

“Adding Sin to Sin”

Judges 18

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1/01/1994

The title for the exposition this evening is “Adding Sin to Sin.”

First of all from this chapter, we have **unbelief in the heart and apostasy in the life**, unbelief in the heart and apostasy in the life.

You remember what has happened so far, that this man Micah has taken on this Levite to act as his priest, in his own private little chapel, with this own gods and teraphim (with the small, false gods), and he has made his own ephod. So we have this manmade religion of a private sort.

And now the tribe of Dan becomes involved in this whole affair. Now in the days of Joshua, Dan had been allotted territory, along with the other tribes in the west, near Judah. We find that in the book of Joshua, chapter 19 and verse 40: “*And the seventh lot came out for the tribe of the children of Dan according to their families. 41 And the coast of their inheritance was Zorah, and Eshtaol, and Irshemesh,*” and so on...

So Dan, the tribe of Dan, was allotted territory like the other tribes. But the Amorites had pushed back the Danites. We read of that actually in this book of Judges, in chapter 1 and verse 34: “*And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountain: for they would not suffer them to come down to the valley.*” Now, we know, that the failure to conquer all of the land of promise and to drive out all of the Canaanites and the peoples of the land was due to unbelief. It was unbelief that meant that they did not enter into the land as totally as they ought to have done. So that’s worth keeping in mind: the reason the Danites were looking for territory was, because of unbelief, they had not conquered the land that was allotted to them. And so these five men now come out to spy out alternative territory.

Visible apostasy in false doctrine and worship has its source in the invisible unbelief of the heart. The reason that people turn to open apostasy from the truth doctrinally and in worship is because of unbelief in the heart. You can’t see the unbelief, but you can see its effects when it comes to expression in open rejection of the truth.

In Hebrews 3:12, the church of God on earth is warned: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”

So it begins with unbelief in the heart, unbelief which has been there all along. And it comes to expression in an open rejection of truth, both in doctrine and in worship. And so the horrible false worship that follows in this chapter, in which the Danites engage, has as its source the unbelief of the heart.

But then, **secondly, we must notice the mutual support among those who depart from the truth.** And that’s in verses 3-6. In verse 3, when the Danites come to the house of Micah, “*When they were by the house of Micah, they knew the voice of the young man the Levite: and they turned in thither, and said unto him, Who brought thee hither? and what makest thou in this place? and what hast thou here? 4 And he said unto them, Thus and thus dealeth Micah with me, and hath hired me, and I am his priest.*”

From these verses let us notice, under this more general heading, let us notice: **when false religion no longer appalls**, when false religion no longer appalls.

The Danites evidently recognized (well probably) the accent of the Levite, and so they are curious as to what he is doing here. What is doing out here away from his home ground? And the answer is, of course, that he is acting as priest for Micah, in his false place of worship, with his false gods, and his false religion and his false ephod. And he is acting as a false priest because he wasn't one of the sons of Aaron.

And he explains all this, not in those terms, of course, to the Danites. And evidently the Danites are not appalled. Not at all; the opposite is the case. They are not disturbed; they are not aghast; they are not surprised. And this is very telling. **False worship and false doctrine ought to appall us; it ought to appall us. And it ought to trouble us if we or other Christians are not troubled by it.** Granted more placid temperaments may express themselves more placidly. Of course they will. But beyond temperament, there never should be indifference, either in us or in other professing Christians. And, if there is, it ought to cause alarm. If we can contemplate false worship with no feeling, no concern, no indignation, then there is something wrong with us.

And then you notice secondly under this heading, **the easy accommodation to false practice**, in verse 5: "And they said unto him, Ask counsel, we pray thee, of God, that we may know whether our way which we go shall be prosperous. 6 And the priest said unto them, Go in peace: before the LORD *is* your way wherein ye go."

