweh’s blessing on the confessed thief. That she offered Yahweh’s blessing indicates that she had some understanding, some familiarity with the true God. But if she really knew God, why did she want to make an idol? Was her knowledge of God just an old tradition that held no meaning, no relationship for her? Well, she must have had some kind of relationship with the true God because she dedicated the silver to Him! Yes, but to what end?

She dedicated the silver to God in order to make a carved image and a silver image. This was so obviously in conflict with the law, the statutes of the true God. Commandment number two is pretty clear: *You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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* (Exodus 20:4). God even attached a curse to the breaching of this command. *Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret. And all the people shall answer and say, “Amen”* (Deuteronomy 27:15). So what part of “no carved images” did they not understand?

This scenario reminds us that rejection of God’s truth always ends up in confusion. The same principle applies in our day. We live in a culture that rejected the authority and inerrancy of the Bible a long time ago. Still people know something about God, something about the Bible, something about Christianity. But the result of

talking about God-stuff apart from the authority of His Word is utter confusion. That confusion is evidenced by George Barna's latest research that revealed when professing Christians do try to share the good news of the gospel, they share all kinds of unbiblical error. They tell people that eternal security is secure only in good works we do. They say that there are various means to receive God's grace. They say that God allows for the evolution of humans from other animals.

That rejection of God's truth resulting in confusion is also why "church" and "worship" today smacks of the humanism. God's blessing to the confused mind is all about making the creature comfortable in his or her sin. Conviction of sin, confession of sin, humble contrition of heart as we bow before the Majestic Creator isn't even considered. We are left to wonder if the people who are busily engaged in talking about and doing God-kind of stuff that contradicts the Bible have ever read the Bible. According to current surveys, the answer is a resounding, "Almost no professing Christians have read through the Bible, and very few of them read the Bible at all."

In that kind of culture, the mother in our story created an idol and her son Micah kept it at home. *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 (v.4).* Having dedicated the 1,100 pieces of silver to Yahweh to make an image, she actually delivered only 200 pieces to the silversmith. Her decision sounds a bit like the way the average Christians dedicates money to the Lord only to withhold large sums of the commitment regularly. That demands a good rule of thumb for church leaders: Never incur a debt for a new building based on pledges.

Micah kept the image, the idol the silversmith made. Why? What did he plan to do with it? Maybe Micah was already engaged in idolatry. That seems to be the picture as this new idol of Micah's took on a life of it's own. He had created his own religion. *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 (v.5).* That *the man Micah had a shrine* reveals that he already had a house dedicated to his gods. He had already created his own "house of the Lord." I can

see a man like that stealing his mother's silver and then confessing because he was afraid of her curse.

In keeping with the creation of his own religion, Micah made an ephod. This was no doubt some kind of copy of the ephod God ordered Moses to make. That ephod was a particular kind of garment or apron that the high priests who were born in Aaron's lineage would wear as they served at the altar. Obviously Micah's ephod was not of the same construction. Nor did it serve the same purpose. This one would have been more like Gideon's ephod that became an object of worship, part of Gideon's manmade religion, a stumbling block to the people, a replacement of God.

Along with the ephod, Micah made other household gods to complement his manmade religion. As in Gideon's case, Micah probably draped the ephod over the idol he made. All this wonderful shrine with its idols and accouterments was in direct disobedience to God's instruction.

And if Micah had his own gods, his own ephod, his own religion, he was going to need his own priest. To that end, Micah ordained one of his sons to be priest. God's rule was that His people could only have priests from the family of Aaron, which was the Levites. Yeah, but that was so old school. Maybe Micah didn't know where to find a Levite born in Aaron's line. What could those guys do that his son couldn't do? The picture reminds us of the principle that one sin leads to another, which leads to another, which leads to chaos. When old-timers warn us of getting on the slippery slide, it is often because they have watched the sad scenario too many times. Typically when people, churches, or cultures get on the slippery slide, they don't ride it again because it leads to oblivion for their chosen expressions of truth.

