

May 14, 2017
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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**“DOING RIGHT IN YOUR OWN EYES”
LEADS TO CIVIL WAR
Judges 20**

Living in fellowship with God has very important spiritual ramifications such as peace, joy, wisdom, and an understanding of God’s will. However, those spiritual ramifications also work out in some very important practical ramifications. For example, if a person or people group is not in fellowship with God, they will forfeit the confidence of God’s will and, being left without God’s wisdom, they will be forced to maneuver through life’s pitfalls nearly spiritually blind.

Walking through life with compromised spiritual vision will almost certainly cause a spiritual wreck. That is what God’s people discovered in the time of the Judges. There was an apparently rather ordinary Levite who we learned about in chapter nineteen. He ran into a very traumatic situation while he stayed overnight in Gibeah which was in the tribe of Benjamin. Wicked and vile men in that city raped and probably killed the man’s concubine. In order to draw attention to the horrible sin, and in particular to the people’s effrontery against himself, he cut the concubine’s body into pieces and shipped the pieces all over the kingdom.

The response of the kingdom of Israel as a whole was to be expected. They were aghast. They hastily called a meeting for all the tribal and family leaders. Gathering to decide how the nation should respond as one, the leaders asked the Levite to be the guest speaker. He gave quite a speech. It was not altogether truthful, but it was impressive and made quite an impact. By the time the guy was finished telling his story, the whole nation was determined to go to war against their brothers in Benjamin.

The result of this man’s influence was tragic. The tribe of Benjamin was nearly annihilated. Tragedy can happen when a “not altogether truthful” man stirs the natural impulses of people who are devoid of God’s wisdom. How different the outcome would have probably been if the leaders had been in fellowship with God and drawing on His wisdom. The lesson is clear. We need to be careful to stay in fellowship with God through prayer and Bible reading so that we can identify error, be confident of God’s will, and react with wisdom.

A Call to Arms (vv.1-17).

One man’s influence can have frightening consequences. That was the case when all the people of Israel gathered to hear the hottest and horrible news. *Then all the people of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled as one man to the LORD at Mizpah. And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 men on foot that drew the sword. (Now the people of Benjamin heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the people of Israel said, “Tell us, how did this evil happen?” (vv.1-3).*

The phrase “From Dan to Beersheba” was a common reference to the whole nation. Therefore, the whole nation assembled *as one man* which was a very rare occurrence during this time when each man did what was right in his own eyes. Even the people on the eastern side of the Jordan River (*the land of Gilead*) showed up. Obviously, the people of the tribe of Benjamin were absent.

Yet the gathering place, Mizpah, was either within the borders of Benjamin or very close to it, lying about 4 miles north of Gibeah which was the site of the crime. The millions of people that made up Israel were represented by *the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel*. The number of fighting men represented was 400,000. Everyone wanted to know the details of the crime that precipitated the Levite cutting up his concubine.

To that gathering of anxious people, the Levite told **his** story (vv.4-7). Like a modern-day news reporter (or not), let’s run the man’s story through the “Fact Checker.” *And the Levite, the husband*

of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. And the leaders of Gibeah rose against me and surrounded the house against me by night. They meant to kill me, and they violated my concubine, and she is dead.

Technically, the man was the concubine's husband, though what they experienced was never considered a husband and wife relationship which would have been more precious and would make the crime more heinous. And it is also quite true that the Levite and his concubine did indeed show up in Gibeah, though it was more a necessity than a prearranged plan as his speech would have us believe.

Looking back at the original accounting (19:22), it was worthless, good for nothing, base, "*Sons of Belial*" who surrounded the house and tried to knock down the door. But in this version, the Levite accused the leaders of the crime. He used the word *bah'al* which refers to rulers, owners, or lords. Another discrepancy is found when the original story has the perverts demanding to have sex with the Levite, not threatening to kill him.

