

Week 19 - Israel's Internalized Idolatry - Judges 17:1-13

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 12:1-8; Joshua 18:1

Introduction

With the completion of the Samson narrative in Judges 16, we reached the end of the book's largest section, and the end of the judge cycles that consumed our attention for the past 16 weeks.

And from the first verse of Judges 17, you sense a significant change akin to walking along a paved road that turns to gravel.

Even if you were engaged in your own thoughts and didn't see the change in the road surface, your feet tell you that things are suddenly different as we read the words, "There was a man of the hill country..."

In the five remaining chapters, there will be no more overt declarations of Israel's apostasy, no relating how God sent oppression or how the people cried out in pain to God, and no raising up of a deliverer.

Speaking of those deliverers, we've spent a good deal of time looking at how they were increasingly found to be wanting, both morally and spiritually.

From the ideal Othniel to the self-centered Samson, they have progressively demonstrated an increasing disposition to take on the attitudes and actions of the Canaanites surrounding them.

However, our author hasn't been interested in sharing the details of the lives of the common, ordinary Israelites, only saying that they repeatedly "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord."

But that's all about to change as the focus of the remainder of the book will be on the condition of the people of Israel at large in the days of the judges.

And the overall picture we will see in these closing chapters is the confusion of a depraved people as their problem is shown to stem from a kind of internal spiritual cancer rather than an external enemy oppressor.

I'm going to introduce a term this morning that might be a new one for some of you, so let's begin by defining it.

The word is "syncretism."

And according to our trusty Webster's 1913 Dictionary, syncretism is the "attempted union of principles [that are] irreconcilably at variance with each other."

In plain English, syncretism is trying to combine things that don't belong together.

And in the case before us, it refers specifically to adding elements of idol worship to the worship of Yahweh.

That will prove to be a key concept in understanding our text today.

Chapters 17-18 tell one continuous story that begins with the corruption of a single household and leads to the corruption of a tribe.

We will be looking at the first half of the story today as we find it in chapter 17.

So, if you haven't done so already, let me encourage you to open your Bible to Judges 17 as we begin.

I. The corruption of a household

The man we are introduced to in verse 1 [**Judges 17:1**] is named Micah, and we are told he lived in the hill country of Ephraim

Micah is the short form of an orthodox name that honors Yahweh and means "Who is like Yahweh?"

Names of this type typically reflected the faith of the one who named the person, so we can rightly assume that Micah's parents were devotees of Yahweh who considered Yahweh to be supreme - certainly when compared to Canaanite gods.

But what we read about this family in the following verses is troubling.

It seems that Micah had stolen 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother.

As we saw last week in the account of Samson and Delilah, 1,100 shekels was a considerable amount of money, so we can deduce that Micah's mother must have been quite wealthy.

When she realized the silver was missing, she pronounced a curse on whoever had taken it - no doubt calling for some horrible fate to befall the guilty party - and it seems Micah overheard her.

So, afraid of the curse, Micah confesses his guilt and returns the silver he had taken.

But, we aren't told that he provided the restitution commanded in Leviticus 6 of an additional fifth of the value of the money stolen when repaying the original owner back.

Still, his return of the 1,100 shekels causes his mother to bless him in the name of Yahweh.

Her blessing is offered in the typical form of the day, and such blessings were typically spoken to profess gratitude for a good deed done to the speaker by someone else.

But, in this case, it seems also to carry with it the desire to reverse the curse.

She also stated that she was dedicating the stolen silver to the Lord, and when Micah had given it back, she gave 200 shekels of it to the silversmith with instructions to fashion it into a carved image overlaid with the silver.

When the image was completed, she gave it to Micah, and he took it to his home, where he placed it with other cultic items.

Specifically, we are told he fashioned an ephod - most likely to place on this new idol - and several other household gods which were likely little totems used in the practice of divination and decision making.

Then he ordained his son as a priest to serve in the cultic shrine he had created at home.

Starting at the beginning, we see Micah has broken the 8th Commandment: Thou shalt not steal.

And he has broken the 5th Commandment about honoring one's parents.

His motive for returning the silver is suspect as he seems to have no remorse but only the desire to avoid his mother's curse.

His mother says she is dedicating the silver to Yahweh, but she doesn't take it to the priests at Shiloh as she should have.

