

## Micah, His Mother and the Money-Minded Minister *Judges 17 + 18*

Today, I want to share with you about an idolatrous society that holds the family in zero regard, has no real reverence for God and is always looking to make an easy living. - No, it isn't today in Britain, although it could be, No it is Ephraim in the time of the Judges.

I want us to look together at the story of Micah in Judges chapters 17 and 18. According to the text that I've chosen, *it was a time when there was no king in Israel and every man did that which was right in his own eyes*. It was a time of general lawlessness, a bit like the wild west. From time to time, God appointed a Judge to announce His judgement on various situations but there were times when there wasn't even one of these judges around. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes. People did pretty much what they wanted to do without reference to any higher authority. In one sense, Micah is living in times very much like our own. Today, there is a similar spirit running through society. Now, you mustn't think that the nation of Israel was completely lawless during the years of the judges. People did what they thought was right. Sometimes it may have been so, other times, they got it terribly wrong. This is the story of one of those times.

Micah lived in the hill country of Ephraim and he seems, or at least his family seems, to have been pretty wealthy. We first meet him, at the beginning of chapter 17, when he is in a blind panic about some money that he's stolen from his mother. His mother has cursed the thief and he's a bit worried that he might have a pot full of tainted money. So he owns up to lifting the 1100 shekels. Well, so far, so good, you might say. A simple tale of repentance and restoration. Well, it would have been if Micah had lived in a normal, God fearing family. When he confesses the crime to his mother, what does he get? A good thrashing? Grounding for six weeks? One of those long silences? No, his mother blesses him! "Blessed *be thou* of the LORD, my son." Now, I don't know how much a grip Micah's mother had on the ten commandments but she is drastically out of line here. He's stolen the money, he's dishonoured his mother, he's lied (until now) about the whereabouts of the silver and his mum blesses him! We can see from the start that this is no ordinary household. The word, "dysfunctional" could have been made for them. Do you know what Micah's name means? "*Who is like unto Jehovah*" - That's a bit like being called "Christian" or "Christine" or "Christopher" in this day and age. He certainly doesn't live up to his name. I have this mental picture of Micah's mother being like so many modern indulgent parents that believe that their child is incapable of doing anything wrong. Having said that, she appears to be no better. As she blesses Micah, she reveals that she'd wholly dedicated that sum of money to the Lord to make idols with. Now, quite aside from Micah's sin growing by leaps and bounds, he was now guilty of stealing consecrated money. This whole thing reveals the root of the family's problems. They were idolatrous. It would seem that the man Micah had a hobby. He was a god collector. In verse 5 of chapter 17, the Word tells us that he had a house of gods that he'd built. He was a religious man and, like many people of his time, he had a family shrine at which he worshipped. His indulgent mother had decided to spoil her son once again and give him some money to make himself a couple more gods for his collection. Eleven hundred shekels was a lot of money. It doesn't take a scholar to work out that this family were well off. Later in the story, when they offer the passing Levite a salary of ten shekels a year plus the usual benefits, you can probably work out that they were big time seed sowers to popular religious causes. So, his mother gives Micah 200 shekels out of the 1100 to cast himself some kind of god with. Note that this 1100 shekels that were "wholly



dedicated to the Lord” are now just 200. It seems that mum was setting a fine example for Micah to follow. She wasn't too honest herself. This would be echoed in the new testament by the two church members Ananias and Sapphira, who kept back part of the offering that they'd dedicated to the Lord and became the first people in the church to be “slain in the Spirit.”

When Satan wants to wreck things, he does so by attacking in a number of places. We see examples of this, here in Judges chapter 17. The first place he starts to stir things up is in the family. God ordained the family as the root of society, right back in the garden of Eden. It is our pattern for government and is a picture of the way in which God deals with His people. God is our Heavenly Father. The father is the head of, and provider for the household. Micah's father appears to be absent, for one reason or another, but seeing the circumstances of this family, you can probably come to your own conclusion as to why. The mother's role in the family should be that of nurturer and teacher. Micah's mother certainly seems to have been able to provide for the family but her example falls far short of the ideal that we find outlined in the book of Proverbs: 31

*Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Proverbs 31:25*

Children are to be respectful of their parent's authority as they are God's representatives in the life of that child. That's why Satan attacks the home. If he can rock these foundations, he's on his way to destroying a society that honours and serves God. We see this in our own day, don't we. The breakdown of family life through successive years of government legislation and popular culture has eroded the foundation of our society.

