

Why Our Children Leave the Church

Judges 2:6-20

Judges

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Sunday, September 22, 2013, 5pm at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois

Outline:


If you want to lose your children, then...

- I. Don't take idolatry in your own life seriously (2:6-9).
- II. Forget to live out the Gospel with your children (2:10).
- III. Ignore your responsibility to disciple your children (2:11-13).
- IV. Don't teach your children to respond to God's chastening love (2:14-23).

“Idols never satisfy, but always demand increasingly more, constantly adding to the burdens of our lives and in the end giving nothing of lasting value.”¹

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

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 Open your Bible to **Judges 2:6-3:6**. We are continuing in a series the book of Judges entitled, “Standing Strong in a Pluralistic Culture.” This evening we are looking a message entitled: “Why Our Children Leave the Church.”²

Judges chapter 2:6 through 3:6 is a second introduction to the book of Judges, which is best read parallel to 1:1 – 2:5.

Idols are All Around Us

Idols are all around us. They are in the land. And if they are not destroyed, they will be adopted. They will also destroy our children.

Why Children Leave the Church

A new study from LifeWay Research³ reveals that more than two-thirds of young adults who attend a Protestant church for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22. Some drop out forever. Why?

Life changes or life situations cause young people to leave the church. In fact, 97 percent of dropouts list one or more specific life-change issues as a reason they left church. These numbers do not add up to 100 because those surveyed could give more than one answer. So lets hear some of the reason young people gave for leaving church.

¹ Richard D. Phillips. *Holding Hands and Holding Hearts* (P&R, 2006), 62

² A significant part of the material in this message is directly from Timothy Keller, *Judges For You* (God's Word For You) The Good Book Company.

³ Accessed Sept. 2013. <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church>

1. "I simply wanted a break from church" (27 percent).
2. "I moved to college and stopped attending church" (25 percent)
3. "work responsibilities prevented me from attending" (23 percent).
4. "moved too far away from the church to continue attending" (22 percent) and, it can be assumed, did not find a closer church.
5. "church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical" (26 percent).
6. Another 20 percent "didn't feel connected to the people in my church."
7. "I disagreed with the church's stance on political or social issues" (18 percent)
8. "I was only going to church to please others" (17 percent).

Why Kids Stay in Church after Age 18

According to the same survey, the two most frequent reasons young people stay in church relate to the investment of the church in the young people:

1. "Church was a vital part of my relationship with God" (65 percent)
2. "I wanted the church to help guide my decisions in everyday life" (58 percent).
3. Half of those surveyed said: "I felt that church was helping me" to grow in my relationship with Christ (50 percent).
4. Forty-two percent remained in church because they were "committed to the purpose and work of the church."

Ed Stetzer, a Vice-President at LifeWay, the publishing arm of the SBC, said: "The vitality and everyday relevance these young people experienced in church is a stark contrast to church dropouts who wanted a break from church and felt unconnected."

In essence, children drop out because they are not connected to the vitality of the church family. As parents relating to our children, our living together for the Gospel means we live in humble relation to our children not only as children but as our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

If you want to lose your children, then...

I. Don't take idolatry in your own life seriously (2:6-9).

A Half-Hearted Generation

The second introduction, like the first one, begins with Joshua, the great yardstick for the book of Judges. Judges 2:6, "When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. 7 And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel."

Joshua's was a life well lived. He was supremely "the servant of the Lord" (v 8). And, unlike every leader of Israel from Joseph to Moses, he had the privilege of dying and being buried "in the land of his inheritance" (v 9). But there is something troubling in these verses. Chapter 1 has already shown that the settling of Israel's tribes, and their service of the Lord, was done half-heartedly and incompletely.

A Stern Warning

Look back at **Joshua 24:19-20**. Joshua himself had warned these people: “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 20 If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good. 23 He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel” (Joshua 24:19-20, 23).

If this imperfect, flawed generation, clearly already struggling with “foreign gods that are among you” and “not able to serve the Lord,” can be described in positive terms in Judges 2:6-9, it begs the question: What would a truly idolatrous generation look like? The answer is not long in coming... What does a half-hearted generation produce? This is truly frightening.

Do you hear Joshua? Idols are dangerous! Stay away from them! But it is hard, because they are subtle and alluring. Dean R. Ulrich, in his book “From Famine to Fullness” helpfully uncovers the subtle idolatry of our own hearts:

We judge God’s love and faithfulness by how many of our desires have been met. When our desires do not materialize, our words are telling. Angry, accusing words reveal the idols in our hearts – so do selfish prayers couched in pious and deferential language. Too often, it is not God’s will that we want, but our will [and our idols] made possible by God.⁴

If you want to lose your children, then...