So the folly of me determining what constitutes truth for me. That was the norm in Micah's day. *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (v.6).* The last five chapters of Judges are different from the previous sixteen chapters. Now the cycle of sin, oppression, repentance, cry for help, raised up deliverer, and repeat is gone. Now there is no mention of oppression by outside enemies. Now the problem is the slow rot of the culture from within. Now the people had no understanding that they had breached God's truth and, therefore, no concern to return to

God's truth. Now everyone just did what was right in his own eyes and fought and argued with everyone else who disagreed. The last five chapters picture a depraved society that moves from one moral mess to the next. It is a very accurate picture of the American culture in which we live.

Oh, almost as an aside, we read that *there was no king in Israel*. Is this to propose that a real king, a good king would have stopped such nonsense? If so, it was a bad proposal. In reality, even Israel's kings would eventually follow Micah's foolish ways of idolatry. As Israel's history would prove, it was not that the people needed a king. The timing of this statement is significant in that it falls just shortly before Israel chose Saul as their first king. God led His people through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons for about 300 years. God grew His people into a nation for 400 years in Egyptian bondage. God led His people through Moses, Joshua, and the Judges for about 400 years. Then God gave them kings to lead them for about 450 from King Saul to King Zedekiah. And the people proved that kings could not bring them lasting peace.

What the people needed was King Jesus. After 400 years of silence (no messages through the prophets), God sent King Jesus and His people rejected Him. And every modern culture proves the same truth. What we need is to be led by King Jesus. Instead of doing what we think is right, we need to do what King Jesus teaches is right. Obviously our culture does not agree. But we as individuals must stay focused on the Truth, His person, His teaching regardless of the direction our world and our peers choose to go.

Preacher for Sale. Like New (vv.7-13).

Now the scene shifts ahead a few months maybe. Micah had his nice, manmade religion running quite well, when suddenly a great opportunity appeared. There was a Levite without a job. He was from a significant clan south of Ephraim. *Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there (v.7).*

We need to stop here and consider that God's plan did not provide inheritance for the sons of Levi because the men from that tribe were dedicated to serving Him. Therefore, God prescribed for

the Levites to have several cities scattered throughout the land where they were to live and farm the surrounding fields. God's law required: *The cities that you give to the Levites shall be the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit the manslayer to flee, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities. All the cities that you give to the Levites shall be forty-eight, with their pasturelands (Numbers 35:6-7).*

Joshua did exactly as God's law prescribed and allotted those cities when Israel conquered the Promised Land nearly 300 years prior to this event. Bethlehem was not one of those Levitical cities. That this relative of Moses (Judges 18:30) was sojourning in a city that was not intended for Levites is not surprising in light of the lack of obedience to God. He was a young fellow, probably not yet age 30, the age when Levites began service. Also, there is some question also about whether this man was a Levite or a Judahite. Probably this identification intentionally reveals the mixed up condition of the nation at the time. No doubt there had been a mixed marriage between someone from the tribe of Levi and someone from the tribe of Judah. All of which leaves the question of whether this young man was qualified to serve as a priest.

Questions or not, the fellow went looking for work. *And 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 (v.8).* We should not be shocked that the Levite was a sojourner. God's rule was that all Levites were sojourners since they did not inherit land. However, if they left their city to serve God elsewhere, they were supposed to go to the place God chose for central worship which was Jerusalem (Deut. 18:6). Instead of moving five miles up the road to Jerusalem, this young Levite traveled to the hill country of Ephraim, to the center of the tribe of people who evidenced pride and arrogance.

Verses seven and eight reveal several ways in which God's people, doing what was right in their own eyes, breached God's rules. Sometimes we get the idea that they were clueless about God's law. At other times they seem to appeal to God's rules (like it is necessary to have a priest from the tribe of Levi to minister in God's things). The picture is so like our own culture where there is no shortage of religion, no shortage of Baptist churches, but there is a dearth of true

knowledge of God and His Word. Ask the average church attender to list and explain the attributes of God revealed in the Bible and you will get trite responses like, “He is cool, awesome, and hip.” At best folks might remember that God is loving, forgiving, mighty or powerful. Those explanations defy intimate knowledge of the God of the Bible.