Instead, she gives less than 20% of it back to her son in the form of a cult object, and nothing is said about what she did with the remaining 900 shekels.

Maybe the reason for her quick forgiveness of Micah's theft is because she is also a thief in the mold of Ananias and Sapphira from the book of Acts who claimed to give all to God while holding back a portion.

But, in making the idol, she and Micah broke the 2nd Commandment against making physical representations of deity.

Then Micah took that new icon and set up a cult shrine of his own in direct violation of Deuteronomy 12, where we see the explicit instructions regarding where worship was to take place once Israel had entered the land.

He also added other cult items to his collection in violation of the 1st and 2nd Commandments.

And lastly, Micah installed one of his own sons as a priest in direct violation of God's rules for the priesthood.

So we see how, despite the mother's apparent dedication to Yahweh and her son's God-honoring name, the family's worship of Yahweh was hardly orthodox.

But here's the really tragic thing - they don't realize their actions are wrong.

Both Micah and his mother are deadly sincere in their religious intention while at the same time being thoroughly pagan in their religious expression.

Like Jeroboam in Judges 11, who believed he was genuinely honoring God when he vowed to sacrifice whoever came forth to greet him on his return from battle, they meant well, but their actions were terribly misguided.

Given all this, it's notable that the author remains silent regarding the inappropriate nature of their worship.

But in verse 6, he reveals how he feels about the state of Micah's family and all of Israel in what will prove to be the pivotal verse of this narrative

And his assessment is repeated three more times in these final chapters making it the basis for all that he reveals in these chapters.

Let's look at verse 6 together [**Judges 17:6**]

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

II. The explanatory sentence

In that statement, the author reveals his own understanding of what has transpired in Micah's household and what transpired in all of Israel during this period, so we need to be sure we have a good grasp of this explanatory statement.

First, he associates these corrupt acts with the absence of a king in Israel.

But he isn't disclosing a pro-monarchical stance here - he isn't saying that a monarchy is the solution and that things would be better if only there were a human king to enforce proper behavior.

Looking back through the history of the Old Testament record, we can see how the monarchy in Israel was plagued with problems from start to finish and was largely responsible for the apostasy that continued to plague Israel.

The list of kings who are outright denounced for not doing what is right in the eyes of God and the kings who generally did okay but failed to remove the high places of Canaanite worship is a long one indeed.

Only three kings in all Israel's history: David, Hezekiah, and Josiah receive praise for doing what was right in God's eyes - and even David is acknowledged for falling short in his dealings with Uriah the Hittite [**1Kings 15:5**].

Our author isn't saying that a human king - any human king - is the answer to the problem.

But we need not think of the king as only a human king - there is also a spiritual element here.

God raised up Israel as a theocracy with the clear expectation that Israel would follow his commands.

God should have always been King in Israel - but during the period of the Judges, he clearly was not.

Looking back to our Scripture readings from Deuteronomy 12 and Joshua 18 we see that God had given clear instructions to Israel as they entered the land.

They were not to do whatever they decided was right according to their own judgment.

They were to tear down the Canaanite worship places, seek out the place God had designated for worship of him, and refrain from building a plurality of cultic shrines - like the one established by Micah.

Instead of doing what was right in their own eyes they were to seek what was right in God's eyes and then do it.

And that's the meaning behind the second sentence in verse 6.

To the extent the people did what was right in their own eyes, they were showing disregard for what was right in God's eyes - they had a compromised standard for determining what was right.

The difference between the period of the judges and the later period of the kings isn't the presence or absence of general evil or, specifically, the evil of idolatry.

Instead, the difference is the source from which the evil arises.

When Israel eventually gained human kings history shows that the kings often led the way into idolatry and subsequent abominable acts, whereas in the time of the judges, the people did evil all on their own.

That is to say, they didn't need a king or a judge to lead them into idolatry - they did the evil of their own volition.

Remember, though, they didn't recognize they were doing evil.

They were doing what was right in their estimation, so they genuinely and sincerely thought they were doing well.

In reality, what the people were doing during the time of the judges wasn't all that different from those who practice a "let your conscience be your guide" or a "follow your heart because it won't lead you astray" mentality today.

Looking to oneself for moral, ethical, and worship guidance is as dangerous as it is appealing.

