



“Eroding Religious Misconceptions”  
Judges 17-18

**Idea:** Your faith is much more than a religious activity that you do, it is a relationship with God that you enjoy.

**Intro:** We are just a couple weeks away from Halloween, so it won't be long till there are zombies, football players, witches, Donald Trumps, and superheroes walking up and down our neighborhoods in search of the ever-elusive candy dish. This holiday has always interested me. I'm intrigued by the costumes and what leads people to choose their particular character. This year we should see a lot of folks dressed as Wonder Woman, Belle, Thor, Groot, and Trump. These characters are chosen because they are prominent in the media today, but they are also chosen because people would love to possess their powers and abilities. After all, who wouldn't want a magical flying hammer that only you can pick up?

Unfortunately, no matter how well you mimic your superheroes' look on Halloween, you won't be able to imitate their special powers. So Superman will be grounded. Thor's

hammer will be plastic, not even hard enough to drive a nail. Wonder Woman's shield won't stop a rock. And the Donald Trump costume comes with neither the presidency nor the billion-dollar portfolio. Instead, we will be nothing more than a shell of what we wished was true.

In many ways what we see on Halloween is all too true each Sunday in the evangelical church. Today in America and especially true in the South, the church is full of cultural Christians. These are people who have no mark of Christianity on their lives other than the fact that they attend church regularly. There is no obedience, no desire for obedience, no relationship with Christ, and no seriousness about God. This is it; all they have is their religious activity. They come. They check the box. They get their little piece of religion. And they call themselves Christian. As your pastor, I must tell you that if there is no obedience and no desire for obedience then you should not call yourselves a Christian. Rather, you should consider yourselves lost and in danger of condemnation.

My words may seem a little strong so early in this message, but we need to know how dangerous of a game people are playing with their lives when they are satisfied with religion over a relationship. Why would anyone ever want to participate in religious activities that point to Christ but have no desire to be in relationship with Christ? That would be like going to your favorite restaurant, looking at the menu, enjoying the ambiance of the room, but not ordering anything to eat. People do it because it is easy. It doesn't cost anything, and you can leave feeling good because you participated.

**Inquiry:** This is where so many people in the American church are today. They are satisfied with their religious activity, and they wrongly think God is satisfied too. This miscalculation is not new. Israel made the same mistake. When we began Judges we learned that the people of God followed the Lord throughout Joshua's life and his contemporaries. After their deaths, however, they walked away from the Lord.

Read Judges 2:10.

The Bible tells us that this new generation did not know the Lord or the work He had done. We might be tempted to think they completely abandoned every aspect of Yahweh worship, but that is not what happened. They continued using the forms of worship that Moses had instituted. The problem is their worship had form but no substance, and they quickly syncretized them with the forms and substance of worship from the neighboring nations. The general summation of Israel's growing apostasy is increasingly described throughout the rest of Judges. Therefore, as we come to chapters seventeen and eighteen, we should not be surprised by what we find. This is a people that have become numb to the promptings and voice of God.

What we find in these final chapters of Judges are some very troubling stories. In fact I don't think I have ever heard someone preach from these appendices of Judges. And I know why; these are hard passages. So I have asked myself over and over, "Why did the Holy Spirit include these awful stories into His Word?" As I have struggled to understand, I believe the Lord answered my question. He preserved these stories to remind us how depraved the human heart is and how dangerous our Christless religious activity is to us personally and those around us.

In these two chapters, an Ephraimite named Micah steals a small fortune from his mother (1,100 pieces of silver). She calls down a curse on the one who stole the money. The curse scared Micah, so he came and confessed that he was the one who took the silver. I believe Micah's mom possessed a little motherly intuition and knew that he had taken it. In response to Micah's confession, she blessed him (17:2) and dedicated the money to the Lord for the construction of two idols (17:3). Micah placed the two idols in his shrine, which already had an ephod, household gods, and his son as a priest.

