

Judges 17

Intro: April 1, 2007 Good without God?

Most social critics agree that modern cinema, particularly commercial film generated by Hollywood, fails to act responsibly. The dribble served up as entertainment does not go unnoticed by the critics, though. After one blockbuster premiered in England late in '05, film critic Polly Toynbee let fly her feelings about what she had to sit through. She found this one particular film 'toe-curlingly, cringingly awful' and saw the whole thing as being 'profoundly manipulative' and 'dark with emotional sadism' and approvingly quoted author Philip Pullman's condemnation of the novel on which it was based as 'one of the most ugly, poisonous things I have ever read'.¹ The movie? *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Polly Toynbee went on to comment about the film's rather obvious moral compass and agenda:

Children are supposed to fall in love with the hypnotic Aslan, though he is not a character: he is pure, raw, awesome power. He is an emblem for everything an atheist objects to in religion. His divine presence is a way to avoid humans taking responsibility for everything here and now on earth, where *no one* is watching, *no one* is guiding, *no one* is judging and there is *no other* place yet to come. Without an Aslan, there is *no one* here but ourselves to suffer for our sins, *no one* to redeem us but ourselves: we are obliged to settle our own disputes and do what we can. We need no holy guide books, only a *very human moral compass*.²

Can a very human moral compass produce morality?

Don't answer too hastily; thinking you know what answer I am looking for.

Can we **do** good without God? If by *good* ... can a person act in a manner beneficial to others without some religious framework, certainly. The world is full of kind souls who, without any religious reflection, act in accordance with what may be considered good.

But, if the question is can we **be** good without God ... then the discussion radically changes, for we are no longer talking about external acts of goodness, but an inward bent, a disposition which can not be measured a part from an external rule.

What problems do we face when we become the judge and jury of our own actions, when the only compass we follow is a very human, very subjective and private one? That is the problem which we will see in Judges this morning.

Since the beginning of this year we have touched on the gruesome events some 3000 years ago, events which for us are so foreign, but at the same time reveal the same issues which we confront daily. As Israel took possession of the Promised Land, their partial obedience produced a spiritual roller coaster ride. Attracted to the promises of the culture more than the promises of God, they suffered from spiritual ADD: apostasy, discipline and deliverance. God raised up a variety of Judges, who were used of God to direct God's people to worship Him alone.

In the final section of this book we are confronted with horrendous moral depravity. The final section, chapters 17-21, describes the darkness when the human heart serves as the moral compass. The repeated phrase, in part or whole, occurs four times, seen in 17:6; 18:; 19:1; 21:25.

The obsession with self produces a desire to devise ones own morality by one's own devices. What is formed may well have morality interwoven through the cloth, but the fabric will show the moth eaten holes left vacant from a baseless code of conduct.

But in the case of our passage this morning, the critique is leveled not against the atheist who seeks to be good without God, but the theist, the believer whose life is built on the premise that there is God. This passage speaks to us whenever we seek to do what is right in our own eyes all the while espousing biblical morality . READ Judges 17:1-18:1a.

We can't be good without God because we'll devise a code for our comfort

WE CAN'T BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD BECAUSE WE'LL DEVISE OUR OWN MORALITY

Morality looks good

Micah's mighty morality

- Micah is not a run of the mill Canaanite, not some Baal worshipping pagan, but is a part of God's covenant people, a member of Israel. His name gives tells us this – Micah.

In v1,4 his full name is given and then shortened later, but in our translation it is just the shortened form. Mikayahu, meaning – who is like the Lord? The ironic name is played out over and over as we see that Micah certainly is not like God.

- As soon as we meet Micah, we see him repenting of a prior sin. He confesses to his mother that he had stolen from her 1,100 pieces of silver. This sizeable sum, which if the v10 gives us an indication what a year's salary could be, is over 100 years of income.
- When his mother heard her son's confession, she effuses with forgiveness. Certainly a noble trait, arms open to receive and praise her wayward boy, even using the covenant name: LORD.
- Finally, we see a family worshiping the God of Israel, as she dedicates the money to the LORD. Micah responds with a new found obedience and draws his whole family into this piety.

On the surface, quite a virtuous scene, one which if told with a few more pious phrases could be upheld as a wonderful illustration of family healing. But of course, there is more to the story. In the midst of doing good, we see someone not being good, for the Micah's mighty morality mocks God.