In this revised version of the story, the Levite seemed to leave out the fact that he thrust his concubine out the door to be abused by the wicked men. Also, in fact, the original story does not make it clear whether the concubine was dead when the Levite found her or after he cut her up.

We also know from the response described previously that the Levite was not exactly a saint. He even admitted, *So I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel, for they have committed abomination and outrage in Israel (v.6)*. So here was this Levite who was not engaged in what Levites were supposed to do – that is, ministry. He was not living where a Levite should have been living. He was supposed to be separated unto the Lord which should have precluded him having a concubine in the first place. Then to cut up a human (even a dead one) was an abomination to the Lord – regardless of his reason for doing it.

In the final analysis, we have to conclude that the man did not exactly tell the truth about what happened. Why not? Was this leverage of the whole nation of personal vengeance? Notice how the

man expressed his desire for a national response: *Behold, you people of Israel, all of you, give your advice and counsel here*" (v.7). That sounds like a reasonable enough request. Or was it possible for one man who had been personally and highly offended to turn the entire nation to act in a way that did not please God? His challenge was really not for the people to draw an objective conclusion based on the truth. His desire was for the people to choose his side against the people of Gibeah, based on half-truths, in order for him to get vengeance.

The problem with a setting like this is that emotions can be very compelling. *And all the people arose as one man, saying, "None of us will go to his tent, and none of us will return to his house. But now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot, and we will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the people, that when they come they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin, for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel." So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one man. And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What evil is this that has taken place among you? Now therefore give up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel." But the Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the people of Israel. Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel. And the people of Benjamin mustered out of their cities on that day 26,000 men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who mustered 700 chosen men. Among all these were 700 chosen men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. And the men of Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered 400,000 men who drew the sword; all these were men of war.*

The people of Israel were all in to eradicate evil from the land. They showed up in great force as one man. When the call was given, an army of 400,000 was represented (v.2). They were agreed and of one mind that the people of Gibeah should be punished (v.11). We need to realize that this was the greatest response to go to war of any calls for help, calls for arms, against the pagan oppressor throughout the judges' period. But this was a also a call for war against their

brothers. The goal was to “*repay Gibeah of Benjamin, for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel*” (v.10). And so to that end, the massive army of Israel demanded that the citizens of Gibeah turn over the hooligans to receive capital punishment (v.13).

This demand to eradicate evil from Israel was leveled by people whom God regularly punished by oppressors because they forsook Him to serve the idols and false gods their pagan neighbors served. Do we see a twinge of hypocrisy here? Mark this principle well: When personal vengeance is sought, the supposed victim will do all that is possible to make the supposed offender look evil while attempting to hide his or her own evil.

The influence of such a person can be devastating. That is what God warns us who are part of the Church to *See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled (Hebrews 12:15)*. Bitterness will explode in an emotional appeal and sweep up many unwise people in its wake.

While the people of Israel were all in to punish Gibeah, the people of Benjamin were all in to defend themselves from extinction. We cannot blame the people of Benjamin for wanting to protect their relatives. We can blame them for not taking action to punish and eradicate their relatives’ wickedness from among them. To defend themselves, Benjamin mustered an army of 26,000. Seven hundred of those warriors were left-handed slingshot marksmen.

Why would such a small army go to war against such insurmountable odds? They fought to protect their families, their homes, their lands. There is a monument at Stone Mountain, Georgia that commemorates that defeated band of southern soldiers who stood fast against the massive army of William Sherman as they swept through Atlanta on their way to the sea. This monument points out that the brave men stood against the blue wave until their meager supply of ammunition was depleted. Then they pick up stones and threw them at the oncoming tsunami. What would cause men to continue to stand against such odds? They were fighting for their homes, their families, and the land against an invading army.

Though the odds were astonishingly in favor of Israel, still they decided that they should find out God’s will in the matter.

A Call to God (vv.18-28).

