

“Corrupt Religion”
Judges 17
(Preached at Trinity, August 2, 2015)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we came to the end of **Chapter 16** we witnessed the death of the final judge of Israel. We read of the tragic end of Samson. He was chosen and consecrated from the womb, strengthened by God with great power, yet he did not treasure being set apart by God. Instead of being holy he was little different from the Philistines. What a warning to us regarding our own consecration. Can it be said of you that you are little different from those who do not profess Christ?
2. Now we come to the final five chapters of the Book of Judges. This is the third major section.
They are confusing and can be difficult to interpret. What was the narrator’s purpose in telling the story for us? It is made even more difficult because the narrator merely describes the events but provides no moral application at all.
3. We might be tempted to skip this last section altogether.
Dale Ralph Davis writes, “Indeed one can almost see those concerned creases wrinkling evangelical brows as they read Judges 17-18 and as their hearts whisper softly and tenderly that there is no need to wrestle with such Scripture when they can be meditating on Philippians.”
4. What we find here is the description of a nation that has now completely forsaken their God. While maintaining the outward symbols of religion it was nothing more than gross idolatry.
One important thing about these final chapters involves the chronology. Chronologically they take place at the beginning of Judges, not the end. These chapters take place almost 300 years before Samson. They take place shortly after the Book of Joshua, shortly after Israel pledged:
Joshua 24:15-16 NAU - "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." ¹⁶ The people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods;"
Joshua 24:19-25 NAU - "Then Joshua said to the people, "You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins. ²⁰ "If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you." ²¹ The people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the LORD." ²² Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses." ²³ "Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and we will obey His voice." ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem."

5. We see in **Chapters 17-21** that Israel soon forgot God. Every man was doing what was right in his own eyes without regard for what was right in God's eyes.
Judges 17:6 NAU - "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."
- A. God is the only one who determines what is right or wrong.
Judges 13:1 NAU - "Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, so that the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years."
 - B. God uses the standard of His Law. The Catechism states: "Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the Law of God." Israel was now seeking to establish their own standard.
 - C. This is also true of modern man. Modern man teaches that only you can define what is right or wrong for you. In other words, right in "my own eyes." There is no absolute standard.
6. In **Chapter 17** we are introduced to a young man named Micah. The Bible mentions several men by this name including the Prophet Micah. This Micah actually has a different name in the Hebrew—**מִיכָיְהוּ** *Mikayehu*, "who is like Yahweh"
- A. He is introduced as a young man who has stolen eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother—a sizable amount weighing about 150 lbs. Upon hearing her curse upon the thief he returns the silver and is forgiven. In fact, she praises him and he receives her blessing.
 - B. She dedicates two hundred pieces to have a graven image made in his honor. Micah then sets the image up in his home.
 - C. In just a few verses we find several of God's laws violated: Stealing, having no other gods, honoring father and mother, making graven images, setting up unaccredited priests. It would seem that they were indeed doing what was right in their own eyes.
 - D. The author's point seems to be that they were living in lawlessness. Without a king to rule over them there was no check on their lawlessness. This has wonderful Christological implications – without Christ human beings continue to be swallowed up in lawlessness.
 - E. Micah's lawlessness is demonstrated by his idolatry. The amazing thing is that most of it was done under the guise of religion. The Micah story is yet one more testimony to the syncretism that characterized Israel's worship of God. Remember, syncretism is the blending of other religions with the worship of the one true God.
 - F. It is also important to see that Micah's image and shrine was set up while the genuine was not far away in Shiloh
Judges 18:31 NAU - "So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh."
 The Tabernacle was set up in Shiloh up to the time of Samuel. The Ark was taken from Shiloh by Eli's sons into battle where it was lost to the Philistines.
7. This passage reminds us of corrupted religion; religion directed towards God that has become defiled.

