

Title: “‘As Long As It Works For You’ Doesn’t Work”  
Text: Judges 17-18  
Theme: We can’t save ourselves  
Series: Judges  
Prop Stmtnt: The people of God need Christ as much as anyone else.

Back in the day (whenever that was) many educational institutions used to have a Baccalaureate Service and then (usually the next day) the Commencement Program as part of the Graduation Exercises. The Baccalaureate Service included hymn singing and a sermon. Since we would not want you to feel cheated in anyway of your graduation celebration and recognizing that most schools have long since gotten rid of the Baccalaureate Service, we thought that we would give you one. Therefore, the sermon this morning is for you. And when I say “for” (the sermon is FOR you) I mean it is intended to be of genuine help in terms of instruction, preparation, challenge and encouragement.

The text for this sermon is Judges 17 and 18. Judges 17 is a personal story that happened in an isolated place that gives us a window into how people were thinking and living at the time of the Judges. Judges 18 says, here is how that seemingly personal account became a factor in a much bigger story that affected an entire tribe and therefore the nation. So, 17 is personal and 18 is very public. What happens privately affects what happens publicly. The line between our private lives and our public lives is rather blurry since so many of us use social media to announce publicly what is going on privately. That comes at a cost. For example. Let’s say that something rather personal and therefore very important happens to you at school, or at church. Somebody says something to you or about you. In those moments, some of you would like to retreat. You would like to get alone and decompress and try to think through what just happened. Perhaps, you would like to talk to one of your parents, or a sibling or a close friend. One of the things you hear thrown around is the concept of creating a “safe place.” If you are connected to social media, there is no such thing as a safe place. If you have a cell phone and other people know your cell #, there is no safe place. You cannot leave the audience and go to your room and shut the door. You are at the mercy of people texting you, and posting about you, even putting up videos of you, none of which you can control. All of that is an intrusion into your life. What others perceive about you is an enormous weight that many of you carry.

Therefore, you feel the challenge of managing the perceptions and expectations of others in order to be liked, to be respected, or at least be tolerated and to be successful – whatever that is. So, what are the perceptions and expectations of others? What does your world expect of you? What are you supposed to be? If you are looking to your world for affirmation, for direction, or for definition, you are setting yourself up for enormous frustration. Our world is trying to champion 50 shades of grey and the “me too” movement all at the same time. What do you do with that? Your world is constantly offended and offensive. The expectations and opinions of others not only judge you, they condemn you. You are told, “be yourself” unless the self you choose to be is not the self that I approve of. This is crazy! What is this?

Philosophy has termed our era as: post-modernism (after the era of modernism). We live during a time that is marked by skepticism (you may be saying, “I don’t know about that.”), subjectivism (that may be how you see it), relativism (hey, whatever works for you) and a general sense of

suspicion of reason or anyone who claims to have the answers. But, post-modernism is not post nor modern. It is on full display in the book of Judges and particularly here in 17 and 18. So, chapter 17 is the personal story of a person who makes up his own rules. Chapter 18 is the story of how this works in life.

1. **What happens when I make up my own rules?** Judges 17

This is the account of Judges 17, although this little story of this seemingly unknown and insignificant family, starts off with some unusual, but yet promising features.

The man of the hill country in Ephraim is named Micah. Micah means, “Who is like Yahweh?” It sounds like his parents were devoted to Yahweh and resisted the Baal worship that was going on all around them. This guy, Micah admits to his mom that he stole 1,100 pieces of silver from her. Last week, we noted that Delilah was given 1,100 pieces of silver from each of the 5 city/state kings for her role in discovering the source of Samson’s strength. We noted that 1,100 pieces of silver is an enormous sum of money. So, this guy steals all of this money from his mom, but then admits it and promises to give it back. Again, so far, so good. His mom, who pronounced a curse on the person who stole the money, now blesses the LORD because her son restored the money, which is also probably her attempt at asking the LORD to remove the curse.