Morality mocks God

Micah's mocking morality

- While confession is good for the soul, we should not forget that robbing one's mother is not praiseworthy. What is more, he returned the money out of fear of her curse.
- The mother's pious praise rings hollow as her shallow view of repentance shows no sign of biblical restoration. He returns to her the amount he stole, despite the dictates of Leviticus 6 which specify returning 20% more as restitution.
But her quick forgiveness of her son the thief should not surprise us, but she too is a thief. Notice what she does with the returned cash – dedicates it to the Lord. But in v4 how much does she give to "God" for the idol? 200 pieces. Like son, like mother.
- So far the fifth commandment was violated with little concern as a son dishonors his mother and the eighth is set aside in the robbery. The third is broken when she dedicates money she does not intend on parting with. Next we see the second command is set aside as money dedicated to God is used to make idols. What is more, Micah then ordains his son, contrary to the demands that only Levites can be priests, even though Micah is not from this tribe.

What about our morality

As with Micah we may try to be good, even within a Christian framework, yet still fail miserably whenever we do so only partially. Augustine said in his *Confessions*

Sin comes when we take a perfectly natural desire or longing or ambition and try desperately to fulfill it without God. Not only is it sin, it is a perverse distortion of the image of the Creator in us. All these good things, and all our security, are rightly found only and completely in him.

So when we think we can be obedient 50% of the time or make a glancing effort at what is right when it is most convenient, we have made a mockery of what God commands.

Confession, they say, is good for the soul. But confession that leaves out God is meaningless motion. But we love the motions, thinking they'll suffice. That is what Frank Warren, creator of PostSecret.com, has found. He receives secrets in the form of postcards from around the world.

Most of the postcards Warren receives details abuses both past and present, or articulates body image issues that people have never told others. For most of them, shame kept them from talking about their own secrets. PostSecret.com provides an anonymous arena for disclosure, and both the contributors and visitors are finding that these confessions remove their sense of shame and isolation.

Surprisingly vulnerable, the confessions on these cards display and evoke a wide range of emotion. Some are humorous, others poignant. One postcard with a picture of two women, one younger, the other older, with faces obscured, had a note which read:

Dear Mother-in-Law

If you tell me how good the deals are at Costco one more time, I will burn the place down. No jury would convict me.

Love, Your devoted Daughter-in-Law

P.S. I hate those giant muffins. I don't care if a dozen cost less than five dollars; I am throwing them out as soon as you leave.³

While there may be an emotional benefit to such catharsis, the biblical mandate to confess our sins to God as well as to those we have hurt is critical if we are going to not construct a convenient morality whose only goal is to soothe our own conscience.

When we become the moral compass, when we alone determine what is for our own good, we will rarely, if ever convince ourselves to do anything hard. We will never go beyond ourselves. The question is not whether some of Micah's actions are good, but what is his framework? Does the little good offset the bad? Certainly not.

When Bernard Ebbers stood before the judge, he asked for mercy. The former CEO of WorldCom was indicted for orchestrating an \$11 billion accounting fraud that shut down the telecommunications firm in 2002, yet he asked for mercy.

His company's collapse represented the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history and devastated the lives of thousands of employees, yet he asked for mercy.

Speaking on behalf of his client, defense attorney Reid Weingarten cited 169 letters from Ebbers' supporters, detailing the 63-year-old's heart condition and numerous (often anonymous) charitable gifts.

"If you live 60-some-odd years," said Weingarten, "if you have an unblemished record, if you have endless numbers of people who attest to your goodness, doesn't that count? Doesn't that count particularly on this day?"

The judge said no, sentencing Ebbers to 25 years in a federal penitentiary.⁴

Do you find yourself bargaining with God? You'll confess your angry response to him, but not your spouse. You may agree that your thought life is far from pure, but not enough to make any real adjustments to what you watch. All the while you read and pray, hoping that will offset the offense to God. It won't.

WE CAN'T BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD BECAUSE WE'LL DEVISE OUR OWN WORSHIP

Worship may look good

Our culture considers the first step to be critical. Morality is the end, so what our worship looks like does not matter. But God's Word is clear; to be good is to worship God as he has prescribed. So it should not come as a surprise that the judgment of doing what is right in one's own eyes concludes the section on morality and flows into the section on worship. Both how we worship and how we live can not be defined by our agenda, by what we think is best.

While it may appear that Micah was caring for his family by wanting the best for them, it is clear that his commissioning an idol to be carved and covered with the silver from his mother is not something good. But his false worship did not stop there. One day a young man stopped by. The end of the story in 18:30 gives us his name: Jonathan. Again, we could find some things to say nice about this traveling evangelist.

He certainly was open to God's leading, seeming so spiritual. He came with a good pedigree, from Judah as well as a Levite. He was willing to disciple others; to become a son to Micah, form a close knit group with his family. But there's more.

Worship may mock God

Jonathan's mocking worship

What we may not notice at first glance is how Jonathan and Micah broke God's Law with respect to worship. First is how he is described. He is a young man (7,11,12). To be a priest one had to be at least 30 years old, according to Numbers 4:3,30.

