

Judges 17-18
Psalm 128
1 Peter 2:1-25

“In Those Days There Was No King in Israel”

September 19, 2021

We saw last time that Moses applies the fifth commandment
to judges, kings, and elders –
in other words, both to religious and political authorities.

And we saw from Paul in Ephesians 5-6,
we ought to have a general disposition towards submission.
Our basic inclination *should be* obedience to those who are over us –
and self-denying concern for those under our care.

Pretty obviously that is *not* the picture in Judges 17-18!

I have changed the scripture readings and outline for today.
I realized that as I look at the situation in our world today,
I would not be a faithful watchman if I preached on the Fifth Commandment
without addressing one of the fundamental problems in American culture.

To use the words of Judges,
“In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Our individualistic culture has run roughshod over the Fifth Commandment –
despising our parents,
despising our rulers,
despising all those in authority except for the ones that we like!
(which means that we will only obey them insofar as they agree with us –
which means we are not really obeying them – we are obeying ourselves).

And our society caters to this!
You can find an authority who says whatever you want!
You see this is politics, education, medicine –
but I’ll stick to an example from what I know best – the church.

I often get calls from friends or acquaintances
asking for advice on matters of church polity – church order.
Usually, the way they frame the question tells me what advice they want me to give!

One time I really wanted to give the advice they wanted!
But I knew enough about the situation to realize that what they wanted
was the easy way –
a simple solution in which everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

And so I told them, No, I think that the right way to walk is the hard way.
In their case, submission to their elders meant not walking away –
but humbly bringing a complaint and seeking to make the situation right.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 128 –
a song which depicts the blessings of a life that is lived in harmony with God's law!
When we walk in the ways of the LORD,
then we (as a community) can expect to see God's blessing.

And if you think about – it makes sense.
If you live the way that God made us to live,
then you will generally be living in harmony
with God, neighbor, self, and all creation.
Of course, the one person in all of history who did that perfectly was Jesus.

Some might say – yeah, and look where that got him!
Yes, it got him crucified.

But more than that, it got him raised from the dead
and seated at the right hand of the Father!

The Christian ethic is never simply an ethic of the cross!
It is always an ethic of the resurrection!

Sing Psalm 128
Read 1 Peter 2:1-25

Peter assumes that suffering is a part of life.
Everyone will suffer.

But if you suffer for doing something stupid – that's not sharing in the sufferings of Christ!
“But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure,
this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.”

You endure what?
A beating.

Peter is talking to servants – to slaves – and saying,
if your master beats you for doing good,
and you endure – suffering patiently –
that is a gracious thing!

I've always encouraged you to be the sort of the people that *complains well* –
that seeks to bring change where change is needed!
And that's entirely consistent with what Peter is saying here.

But in order to complain well,
 you have to have the sort of mindset that Peter is talking about!
If your mindset is based on “I have my rights!”
 then you are not going to be an obedient person.
But if you are an obedient person –
 then you will tend to be the sort of person that others can hear well.

We’ll end back here with Peter –
 but I’d like for us to spend some time first in Judges 17-18.

What’s going on in this story of Micah and his Levite from Bethlehem in Judah?

We could start by saying: Sin has consequences.
 There was once a man who stole a large amount of silver from his mother,
 and the end result was that a whole tribe set up an idol.
If you don’t repent of your sin, then it will only get worse,
 and it can snowball into a problem of epic proportions.
On the surface, that appears to be the point of Judges 17-18.

It is certainly true.
 But there is more to this story!

In one sense this story is pretty gloomy.
 It is a story that only gets worse and worse.
 Sin and apostasy is met with sin and apostasy.
 There is no one who does good.
 No one who understands.
 No one who seeks after God.
 They all have gone astray, each one to his own way.

1. Micah and His Mother (17:1-6)

You see this in Micah and his mother.
 Micah means “Who is like Yahweh?”
 The answer being—no one—especially no one in *this* story!

Micah comes to his mother and says (v2) – yeah, that silver that you cursed –
 I was the one who took it!

1100 shekels is a lot of silver,
 and for those who are paying close attention to the story of Judges,
 it the same amount given by each Philistine lord to Delilah,
 as the price for betraying Samson in the previous chapter.

Whether his mother is actually Delilah or not –

you are supposed to think of her in the context of Delilah –
the woman who betrayed Samson to his enemies.
She is a “Delilah-sort-of-woman”!
Like everyone else in our story – she does what is right in her own eyes!