God’s people inquired of the Lord, went into battle according to His leading, but were soundly defeated. That would be discouraging after the leaders of the people had been careful to rise up and go to Bethel to inquire of the Lord. *The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God, “Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin?” And the LORD said, “Judah shall go up first” (v.18)*. Apparently the ark of the covenant and, therefore, the tabernacle had been relocated at Bethel. Bethel just happened to be right on the border between Ephraim and Benjamin.

There the leaders of Israel gathered and sought God’s will, and in some way God revealed that the soldiers from Judah should lead the way. This was fitting since the man with the grievance was from Judah. Did God really answer their prayer request? Yes. Did God really tell them to send Judah? Yes, in some way unrevealed. Well, if that was the case, there was nothing to worry about. Everything was going to be okay.

As it turned out, everything was not okay because the little army of left-handed Benjamites killed 22,000 of God’s people (vv.19-20). God’s people were really confused and distraught about this apparent contradiction to their confident feelings. They went back to Bethel and wept to know God’s will, again went into battle with God’s blessing, and were again defeated (vv.22-25). In light of the first defeat, God’s people got really serious with God and wept before the Lord. *And the people of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until the evening. And they inquired of the LORD, “Shall we again draw near to fight against our brothers, the people of Benjamin?” And the LORD said, “Go up against them” (v.23)*. This time the Lord revealed that they should attack again the next day (v.23). They did and were soundly defeated again losing 18,000 more soldiers (v.25).

By this time it began to sink in that something was terribly wrong. Apparently, the people must have misunderstood God’s will because surely God would not let people who fight against their brothers suffer loss, would He? If you and I had been among the Israelites, would we not have assumed that we were in error because when God is on our side we never lose, right?

A lesson to learn. The character of the judges' period was each man doing what was right in his own eyes. The resulting cycle of that wrong choice was that the people forsook God in rebellion, they served the false gods of the pagans, which led to them being oppressed by the same pagans, which led to their repenting, God raising up a deliverer, and the people enjoying a period of fellowship with God, only to go back to sin and rebellion.

That is not a picture of God's plan for His people. God's plan looked more like what He revealed through Isaiah some years later. *O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD (Isaiah 2:5)*. Nor is a constant cycle of rebellion, discipline, repentance, fellowship, back to rebellion Jesus' plan for His people. Rather, Paul expressed our Lord's plan for us when he wrote, *Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord (Ephesians 5:6-10)*.

When we walk in the light of the Lord's truth, we are more likely to discern His will. If we walk in sin, because the Lord loves us as a father loves his children, He will discipline us. Divine discipline is not pleasant, but it does bring us back to the place where we can discern God's will. The pain of discipline is the will of God to help us listen to Him more carefully. We should be thankful and take great joy in the fact that the Lord reveals His will to us. Therefore, God's people really do lose sometimes. When we do, it is an opportunity to carefully consider if we are not walking in fellowship with the Lord.

Because of back-to-back losses to a much smaller army, the spirits of God's people were crushed. They were sincerely humiliated. *Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. And the people of Israel inquired of the LORD (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, ministered before it in those days) (vv.26-28a)*. Now the people were really serious about knowing God's will.

We cannot help but wonder if by this point God's people were figuring out that the loss of 40,000 of their friends and family members was the extreme to which God was willing to go in order to get the people's undivided attention. Now they realized that they were in this mess of a civil war against their brothers, which probably could have been avoided if they had not listened to the Levite who was out of God's will. Getting out of the mess was going to be even more painful.

Nevertheless, the people waited to hear from God. They inquired of Him, *saying, "Shall we go out once more to battle against our brothers, the people of Benjamin, or shall we cease?" And the LORD said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand" (v.28)*. But notice for the first time in the process that God promised to give the enemy into the Israelite's hand. Did it suddenly dawn on them as it does us that up to this point God did not promise victory when He told the people to go into battle? No doubt the people were much relieved knowing now that they would have victory over the enemy. Yes, but they should have been very sad knowing that the enemy was their brother.

Complete Disaster (vv.29-48).