So Micah takes his reduced pot of money and makes himself an ephod and teraphim. Now, the ephod was one of the symbolic priestly garments that God had ordained for Aaron and his successors so that they could carry out their priestly duties. Micah recognised that if he was going to do this religion-thing properly, he was going to need a properly equipped priest to do it for him. You see, Micah's idolatry was certainly evident, but he wasn't blind in his efforts to make a comfortable religion that he could live with. He was trying to make his own copy of the tabernacle and the ark, so that he and his family could worship Jehovah. So, after buying in the necessary bits and pieces for his DIY tabernacle, he ordains his own son as priest. We must understand, at this point, that God had set the role of priesthood on just one family, that of Aaron, the brother of Moses. This was to last in perpetuity without any other family or tribe being given this honour. It was a holy priesthood and Micah was usurping this and making a bad copy for himself.

Now, I don't know how many of you have maps in the back of your Bibles. For years, I thought they were there just to add colour to the presentation. Tiny lines on a little map of the Mediterranean, tell us about where Paul spent his missionary life. I'd never looked at the one marked “The Holy Land in the Time of the Judges” with any great interest until now. Having read this story, I'd assumed that poor Micah, living up in the hills of Ephraim, just couldn't get to the tabernacle to worship so he had to build his own. Well, the map showed me that, as the tabernacle and ark of the covenant were at Shiloh, they weren't more than ten miles from Micah's home! He didn't have the excuse that he couldn't get there, he simply wanted to create his own religion of comfort and prosperity. We see this in his later comment when he completes his set of religious artifacts by appointing his own priest. He says “ Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to *my* priest.” (v13)

This would be laughable, wouldn't it? Or at least a tragic tale of a misguided man, until we realise that we do the same thing today. The true relationship with God is not far away but we insist on building our own “tabernacle” and attempting to meet God on our own terms in our own place. Time and again we see it. People try to build a personal tower of Babel to reach up to God on their own terms but they miss out on the way in which the Lord has provided. Just as in the time of the Judges, there was only one tabernacle where the faithful could worship God, now there is only one way to come to God, and that's through Jesus Christ.

It doesn't take too much imagination to see that this kind of thing isn't too far from some of today's various religions. When we think of idolatry, we imagine primitive people bowing down to some wooden carving in a jungle setting. We almost excuse them by saying that they don't know any better. But there is a form of idolatry that is every bit as perverse, when men try to worship the true God in an image that they have created for themselves. It is very easy for us to look at others and spot the idolatry. As protestant evangelicals, we find the church of Rome particularly easy to call idolatrous. The Council Of Trent gave Catholics instruction that proper veneration was to be given to statues of saints and the virgin. Venerate statues!? Oh yes, it's easy to pick on the Catholics but evangelicals do it too. Subtly, we create a god of our own liking. A gentle, non-judgmental god that cuddles us when we're down and rewards us with every blessing because, after all, he's a god of love. We have no place in our life for the real God so we create our own and worship that god in the way that the real one has prescribed. We sing songs, we pray, we read the books and give honour to a god that we've built ourselves. We can give so much attention to the "*apostles doctrine, the breaking of bread, the fellowship and the prayers,*" (Acts 2:42) that we forget the God who is served by these things. This is just what Micah is doing. He's built himself a tabernacle and a substitute for the ark, the symbol of God's presence. He's consecrated his own son as a priest and made him the multicoloured linen ephod to show his status. The ephod was a fine linen garment that the priest wore on his chest and his back and it showed his status as a priest. He's collected the full set now and he's ready to roll. Trouble is, that there's a nagging doubt in the back of Micah's mind that he hasn't done exactly the right thing. He still has one or two pieces missing from his collection and, as luck would seem to have it, his fortunes are about to change.



Part two of the story is that of a wandering, mercenary Levite. Satan's second strike at God's people is through a thoroughly corrupt priesthood. Here's a prosperity-preaching Levite who is after a new place, a new job and a new suit. Here's Micah, he has a need – he realises he's probably done the wrong thing in appointing his own son. He needs a real man of God, so he pleads this itinerant Levite to do the job – "I have a need, you

have a need. I need a priest, you can be my priest! I'll pay you!" Now, I don't know what went through the Levite's mind here. Surely, as a Levite, he would have known that only Aaron's descendants could be priests? Surely, he would have known that the bargain basement ephod and the silver teraphim in Micah's "House of gods" would only mean trouble? He already had a calling in Bethlehem-Judah. He was a Levite, a consecrated man. Why was he wandering about looking for a job anyway? The Levites were kept by the tithes of God's people and it may have been, since everyone was doing *what was right in their own eyes*, that they thought the money could be better spent elsewhere, than on some guy who wandered around the temple all day and didn't work for a living. Maybe he was without a job. He should really have told Micah that he was making a big mistake. But, this Levite was unprincipled. Like many pastors and ministers of today, he knew the truth but he was living the gospel of expediency. He wasn't going to do God's work if he could get an easy living, seeing to the religious needs of a rich family. Ten shekels a year plus the usual benefits seemed to be a prize just too big to deny. I tried to work out the value of what he was being paid by finding the price of silver today and converting it, weight for weight. Alas, silver isn't what it was and it was impossible to come up with a figure. All I can say is that it must have been worth his while to compromise his conscience.