II. Forget to **live out** the Gospel with your children (2:10).

Forgetting the Gospel

Verses 10-11 describe a rebellion. It had two stages. First, we read some sad and shocking news about the next generation in **Judges 2:10**: “And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.” The word “know” probably does not mean that they did not know about the Exodus, the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan, and the walls of Jericho falling, but rather that the saving acts of God were no longer precious or central to them. They had not learned to revere and rejoice in what God had done. In other words, they had forgotten the “gospel” that they were saved from slavery in Egypt and brought into the Promised Land by the gracious, mighty acts of God. Put simply, they forgot.

That Which is Truly Evil

Second, and as a result of forgetting the gospel, “the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals” (2:11). This is an interesting parallel. What does God say is evil? **Turning to love and serve idols, mini-gods, non-gods.** This is a very different definition of “doing evil” than the one we usually use! It is also much more challenging to us.

The Word “Baal”

The word “Baal” is a Canaanite word for “lord.” This new generation forget all about the Lord and instead serve mini-lords. It is striking that this happens within a generation. Their

⁴ From Famine to Fullness, P&R Publishing, 2007, p. 29. Used by Permission.

parents, though flawed and sometimes half-hearted, had faith—they “served the Lord.” The children “served the mini-lords.”

Idols are like that. **Edward Welch** says it this way, “Either we will love and serve God, or we will love and serve our idols. Idols exist in our lives because we love them and invite them in. But once idols find a home, they are unruly and resist leaving. In fact, they change from being the servants of our desires to being our masters.”⁵

Blaise Pascal said, “There is nothing so abominable in the eyes of God and of men as idolatry, whereby men render to the creature that honor which is due only to the Creator.”

If you want to lose your children, then...

III. Ignore your responsibility to disciple your children (2:11-13).

Who is Responsible: Parents or Children?

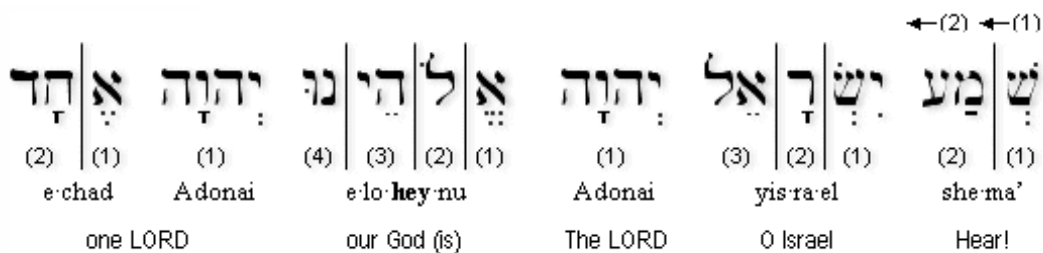
Who is responsible? The parents or the children? It is always impossible to lay blame neatly when one generation fails to pass its faith on to the next one. Did the first generation fail to reach out, or did the second generation just harden their hearts? The answer is usually **both**. Mistakes made by a Christian generation are often magnified in the next, especially in one that may say they know the Lord but are merely nominal (name only) Christians. Commitment is replaced by complacency and then by compromise.

The Halfway Covenant in New England

Judges 2 is by no means the last or only time this has happened in human history. Another interesting example is in early New England. Nearly all the first settlers of 1620–1640 were true, biblical, born again Christians. But by 1662, the first generation realized that many of their children and grand-children were only shallow, nominal believers. They had to institute the “halfway Covenant,” allowing people to vote in the church who were only baptized as infants, but who as adults were not church members. Of course all that changed 80 years later when Jonathan Edwards got rid of the half-way covenant during the Great Awakening. He also got kicked out of his church!

How Can We Make a Difference?

How then, can we be sure we don’t lose the next generation? To understand we need to go back to the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This is what the Jews pray daily to this day. It is called the Shema. It’s found in Deut. 6:4. It reads: “Shema Yisrael, YHWH, Eloheynu, YHWH echad!”



⁵ Edward T. Welch. *Blame in on the Brain* (P&R Publishing, 1998), 194.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” He continues in Deuteronomy 6:5–9, “5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

These verses tell us what needs to be done to pass our faith on: We ourselves must love God whole-heartedly. We are to have these commandments on our hearts (v 6). That means that we are not hypocritical or inconsistent in our behavior. The commandments are not only kept mechanically or partially. Rather, God has an effect on all of us, through and through.