On the third attack, God's people illustrated that careful planning yields success. Careful planning was lacking in the first two attacks. This time, even though the Lord promised success, the people planned for it. They planned an ambush much like other ambushes we read about in the Old Testament stories (vv.29-34). It makes one wonder why they waited until after the loss of 40,000 people.

We can be pretty sure that it is God's will for us to plan carefully before jumping into significant ministries or projects assuming they are God's will. Why wouldn't we plan carefully to do God's will? It is possible that we, like the Israelites who looked at overwhelming odds in their favor, might assume that careful planning isn't necessary. A sad reality about God's people is that our fleshly nature causes us to always look for the easy way out. That is sad because the easiest way out of almost any situation or challenge is to do nothing and blame the lack of results on the Lord. The next easiest way out is to jump into the matter without planning and blame God

for not leading. Far better to have great confidence in our Lord who expects us to count the cost before going to war.

Having confidence that God would deliver, His people laid down a good plan and it worked. It worked, not because the people were brilliant, but, because the Lord carried out His promise. *And the LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and the people of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day. All these were men who drew the sword (v.35).* Yes, the battle was a success. But what did the cost of over 40,000 Israelites and over 25,000 Benjaminites (total loss of 65,000) accomplish?

That the remnant of Benjaminites ran away seems insignificant at this point. But we will learn later how important it was that a remnant survived (v.45).

Ultimately, this was not really a victory for some of God's people over other of God's people. Rather it is a grim reminder that failure to follow God results in disaster. Because they were not in fellowship with God, Israel treated their brothers like pagans. *And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire (v.48).* God's people destroyed nearly the entire tribe of Benjamin. It wasn't bad enough that they killed 25,000 young men. They also killed men, women, beasts, and razed the towns. It was complete and utter destruction of their relatives, their fellow countrymen.

This is the kind of judgment God prescribed for Canaanites. God required this kind of annihilation of the Canaanites because they were thoroughly perverted people. But didn't the whole tribe of Benjamin try to defend people as perverted as the Canaanites? While this attack is very similar to Israel's attack against Ai (Joshua 7), it is even more destruction in that here they even killed the animals. What a horrible accomplishment!

We must wonder if the outcome would have been different if the people had been in fellowship with God. Would the offended Israelites have focused destruction only on Gibeah? Would they have tried to negotiate a settlement?

There are some important lessons taught in this sad story. Remember that the whole ugly story began with the statement that there was no king in Israel (19:1). Often the purpose of a king or

God-ordained ruler is simply to keep people from self-destruction. Sadly we learn in Israel's history that even under the leadership of kings, God's people still fought civil wars.

God's rule still is, *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good (1 Peter 2:13-14).* He desires for us to pray for rulers, *for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way (1 Timothy 2:2).* Even in our civilized cultures God has ordained that governing rulers are to keep peace even if through force. And yet as we experience increased sin and perversion in our culture, we discover that the rule of law is very limited.

Another lesson taught is that a person with a pretense of righteousness can do a lot of damage. No doubt the worthless men of Gibeah did a horrible thing and deserved to be punished. However, the Levite who was out of God's will had his own problems that he needed to deal with before calling out the army to gain personal vengeance. We all do well to consider ourselves while we help sinners deal with sin. As Jesus taught, specks and logs cause serious eye problems.

Sometimes God's will seems to be in conflict with God's will. Sin has turned everything in God's creation topsy-turvy. Sometimes when God chooses to deal with sin, the painful loss is hard to understand in light God's perfect character. For example, the God who forbids murder requires capital punishment for certain crimes. The Prince of Peace promised that He brought a sword of division between those who love and serve Him and those who do not. Such tension requires great faith in God.

Most important we learn from this story that when God's people insist on doing what is right in their own eyes, they create such a quagmire of confusion that it is difficult to understand what God is doing as He extracts His people from it. The best scenario is for us who name the name of God to submit our lives to Him and be busy going about to bring glory to Him through our works.