

## Will-Worship and Superstition in Worship

### Judges 17

Pastor David Silversides

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Our theme this evening is “Will-worship and superstition in Israel.”

In the first 16 chapters of this book of Judges, we have had pretty well consecutive history.

And in these last chapters 17-21, we have a kind of appendices to the book of Judges, containing two incidents illustrating the state to which Israel had sunk at the time of the Judges. We have in these chapters, 17-21, first of all the sin of Micah and the Danites, in chapter 17 & 18, where they sinned especially against the first table of the law; they were guilty of idolatry. And then, in chapters 19-21, we have the sin of the inhabitants of Gibeah. And the sequel of that and the sin which begins that section is, of course, the sin of immorality, the breach of the seventh commandment. And we see then, in these chapters 17-21, just how much the Canaanites had affected Israel. And in both cases, a Levite is central to the account. You will find that as we go on in this book, that here it is a Levite who is at the heart of the matter, and, in the other business, of the men of Gibeah, it is a Levite who is involved.

This is showing us just how far things have declined. The calling of the Levites was to be consecrated to the Lord. And then through the Levites, the Lord Jesus, the Christ of God not yet incarnate, but the Christ of God was revealing His grace to Israel. But here, in these chapters, the Levites are seen to be a cause of stumbling to Israel—a body of men with nothing worthwhile to do, and men who far from being separate from the wickedness and the decline that was going on around them were very much a part of it.

And in tonight’s chapter we will find that false doctrine and false worship are found together. They usually are. They mutually strengthen and support one another. False doctrine causes people to crave false worship. And false worship is designed to create in men a false idea of God. And so there is a circular movement between false doctrine and false worship, the one supporting the other constantly. So they do go together.

But, first of all, let us look, in the first six verses at **a catalog of sin and the name of the Lord**, a catalog of sin and the name of the Lord. There are some indications, especially in chapter 18, that Micah lived prior to the oppression of the Philistines. That is, if you think of what comes later, the movement of the Danites and so on, it all indicates a time before when the Philistines were oppressing Israel. This points then to the fact that Micah lived in an early part of the period of the Judges.

And first of all we have sins of word and deed in the first two verses. Micah stole from his mother. We shall see that theft is a recurring feature of this account; it comes up again in the next chapter. Evidently, Micah stole this large sum of money—1100 shekels of silver from his mother. His mother roundly cursed the unknown thief. And then, Micah, for whatever reason, whether he was troubled by his mother’s curse, we do not know, he owns up, and says, “it was me.” And then his mother blesses her son in the name of the Lord. So when she didn’t know

who did it, she cursed him. But when she knew it was her boy, she blessed him in the name of the Lord. Perhaps because he had owned up. But at any rate, it shows a view of sin that is not honoring to God. Sin is sin no matter who commits it. So the woman cursed the unknown thief and blessed him when she knew who it was. She should have done neither. Her son's sin was no less because he was her son. Indeed, it was worse. To steal is always sin. For him to steal from his mother was even more sinful; it brings in a direct violation of the fifth as well as the eighth commandments, and it is contrary to the demands even of natural affection.

But what should be noticed is the woman's use of the Lord's name. A nominal belief in the Lord can exist alongside blatantly ungodly behavior. It does so; it does so in this province, and it does so with great frequency. A belief in the Lord, even a little bit of religious vocabulary and yet the most ungodly behavior at the same time.

And then in verses 3-5, we have sin upon sin. The woman had dedicated the money to the Lord, she says, to make images in direct violation of the word of the Lord. And so she used 200 shekels of it to make images—a graven image and a molten image. If she had wanted to give the money to the worship of the Lord, she should have sent it to the support of the true worship of the Lord in Shiloh. But she didn't. She calls it an offering to the Lord, dedicated to the Lord, and then uses it in a mode of worship that is a violation of the command of God.

