

Sermon 19: Judges 21: **Christless Religion**

OUTLINE

Rash vows
Loophole obedience
Authorized sinning

INTRODUCTION

We come to the final sermon in the book of judges, and the last verse summarises the book and this chapter perfectly, v25, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' Judges is a picture of life without King Jesus and then as we all go our own way and the terrible situations we create. It is a commentary on the words, 'we all like sheep have gone astray' telling various short stories of man's sinfulness and in answer to this God's relentless patience. In this last section we have a parody on religion; this is what religion without Christ looks like. We see will religious obedience, people negotiating how to obey God, elders giving advice and they are sinning all the while. Sinful deeds done in the name of religious obedience. The event with the Levite and his concubine have united Israel in military action against their own people. In their zeal to purge the land of this evil they essentially committed genocide against one of their own leaving only 600 men of Benjamin and no women. On top of this chapter 21 reveals that in their zeal they made a vow in God's name to never allow their daughters to marry the people of Benjamin. This chapter looks at how they try to 'fix' the situation. These are men who are ignorant of God and His grace and even though they engage in religious obedience they make themselves worthy of justice for doing so. True holiness is keeping all the commands of God, false religion is pitting the laws of God against each other, and justifying breaking one law by keeping another. False religion in its denials of grace; its pitting of God's laws against each other; its redefinition of sin; its attempts to find loopholes to disobey God while calling it obedience; its offering of strange fire to God can all be seen here. We have three headings, rash vows; loophole obedience; and authorized sinning.

Rash vows

At the heart of all legalism is a basic misunderstanding about God and grace. Our story begins with the nation of Israel lamenting because they had taken a rash vow, v1-2, 'Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, "No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin." 2 And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly.' They swore to never give their daughters in marriage to Benjamin. No doubt they were zealous and full of good intentions, but legalism is often guilty of offering strange fire to God, trying to give Him things He never asked for. In this overcompensating gesture of godliness for a people prone not to be, they get themselves in trouble. Now they have put themselves in a very serious situation because they have bound themselves and could break the third commandment, Ex. 20:7, "'You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.' God insisted that all vows be done in His name to ensure that all the business dealings of the land were upheld, that the people of Israel would be those who told the truth and reflected God's own promise keeping nature in order to glorify

Him. But unlike God we can bite off more than we can chew, we can rush into promises that are wrong and that would be sinful to keep.

Now those who are legalistic tend to see God as a lawgiver but not as a forgiver. They have an oversensitivity to law and penalties and no instinct for grace. This is the instinct of every fallen sinner, we are finely tuned to guilt because it is our biggest problem. This gift of a conscience can be a curse when we overcompensate with attempts to obey God at the cost of forgetting His character. Legalists see God as one who is holy, who is just and who punishes sin only. They do not recognise that God is slow to anger and always ready to forgive. They make one aspect of God all of God and fall prey to error. They are not in tune with verses like Lev. 5:4-6 where God has made provision for those who have committed themselves in vows sinfully, 'or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; 5 when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, 6 he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.' They only fixate on verses like Ecc. 5:2-6, 'Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

⁴ When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶ Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?' and Ps. 15:4, 'in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the Lord; who swears to his own hurt and does not change.' They do not think in terms of where sin abounding God's grace abounding to forgive. No they think that God is impressed by costly obedience that true obedience has to hurt, that God is a sadist not gracious who wants us to feel the pinch for its own sake. They do not come to God in their brokenness to receive healing and forgiveness but they pick up the bludgeon of the law and try to do heart surgery with it and break themselves upon the law and others as well as they hold them to the same legalistic standards. Legalism because it does not cast itself upon God's grace and commits itself to law compounds the problem.

Then instead of seeing how much trouble they have made by committing genocide and then adding to the problem with a vow resulting in Benjamin's extinction, they question God and not themselves, v3, 'And they said, "O LORD, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?"' Legalists are not able to see how their injurious zeal has created the problem they experience. They can only see their so called obedience and good intentions. Israel had punished Benjamin, administered justice, and are seeking to honour God's name but keeping a rash vow. All of these actions and intentions make them feel good about themselves and blind to their faults. Zeal, sacrificial service, things done in God's name these are the camouflage of our religious sins. It results in them questioning how God can do this and not themselves. Everyone else is wrong even possibly God.

And it is not only religious legalists who question God and justify themselves, the non-religious unbeliever does the exact same thing, because this is a universal

tendency of the sinful heart. The unbeliever cannot fathom why life is not good, why bad things might be happening. They are good people not bad deserving of justice, they have put in some efforts and expect payment for their efforts. It is insanity on display when the holy God who can do no sin is questioned by the sinner who is oblivious to their sins.

Loophole obedience

Blind to the error of their past ways they continue headlong into them. After a token worship service, v4, the people of Israel set to problem solving, 'And the next day the people rose early and built there an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.' Their questioning God not being able to fathom why certain consequences have happened, and their legalistic insistence in not seeking forgiveness for their rash vows, their ignorance of God's grace on this count put a question mark over their worship at this point. They do not turn to the Lord but work within the confines of the legalistic pieces they have established.

In v5 they enquire into who of the tribes of Israel did not come to the summons to war against Benjamin because they had made another rash vow. 'And the people of Israel said, "Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the Lord?" For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death." Here we see there was not only one rash vow but a second as well. You would think that they would see that the problem is the foolish way they have bound themselves by their sinful words and that they would cast themselves on God's grace for forgiveness. No, like good legalists they double down. And let us not miss their compassion and religious dedication on the heels of this, v6-7, 'And the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. ⁷ What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the Lord that we will not give them any of our daughters for wives?"