But notice why he comes to her.
He feared the curse of his mother,
and so he returns the silver in order to escape her curse,
and then his mother blesses him (to undo the curse).

And she consecrates the silver to Yahweh,
but rather than take all of it to the tabernacle at Shiloh,
she uses 200 shekels to make an image and an idol.
(this refers to the process: a piece of wood would be carved,
and then overlaid with silver)
And so Micah takes the image, puts it in his household shrine,
and consecrates one of his sons as a priest.

You can easily see the ambiguity of his sense of the Fifth Commandment.
He didn’t honor his mother when he stole her silver –
but he fears her curse – so he fesses up!

Isn’t this how we operate so often?
We only honor and obey upon the threat of judgment!

Our Larger Catechism asks:

Q. 127. *What is the honor that inferiors owe to their superiors?*

A. The honor which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defense, and maintenance of their persons and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love, that so they may be an honor to them and to their government.

Micah dishonored his mother when he stole from her –
but he also dishonored her when he accepted the idol from her!

I realize that this is a fairly obvious one,
but if your mother ever makes an idol and gives it to you –
you need to say “NO!”

But instead, Micah adds to his sin by consecrating one of his sons as his priest!

All of this is obviously in violation of all sorts of God’s laws!
And so we hear that “in those days there was no king in Israel.
Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Samson had insisted on doing what was right in his own eyes.
And now we see that all Israel is becoming what Samson was.

And even though this is a history book, it is also a sermon.
Verse 6 is not meant to be simply a description of the times,
it is also a reminder and a warning to us!

Too often, we are too like the Israelites.
We run along on our own path, doing what is right in our own eyes.
What Judges is saying is that we need a king.
We need a king who will do what is right in God's eyes.
And, what is more,
we need a king who will lead *us* to do what is right in God's eyes.

But our story continues:

2. Micah and the Levite from Bethlehem in Judah (17:7-13)

Because there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah,
who was a Levite, and he sojourned there.

Notice how in three times in three verses the text emphasizes that he is
from "Bethlehem in Judah." (verses 7, 8, and 9)

This sounds promising, because throughout the book of Judges, God is with Judah,
and when Judah leads, good things happen—
though the people of Judah did not follow Samson,
but handed him over to the Philistines.
One might almost think that this is a great possibility for a type of Christ—
the only character in the OT who combines Judahite and Levite descent!

But this Levite from Bethlehem in Judah comes to the hill country of Ephraim and meets Micah.
And when Micah discovers that he is looking for "a place"
he offers him the local priesthood.

So Micah ordains the Levite from Bethlehem in Judah as his priest, declaring,
"Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest."

Never mind that I stole from my mother.
Never mind that I made a graven image.
Never mind that I established a shrine with household gods.
Now I know that Yahweh will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest.

Beware of this sort of magical thinking.
"God will bless me because I read my Bible every morning"

–when you treat your co-workers like dirt...
“God will bless me because I have family worship every night”
–when you then ignore God *and your children* for the rest of the day...

Our Larger Catechism also asks:

Q. 129. *What is required of superiors towards their inferiors?*

A. It is required of superiors, according to that power they receive from God, and that relation wherein they stand, to love, pray for, and bless their inferiors; to instruct, counsel, and admonish them; countenancing, commending, and rewarding such as do well; and discountenancing, reproving, and chastising such as do ill; protecting, and providing for them all things necessary for soul and body: and by grave, wise, holy, and exemplary carriage, to procure glory to God, honor to themselves, and so to preserve that authority which God hath put upon them.

That’s what a godly superior looks like!

3. The Danites and the Levite from Bethlehem in Judah (18:1-20)

But in those days there was no king in Israel,
and in those days the people of Dan were seeking an inheritance. (Ch 18)

What?

Hadn’t God given them their inheritance?

Their lot was apportioned to the south and west, next to Judah.

But as the Samson narrative shows us,

the Philistines ruled in that region,

and so the Danites were unable to take possession of their inheritance.

So, abandoning the inheritance promised by God,

the Danites decided to take matters into their own hands and find a new home.

They were not seeking a heavenly country (Heb 11) but an earthly one.

So they sent five “able men” in order to spy out the land (echoes of Caleb and Joshua)

But their spiritual discernment is far from that of Caleb and Joshua!