Much that is done under the banner of "the work of the Lord" is nothing of the sort. This woman talked about dedicating and consecrating it to the Lord, but she used it to sin against the Lord. And because something is called the Lord's work and because there is generous giving to it does not make it the Lord's work, if it contrary to the Scriptures.

Then again, Micah goes further still. Micah engages in further creativity. That is the word that is often used, isn't it, of innovative worship. "We must be creative in our worship." Well, Micah was creative; he makes a private chapel, a private place of worship. And he makes teraphim—which are small household gods. And he makes an ephod, like that of the priest—the sons of Aaron were appointed by God and the ephod was appointed by God; this wasn't—but he makes an ephod, like a priest's ephod. And then he appoints one of his sons to be priest, and he consecrates him; he just does it—to be a priest. There is no reference to anyone or anything outside of himself; he just does it, because he wanted to do it.

This kind of thing is what the apostle Paul has in mind (not this exactly, but all this kind of thing) when he refers to "will worship" in Colossians 2. Worship, that purports to be the worship of God, but where we just do what we want and call it worship, rather than do what God commands. And so this creativity was actually will worship; it was Micah doing what he wanted and wanting it to be regarded as the worship of the living God at the same time.

And then we have a little word of explanation in verse 6: "In those days, there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

Now the presence of a king would not have prevented idolatry, if it was a bad king. We know that. We know there were sometimes wicked kings and that idolatry abounded under those wicked kings. Certainly, a godly king would have suppressed idolatry in Israel. But the absence

of any king meant an even greater dependence on the grace of God to keep the people as a whole walking in the truth and in the covenant and united together in the ways of the Lord. And without that grace, sin expressed itself in rampant individualism.

Under wicked kings, there tended to be a certain measure of uniformity, even in idolatry. But, in the period of the Judges, without the strong influence of a particular judge, sin went in all directions much more, because there was no central authority. And so there was rampant individualistic sin. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes. There was an individual license.

And then we come to the second main section. We have been looking at a catalog of sin and the name of the Lord. But now, secondly, **a superstitious desire for a bit of orthodoxy, a superstitious desire for a bit of orthodoxy**—verse 7 to the end.

First of all, we see this wandering Levite in verses 7-8. Why was he wandering? Well perhaps it was his fault. Perhaps also it was an indication of the breakdown of the God-given order in Israel, that the Lord's provision for the Levites to be able to minister at the tabernacle had fallen into disarray, a sign of the chaos of the times.

But then we have Micah's suggestion in verse 9: "And Micah said unto him. "Whence comest thou?" And he said unto him, "I am a Levite, from Bethlehem Judah, and I go to sojourn where I may find a place." And Micah said unto him, "Dwell with me, and be unto me a father and a priest, and I will give thee ten shekels of silver by the year, and a suit of apparel, and thy victuals." And so the Levite went in.

Micah's suggestion—he only asks the man whether he is a Levite. Clearly, Micah thought that to have a Levite as a priest was a better option than to have his own son, who was not a Levite. And he seems to ask this man no more questions than to determine that he was a Levite; any Levite would do. And he makes the man an offer that he could not, or at least did not, refuse. He offers him a salary; he offers him bed and board; and he offers him clothes as well.

Now there is no doubt that Micah's enthusiasm for having a Levite was due to the fact that the Levites had originally been appointed by God to minister (not all of them as priests—only the sons of Aaron, but to assist the sons of Aaron in the priesthood). So here is a man who has made his own form of worship, but he still wants (he still thinks it would be a good thing to have a Levite—not the exact thing that God had appointed, but a bit closer) a Levite to be his priest.

Then we have a wicked agreement by the Levite. Verse 11: "And the Levite was content to dwell with the man. And the young man was unto him as one of his sons."

This man allowed himself to be bribed into utter profanity. The proposal was wrong, absolutely wrong. First of all, the sons of Aaron were to be priests. Secondly, the correct place for priestly worship, sacrificial worship, was at the tabernacle at Shiloh. Thirdly, he was to minister to images, contrary to the second commandment.