This may be called a classic example of people deceiving themselves and each other. The Danites imagined that the Lord would use such manmade devices to bestow His light and His grace upon them. And, sure enough, having entered into the spirit of the thing, they get the answer that they want. Albeit, it is actually a very ambiguous answer, of the kind that the heathen oracles came out with, an answer that suggested one thing but not so explicitly that it could not be reinterpreted later on.

And so here hand joins in hand in false religion. And the man who in this kind of situation of self-delusion—joint self-delusion, the man who would speak up can expect trouble. Because what you have here is an unspoken agreement to believe the lie. There is no deal; there is no explicit reference to the fact that it was false. But they all joined in an believed a lie.

Then, thirdly, we have **the apparently favorable providences that can accompany false religion**. The apparently favorable providence that can accompany false religion.

In verse 7: "Then the five men departed, and came to Laish, and saw the people that *were* therein, how they dwelt careless, after the manner of the Zidonians, quiet and secure; and *there was* no magistrate in the land, that might put *them* to shame in *any* thing; and they *were* far from the Zidonians, and had no business with *any* man." Laish was situated in a fertile valley, far from anyone else who would protect them. And they were living in the Zidonian style of ease and security; perhaps they were Zidonians themselves who had settled there. They were also lawless and self-indulgent. Because there was no magistrate, or, literally, no agent of restraint. That may mean that there was no settled and formal government. At any rate, there was no restraint among them. They were lulled into complacency by indulgence and sin. They were complacent, and they were isolated. And the land in which they dwelt was ideal.

And the Danites conclude that this is where they should settle. And in verse 10 they report back: “When ye go, ye shall come unto a people secure, and to a large land: for God hath given it into your hands; a place where *there is* no want of any thing that *is* in the earth.” And so they conclude that the message from this false priest is being fulfilled. Here is the ideal place with the ideal sitting target for us to take. And, as we see later on, they did take it. And, in God’s providence, it was given into their hands. But, in no way, was it given with His approval and blessing upon the false religion in which they engaged.

And that brings us, fourthly, to **ungodliness and unrighteousness of men**, ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. From verse 11, right down to verse 21. Ungodliness, the rejection of God’s authority, the rejection of His gospel, will lead to unrighteousness between men. Where men are not at peace with God, they are not likely to be at peace with one another.

That’s why various attempts to patch up the social evils of our own day, without repentance toward God, are never going to bring solid, lasting solutions. What we are seeing in our own nation is a people who have despised the Lord and are reaping the effects of that in man’s behavior toward man. And endless plans are made to remedy the inconvenience of anti-social behavior, but without reference to God and without repentance toward God. And, basically, what the majority of people in this country want is some of the spin-off benefits of Christianity, but not Christianity. They want some of the outward effects on the way people behave toward one another when the cause of the gospel was strong and vibrant in the nation, but they do not want that gospel itself nor the Lord Jesus Christ whose gospel it is. And it will not work.

It may be that in God’s providence various measures--political and social—will have a degree of restraining effect, but the root problem lies in the fact that as a nation we have despised God. And when there is ungodliness, there will be unrighteousness. And this passage illustrates this.

Let’s look at these Danites. Having decided to attack Laish, on the way they come to Micah’s house. They steal his gods, his teraphim, his graven images, his ephod, his priest—the whole lot. And that’s there in verses 14-18. And then in verse 19, they tell the priest, “Hold thy peace, lay thine hand upon thy mouth, and go with us, and be to us a father and a priest: *is it* better for thee to be a priest unto the house of one man, or that thou be a priest unto a tribe and a family in Israel?”

It is obvious from this that they expect that this stolen religious apparatus will bring the blessing of God, despite the fact that they stole it. Of course, it wouldn’t anyway because it was all false, it was manmade—but one absurdity leads to another. They imagine—not only that the blessing of God will attend to possession of these things, but that even if they have stolen them, still the blessing of God will be upon them because they have these gods, these images, this ephod, and this young man as their priest.