As they come to the hill country of Ephraim, they pass by Micah’s house
and hear the voice of the Levite from Bethlehem in Judah.

Either they knew him (since the Danites were living in the territory of Judah),
or else they recognized his accent.

But either way, they recognized his voice and asked him what he was doing.

He replied (in effect), “I’m a hired priest.”

With a so-called priest of God before them, they immediately seek his guidance.

“Inquire of God, please” will we succeed?
And this quasi-priest of an idolatrous and apostate household declares a blessing:
“Shalom” go in peace.
“The journey on which you go is under the eye of Yahweh.”

They take this as God’s blessing on their journey—they go and spy out the valley of Laish,
and they return home giving the report of Caleb and Joshua:
“God has given it into your hands,
a place where there is no lack of anything that is in the earth.”

So 600 men set out from Dan to attack Laish.

Notice how Laish is portrayed in the account:

“Quiet and unsuspecting” (18:7, 27) with “no deliverer” (18:28) because the Sidonians
were far away and apparently uninterested in this remote outpost.

The people of Laish are the most sympathetic characters in the story.

Why is the narrator sympathetic to Laish?

They are Canaanites!

According to the command of God, they were to be destroyed!

But Israel is worse.

The Danites are living in rebellion against God,

refusing to be content with their own inheritance,

and turning to idolatry, they are now worse than the Canaanites!

And so the Canaanite city of Laish becomes the “good guy” in our story!

But before coming to Laish,
the 600 men stop at Micah’s house and take the Levite with them (verses 14-20).

Which would you rather be, the pastor of a house church, or a megachurch?

4. Micah and the Danites (18:21-31)

When Micah discovers this, he pursued the 600 Danites with a company of neighbors.

In response the Danites asked (v23)

Micah’s response is pathetic:

“You take my gods that I made and the priest, and go away,
and what have I left?”

This is utter stupidity.

You would think that Micah could figure it out for himself!

But that is what idolatry does—
it turns us into fools.

Any time you find yourself turning to idols—making something else more important
than the living God,

ask yourself, “what lie am I believing?”

Because every sin is based on a lie.

But the Danites do not respond in a godly fashion either.
They threaten him with death and move on.

The 600 troops from Zorah and Eshtaol (Samson's home turf) are able to take the city of Laish,
when the entire tribe had been unable to take the smaller towns in their proper territory

This would appear to be God's blessing upon Dan.
After all, throughout Judges whenever the people sin,
disaster comes upon them.
Here, the people sin, and God blesses them!

Why would God bless an apostate and rebellious tribe?
These last two stories in the book of Judges
are focused around characters from Bethlehem in Judah.
Even in the midst of apostasy and idolatry,
God's blessing is on Bethlehem in Judah.
There is something about Bethlehem in Judah that should cause you to take note.

In those days there was no king in Israel.
We need a king—we need a king from Bethlehem in Judah.
Because even when everything else is going wrong,
God's blessing remains upon the man from Bethlehem.

And did you notice who this Levite from Bethlehem in Judah is?
He is Jonathan the son of Gershom the son of Moses.
Even the grandson of Moses has become corrupt.
There is none righteous—not even one!

This is also a good place to point out that God's blessing
often still attends the ministry of corrupt preachers.
It is not a man's personal character that determines whether God will use him.

God had called Jonathan to be his servant,
and even though Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses
was an idolatrous priest,
he was still God's servant, and God's blessing came through his mouth.
Those who minister in the name of the King from Bethlehem in Judah
are used by God regardless of their personal character.

Now that does *not* mean that their wickedness is shorn of consequences.
Grievous evil comes to Dan and all Israel because of the sin of Micah and Jonathan.
The carved image was set up at Dan,

and Jonathan's heirs were priests in Dan until the captivity of the land.

Idolatry and apostasy results in judgment.

An apostate church will not stand.

God may temporarily bless and provide apparent success,

but in the end, God will judge the wicked church and bring it to destruction.

This is why we need King Jesus.

Jesus Christ alone is Lord and head of the church.

Where now are the grandsons of John Calvin?

Where now are the heirs of Martin Luther?

Rome has tried to guarantee fidelity through an unbroken succession of bishops,
but no earthly line, no merely human order,

can withstand the cycle of the book of Judges.

We need a King who will not only do what is right in God's eyes,

we need a King who will lead us to do what is right in God's eyes as well.

Judges tells us to look for that King in Bethlehem of Judah,

for there God's blessing will come upon a weak and sinful race,

when God raises up a man after his own heart.

