

Sermon 15: Judges 17: Will-worship

OUTLINE

Self-appointed worship
Self-appointed priesthood

INTRODUCTION

Will-worship is an old Puritan description of religion and worship that is directed towards God not according to God's will as revealed in His word, but rather worship that is directed by human will and ingenuity. The time of the Reformation was a time of worship wars, a battle for a pure and biblically regulated time of worship. The time of the judges is the opposite, it is a time typified by impure religion and will worship. This is one of the main things that we see as we move into this new section in Judges.

We have finished with the judges cycle, looking at the various judges and their rule. The cycles illustrated the sins of the people of God from the perspective of the leaders. The people sinned; God sent a punishing invasion; the people cried out; God sent a deliverer; and the land enjoyed peace. In one sense this is a picture of the gospel. We are sinners, God afflicts us with the effects of sin both in creation and in our personal lives, we cry out to God in repentance and Christ becomes our deliverer and gives us peace. But those repetitive cycles became a window into human nature as we saw a deteriorating slide into deeper sin. The cycle section looked at Israel from the point of view of the leaders and we spent a lot of time focusing on the leaders and how they were not perfect and got progressively worse. Well here the focus shifts. This last 5 chapters focus on the people of Israel rather than the leaders. Our narrator has taken these events out of chronology and saved the worst for last. These are token samples of the godlessness of the nation of Israel during this time. These 5 chapters revolve around 2 major events. The first, ch. 18-19 record the religious failure in Israel. We see a man who completely disregards how he is to worship making his own gods, religion and priests. This culminates in the apostasy of Dan and the foundation laid for the false religion of Jeroboam after the North-South split. If the first focuses on religious failure; the second focuses on moral failure. A woman is brutalized to death which results in a civil war where one of Israel's tribes is nearly wiped out. These chapters show us the Canaanization of Israel. They remind us that the greatest enemies we face are not those obvious threats from without but threats from within. What is also amplified here at the end in these chapters is that constant refrain, 17:6, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' 18:1, 'In those days there was no king in Israel.' 19:1, 'In those days, when there was no king in Israel.' 21:25, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' The idea of kings in the OT is very suggestive. Firstly, it points to the fact that Israel did not have God as their king. Secondly, it points to the need for Christ who is the perfect King. Thirdly, it points back to Adam as the failed king who points to the need of an obedient king who will go to war and vanquish the serpent from God's garden. Every failed king in the Bible is a repeat of this sad story pointing us to the gospel. This state of Israel with no king is a picture of the human heart without Christ, it is an absolute mess. The mess we focus on in the next 2 chapters is the mess we make of true religion.

Self-appointed worship

V1-5, 'There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

² 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." And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the Lord."

³ 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." ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.' We are introduced to a wealthy Ephraimite, Micah. His name is a shortened version of a longer name which means 'Who is like YHWH.' Ironically the man whose name speaks of God being unlike any other ends up treating God just like the pagans treated their gods. We are plunged into a family matter which reveals where the man on the street is in his thinking and acting. The picture we get of Micah and his mother is a very poor picture indeed. Firstly, we note that Micah was thief who stole from his own mother, possibly his widowed mother. When children act against their parents in this fashion where this is no obedience, and even sinning against them, the homelife which should be regulated by a love of God and a training in keeping is law is shown to be in a sorry state.

Secondly, we see that the mother uttered a curse which led Micah to return the money. This reveals that his motive for doing good is not driven by a desire to do the right thing but to avoid the curse. Sadly this also reveals more about his view of God. He is viewing God in a superstitious way not engaging with God as personal and holy. He seeks to get the words unsaid not be holy in the eyes of God to have his blessing. This mechanistic approach to blessing and cursing betrays that he is not thinking of God as He has revealed Himself. Sadly, most of the world does this. Instead of seeing ourselves as sinners before a holy God and being concerned as to how we can be righteous in the eyes of the God who will weigh all our deeds on the last day. Instead of recognizing that there is nothing that we can do to undo our sinful position and receive the free gift of salvation God provides in Christ, so many turn to false religious ways to try and secure blessing. They are not engaging with God as He has revealed Himself but some distorted notion of Him.

