

Sermon 17: Judges 19: When Jesus is not our King

OUTLINE

We dehumanize others
We tolerate sin
We violate all things sacred

INTRODUCTION

How bad can human beings get without God in their lives? Sadly we can write an endless list of evil things that we, who are made in the image of God, made to worship God and love others, how we have done everything wrong that can be done. In many ways I don't want to make a list of these things, we are confronted with them every day. Paul tells us it is a shame to talk about the sin that is done in secret, and yet at the same time he tells us to expose them. Eph. 5:11-13, 'Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible.' There is a time to talk about sin, when it is time to expose it, in order to show our need for salvation from it. We all think that there is terrible evil in the world but we do not think that it lives in our own hearts. This chapter is going to shock us with what even the people of God are capable of when Jesus is not our King. We turn to this chapter not with a morbid and perverse fascination with sin, but with a desire to see again what life without Christ looks like and come to a deeper grasp of our need for Him. We come to what some have called the worst chapter in the bible. And it is the gateway to the last section of the book of judges. This last story is the worst and it is the longest. The book as a whole has been demonstrating what it looks like when each man does what is right in his own eyes. What it looks like when there is no king in Israel, either God as King, or a David-like King. The last story of Micah-Jonathan-and the tribe of Dan illustrated how soon the people of God turned to false religion. These last three chapters document the story of a Levite and his concubine and because godlessness reigned in Benjamin she was assaulted to death. This leads to civil war, and to the near extinction of one of the 12 tribes. Once again we are to realize how quickly things got so bad in Israel. 20:28 tells us that these events transpired while Phineas the grandson of Aaron was ministering before the ark of the covenant. The same Phineas who was awarded perpetual priesthood for his zeal in spearing a sinning Israelite and Midianite women in the act when God was punishing Israel with plague for idolatry, Numb. 25:7-10. These dark events were happening in Israel's 'glory days' those early days when the first generation that had entered the land was still alive, Judges 2:6-7. These chapters help explain why God did not immediately deliver Canaan into their hands, 2:3. These dark final chapters of Judges act as flies in the ointment to ruin the delusion of our own self-righteousness, and that everything is ok.

As we go through this chapter we have three headings highlighting what happens when we don't know Jesus. We dehumanize others; we tolerate sin; and we violate all things sacred.

We dehumanize women

V1, 'In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself

a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.’ When we self-rule things go wrong. When we deny the God who made us, and what He says we are made for, for marriage, holiness, service, and instead we right our own laws, determine the purpose of our own existence. When we reject God’s rulership over us, we are vulnerable and will become the servant of something else. Inevitably we fall prey to our sinful desires, we become open to deception, we live by laws other than God’s and this is when the destruction of others and ourselves begins. Our story is just another glimpse into a time when God was not King, when godliness was not driving the nation forward, an example of what our lives without Christ look like. Our story begins with a nameless Levite and his nameless concubine. It has been suggested the anonymity of everyone in the story underlines that these individuals are representative of everyone else and not exceptions to the rule. When we hear of a Levite we think of a priest, a teacher of the law, someone committed to God’s law and living it out, but what we see is something else. Levites were held to higher standards when it came to marriage, Lev. 21:7. However, we see that this Levite instead of exemplifying godly marriage has a concubine. A concubine was a second rate wife who did not have the same legal standing as a wife. She was usually brought in to bear extra children or to provide sexual services. We are not told whether the Levite is even married to a wife. She is from the tribe of Benjamin, and this becomes important for the events that unfold.

V2, ‘And his concubine was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father’s house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months.’ Whenever we have a story of betrayal we usually want to know the back story. Was he abusive, did he neglect her, did his wife mistreat her? Why was she unfaithful? Was it all her fault? And why did she go to her father’s house? Did she run away or was she sent away? We are not told and our curiosity is not satisfied. These casual references to a Levite turning a woman into a sex object, and this woman being unfaithful are merely mentioned in passing to place our characters in a certain geographic location, in the land of the tribe of Benjamin. This Levite waits 4 months before he goes to get her. Why so long? We are not told. V3, ‘Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. And she brought him into her father’s house. And when the girl’s father saw him, he came with joy to meet him.’ We see at least that the man intends to take her back and not put her to death which the law permits. No doubt this would be part of the relief we see in the joy of the father-in-law. This chapter which holds such dark actions really presses the minutiae of the events as they unfolded drawing us into this awkward domestic setting. A tremendous amount of detail is given showing how the father-in-law seeking to ingratiate himself with the Levite becomes annoying and the very reason for the Levites late departure. V4-9, ‘And his father-in-law, the girl’s father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and spent the night there. ⁵ And on the fourth day they arose early in the morning, and he prepared to go, but the girl’s father said to his son-in-law, “Strengthen your heart with a morsel of bread, and after that you may go.” ⁶ So the two of them sat and ate and drank together. And the girl’s father said to the man, “Be pleased to spend the night, and let your heart be merry.” ⁷ And when the man rose up to go, his father-in-law pressed him, till he spent the night there again. ⁸ And on the fifth day he arose early in the morning to depart. And the girl’s father said, “Strengthen your heart and wait until the day declines.” So they ate, both of them. ⁹ And when the man and his concubine and his servant rose up to depart, his father-in-law, the girl’s father, said to him, “Behold, now the day has waned toward evening. Please, spend the