The apostle Peter then speaks to us as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation."

But then he reminds us that we are "sojourners and exiles" here.

Peter is writing to those who dwelt in the Roman empire.

Rome is not your home.

America is not your home.

You are a holy nation – Rome never was. America never was – or will be!

When Peter was writing, the emperor was Nero.

Even before he went crazy, Nero was not exactly a "kind" ruler.

Indeed, it would have been easy for Peter to argue that the emperors were usurpers –
and not the rightful rulers of Rome!

If you went by Rome's written constitution,

Rome was a republic! – and the emperors had no right to rule!

But that's not what Peter says.

Peter is not interested in whether Nero was a rightful emperor.

Nero was the emperor!

And so Peter says "be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" –

honoring the emperor and submitting to the governors sent by him.

What did that mean?

Well, for one, it would mean not wearing a purple toga.

Purple dye was very expensive,
and so wearing a purple toga was reserved for the emperor.
In fact, Roman law insisted that everyone should dress “according to their station”
so how you dressed would be included in “honor the emperor.”

Peter does not say that you only need to obey those laws that seem good to you.
He says that you need to be subject – for the Lord’s sake – to every human institution.
(that is, every institution ordained for man –
the implication here is that *God* has established these institutions for us).
And he did this *for our good*.

And – what is more – the governors sent by Nero – are sent by him
“to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” (v14)

That is what human magistrates are supposed to do.
And so – whether you are living under Nero, under President Biden,
under the Chinese Communist Party – or anywhere else! –
Peter tells you that magistrates are there to punish those who do evil
and to praise those who do good.

And *for the most part* – that is what they do.
Occasionally they will punish those who do good
and reward those who do evil.
But when that happens – do not be afraid –
but trust God, because he will deal with it!

And Peter says that “this is the will of God,
that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.” (v15)

I’m sure that some modern folks would say,
“insisting that only the emperor can wear a purple toga is idolatrous –
therefore Christians should wear purple togas in obedience to God!”

Peter would shake his head and say,
“Live as people who are free,
not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil,
but living as servants of God.” (v16)

Rather than always thinking the worst of others –
use charity in your interpretation of others!
If there is a charitable construction of someone’s words –
use it!

That’s what it means to:

“Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”

Your freedom is not to be used for yourself.

Our catechism also asks:

Q. 131. *What are the duties of equals?*

A. The duties of equals are, to regard the dignity and worth of each other, in giving honor to go one before another; and to rejoice in each others' gifts and advancement, as their own.

Q. 132. *What are the sins of equals?*

A. The sins of equals are, besides the neglect of the duties required, the undervaluing of the worth, envying the gifts, grieving at the advancement or prosperity one of another; and usurping preeminence one over another.

You see – even if you want to level everyone to the status of equals –
you cannot escape the Fifth Commandment!

In Peter’s words, you must *honor everyone!*

And to honor someone is to prefer them to yourself.

To honor someone is to regard them as more important than yourself.

Every time I undervalue someone – I am sinning against them.

Every time I wish that I had got that honor – I am diminishing them.

And in doing so – we are saying that God’s gifts are worthless.

And we begin a vicious cycle of tearing each down.

We dishonor God when we dishonor those made in his image.

But here’s the beauty of it!

When we rejoice in each other’s gifts and advancement,
when we honor them and value them –
we create a virtuous cycle of love and praise.

Because – ultimately – we are praising *God* for the gifts that he has given.

Here’s our problem:

Because we only submit to those with whom we agree,
Americans have created alternate universes on parallel tracks.

You can find politicians, news sources, doctors, pastors – you name it! –
all of whom will confirm your own opinions
and encourage you to do what you want.

If you want to cut off some body parts and add some new ones,
you can find a doctor who will tell you that’s a wonderful idea!

People have figured out that there is a lot of money to be made
by telling people what they want to hear.

What I'm telling you is that that approach has been tried before –
and it is a one way ticket to destruction!

The only way out of the echo chamber is to listen to Jesus-
the true King from Bethlehem.

And if you do good and suffer for it – what then?
This is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

Peter says that unjust suffering is a gracious gift from God!

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you,
leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps....

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,
that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed.

For you were straying like sheep,

but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” (v21, 24-25)

When you trust Jesus – when you are confident that *he knows* what he is doing –
then you can stop worrying about what others are doing!