Thirdly, notice how the mother flip-flops from curse to blessing in the name of God, and not because the son has repented. She is throwing God's blessing around as if her words control it, not our standing as sinful or righteous in His sight.

Fourthly, she dedicates the silver to be made into an idol by her son. But only 200 though she dedicates all of it, holding back what she says is God's only giving a token for religious purposes. Please notice that she is dedicating the silver to YHWH to be made into an image. This is a clear violation of the 2nd commandment, Ex. 20:4-6, '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. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.' Like the golden calf this is an abomination even though it is an image to YHWH. Why are idols of God wrong? Firstly, because God said so. But there are other reasons we can put forward. All images will necessarily misrepresent the nature of God who is uncreated. Also, many totemize God and

turn Him into a charm and seek to control Him and extract blessings by services rendered to an image reducing worship to bribery and not engaging with God as God. Also all worship where one just directly walked up to a so called image of YHWH that you could touch a kiss denied the truth about our sinful position before a holy God who cannot be approached by us. Apart from the fact that the Ark of the Covenant did not have an image between the Cherubim, no worshiper could look upon God, go into His presence or make any old offering they liked. All of that was regulated to underline who we are before God, and our need for a Savior. Making our own way to God's presence by images is a denial of the gospel. There are some parts of the Christian church that have decided that images to worship Him by are now ok. So images of Christ because He was created and people would have had an image of Him in their minds when they prayed in the first century are ok in churches to spark our faith. We do not believe that we can play fast and loose with this law of God. We also take note of those instances where things like the bronze serpent became a snare to the people of God and Hezekiah wisely destroyed it. Fifthly, it goes from bad to worse, Micah sets up his home as a shrine for this idol. This too is against the clear instruction of God that He will decide the place where His temple will be. Then he makes for himself his own ephod, you will remember that an ephod had the urim and the thummim and was used to discern God's will. Here Micah is putting God on speed dial to give him personal direction whenever he wants it. And then he also appoints his own priest, his son, inserting nepotism into the worship of God.

V6, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' Any person who tried to be religious but not according to what God has revealed is guilty of the same sin. Any person who rejects Jesus Christ as the God appointed sacrifice, and temple and high priest and tries to make their own connection with God and worship Him in the way they think is best is doing the same thing. Sadly, the Christian church in the past has been guilty of the same sins. Turning the Lord's Supper into a sacrifice; introducing images into worship; having other mediators, a priesthood apart from Christ's. these are all will-worship as well.

Self-appointed priesthood

V7-10, 'Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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.' The identity of this man is kept back for a shock effect and revealed in 18:30 after the full impact of his actions play themselves out, namely the apostasy of a tribe, 'And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land.' This young man is the grandson of Moses, this means that these are very early days in Israel settling into the land. That when things should have been at their strongest spiritually under Joshua and Othniel this is what was going on. A powerful lesson is that it does not matter who your father or grandfather is, do you know the Lord. Another lesson is that sin can very

quickly overtake a family and go from godly leader to ungodly apostate very quickly. Here we see the need for families to make sure that they do not take their faith for granted. Coming from Christian parents does not a Christian make. Here was a man who was serving as a priest, and his child does not walk in the ways of the Lord. Parents cannot elect their children but they must make every effort to ensure that their children know the truth, living out a good example, going to church, teaching them all they need to know from young.

This is a young man is from a Levitical family, but is young. Levites only began serving in the temple when they were 30, so this is the texts way of signaling that this man was not of age to serve as a priest. What we have here is the typical picture of a young person who wants to leave home, strike out on his own, get out from under his parents, be himself and not what others tell him to be, making his own way. Instead of going to Shiloh where the tabernacle was, he heads out with no clear objective in mind.