We are to apply and reflect on the gospel practically, not only academically or abstractly. We think of the wonderful passage in **Deuteronomy 6:7**, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” The LORD is not here promoting regular family lectures! The references to “sit ... walk along ... lie down and ... get up” refer to routine, concrete daily life. Instruction in God’s truth then is not to be so much a series of lectures and classes. Rather, we are to “impress” and mold truths about God by showing how God relates to daily, concrete living. This is a call to be wise and thoughtful about how the Gospel affects every detail of our lives.

More than Beliefs and Behavior

We are not only to speak of **beliefs** and **behavior** but of **our personal experience of God**. We are to be open about our own struggles to grow. We are to be transparent about how repentance works in our lives. We are not to be formal and impersonal in the expressions of our faith. In summary, we must be consistent in behavior, careful about the world, and warmly personal in our faith. This is not easy! Most Christians rely on institutions and formal instruction to “pass on the faith.” We are all called to personal discipleship of one another so that we might “pass it on.”

We might be tempted to think that if we instruct our children in true doctrine, shelter them from immoral behavior and involve them in church and religious organizations, then we have done all we can. But youth are turned off not only by bad examples, but also by parents who cannot be open about their own failures and the struggles of the deepest parts of their spiritual lives.

In Judges 2, we are not told exactly what the first generation of believers did with their children. **Judges 2:10** is key, however. “The next generation did not know the Lord,” relationally and personally. This is the very outcome that Deuteronomy 6 was written to avoid. Deuteronomy 6 is not a “technique” that guarantees that someone’s children will be believers, because their own wills and choices play a large role. However, when a whole generation turns away, we have to expect that the parents have failed to model real faith and disciple their children.

The Repeated Cycle

Judges 2:10-13 are the first stage in the cycle that repeats itself in Israel’s history throughout Judges, in the time between Joshua’s death and God giving his people a king. The people rebel. They forsake the Lord, the God their fathers had worshiped and who had rescued them as he had

promised; and they decide to become like the people who did not know anything of the Lord, and to worship their gods (v 12).

Judges 2:11-13, “And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. 12 And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. 13 They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.”

If you want to lose your children, then...

IV. Don't teach your children to respond to God's chastening love (2:14-23).

God's Response

How does God respond to idolatry? Judges 2:14a, “So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.”

God is angry when people in his world set other things in his place. His anger is not against a particular people group or type (here, he is angry with his own people).

Anger is Not Always the Opposite of Love

Anger is not always the opposite of love; it can be the outworking of it. God here is like a parent whose child has completely rejected them. So, as a result of Israel's rebellion and God's anger, there is oppression by enemies:

Judges 2:14-15, “So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. 15 Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm [to defeat them], as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them.”

Don't miss the irony here: these enemies are the very people whose gods Israel has chosen to serve. If there were ever a historical picture of the truth that idolatry leads to slavery, this is it. Next follows repentance (2:15c): “And they were in terrible distress.” As we'll see, this distress caused the people to cry out to the Lord (3:9). And so finally, God “raised up judges, who saved them” (2:16). The Lord sent his salvation through a chosen leader, who liberated the people from their slave-masters and returned the land to peace (v 18).

But the judge's leadership was not heeded in any kind of lasting way—“they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way [of obedience]” (v 17).

The Downward Spiral

And, as we'll see, this cycle was in fact a downward spiral—Judges 2:18-19, “Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. 19 But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways” (v 19). The thorns dug deeper and deeper; the snares pulled Israel more and more tightly. We will

see as Judges progresses that the rebellion becomes **worse**, the oppression **heavier**, the repentance **less heartfelt**, the judges themselves more flawed, and the salvation and “revivals” they bring **weaker**. It is a reminder, of course, that we need something better than a human judge; something more permanent than a leader who dies; something that can deliver the soul, as well as the body. We will not find such a rescuer in the book of Judges!

So we are left with this dismal conclusion in Judges 2:20-23, “So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he said, “Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, 21 I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, 22 in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not.” 23 So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.”

The Judges Cycle in Your Life

How have you seen the “Judges cycle” in your own Christian life? How does the reality of your sin and of God’s grace prompt you to praise and thank him today? Isn’t God patient, gracious, and forbearing with us?! What a joy!

Application & Conclusion

As we conclude, let me ask you a few questions. We’ve had two deaths in the families of our congregation in two weeks. Life is a vapor. In light of tonight’s study, what might be your spiritual epitaph? What are your children (if you have them) going to say at your funeral?

In what ways are you calling out the young people of this church to be a “servant of the Lord”? We can do that as a parent by humbling ourselves and living out our faith together. Not bossing anyone around, but humbling serving Christ together.

If you are a parent: How are you passing your faith on to your children? What has encouraged you and what has challenged you today? [Get ideas from the congregation]

If you’re not a parent with children living at home: How are you praying for and sharing your faith with younger generations in your church? [Get thoughts from the congregation]