One day a young man named Jonathan from Bethlehem showed up. He was a Levite on the look out for a new home and a job, so Micah offered him a position as his personal priest. Jonathan took it and served in the family shrine (17:12). The chapter ends with Micah being convinced that the Lord would bless him because he had a Levite as his priest.

The tribe of Dan did not yet possess land of their own. They lived among the people of Judah. Tired of the Philistine oppression and not possessing land, they sent five spies to search out land in the north (18:2). The spies discovered a land that was perfect for them. In that land they found Micah's estate. When the Danites came back to claim the land, the spies told them of Jonathan and Micah's shrine (18:14). The people of Dan then took Jonathan, the ephod, the household gods, and the carved images (18:20). They conquered the land and set up the carved image at Laish. Jonathan and his sons became their priests and served them until the day that Assyria carried them into captivity in 722 B.C.

This story reveals just how destructive the slightest deviation from the truth is in our lives. It is like water running down hill that carries away the fertile soil. I want to share five eroding religious misconceptions that we find in these chapters and in our own homes.

### **1. My religious beliefs and practices don't really influence my children. (17:1-5)**

What makes us think that our children won't grow up to be just like us? The old saying, "Like father, like son" is as true today as ever. Much of what we believe and the way we live as adults we learned as children from our parents. That's a sobering thought, isn't it?

Micah learned to be an idolater from his mom. He built a shrine in his home because she probably had a shrine in her home. He syncretized his Jewish faith with the beliefs of other religions because momma syncretized

her faith with other beliefs. My beliefs and practices as a parent today will deeply influence the beliefs and practices my children will have as adults.

Appl: More than 80% of the seniors going away to college will leave the church, and only a small percentage will ever return. Why do they leave? They leave because of the influence of their parents who either failed to drive deep the gospel into their lives or failed to properly model the gospel in their lives.

Parents we must be careful to drive the gospel deep into the hearts of our kids. It's never too late to talk to your children about Jesus. And we must be careful to model the gospel properly before our kids. What you believe and how you live greatly influences your children's beliefs and lifestyle.

## **2. God is more concerned about my sincerity than my obedience. (17:6)**

Micah and the people of Israel in their abandonment of God had not abandoned the forms of Yahweh worship. They were going through the religious motions set forth in the Law. Doing things the right way was important to them. They thought their worship was right. The problem lay in the fact that they added to their worship what they learned from the Canaanites. But they thought God would accept it because after all, they were sincere.

Did you know that you can be sincere in your worship yet be sincerely wrong? You can attend church every Sunday, participate in a small group, read your Bible, sing songs of praise, and even tell others about Jesus and miss the whole point of the gospel. God wants you to be sincere, but He is more concerned about your obedience. The demons of hell are sincere in their war against heaven, but have been living in rebellion since

their fall. This leads us to a third and close misconception.

### **3. God is pleased through my religious activity. (17:13)**

Don't be fooled into thinking you can please God by your participation in religious activities.

*And Samuel said, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.*

– 1 Samuel 15:22

What makes us think we can charm God by jumping through some religious hoops? What a small God, He would be if that were true!

Illust: When things seem to be falling apart in our lives, we tend to think, "I've got to get back into church." We think that if we return to religion, then God's blessing will return to us. The truth is God does want you to be in church, but His purpose is not for you to become religious for the sake of religion. He wants you in church because as a child of God you are part of His body, comprised of other believers who make up the church. You need the community of the church. When you return to participating in the church, you are becoming obedient to the Word of God.

God desires to see you obey His Word...to obey the gospel. When we obey the gospel it means that we approach God on His terms. It means we acknowledge our sinfulness, His holiness, and His sufficiency to cover our sin. We approach Him by faith through the blood of the cross. Jesus never accepts us because we are sincere and religious. He accepts us only as we surrender in obedience to His Lordship.