Secondly, he is from Bethlehem, a city not where the Levites were to live. But there is something else fishy here. He is from the family of Judah and is a Levite.

While this can be explained away, given the condition of Israel at this time, it appears that God's prescribed order for keeping separate the priestly line from the coming kingly line is not being obeyed here. He wanted to be a priest and went looking for help to fulfill his dreams, no matter what God's Word prescribes.

So when he stumbles upon Micah who likewise thinks worship is whatever one designs, they are a perfect match. They negotiate a salary, put Micah's son out of job and set up their own little church, with Micah ordaining Jonathan as a priest.

With that done, Micah is able to sit back and wait for God's blessing to pour down on him.

Never mind that he stole from his mother, made an idol, rejected God's Laws. The Tabernacle was located at Shiloh (18:31), not far away and Deuteronomy 12:5

prescribed that worship was to be at the place he prescribed, not where everyone thought was best.

Micah worshipped God in the wrong way, doing what he thought best he made a mockery of God in his worship.

What about our worship?

Aren't our ideas just as good as anyone else's? Why can't we just decide to worship God anyway we want as long as our hearts are in the right place? What's wrong with homemade worship? Worship crafted by what we think is best?

A wise pastry cook once advertised, "Pies just like your mother made -- \$5.00 each. Pies just like your mother THINKS she used to make -- \$10.00 each." There are times when homemade is not so great. Would you want a backyard brain surgery performed on you? Would you want homemade brakes on your car? Would you want to wear homemade contact lenses? Then why do we think we can approach God apart from the way in which he prescribed?

This past week I heard about a church's peculiar worship service. I went to their website and could not believe my eyes and ears. While talking about getting back to the basics of the Christian faith, their worship service was geared around Retro days, so on March 11th when the service had a 70's theme complete with leisure suits, it seemed only natural to have an Elvis impersonator come out in a sequin white jumpsuit and sing *How Great Thou Art* complete with Elvis' pelvis shake.

But can we be so self assured they we will not go down Micah's path of doing what is right in our own eyes. We will not manufacture idols nor is it very likely we'll have Elvis leading the Lord's Supper complete with fried peanut butter and banana sandwich for the elements. Yet, can we be so confident that we will not fall prey to the same sins.

Whenever our worship prizes either innovation or mindless repetition more than historical orthodoxy, we have fallen into the same trap.

House churches that seek to escape the sins of others while being content with their own sin, likewise have the same troubles as Micah's family centered worship.

How easy it is to imagine we are worshiping as God has prescribed, only because it is so comfortable and easy. What expectations do you have for the coming weeks, that when we move into our new home we will not likewise do what is right in our own eyes?

Are my standards for worship to be equated with my preferences? Am I willing to root my convictions in what God prescribes while giving freedom for cultural expression?

On this Palm Sunday, as we pack up and leave this our home for the past 14½ years, we can easily think that our salvation has come. So much will change in when we walk out of this building for the last time. But will having our own building be equated with having it right? What expectations do you have for the new building and why do you have them? What do you think will change and why?

How much like the crowds gathered outside of Jerusalem when Jesus arrived. They hailed him as King, and he was, they praised him as the Son of David and they were correct. Their worship was so good, so right. But as the week unfolded their hearts were seen for what they were. They worshipped Jesus as long as he fulfilled their dreams, their desires. When he no longer gave them the peace they wanted, their adoration turned to condemnation.

It is easy to shake our heads at those who see no need for a savior, whose view of the world to us is topsy-turvy. We need to see that we live much that same way, as though there is no king but our conscience and we are wise to do what is right in our own eyes.

While Polly Toynebee is incensed with a film which portrays a king dying in place of his subjects, such an exchange is necessary. Where there is no king, there is no morality and there is no savior. That is the starting point.

We need not someone to tell us how to live, but who empowers us to live. We need a king who will be a priest. Not like Jonathan the Levite, for he could not do it for Micah. But another one from the line of Judah, born in Bethlehem, who would be to us a king and a priest.

It is for that reason this table here is such a comfort to us. This is not our own invention, but the comfort God gives to us, to remind us that he will feed and nourish us, care for us along the way.

¹ Polly Toynbee, The Guardian 12/5/05 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/Story/0,2763,1657759,00.html>

² Ibid., emphasis mine.

³ Dana Beatty, *St. Charles, Illinois*; sources: <http://www.postsecret.blogspot.com/>, <http://circlesarefun.com/NY0609A018X.pdf>

⁴ "WorldCom's Ebbers Gets 25 Years in Prison," *Newsmax.com* (7-13-05)