But then things get really squirrely in v.3. She dedicates the money to the LORD for her son to make a carved image and a metal image. So, after he gives her the money back that he stole, she takes a chunk of it (200 pieces) and gives it to a silversmith who makes a metal image and a carved image for her, which ended up being for Micah.

Micah sounds like a religious guy. However, when you look at the text carefully, I think it would be better to say, superstitious. In fact, it doesn’t sound like he returned the money because he actually felt guilty about it. He was afraid of the curse that his mother said. Look at v.5. V. 5 says that he had a shrine (an area inside or outside of his house) he has an ephod (a special garment worn by a priest) and he has some household gods. Then he ordains one of his sons who became his priest. So, in blatant violation of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> commandments, he has other gods and he has idols. He is a thief and instead of worshipping Yahweh at the Tabernacle, he makes his own shrine and creates his own priest. It’s a whole lot more convenient. And yet, what is missing? Even though he has taken matters in his own hands, he has no security. Micah is very superstitious because he is so fearful. And with good reason. You get the sense that he is trying anything and everything to “cover his bases.” He’s like the taxi cab drivers in India I met. They had a cross, an Islam crescent and a Hindu god on the dashboard. We got it covered. I don’t care who I follow as long as I make money and my car doesn’t die. That is what is going on here. I want to be blessed. I want to make money. I want to be protected and I don’t really care about these gods, I really only care about myself. So, by the time we get to the end of v.5, our heads are spinning. Mom and Micah certainly have a measure of sincerity to them, and are respectful of Yahweh, but their actions are pagan. The fact that they don’t know who wrong they are, does not make their actions any less wrong.

You’ve seen those little scenes where you are supposed to point out – what is wrong with this picture. In this case, we’re almost speechless. It is not just what is wrong with this, but this is SO

bad, we have a difficult time trying to find anything right with it. This is crazy! This is insane! This is absurd! But not to them. They see nothing wrong with what they are thinking and doing. They are very matter of fact and actually rather casual and business as usual about the whole thing. But you cannot worship Yahweh through the use of an idol. No OT Israelite had the authority to designate whoever he or she wanted to be a priest. Only Levites could be priests, not Ephraimites and the Levites who were priests were priests for the nation, not for a family. What is Micah doing? He is making up his own rules. He's taking a little bit of the language of Yahweh and mixing it with the practices of Baal and other deities and is stirring it all together, warms it up in the microwave and is serving it. What is this? V. 6 tells us. Everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes. This is what works for me. Doing whatever works for you, is simply the idea of I am God and I make the rules.

Last Wednesday night, we had a presentation on how to think through and address the issue of abortion. The jaw dropping moment for me was listening to an abortion physician say that he was killing babies in the name of Jesus. This was his mission from God. Now, most of us, went, "What?! Are you kidding me? You cannot kill babies in the name of Jesus." Actually, you can if you get to make your own rules. But, if Jesus makes the rules, then of course, you can't and just saying that you do, doesn't make it right. The issue is, who makes the rules.

Chapter 17 is rather short. The second half adds another element to the story that really becomes significant in chapter 18. At this point we don't know that. All that we know is that Micah is trying to get his best life now by finding some god that he can manipulate to give him what he wants. He has built a shrine. He has made his own gods. He has made his own priest. He has given the priest his own clothes. And life is great – right?

Well, not exactly. A young man from the tribe of Levi had been living in Bethlehem in Judah and decides to go out on his own. He meets Micah who finds out that he was a Levite. Well, to Micah, having your own Levite is a little more legit than making your son your priest. Micah clearly has some doubts about his little system. His efforts are not good enough. Maybe if he had his own Levite, it would be better. So, he offers this young man a job. Stay here and be my priest and be like a father to me. I.e. tell me what I need to do. Give me counsel. I will pay you 10 pieces of silver a year. You get room and board and I get a priest. Look at the final phrase of chapter 17. "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as a priest."