**4. It is okay for me to worship Jesus alongside other gods.**

(17:5; 18:14-20)

Over and over again we read in the Bible that God is a jealous God who will not tolerate the spiritual adultery of His people (Ex 20:5, 34:14; Deut 4:24, 5:9, 6:15, 32:21; Joshua 24:19; Zech 8:2). Now most of us could not imagine offering sacrifices and worshiping the Canaanite gods. Truthfully, our idolatry is much more subtle than that. The idol we set up and worship alongside of Jesus is often Christianity as a religion. We place the forms of our worship alongside Jesus. We become satisfied with the form rather than the substance.

How do you know when your faith has become more focused on form rather than substance? Many times you will know it when your religious experience is upset because something changed in the worship service.

May we never allow anything, not even our religious activity, to rival the preeminence of Jesus in our lives. He will not tolerate idolatry. We must worship Jesus in spirit and in truth.

**5. My actions today have no impact on future generations.**

(18:30-31)

What we do today always impacts tomorrow.

“Let us be true to truth, loving it not because it is pleasant or picturesque or ancient, but because it is true and divine.” – Horatius Bonar

The deception of the enemy is subtle. We are rarely tempted to completely abandon the Word of God and the gospel. Instead, the enemy’s scheme is to carve away little by little our commitment to the Truth. We

see this deception in the Garden with Eve, as the serpent did not deny God; he just questioned His character.

Israel did not completely abandon God at the beginning, but little by little their deviation from the Truth eroded away their faith and fidelity to God. Therefore, as we come to Micah's mom, we find a woman who was nothing more than the product of her upbringing. She became an idolater because she learned it from those who came before her. She in turn provided the blueprint of an idolater for her son to follow, which inevitably led an entire tribe into greater idolatry.

*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. – Prov 22:6*

“Like father, like son.” Children are like sponges; they soak up everything they see, hear, and experience. They soak up the good and the bad. Dad, what are you teaching your children by the way you speak, watch, and do? What are you teaching them by the way you pursue Jesus? Mom, what are you teaching your children by the way you speak, watch, and do? What are you teaching them by the way you pursue Jesus? Have you allowed the gospel to be driven down deep into your heart? And are you striving to drive it deep into the hearts of your children, whether they are four or forty?

If you have failed and your kids care nothing for God today, it is not too late. Lay that at the foot of the cross and receive grace from Jesus. Then go to your children and confess to them that you failed to point them in the right direction. Pray for your kids, and preach the gospel to them.



**Conclusion:** As we come to these final chapters of Judges, the people of God were nothing more than a shell of what they were supposed to be. The faith and vibrancy of Joshua and Caleb are long gone. Everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes.

The problem with that is it is easy to deviate from the true mark...the anchor. This week I had a new peep site and a kisser button installed on my bow. The peep site has a little hole that I look through at full draw and line up with a sight-pin. It ensures that I have everything in line for a straight shot. The kisser button fits in the corner of my mouth to ensure the same anchor point each time I shoot. Therefore, when I draw back to shoot an arrow, the kisser button rests in the corner of my mouth, the string rests against the tip of my nose, and I'm looking through the peep to the proper pin. All of things must be in place in order to hit the target. The slightest deviation from the anchor point on the bow will cause a colossal miss of the target. But if I stay true to my anchor points, then the arrow will fly straight and hit the desired target.

The same is true in our lives. A slight deviation from truth today will lead to a colossal split from the truth in future generations. But if we stay true to the gospel as our anchor, then we will leave a gospel legacy in our families.

Today, is your Christianity best described as "your little piece of religion?" If it is nothing more than a shell or form without substance, then what you need most is to repent of your sin and by faith believe on Jesus today. You need God to awaken you spiritually. What would prevent you from trusting in Jesus?

If you Christianity is authentic but not vibrant, then you need to confess your apathy to Jesus, receive His forgiveness, and begin to walk in step with Him. You need spiritual revival in your life. What would hold you back from seeking a fresh work of God in your life?