How many ministries have been compromised by a love for money. Sure enough, money is needed for the running of these things but when men of God abuse their calling in order to achieve excessive monetary gain, there's something radically wrong. Micah's Levite priest had landed a cushy number. He had to push his conscience into the background but, hey, the guy was genuine, a seeker after God and, who knows, in a couple of years, he might even have got a raise.

Micah had his priest. The Levite had his living, but, once again, as luck would seem to have it, both their fortunes were about to change. Sure enough, Micah thinks that he'll be blessed by God for his new religious status but trouble was brewing on the horizon.

Chapter 18 introduces us to the descendants of Dan, one of the twelve brothers who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. In chapter 1 of Judges, we are told that the tribe of Dan had been instructed by God to take the land of the Amorites but they had failed miserably. So much so that the Amorites had actually driven the children of Dan into the mountains where they were licking their wounds and integrating with the local tribes. They were marrying into the Amorite clans and were generally becoming more and more annoying to God as they adopted the pagan ways of their hosts. The Danites were a bunch of cowards who hadn't trusted God for their victory, so they were out for easy pickings. In fact, they were on their way to conquer the unprotected village of Laish when they came across the household of our man, Micah.

They recognise the voice of the priest and they ask him if God will prosper their adventure. When he answers in the affirmative, they, as the saying goes, make him an offer he can't refuse. "Why be a priest to just a family when you can be priest to a whole tribe?" These Danites weren't completely unthinking in their offer. They had recognised the Levite's voice and they must have known that he was the accommodating sort that wouldn't preach too much against their ambitions of easy money. I can only draw a parallel in some pastor becoming chaplain to a bunch of unprincipled gangsters.

Micah isn't going to let go without some little bit of a protest. After all, he's the one who has braved his mother's curse, built his house of gods, installed the priest and given him the idols and the ephod to worship with. He has a sizeable investment in all this and he's understandably sore about it just fading away with the Danites. He whines "*Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and ye are gone away*" 18:24

Doesn't this just show up idolatry for the shallow, emptiness that it is? Micah is whingeing because his gods were too weak to resist their own theft and his crooked priest is too unprincipled to stay.

We see the result of the Satanic plot in the final part of the story. We now see the Danites after they have taken Micah's stuff. They ambush a tiny, undefended village called Laish and re-name it Dan after their father. What an honour for the memory of Dan! They hadn't taken the land that God had given them, they took the easy option and bullied a few hill farmers out of their settlement. What a prize bunch of losers! Even the scribes of Israel, as they write the story down, show their scorn in chapter 18 verse 29 They write: "*And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born unto Israel: howbeit the name of the city was Laish at the first.*" The Danites might have a place called after their father but remember, everyone, it was called Laish first. It was to be a milestone in the downfall of the tribe of Dan. They couldn't be trusted with the task that God had given them, so they, like everyone else in this story it seems, decide to find their own way to serve their idea of who God ought to be.

Sadly, at the end of time, in the book of the Revelation, chapter 7, we read a list of the twelve tribes that make up the 144,000 Jewish witnesses through the great tribulation. There are twelve tribes listed and named, but Dan isn't one of them. God can't trust them, even to the end of time, to do what He tells them to.

What can we learn from this over all? There is so much in here, that we could probably need a weekend away just to study all the implications.

Micah and his priest and the Danites lived in a world so much like our own that it's uncanny. It may have been thousands of years ago but it was a similarly lawless society, peopled by those who did what they they thought was right in their own minds. They weren't necessarily doing evil, they were just using their own standard, since they had no king to represent God's justice and leading. How often do we find that we have new laws that tolerate things that the Bible calls abomination? How many times do we see church leaders compromising the truth so that they can keep the fabric together? How many times do we



justify what we do because we really can't imagine that it would really offend a just and holy God?

The overriding philosophy of today, as in the time of the judges, is an easy relativism that has destroyed all absolutes and effectively left us lawless. "If you don't like the law, change it. Whatever's right for you is fine by me"

One passage that we didn't cover today is the one that shows the result of this easy lifestyle. I didn't include it this morning because we have a young congregation here but, if you want to read of the evil that happens to a lawless land, read Judges chapter 19. It is the tale of another Levite, who sinks to the pit of human degradation in his quest for personal enjoyment.

I will close with a prophetic word from the Apostle Paul as he writes in his second letter to Timothy

*This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. **2Timothy 3:1-5***

These are the signs of Jesus return. Do you see these things happening now?

When the Lord returns, will you be found in His house, worshipping Him or will you be found in a house of your own man made idols, worshipping a shadow?

The choice, as they say, is yours.

Amen

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