There are two very revealing ideas in that statement. The one is how insecure Micah is. He doesn't know where he stands. The other is, how he is trying to use Yahweh to get what he wants. Yahweh is his servant whom he is trying to get to do his bidding. And what is worse, is that the Levite who was supposed to teach the law is now lending his influence to Micah and instead of challenging Micah is only reinforcing his idolatry. The Levite gets "security" from Micah and Micah gets "security" from the Levite. Or do they?

Let's pull off to the side of the road for a minute. I do not assume that each of you are followers of Christ. If you are not a follower of Christ, you live with a tremendous of insecurity. You do not know what to believe. You do not who to believe. You do not know who you are. You do not know what is going to happen to you. You want to find what "works" for you, but you never really know if it does. You are in a very confusing place and you live in a very confusing world.

For those of you who are followers of Christ, what I have just described is your world. It is woefully inconsistent. This is the world that champions the rights of women to murder baby girls. What I want you to see is how empty and sad that world is. When you look at Christianity you see rules and structure. And you are right. There are rules because God is the ruler. And those rules are there to make it clear that we are not in charge, God is. Do not apologize for that. Let me explain it this way.

There are two girls: One is Kristie, the other is Karie. They are friends and they are at a party. At 11.00p Karie gets a text from her dad that says, "Don't forget who you are. Be wise, be careful, be safe and be home by midnight. I love you." Kristie says, "Who was that?" Karie says, "Oh that just my dad telling me that I have to be home by midnight. He is so controlling." Kristie says, "Do you know what I would give to have a dad like that?"

The freedom of no rules, comes with the price of no security. Christianity is defined by Christ and the gospel. Those are the walls that we cannot breach nor not tear down. While you may focus on the walls, don't forget that inside is a playground. Judges is about a people who have no walls and therefore no playground. You cannot play tag on the merry go round, when cheetahs are trying to kill you.

## 2. What happens when everyone makes up their own rules? – Judges 18

Judges 18 tells the story of what happens when you make up your own rules and you try to live with everyone else who makes up their own rules as well? Look at how the chapter begins. "In those days there was no king in Israel." The author is reminding us that people are living as if there are no rules.

There are certain third world countries that have no traffic laws. How do you think that works? It's great if you are the only car on the road. But, what happens when there is another and another and another? So, in that sense, chapter 17 is Micah driving as the only car on the road. It appears to be fine. Chapter 18 is what happens when Micah runs into some other drivers.

The story of Micah took place early on the era of the Judges. The tribe of Dan had not found their own territory where they could live, yet. Way back at the beginning of this book we read the discouraging news that instead of taking the land that God had given to them, that the Danites were defeated by the Amorites and were left without any of the land that had originally been allotted to them. So, they send a scouting expedition (5 spies) out to see if they could find another place that would suit them. This is not how it is supposed to be. These 5 guys happen upon Micah's place and they stop in for some conversation, and probably some food and rest. They recognized the Levite and asked him what he was doing there and he told them. In fact, the entire conversation between the two reveals that the Levite sees no problem with his apostasy and they see no problem with their disobedience. So, they asked him to inquire of God as to whether or not their mission would be successful. The young Levite assures them that they will be successful, although there is no indication that he actually inquired of God for them. In fact, the expedition is a tacit admission that they have failed to trust God and do what he has commanded them. These guys are as superstitious as Micah.

The Levite is clearly wrong, but no one calls him out on it and the men from Dan are wrong but he doesn't say anything to them. It is likely, that in exchange for his intercession, that they give him some money. You know if you pay off the religious guy, God will smile on you, right? Isn't that how it works? You can bribe God, right?

So, the 5 guys do indeed find some land that was suited and spacious and what is more, the people who lived there did not have walled cities but were unprotected. So the spies hurried home and told the rest about it and with a sense of urgency said, "we've got to go now before someone else takes it or they suspect us." Well, it doesn't sound like they were too successful. Most refused to go with them. But they did manage to amass a small army of about 600 soldiers and off they go. On their way, the 5 spies tell the rest of the group about this Levite and the idols and shrine. Well, they need all of the good luck they can get, so they go to Micah's house while Micah is not home and while the 600 men engage the Levite in some conversation, the 5 spies walk in and simply take the gods. The author emphasizes the fact that these 600 men are armed with weapons of war. So, here is the Levite watching as the 5 spies take all of his gods.