- I. Corrupt religion can be zealous and sincere
- A. Micah was not lacking in religious zeal
1. His mother was zealous towards God
Judges 17:3 NAU - "I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you."
 The Hebrew form shows intensity. "I wholly dedicate"
 As with all corrupt religion, however, it is mixed with hypocrisy. She pledged all but gave only a portion.
 2. Micah set up a shrine unto God
 - a. He set up the silver idol as an object of worship
 - b. He made an ephod – this was the garment of the priest that held the urim and Thummim. It was designed to seek the will of God. But it was absolutely forbidden for an individual to do this. Gideon also committed this sin.
 - c. He also consecrated one of his sons as a priest.
 3. It should be noticed that Micah's religion had many elements of truth. This is always true with syncretism. There was an ephod and a priest. And he knew the special significance of the Levites. But after so many years of blending Yahweh with the pagan religions he could no longer recognize the truth. He had zeal void of truth.
 4. And religion void of truth has no substance and no strength. It can easily be lost.
 - a. This is the problem with the morality of most people. For some it is a borrowed morality passed down from previous generations but no longer rests upon the truth of Scripture. Such morality can easily be lost. For others it is a morality of sheer legalism. There is no grace, only the pride of external works.
 - b. Micah's idols would later be stolen. And being taken away Micah had nothing
Judges 18:24 NAU - "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and have gone away, and what do I have besides?"
- B. There are millions of people on the earth who are zealous for their religion
1. Micah was very zealous for his idols. His life was consumed with them. Zeal without truth has no value
 2. Multitudes today have zeal without Christ. Zeal without Christ has no value at all.
 3. If we reject God and His Word there is no end to the corruption that will result. And all the while we will think we are doing the right thing – that which is right in our own heart.
- II. Corrupt religion is molded after the human imagination
- A. We can only imagine what Micah's image looked like
1. It was supposed to be a representation of Jehovah
 - a. It was most likely in the form common to the pagans around him
 - b. We do know it was pleasing to Micah. His heart was enflamed by it. He was doing what was right in his own eyes.

2. It was no more than a god created in his own mind
 3. We won't question his zeal. But it was a zeal without knowledge
 4. It was religion shrouded in sacramentalism. In other words, believing that conformity to religious externals would command Divine approval.
Judges 17:13 NAU - "Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest."
 5. It should be noted how easily his idol was taken from him. His worship offered him no security and no protection.
Judges 18:17 NAU - "Now the five men who went to spy out the land went up *and* entered there, *and* took the graven image and the ephod and household idols and the molten image, while the priest stood by the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men armed with weapons of war."
 6. Micah was enraged but helpless. His god could not help him. He had to return home empty-handed.
Isaiah 46:6-7 NAU - "Those who lavish gold from the purse And weigh silver on the scale Hire a goldsmith, and he makes it *into* a god; They bow down, indeed they worship it. ⁷ "They lift it upon the shoulder *and* carry it; They set it in its place and it stands *there*. It does not move from its place. Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer; It cannot deliver him from his distress."
- B. Israel's religion had become empty.
1. Israel had forsaken God and God had given them over to their vain imaginations. Micah's image was tied to this earth – something to gaze upon, something to touch, something tangible.
 2. But it denied the truth about God
 - a. God forbids the setting up of idols of the imagination
Exodus 20:4-5 NAU - "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵ "You shall not worship them or serve them"
 - b. Micah changed the truth of God for a lie
Romans 1:25 NAU - "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."
 3. Multitudes today have created their own religion—a form of religion void of its power.
 - a. They have created a god in their own mind and call it Jehovah or even Jesus but it isn't the God of the Bible. They have refashioned God into a friendly God who is all love without judgment.
 - b. They create a God who accepts all people as they are denying the demand for repentance
This is why we have homosexual churches
- C. This is why we have to be so careful with our worship
1. We are prone to come up with our own ideas – God will not allow it.
Exodus 20:25 NAU - "If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it."

2. This is why the regulative principle is so important. What is our standard for worship?
LBC 22:5 (Of Religious Worship and the Lord's Day) - "The light of nature shews that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is just, good and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures."
LBC 22:5 - "The reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as also the administration of baptism, and the Lord's supper, are all parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear; moreover, solemn humiliation, with fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner."
3. Dale Ralph Davis – "The contemporary mood (*is*) that worship is actually a very individual affair, a matter of sheer personal preference, and – like our toothbrush – a very personal thing? To declare that faith, worship, and religion are rather regulated by royal revelation and subject of sovereign prescriptions sounds like a novel idea."
4. Whether it sounds novel or not, we must worship God in the way He has prescribed, and in no other way.