The Levite just kind of showed up and Micah decided to buy the minister. *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” (v.9).* Having wandered without purpose to Micah’s house, the young Levite happened upon a gold mine. It is interesting that when Micah asked where he was from, the guy pointed out first what he aspired to do. The response, “I am a Levite of Bethlehem” should have generated questions like, “Why were you living there since it is not a Levitical city?” and “What are you doing here?” But if you don’t know God’s law or don’t care what God’s law says, those questions are not relevant.

As soon as Micah learned that this young fellow was a Levite, he made him an offer he couldn’t 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 (v.10).* The request was for a spiritual leader for Micah’s manmade personal religion. Micah’s shrine where he kept his household gods, idols, and ephod was literally a cult. The title “young man” (v.7) identifies the man as not yet thirty and not old enough to serve as a priest. But when you have rejected God and His truth, you can do religion anyway you choose without sweating the details.

Because Micah paid for the man’s upkeep, he now owned his own preacher. When you own the preacher, you can expect him to say nice things to you and about you. In one of the churches my father pastored, there was an older retired fellow who would sometimes needle Dad about stepping on his toes. One particular Sunday, as the man was leaving the service, he stopped to shake Dad’s hand and said, “Young fellow, I would like to remind you that I pay your salary.” I guess Dad had about enough of that and retorted, “And Lee, let me remind you that every time I send in my taxes, I pay your salary.”

Rejecting God’s plan will eventually lead to an untruthful conclusion (vv.11-13). Micah made the offer, the Levite accepted it and Micah took it upon himself to ordain a priest. *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 (vv.11-12).*

The Levite was content to dwell. Everything was beautiful in its own way. No doubt the people involved in this little utopia would tell us not to rock the boat, and not to cause waves. So, are we supposed to just let people go on claiming to be God’s people when they breach His rules all the time? Okay, maybe they didn’t do things exactly right, but they had such a wonderful relationship going on. Did they really? Notice that in the original offer (v.10), Micah requested the Levite to be a father and a priest to him. The father is one who guides and directs and sometimes corrects. The priest was supposed to represent God to the people and the people to God.

Now, once he owned the Levite, Micah decided he was like a son not a father. The son obeys the father. The father rules over the son. So, Micah the father would feel quite comfortable telling the priest what to do. This relationship was standing on its head as much as many churches scattered across America in which the people and church leaders have been in the church for three generations and the pastor is the new guy— every three years! When we hear someone in the church speak about the pastor saying, “We were here before he came and we will be here after he leaves” that is a religion in which everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes. That is not the Body of Christ submitting to their Head Jesus Christ.

Not surprisingly, an errant opinion of truth led to a wrong conclusion. *Then Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest” (v.13).* We can understand how human wisdom would come to that conclusion. But the idea that if you own your own priest, God is required to bless you is found nowhere in Scripture. In fact, as we consider the rest of the story, we will be quick to conclude that this man counted his chickens before they hatched. He would have been much wiser to follow James’ advice to live every day according to God’s will. God taught us through James, *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and*

make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil (James 4:13-16).

We have a choice. We can live according to the will of God as it is revealed in Scripture, or we can live according to what is right in our own eyes. When we exalt ourselves above God, like Satan did, we will dismiss any Bible principles that we find inconvenient. When you find yourself arguing that you should be permitted to do something or not do something because the Bible does not address that matter specifically, you might want to question your motives. It is one thing to abandon an old tradition because it is neither useful nor edifying. It is something else to abandon the old ways because we find them inconvenient, even though they are edifying. Doing what we think is right while ignoring what God says is right is a sign that we have broken fellowship with God.