We see that no one came from Jabesh Gilead, v8-9, 'And they said, "What one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah?" And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead, to the assembly. ⁹ For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there.' So they make for themselves a solution whereby they can fix both their problems, they have to keep their rash vow and provide wives for Benjamin, so they decide to commit genocide against Jabesh Gilead, steal their wives and give them to Benjamin. V10-11, 'So the congregation sent 12,000 of their bravest men there and commanded them, "Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword; also the women and the little ones. ¹¹ This is what you shall do: every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction." Can you see the logic, if you want to fix a problem you created by committing genocide, the solution is easy commit genocide against someone else. V12, 'And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him, and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.' They spared all the virgins because widows would not be good enough but this only amounted to 400. So these 400 virgins were gifted to men as slaves would be in order for Israel to fix the problem they had created. But here is the up side, at least they kept their vow.

Legalists find way to fix their problems by apparent obedience and lip service to the law. The law of God is not merely concerned with a broken vow, the law is given to uphold God's glory, God is loving, compassionate, holy and kind. He seeks obedience to the law that brings about these characteristics in us. He is not seeking a use of the law that is exacting as far as the letter is concerned as a loveless showing of rigour because this is an insult to God. These Jews who were seeking to not break a vow portrayed God to be a God who did not make provision for the forgiveness of rash vows and forces people to commit other sins in order to keep a vow.

Authorized sinning

V13-15, Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon and proclaimed peace to them. ¹⁴ And Benjamin returned at that time. And they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead, but they were not enough for them. ¹⁵ And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.' With women in hand Israel calls Benjamin from their rock of refuge in the wilderness and hand over the 400 women. Their refusal to seek forgiveness for their vows is now impossible because they would then have to admit that they were wrong in annihilating Jabesh Gilead. So they continue on this road not content with 400 stolen women they need to get 200 more. Sinful solution number 1 did not give them full results so they lay out plans for sinful solution number 2.

The text highlights this problem repeating again the matter of their rash vow, v16-18, 'Then the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin?" ¹⁷ And they said, "There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel. ¹⁸ Yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters." For the people of Israel had sworn, "Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin." We know God's curse rests upon those who break God's law, but their bankrupt view of sin can see no fault in their actions. They offer a solution to the men of Benjamin, v19-21, 'So they said, "Behold, there is the yearly feast of the Lord at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah." ²⁰ And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, "Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards ²¹ and watch. If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.' Some have asked the question about these dancing festivals. The Israelite men were commanded to meet three times a year but there is no law of dancing feasts. Some have suggested that this may be a Canaanite practice unselfconsciously adopted by the Israelites.

The leaders who are supposed to uphold God's law instruct the people on how to break it in the name of obeying a vow. They even offer to defend them when the fathers and brothers come looking for them v22, 'And when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, 'Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle, neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.'"" It is very interesting to note the limited way in which the leaders see guilt. Guilt is the breaking of an

obvious law, it is not something that can be a motive, or a fantasy. SO as long as you are not technically breaking God's law, even though you may be condoning another sin to do so, you are ok. Legalists necessarily have to redefine sin. It is not any want or conformity to all of God's law but the condoning of sins in the name of the service of what they consider to be more important laws.

V23-24, 'And the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them. ²⁴ And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and they went out from there every man to his inheritance.' Our Hollywood trained minds want to add, 'and they all lived happily ever after.' It looks like the problem of Benjamin has been solved but what problems have been created. These last few chapters began with the rape and murder of one woman. And all of this leads to the murder of all the women of Benjamin, and now the stealing and no doubt raping of these 600 virgins. The outward integrity of the tribes is kept in tact but what can we say about the spiritual integrity of the people of God. It looks like Israel has a zeal for God's name and went to great lengths to honour promises made in His name, but all they have done is dishonoured the name of God. May God deliver us from this sort of religion.

This chapter ends reminding us that without Christ this is what we become. V25, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' Unless He shines His light upon our best religion and exposes it for the man serving wrangling that it is, to expose it for the God insulting god we portray we would be without hope. But Christ has come, we need not be without a king.

Let us wrap up the book of Judges that we have been studying. It is a book that deconstructed the moralizing way we normally read the OT. Instead of seeing these men as heroes of the faith, rather they were progressively worse samples demonstrating what life in sin looks like. The book has the regular refrain of there being no King, God or a godly king, and each man going his own way and doing what was right in his own eyes. The book is dark and disturbing as it highlights the sin we are capable of and our deep need for Christ. I have personally loved preaching through this book because the clear gospel themes of our sinfulness and our deep need for Christ have been in every chapter. But we must not miss the part this book plays in the developing story of the gospel in the OT. The repeating pattern of the failure of the people of God to keep God's law, of the leaders of God to deliver and lead God's people all concentrate our need for Jesus Christ. This book acts as a preparation for King David a type of Christ to come and do what none of the judges was able to do, to make war against all God's enemies and establish pure worship in Israel. But again he too is only a type and a sinner who will fail but give us a greater glimpse of the victory we will have in Christ. The book of judge like every other book in the OT speaks of God's plan to save sinners in Christ.