This man is in that vulnerable stage that many young people find themselves in. there comes that time when a young person leaves the protection of their parent's home, they step out from the patterns that their parents fought hard to establish to ensure that life moved in predictable and healthy ways revolving around church and family and school and work. In that context a young person chaffs only focusing on all the ways their selfish desires are resisted and suppressed and how they don't have the freedom that those who don't have Christian parents have. So they dream about being 'free' of standing up in that strength that they think they have. They decide that they are going to leave home, not because they are leaving to pursue marriage, or a career, or because they have a clear idea about what God has for them. No, they just don't want what they have at home, so they leave. Here is why they are vulnerable: those who don't take a stand and live for God will end up living for something, anything else. This untested young man who did not have the protection of his commitment to walking in God's ways and honoring Him in everything he does because a victim to someone who has very strong ideas and who turns this young man into a prop for his own ideas.

Micah manipulates this young man by offering everything a young person in this position would find attractive. Instead of being a wanderer with no certainty, he offers him a place. He appeals to this young man's pride by asking him to be his 'father'. He appeals to this young man's ambition by offering him a role as a priest, when ordinarily he would likely be too young to properly serve as a Levitical priest. Suddenly a life without direction and purpose seems to have purpose. Not only that this wanderer who has probably been living on some meagre savings and charity is offered a job, financial security, as well as board and lodging. From a worldly point of view he will have a family, a house, a stable job, respectability and purpose, he will even have a disposable income for other things. These are the things of the world that seduce his heart and he agrees. Instead of being a true Levite who insists on teaching and upholding God's word, correcting this man, he dares not correct him lest he lose out on this free offer. Because he has not decided to honor God first and foremost and be willing to suffer the loss of all worldly offers in order to be faithful to God, he is vulnerable and compromises.

How do things normally pan out? V11, 'And the Levite was content to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons.' This young man did not end up being a father but rather more like a son. Remember Micah

employed his own son making him a prop in his homemade religion. This young man will eventually abandon this offer for who ever has a better deal later on.

V12-13, 'And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. ¹³ Then Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest." Micah assumes the power to ordain the Levite, and this event ends with Micah's religious views exposed as he thinks he is securing blessing by having a priest work for him. Micah is religious but for materialistic ends, he wants religion as far as it will be practical and useful and is not interested in the truth. Because his view of God is wrong he is superstitious not considering who God actually is, but merely as a blessing factory who can be manipulated like an idol. He is self-willed and confidently plows on with his own ideas; he sets up an ephod to get God to speak to him whenever he feels he needs it; shows no repentance; and uses people to advance his own plans. He decides how God can be worshipped, he thinks he has the right to barge into God's presence to force blessing out of Him by throwing by token religious stuff at Him. This is what it looks like when people do religion their own way. There are many variations of people making religion to suit themselves and putting a little God into their lives according to what they determine is right. Today for example we are seeing a rise in cultural Christianity. Christianity with its emphasis on traditional values is now seen as an ally to stop the rot of the leftist and woke agenda. Many are talking about Christianity but not in agreement with the Bible. They are using Christianity as a way to make their own lives better but don't take the rest of what the Bible says. They think Christianity is good but not true. Today I hear cultural influencers endorsing Christian ideas but are they willing to believe in a God who created them and has the right to rule them by His will? Will they submit to Him as the one who is worthy of their worship and obedience? Do they agree with what He says is sin and their lost condition that is desperately in need of salvation? Will they accept that their sins are so bad that there is no possible way we can provide salvation for ourselves and we need Him to save us? Will they agree that Jesus Christ alone and what He did on the cross in payment for our sins is the only way that a sinner can be saved, and that every other religious and philosophical system is false? Will they accept that their hearts deceive them because they have a sinful nature and need the Bible to guide them into truth, that there is a personal devil and not just a generic idea of wickedness that we use to describe evil oppressive systems like communism or leftism? Micah, his mother, and Jonathan are the natural product of our own hearts when we try to be religious apart from God's truth.