This Levite was an ecclesiastical career man. He would use the fact that he was a Levite and had some kind of official standing in the professing church of God, he would use that to look

after himself, whereas he ought—whatever the cost—to have upheld the true, pure worship of God.

And that brings us to private religion reaching a height—verse 12: “And Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and was in the house of Micah.” He simply consecrates this man. Never mind his son and what he’s done up until now; we’ll put him to one side. He is a Levite; this makes it a little more Biblical. And he just consecrate him.

Do you see the strange thinking here? There is this strange desire to be a little bit closer to what is Scriptural but a complete disregard for the fact that he had no right to consecrate anybody.

This is DIY (Do it Yourself) religion, and it reaches an appalling conclusion. Verse 13: “Then said Micah, “Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to be my priest.”

Self-centeredness and superstition lay behind the whole thing. I think I have a priest, and, especially, if I have a Levite to be my priest, the Lord will do me good.

That brings us thirdly, **to practical lessons for us all.**

### **#1. What is needed in worship is not creativity but obedience.**

I hope I never tire of telling you this, because it is important. What is needed in worship is not creativity; it is obedience. This stands out a mile in this passage. We do not need imaginative ideas in worship. We do not need clever innovations and striking initiatives.

We do not need Christian rock. We do not need the whole paraphernalia of music that God has never appointed. We do not need Christian acrobats—yes, it has been done. We do not need Christian musicians. We do not need Christian dramatists, and mime artists, and choreographers, and Christian clowns (yes, they are around as well).

We do not need any of those things in the worship of God. And not only do we not need them; we need to keep them out of the worship of God, because God has never required it at our hand. The only question we should ask after we ask the question, how are we going to worship God? The only question we should ask is, what does God say in His Word? And if you skip that question, you are wrong straight away. You don’t get the right answers if you don’t ask the right questions. And the question that we must ask always before we worship God is, what does God say we should do in **His** worship?

And if we are all agreed on that, that the only thing that matters is what God has appointed in His own worship, then we have a solid basis for unity. Where there is not agreement on that, there is no basis for unity. And the form of worship is simply decided by the survival of the fittest—whoever can push hardest to get his own way.

So that is the question. And what is needed in worship is not creativity but obedience.

### **#2. Money must never be allowed to dictate the form of worship or any part of it.**

Money can be used by people to get what they want in the worship of God. In this case, it was by financing private religion. Micah (and there was money in the family obviously) had enough to make his own little place, a house of gods, and to provide a salary to his own personal family priest. He had enough money to do it himself—to have his own private religion.

But it can happen in congregational worship also. People can use their financial muscle to exert pressure to get what they want in the worship of God, whether it is Biblical, or whether it is not. Ministers and elders of the church must always resist such things, without exception.

Only the Word of God must be decisive. And if someone who has money says, “If you don’t do what I want, I’ll withdraw my money, I won’t do this, I’ll do the other...”, then so be it.

You remember what Peter said to Simon Magus when he wanted to use his money to be able to convey the gift of the Spirit: “Thy money perish with thee. Thou has neither part nor lot in this matter, for I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

I’m not saying that everyone who tries and gives way to the temptation to use to exert pressure over the form of worship is in that category—I’m not saying that. But it must be resisted. The word of God must prevail in the worship of God. And, if it doesn’t, if keeping individuals happy determines the form of worship, how can we really say we are worshipping God at all?

Money should be given freely to support the true worship of God—never used as a lever to get what we want.

### **#3. The failure to acknowledge the King of the Church leads to chaos in worship.**

Verse 6: “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

The absence of a God-appointed human king under the Lord only accentuated the need for the people to acknowledge personally and collectively the Kingship of the Lord. There was no visible king, no visible focal point of one who acted as king under the Lord, no visible representative of the authority of God. But that only emphasized the need for the Israelites, the individual Israelite, the heads of families in Israel, and the people as a whole, and the leaders of Israel, to acknowledge collectively that the Lord was their King. And when this was not done, chaos—the chaos of manmade ideas—resulted. ‘

Every man did that which was right in his own eyes—that was true of morality, but that was also true of worship. And here is the example. We are given this appendix to show the kind of absurd, ungodly nonsense that went on under the name of the worship of the Lord.