So you see how ungodliness, in the sense of breaking the first table of the law, leads to unrighteousness—the breaking of the second table. Their idolatry led to this theft.

In church history there is an illustration of that. John Calvin was frequently in difficulties with the city council of Geneva. And one time it looked as though he would have to leave again. And he said to them that if they wanted to try to govern Geneva without the gospel again, they could try it. And they backed down because they had learned from experience that they needed the gospel to be preached.

But you see how dishonesty and religious superstition can mix very well together. We are sometimes astonished at the things that go on, for example, in Roman Catholicism, where there is blatant dishonesty and yet religion mixed in together. But, of course, that's not the only thing. In liberal Protestantism, there are churches taking funds from the national lottery and yet using the name of the Lord at the same time, to keep their building standing and so on. They take funds from the national lottery, which is just state-organized, God-dishonoring theft, and then they engage in religious worship, using the name of the Lord in those buildings that the lottery funds have been used to keep standing. So it's not just Romanism. We are used to that. We are used to the idea that an absurd mix of seeking God's blessing in the midst of the most appalling, damning dishonesty as well. But it's not just in Rome; it's in liberal Protestantism as well.

So that's the Danites. But then the Levite himself. In verse 20, "And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod, and the teraphim, and the graven image, and went in the midst of the people." This man was a worldly ecclesiastic. He gave people what they wanted. When they asked for a counsel in verse 5, he gave them counsel, and he gave them the counsel that they wanted. And when Micah had originally said, "come and be my priest," he saw it as a golden opportunity, so he became a priest, and he ministered in this private chapel for Micah.

And now that the Danites make a better offer than Micah's, he goes with them to be the priest for the tribe of Dan. **False shepherds, false ministers, who give people what they want rather than uphold the truth of God, frequently appear openly selfish in the end.** This man gave people what they wanted, as long as what they wanted would secure something for himself. He gave Micah what he wanted when it was in his interest to do so. But forget about Micah now; there is a better offer on the table. And so he goes with the Danites. Worldly churchmen are ultimately selfish. Men who will proclaim to be ministers of God, but who will give people what they want rather than what they need to hear from the word of God—they are selfish. And sometimes that becomes obvious.

During the plague, the great plague of London, the episcopal clergy fled to the country—not every single one of them, it is true, but many of them fled from the plague. They left their people to get out into the country where it was much safer than in London. Whereas, the despised Puritan ministers stayed. The majority of the Puritan ministers stayed, and they preached to the people in the midst of the plague. Of course, some of them did die of the plague as a result, and some survived. But the Puritans stayed; the high churchmen fled. Because the Puritans, despised as they were by many, they were the real men of God who really cared for the people and who would teach them the truth.

But, then, fifthly, **the extent of evil done in the name of the Lord**, the extent of evil done in the name of the Lord. In verse 22 unto verse 27. Micah and his neighbors pursue the Danites in verse 22: "And when they were a good way from the house of Micah, the men that were in the houses near to Micah's house were gathered together, and overtook the children of Dan."

Whether the neighbors had access to his house of gods, we do not know--and whether that was their interest, or whether there was just neighborliness. But at any rate, they pursued him. And the upshot is that when they get there, they find that the children of Dan are too strong for them. And Micah is told very clearly to clear off. In verse 25: "And the children of Dan said unto him, Let not thy voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows run upon thee, and thou lose thy life, with the lives of thy household." They are telling him to go.

But how could these Danites hope for God's blessing through these stolen images, an ephod, and so on. How could it happen, that they had stolen them. Now when their owner comes to get them back, they threaten him with violence. If he doesn't clear off, some of the young men will lose patience and slay them. How could they expect God's blessing to come upon them by means of this stolen religious paraphernalia? How could it be? You say, surely it doesn't make sense. Not only were they idols, but they were stolen idols. How could they seriously believe that this would bring blessing to them?