After all, the Bible tells us in **Jeremiah 17:9** that *"the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*

And Jesus taught that [**Mark 7:21-22**] our hearts are the source of evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, and so on.

And **Proverbs 14:12** is clear in saying, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."*

The time of the judges was a time of radical individualism and self-governance where everyone believed they knew what was best and looked only to their own moral compass to determine their path - just like today.

And the corruption that comes from that mindset isn't limited to the individual or household level; it also has a corrupting effect at the institutional level.

III. The corruption of the priesthood

The second vignette opens with the introduction of a new character, a young Levite from Bethlehem of Judah.

Our author begins by sharing some personal information about this young man.

First, he labels him as a "youth" - that's what the Hebrew word behind the English "young man" means.

And we would probably do well to interpret that in light of the fact that the service as a priest was to begin at age 30 and therefore consider that his relative youth would make him serving as a priest an irregularity.

Second, we are told he was sojourning in Bethlehem of Judah.

And God had established cities where Levites were to dwell and places for them to serve - and Bethlehem of Judah wasn't on either list.

So, apparently, this Levite youth was also doing what seemed right in his own eyes and residing as an alien in a place other than where God had given him to dwell.

Third, it seems he was offering himself as a priest for hire at any convenient place - not the place where God had established for priestly ministry - which, at that time, was Shiloh, as we read in **Joshua 18:1**.

So we get no sense of divine calling, no burden of responsibility, and no regard for God's plan in this young man.

He is a shiftless priest for hire, following the path of least resistance and looking for any opportunity to open up.

As he traveled about looking for an opportunity, he happened to wander into the hill country of Ephraim and found himself at Micah's home - the location of Micah's cultic shrine.

His answer to Micah's inquiry of where he came from is instructive as he readily reveals just how opportunistic he is.

First, he informed Micah of his professional class, then his shiftlessness, and then his openness to whatever prospect he might encounter.

Micah seizes the opportunity to have a bona fide Levite who can increase the legitimacy of his cult center, so he offers the young man a home, a place of honor, and the opportunity to serve as his personal representative before God.

The offer is designed to appeal to the young Levite's ego and ambition, and the offer of 10 pieces of silver annual salary, garments, and board seems almost an incidental afterthought.

And the episode ends rather abruptly in verse 11 with the statement, "And the Levite went in," showing that he saw it as a good deal.

He was content to dwell with Micah, but, in a curious reversal, it turns out that Micah treats him like a son, not a father, as he had said.

Still, Micah follows through and ordains him, and he becomes Micah's private priest living in Micah's home.

This part of the narrative ends in verse 13 with Micah thrilled by this fortuitous occurrence as he is convinced that having an actual Levite functioning as a priest, his cult would now have legitimacy.

And, notably, neither Micah nor the Levite seems aware of the strangeness of the situation.

Micah is aware of the fact that God had given the Levites a monopoly on the priesthood in Israel but, seemingly, not any of the restrictions and rules that surrounded that privilege.

So he assumes that now that he has employed a Levite, God will grant him immediate and unfettered access to the resources of heavenly blessings.

Again, Micah sincerely believes he is doing well.

But, he's unaware that his approach is fundamentally pagan, and having a Levite who is illegitimately installed as a priest is no better than having his son as a priest.

Micah is treating the Levite as more of a good luck charm with the intent of manipulating God than an actual priest before God.

And yet he is completely confident in his assessment because he is doing what seems right in his own eyes.

Everything he has done makes perfect sense in Micah's world because he has placed himself on the throne.

The young Levite is also infected by the same disease.

He appears to be totally compromised as he fails to chastise Micah for establishing an illegitimate cult site and warning him of the dangers of what he is doing.

Instead, he capitalizes on the opportunity that Micah has presented to gain meaningful employment and the guarantee of security.

Maybe it's a symptom of his youth, but the young man finds the offer of "fatherhood" and being looked to as a spiritual guide for this wealthy man too much to resist.

He easily and willingly corrupts his high calling, and rather than standing for God and pointing Micah to what is right and proper before God, he shows himself to be mercenary and is prepared to do whatever he is hired to do.

What began as the corruption of a family has now infected the priesthood.

And the tragic thing is, no one recognizes that they have been corrupted and are doing evil in the sight of the Lord because they are all convinced they are doing right.