And we have it today. The immense variety of forms of worship is not a rich diversity; it is a shambles, and it is a disgrace. It is a lawless shambles.

It is true that some diversity is due to an inability amongst the Lord’s people to honestly agree as to what the Scripture teaches, but most of the time it is not. Most of the time the question of what the Scripture teaches is not even being asked. It is not for the most part that the whole

professing church is anxious to do what is Scriptural, and they can't agree on all the details. That is not what we are seeing today.

Large parts of the professing church are not even concerned about what is Scriptural. Worship is (to them) a matter of self-expression, rather than submission to God's ordinances and a hearty engagement in them to the honor and glory of God.

So most of the time the question, what is Scriptural?, is not being asked. The question that is being asked is simply, what do I like? And that is humanism; it is putting man in the place of God.

**#4. A mere regard for certain elements of Biblical worship can rest side by side with total disregard for the Lord and for His Word as a whole.**

So here, the desire to have a Levitical priest, not quite Scriptural but a little closer. But look at what else is going on: the images, teraphim, molten image, graven image, a house of gods that God had never appointed, a consecration by a man who had no right to consecrate anyone. All of that is going on, and yet he wants a Levitical priest.

And so it is that men can have a certain kind of regard for some Biblical elements and yet despise the word of the Lord as a whole. There are many churches where the Bible is still read, for example, and yet that Bible is openly despised in virtually all else that takes place. In the preaching and in whatever else goes on, the Bible is ignored. And yet, it is still read; there is a certain regard that it is the tradition that the Bible is still read, but then it is ignored. So you see how there can be some kind of desire for or some attachment (not a godly attachment) to some residual element of things that were once done for a Biblical reason and yet a disregard for the word of God all around it.

And so the fact that someone has a superstitious or a sentimental attachment to one or two elements of Scriptural practice does not even mean that they are converted.

**#5. Finally, false religion is self-centered, whereas true religion is God-centered.**

Look at verse 13 again: "Then said Micah, "Now I know that the Lord will do me good, seeing that I have a Levite to be my priest."

He thought that he was now a winner, that now he got it. He was into religion for the benefits.

How different from Job. You remember Satan said of Job, "Doth Job fear God for nought? Thou has hedged him about . . . and preserved all that he has." When the hedge was taken away, Job suffered and struggled and was in anguish and sometimes said things that he shouldn't have said, but Job still loved God.

Why should we worship God, and why should we be fussy about worshipping God God's way? Why? Well, simply this: because if we are Christians, if we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, and if we are Christians and new creatures in Christ, we love God. That's why.

That's why we should be fussy about worshipping Biblically. Irrespective of anything else, we should do it because we love God. And it honors God to worship God, God's way. Just because we love Him.

Let us not think that we can use careful Scripturalness in our worship as a bribe to gain God's favor or blessing or church growth. We should worship God, God's way, whatever else happens. If you read the pages of church history, you will find that one of the weaknesses often found in those who were most careful to worship God God's way was this assumption that they therefore must have more of the evident blessing of God (in terms of expansion) than others.

That is not the motive at all. We worship God God's way because God is honored, and we love Him. And whatever else happens, we want to honor God. Irrespective of whatever benefits may come over and above that, we want to do what honors the Lord Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the Church, who told His apostles that they were to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe whatsoever things I have commanded you.

We love Christ; we want to honor Christ; and we want to worship Him in the way He says. We want to acknowledge His kingship before we even start to worship. And we want to acknowledge His kingship in the form in which we worship. And we want to acknowledge His kingship in the hearty engagement in those forms of worship which He Himself has appointed. And we will engage in no other.

We do it, then, because we want to honor Christ the King. And we want to honor Christ the King because He is our beloved and the One whom our soul loveth. Amen.