night. Behold, the day draws to its close. Lodge here and let your heart be merry, and tomorrow you shall arise early in the morning for your journey, and go home."

But before we follow this group as they set out on their fateful journey, let us stop and think about how sin has caused the degrading of this woman. When we forget God we mistreat each other. This happens in all sorts of ways, it could be slavery, war, kidnapping, torture, etc. Here we see that when sin has its way with us we turn people into tools for our own gratification, we objectify them. A concubine is a person made in the image of God but whose whole existence is repurposed, not to serve and glorify God but sexual gratification. Prostitution, pornography, sexual abuse, they are all driven by the same sin. We objectify people in all sorts of ways turning them into props for our own satisfaction. A wife can objectify her husband demanding that he make more money so that she can fulfil her dreams of the house and clothes and car and security she desires, turning him into an object that serves her desires. Sin causes us to dehumanize other people. Instead of us seeking to see others flourish in the purpose that God has for them we use others for our own satisfaction. Men treating women as sex objects is only one form of this sin.

We tolerate sin

V10-14, 'But the man would not spend the night. He rose up and departed and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys, and his concubine was with him. ¹¹ When they were near Jebus, the day was nearly over, and the servant said to his master, "Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites and spend the night in it." ¹² And his master said to him, "We will not turn aside into the city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel, but we will pass on to Gibeah." ¹³ And he said to his young man, "Come and let us draw near to one of these places and spend the night at Gibeah or at Ramah." ¹⁴ So they passed on and went their way. And the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin.' The Levite refused the hospitality and was determined to set out even though it was getting late. One the way home they came to what would one day be Jerusalem. Jerusalem at this time was inhabited by the Jebusites. The Levite's servant suggested that they turn in there for the night. The Levite refused, he would not stay in a town of foreigners. Was this for some religious reason that the Levite felt he might be contaminated; was it because he did not trust to the morals of these Canaanites and did not feel safe? We are not told. He would rather spend the night in an Israelite town than a Canaanite one.

What is important to note is that Benjamin have not driven out the Canaanites, the Jebusites continue to dwell in the land. We know that God has given the armies of Israel the role of administering His justice against these tribes for their idolatry. That they are to cleanse the land of all those things that are evil and turn the promised land into a consecrated place where the will of the Lord is done in all things. Israel like Adam was given a place where God would dwell with His people, but they were to tend and keep it, they were to maintain its holiness, cleanse it of all offensive elements, they had the power of the sword to put to death all those who offended God's law. But Benjamin like Adam allowed the serpent to remain in the garden. And as with Adam Benjamin became shaped by these bad elements. The events of this chapter where we see the people of God acting like Sodom, where those who should have cleansed the

land become polluted and resemble those in it, are all because this sin, this evil, this which God had said must be removed was tolerated.

When Jesus is not our king we tolerate evil in our lives, and where we are supposed to root it out and put it to death, it takes over and influences us into its image instead of God's image. When Jesus is not King we have no truth to show up what is right and wrong; we have no law that we feel necessary to keep; no other's will that we serve for we serve our desires. When Jesus is not king we allow terrible and vile wickedness to dwell in our midst; we neglect the very purpose for why we are here; we reach a peace with what we should be at war against. Here was a man with his family looking for a safe place to sleep and could not find one because evil had been allowed to dwell there influencing the whole area.

We violate all things sacred

V15, 'and they turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. And he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night.' This Levite has pushed on past sunset despite the danger just so that he could reach an Israelite town, and this brings him to Gibeah. And here our ghastly scene unfolds. In the ancient world the laws of hospitality were seen as sacred. It was an honor to welcome strangers. Especially in the land of Israel where there were laws protecting the stranger and providing for the poor, the obligations to one's fellow Israelite were heightened by the law. Here the Levite expecting to receive hospitality sits in the open square waiting for an invite, but no one takes them in. This is an ominous sign. The eroding of public civility is evident. When Jesus is not king, there is no kindness towards strangers, there is a breakdown in that social contract of public trust where people treat each other well. When selfishness reigns in our hearts we don't imitate God's kindness towards all but become self-absorbed, stingy, rude, even exploitive.