Because **false religion distorts the truth about God Himself**. False religion always entails a distorted view of God, and it always entails a distorted view of God that makes God less than God. That is inevitably the case. The living and true God is the highest conceivable being. It is impossible to overestimate God. And so since false religion always involved a distortion of what God is like, it is always a distortion downwards—a lowering view of God. And that is why it is frequently channeled into a superstitious kind of God—to things, to objects, to procedures. The view is that His blessing is to come automatically, without reference to the state of the heart.

So Rome, though it does teach certain aspects of the need of a right state of heart, nevertheless it has its doctrine of *ex opera operata*—the idea of automatic blessing through particular things and procedure. And that is why these men could steal these things and still expect blessing through them. And we must understand that if people don't believe the truth, they are vulnerable to believe anything. If they hold down the truth in unrighteousness, they are capable of believing anything.

And we must remember also that false religion is fundamentally selfish. **False religion is fundamentally selfish**. False religion is dominated by the thought—"How can I get God to do what I want God to do for me?". That is the dominant note of false religion. "How can I get God to do what I want Him to do?" And so, because the non-Christian is selfish is his religious interest, he imagines that God is likewise; he fashions God in his own image. And so he imagines that he can deal with God. And so, stolen images, who cares? It must work! It doesn't matter if the images and the ephod are obtained by robbery and theft. **That is how false religion works. It is selfish at its core, and it imagines that God operates the way they do.**

Then, **finally, the Lord is still on high**. The Lord is still on high. Verse 27-31. In verse 27, we read: "And they took *the things* which Micah had made, and the priest which he had, and came unto Laish, unto a people *that were* at quiet and secure: and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and burnt the city with fire. 28 And *there was* no deliverer, because it *was* far from Zidon, and they had no business with *any* man; and it was in the valley that *lieth* by Bethrehob. And they built a city, and dwelt therein."

Further success. The Lord gives them success, not because of the prediction of the Levite; but He sends strong delusion, that they may believe a lie. So God can providentially act in such a way that men already believing a lie are confirmed in that lie and in that error.

But then look at verse 30: "And the children of Dan set up the graven image: and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land."

Until. Until. The captivity referred to is evidently when the children of Israel were so oppressed by the Philistines that the ark of the covenant was taken away. We mustn't look at the short

term merely. The Lord forebears long. The vessels of wrath are through much longsuffering fitted for destruction. The Lord forebears, but He does not ignore.

Nevertheless, although God judged Israel and judged Dan, there was mercy with the judgment. Because through His judgments that came later, He preserved Israel; He preserved a Church; and He preserved the promise of the Redeemer that resided in that Church.

But then, we must look finally, under this final point, at the fuller repercussions, the fuller repercussions. This Levite became a priest, first of all, to a man and his family, then to a tribe—the tribe of Dan. And they built their city Dan at the far north of Israel. That's why you get the phrase "from Dan to Beersheba". And in future years Dan was a recurring center of false worship. What a fearful responsibility this man bore. He started as a Levite, but he became a priest without divine authority; he ministered in a place without divine authority; he used graven images without divine authority; he used an ephod without divine authority—in one man's household. Then, he went on to become a priest to a whole tribe of Israel, to encourage them in their false sin. And then that place, Dan, in future generations became a recurring place of false worship. **So it all started with one man's idea of what it would be nice to do in the worship of God!**

This man bore a fearful responsibility. **False ministers are not just nice men who lack evangelical emphasis; they are a curse of God.** Galatians 1 says so: "If any man preach another gospel. If we or an angel from heaven preach another gospel than that which is preached, let him be accursed." They are not my words; they are the inspired words of the apostle Paul. So that **false ministers who will not tell the truth are accursed of God, and they are a curse to others.** They are under God's wrath, and they encourage others in the way of ungodliness and unbelief and the way that leads to everlasting destruction.

Let us then not minimize the difference between the truth and the lie, between the religion of God's revelation and the religion of man's invention.

And let us, given that this all occurred in Israel, of all places, let us prove all things and hold fast that which is good.