And the stain of corruption doesn't stop at the level of the priesthood as we will see an entire tribe of Israel fall prey to doing what is right in their own eyes next week as we look at chapter 18

Conclusion

Sadly, the sin of self-determination and syncretistic religion didn't end with the period of the judges; it's still alive and well today.

Who could deny that we see churches - both local churches and entire denominations - becoming more and more enculturated with each passing year?

Churches that actually seek to discover and follow God's ways are largely viewed as quaint throwbacks to an earlier, less enlightened time - when they aren't being denounced as evil, hateful bigots, that is.

We, too, are living in a time of religious and moral turmoil where every person is a law unto themselves and everyone feels free to make up their own rules for living and worshipping and then to change those rules on a whim.

Of course, this tendency show up in all manner of overt ways which we could list and shake our heads in judgment.

But I want us to focus this morning on the focus of the chapter which is syncretism.

Again, syncretism, in the sense that we are considering it today, is the adding of things such as elements, beliefs, practices, and the like to a proper worship of God thereby rendering it improper.

Syncretism could be something as obvious as looking to one's horoscope or consulting a Ouija board, a magic 8-ball, or calling the psychic hotline for guidance.

Those are things we readily recognize as overt forms of divination or supernatural guidance that supplant God's authority in our lives and Christ-followers should know to avoid such things.

But what about syncretism that is far more subtle?

I'm not one who says a Christ-follower should never flip a coin to make a decision.

When God hasn't clearly spoken and either option is permissible, and neither is morally preferable or clearly wiser than the other, I guess one arbitrary means of decision making is as good as another.

But there are times when we know God has spoken to us and we determine to use those means to try to wiggle out of it - even to the point of calling for a "best two out of three or three out of five" when the test comes up against us.

Clearly, that would be a form of doing what is right in our own eyes and going against God with or without the toss of the coin.

But syncretism can be even more subtle than that and we can add things to our worship of God without truly being aware we have done so.

Much of what we do, we do because we prefer it - not because God has prescribed it.

And that can be fine as long as we keep our preferences in their proper place.

However, syncretism creeps in as we begin to elevate our preferences to the level of necessity.

And when we become attached to things like a building or its furnishings, an order of service or the type of music we sing and the types of instruments used, what people wear or how they cut their hair and add them to our ideas of proper worship - then we have a problem.

When we add in performative acts and come up with extra-biblical things people must do in order to truly please God and make them a litmus test of fidelity, we are adding to what God requires.

Sadly, our tendency is to take things we find in God's Word - things that are good in God's eyes - and add to them thereby destroying them through syncretism.

For instance, we know that we are told not to neglect meeting together - a clear command from God.

So, our tendency is to go overboard and make attendance at each and every church function a litmus test of spirituality instead of the encouragement to engage in regular fellowship and mutual support that's the focus of the passage.

Of course, on the flip side, we can also add in a healthy dose of American liberty and err in the other direction too.

The point is, there are all manner of things we can add to what God requires of us and so pollute and degrade our worship of him.

And we can do that under the auspices of both legalism and liberty either by adding requirements that God doesn't or by granting ourselves latitude where God doesn't.

Either way, it comes down to the same thing - doing our own thing instead of God's thing.

And adding anything to God's perfect plan for us utterly distorts his plan and turns it into our plan.

But again, just as in the time of the Judges, the people who are guilty of syncretism typically don't recognize it - they truly believe they are right - and they will fight anyone who tries to tell them otherwise.

The solution, though, is as obvious as the problem is subtle - stop following your own authority and commit to doing what is right in God's eyes.

And the obvious place to begin is to know what God desires.

God is unique and God's people should reflect his uniqueness in their lives by knowing and practicing God's instructions.

There is no excuse for a Christ-follower to fall into doing what is right in their own eyes simply out of ignorance, because God has given us his clear revelation in the Bible as to what right looks like through his eyes.

So every follower of Jesus Christ must make the study and understanding of God's Word a priority in their life.

They must commit to showing clear biblical support for everything they deem necessary and to weeding out all of the things they've added on to what God actually requires - or, at the very least, they must accept and admit those things are personal preferences and not requirements.

Doing what is right in our own eyes is a natural inclination and a huge temptation because it seems right.

So we, as followers of Christ, must always be on guard against it in ourselves.

Let's pray.