Listen, you know that it is a bad day at school or at work when someone steals your gods. So, the Levite is freaking out. And they threaten him and tell him to shut up. In fact, they tell him that he ought to come with them. Well, since they just basically dismantled the shrine, he might as well. Besides, they say, why be a priest to one family when you can be the priest to an entire tribe? A little more prestige – right? So, he agrees and off he goes.

These idols are treated like magic rocks with special powers. The soldiers put them in the front so that if anyone comes chasing them, they will run into the soldiers first, which is exactly what happens. Micah and his neighbors are outraged that someone has stolen their gods, so they go on a mission to get them back. They catch the people of Dan who turn around and say, "What is the problem?" Micah is apoplectic! You stinking stole my gods and stole my priest and you want to know what my problem is? The Danites said, "hey you'd better get a grip on yourself otherwise there are some unpredictable characters around here who might get angry with you and kill you and your household and you wouldn't want that to happen – right? Micah realizes that they are too big for him, so he concedes defeat and goes back home.

What happened? The man who made his own rules collided with others who made their own rules because their rules did not agree. Without a rule maker or rule-enforcer, then whoever has the power in the moment, gets to make the rules. But whoever has the power is always at the mercy of someone else who has more power.

The Danites go to the land the 5 spies found and they kill the people and take their land. They set up a shrine and use those gods as a part of it. At the end of the chapter, those Israelites do not look nor act any differently than the pagan Canaanites they dispossessed. The people of God were a very poor advertisement for the people of God.

Conclusion:

1. Do not worship a god that can be stolen.

A god that can be taken away from you cannot protect you and cannot save you. If you really want to be miserable and fretful and insecure, worship the god of sports. And here is a word to parents. If you want to raise your children to be idolaters, trade off Sunday Worship for sporting events. In doing so, you will teach them that soccer, basketball, whatever is more important because it has the capacity of giving them identity, value, worth, power and significance. Which it does, until they blow out a knee, or an Achilles, or until someone else who is a little faster, a little stronger and a little better comes along. In sports, you are not loved for who you are. You are only as good as what you can do in the moment. And at any moment that can be taken away, and one day, it will be. Why would you worship a god that can be taken away?

2. Do not worship a god that you create.

A god that is created is a god that can be uncreated. Giving your life to someone or something that cannot even define itself is terrifying because you are trusting in something or someone that cannot be trusted. How many of your friends would say, "I have trust issues."? How many of you would say the same thing? "I have trust issues." You have trust issues because you are trusting in something or someone that is not dependable. All idolaters have trust issues.

3. If you have money and power, it is easy to think that you get to make your own god

Honestly, this is why so many people want money and power. They want to make their own rules. But money and power do not give you permission to make your own rules. They may give you the illusion that you do. They may give others the impression that you do. But in the end, no one will dethrone God and having all kinds of success may only delude you into thinking that, like Samson, the rules don't apply to you.

4. There is only one God who is worthy of your worship.

You are made in the image of God. Therefore, you were made to worship and you do. The question then, in fact the ultimate question is, who or what are you going to worship. God does not need your worship, but you and I need to worship Him. No one cares for you like God. No one has lived for you and died for you and will intercede for you and provide for you and actually deeply love you like Christ. The story of Judges and the story of your world is the bankruptcy of post-modernism. The verdict on moral relativism is in. The result is depression on a scale that has never been seen before. The New York Times estimated that \$500 billion annually is spent on costs directly and indirectly related to depression.

I would be seriously depressed if I thought that it was up to me to save me and fix me. It is so good to know that it isn't up to you. It was up to Christ and he did what you couldn't.

5. You expect resistance from your world for following Christ, but don't be surprised when some of the strongest resistance comes from people in the church.