V16-21, 'And behold, an old man was coming from his work in the field at evening. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was sojourning in Gibeah. The men of the place were Benjaminites. ¹⁷ And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveler in the open square of the city. And the old man said, "Where are you going? And where do you come from?" ¹⁸ And he said to him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to the house of the Lord, but no one has taken me into his house. ¹⁹ We have straw and feed for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and your female servant and the young man with your servants. There is no lack of anything." ²⁰ And the old man said, "Peace be to you; I will care for all your wants. Only, do not spend the night in the square." ²¹ So he brought him into his house and gave the donkeys feed. And they washed their feet, and ate and drank.' A man from a different town and tribe, an Ephraimite who was himself a sojourner offers hospitality. An older man who remembers the day when people used to greet each other, and help each other, and be good neighbors towards each other, he engages the newcomers. The Levite practically begs for hospitality by talking about providing all his own food. The old man invites them in, and we can hear that ominous note in v20, 'only do not spend the night in the square.' He knows something that the travelers don't.

V22-26, 'As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door. And they said to

the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him." ²³ And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴ Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now. Violate them and do with them what seems good to you, but against this man do not do this outrageous thing." ²⁵ But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and made her go out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. ²⁶ And as morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.' The parallels with Gen. 19 of the angels encounter in Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot are clear. Late travelers, the need for hospitality, a lone hospitable resident, wicked men coming at night, attempted homosexual rape, an appeal to reason and conscience, an offer of women to rape instead. The details are coordinated to show that Israel has become Sodom, the people of God supposed to be used to punish such evil are now worthy of judgement themselves.

When Jesus is not king we see a violation of all things sacred. Cultural law is violated as the laws of hospitality are breached to do harm to those under this man's protection. Marital law is violated as this man's concubine; someone technically married to him is raped. Natural law is violated as these men act against God's creation and against nature with unnatural desires and acts. Civil law is violated as they rape and attempt to rape leading to murder. Religious law is violated as they seek to act against a Levite, one of God's own priests. What can we say about the host's willingness to offer his daughter; what can we say about the concubine being offered but not the male servant; who was it that drove the woman outside to be abused, the Levite or the host? These questions heighten the atrocity because there is no relief, no morality, no goodness, it is a vile and sordid episode which leaves us feeling sick.

The horror of these events seem to follow on in the response of the Levite, v27-28, 'And her master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ²⁸ He said to her, "Get up, let us be going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey, and the man rose up and went away to his home.' The narrator records the detail of her hands reaching out for help, for protection and falling short of even being able to knock on the door. And there she is dead in a pose, frozen reaching out for the help that did not come. And this is met with the cold indifference of a man who is acting like nothing has happened and who is addressing his dog. V29-30, 'And when he entered his house, he took a knife, and taking hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. ³⁰ And all who saw it said, "Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day; consider it, take counsel, and speak." The Levite uses the body of his wife to get his revenge, by chopping her up to make a point. It is good that he is trying to rouse the nation to put this evil down, but his disregard for his wife is a bitter twist in it all.

We would rather not read or hear a sermon on a chapter like this. The graphic realities of this situation make us sick, we are revolted by what we see. God did not make a mistake by putting this into His word. He looks upon the hearts of every human at all times, He knows all things that every person is doing, this is a

miniscule sliver of the evil that is happening in the world right now. The sin that you see in this people, this nation, these wicked men is the sin that is within us all. The judgement that you cry out for is the judgement that this world deserves at every moment. The cause for these terrible things, this microcosm of our human condition is diagnosed for us. If Jesus is not our King then this is what and is happening. Some chapters of the word woo us with God's gentleness, silence us with His immeasurable generosity, this is one of those chapters which leaves you stunned with the hard realities of our sin and worthiness of judgement of the awful evil and harm we have caused because we refuse to be the people of God. Where is Jesus in a chapter like this? We see our deep need for Jesus in the sin that results when we are not saved, when we are left to ourselves, this is a lesson in our need for Christ. But there is a way to see Jesus in this chapter, when we compare the Levite with Christ we see a very different type of husband. The Levite goes to Bethlehem to his unfaithful wife, but when it comes to defending her, caring for her, and laying down his life for her, he is a coward, he is selfish, he is cold. Christ too is a priest, our great Highpriest. He too went to Bethlehem to find His unfaithful bride. But when it came to His life or the life of His unfaithful wife, He gave Himself not to save her from criminals but from the justice that her own crimes had brought upon her head. He is the attentive, faithful, loving, providing husband that this Levite is not. The terrible disappointment, anger and injustice we feel at this husbands actions are overturned when we see what Christ has done for us.