III. Corrupt religion is always without grace

- A. Micah saw God as one to be bribed
 1. This was also the heart of his mother – she dedicated a portion of her silver in order to court God's favor thinking God could be bribed with her gift.
 2. **Verse 5** speaks of Micah's shrine, his ephod and his idols. He consecrated his son as a priest but later he acquired a Levite. **Verse 13** reveals his motive: **Judges 17:13 NAU** - "Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest."
 3. Micah's religion hinged upon his outward acts. Later his Levite priest stole his ephod and household idols and went with the army of the Danites. Micah cried out: **Judges 18:24 NAU** - "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and have gone away, and what do I have besides? So how can you say to me, 'What is *the matter* with you?'"
 4. It wasn't about God or of being the people of God. It was about who had the images.
- B. Too often members of Christian churches are busy doing religious acts but they do not love God. They set up rules of behavior and are very critical of those who don't follow their rules, but there is no love for Christ. .
 1. Many religious men pretend to love the ways of God.
 - a. They love the outward ornaments of religion – being a member of a particular church. Going to church and appearing pious.

- b. They often love to talk religion. They discuss doctrines – reformed doctrine, eschatology, Charismatic gifts.
 - c. They are often very diligent in every ritual according to the commandments of men – ashes on Ash Wednesday, they bring home a palm, they possess their holy water, they are proud of their icons
 - d. Or good Baptists doing all the churchy things – but no love
 - 2. They fail to recognize the grace of God. God can't be bought. You can't earn His favor. He freely gives.
- C. Religion has a tranquilizing effect. It makes us feel better. Micah's idols and shrine and consecrated priest made him feel accepted by God.
- 1. Mere religion makes us feel acceptable to God.
 - 2. Proper lighting can set the mood. The music can soothe the soul
 - 3. Satan has always used religion as his chief instrument because it blinds people to their true need for God.
 - a. He can be very convincing. Most people think they are right with God because they have some involvement with a church.
 - b. In every generation Satan has raised up false teachers to spread his lies
 - 4. Religious men can be among the most cruel
 - a. Most of the martyrs in *Foxes Book of Martyrs* died at the hands of religious men. William Tyndale died at the hands of religious men because he translated the Scriptures
 - b. Many churches today are torn apart at the hands of religious men
- D. We need to be cautious in our own church
- 1. There are many things in our church that can degenerate to religious ritual. We gather at the appointed time for worship - prayer, hymns, preaching. It can be a common experience – religious traditions void of God. Do you enter with a sense of awe?
 - 2. Our worship can become void of the presence of God. We must not over stress the importance of preparing ourselves for coming to worship
 - 3. And we can begin to devour one another with pseudo-pious pride that is void of truth, love, or grace.
 - 4. And we must not overlook that corrupt religion is generational. Micah learned his corrupt religion from his mother and then made his son his priest, thus continuing the religious corruption to the next generation.

Conclusion:

1. Judges 17-18 shows us Israel fallen into idolatrous decay. And it all seems right in their own eyes. They had an idol and they had a priest. **Verse 30 of Chapter 18** is disturbing. **Judges 18:30 NAU** - "The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land."
 - a. Gershom was the son of Moses which is the way many Hebrew manuscripts read. NASB & KJV translate "Manasseh" but CSV, ESV, NIV: "Moses." This means that it was Moses' grandson who set up the idol for the tribe of Dan.
 - b. The danger is always before us.
2. We need to erase our minds of ritualistic, tradition filled religion.
 - a. The cure for false religion is always Christ. He destroys the syncretistic practices of modern cultural Christianity. He says, Forsake all, Look to Me, follow Me." **Luke 9:23-24 NAU** - "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. ²⁴ "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."
 - b. And Jesus says, "I am the way . . ."
We need to examine our hearts. It has never been our external deeds that make us acceptable to God but the inward change wrought by Christ.
3. Christianity is not just a religion. It is a relationship. This relationship with Christ focuses all attention upon Him.
4. Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.
We have a King!

Westminster Larger Catechism:

45. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

Answer: "Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself,¹ and giving them officers,² laws,³ and censures, by which he visibly governs them;⁴ in bestowing saving grace upon his elect,⁵ rewarding their obedience,⁶ and correcting them for their sins,⁷ preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings,⁸ restraining and overcoming all their enemies,⁹ and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory,¹⁰ and their good;¹¹ and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel."