



When What Seems Right is Wrong

SERIES: *Fallen Heroes; Faithful God*

Read the newspaper lately? Some of us avoid it because it can be so depressing. One look at the newspapers and you get the feeling that all hell has broken loose.

This morning we come to our last look at the book of Judges. What began as a book full of hope, ends with a story that gives you a sense that all hell has broken loose.

I. When what seems right is wrong.

1. The breakdown of the family: The story begins in the 19th chapter of Judges.

“Now it came about in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, who took a concubine for himself from Bethlehem in Judah. But his concubine played the harlot against him, and she went away from him to her father’s house in Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for a period of four months” (vv. 1-2).

Once again, as in ch. 18, the story concerns a Levite. Levites were religious professionals, called to be Israel’s priests and workers at the tabernacle. This particular Levite had a concubine, which means she was a secondary wife. This was a form of marriage with a recognized commitment between the man and the woman; it wasn’t just cohabitation. But it was less honorable than a formal marriage would be, and the reason typically was that either the woman was a slave and unable to enter into a marriage, or she had no dowry or some other mark against her. Notice in v. 2 it says she “played the harlot” against him. That may mean that she was unfaithful to him, but it also may mean that she was just angry with him for some reason. Regardless of why she left, this is an example of the breakdown of the family that was taking place in their day, and is taking place in ours as well. We saw last week the story of a young man named Micah who stole a small fortune from his mother. This is always one of the signals that a society is beginning to crumble – the family disintegrates. Husbands and wives disregard their marriage vows; children disrespect their parents.

After four months, this Levite decided that he would try to win her back. Look at vv. 3-4.

“Then her husband arose and went after her to speak tenderly to her in order to bring her back, taking with him his servant and a pair of donkeys. So she brought him into her father’s house, and when the girl’s father saw him, he was glad to meet him. His father-in-law, the girl’s father, detained him; and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and lodged there.”

I like the phrase “he went after her to speak tenderly to her.” That’s a good thing for a man to learn to do. I’m starting to like this guy! The father-in-law really likes him, too. In those

days, this kind of thing would bring shame on the family, so he’s anxious to get these two back together. He’s so glad that he goes overboard in his expressions of hospitality. On the 4th day, the Levite was ready to go home, but the girl’s father wants him to stay even longer. Back then, there were very firm rules about hospitality. You could easily bring offense if you broke one of those rules. So it’s not until the afternoon of the 5th day that the Levite is able to leave. But that posed a problem because they wouldn’t get far before they needed somewhere to sleep.

B. Callousness to social responsibilities: Look what happens that evening.

“When they were near Jebus, the day was almost gone; and the servant said to his master, ‘Please come, and let us turn aside into this city of the Jebusites and spend the night in it.’ However, his master said to him, ‘We will not turn aside into the city of foreigners who are not of the sons of Israel; but we will go on as far as Gibeah.’ He said to his servant, ‘Come and let us approach one of these places; and we will spend the night in Gibeah or Ramah.’ So they passed along and went their way, and the sun set on them near Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin. They turned aside there in order to enter and lodge in Gibeah. When they entered, they sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night” (vv. 11-15).

The writer comments on the refusal of the travelers to enter Jerusalem because it was inhabited by non-Israelites. They don’t want to take a chance on entering the town of ungodly gentiles! So they go on to the town of their brothers, to Gibeah, in the territory of Benjamin. But look what happens, or I should say doesn’t happen – no one offers them shelter. It was an enormous breach of convention in the ancient world for a stranger to come to a village and not be offered hospitality. This is another sign that all hell is about to break loose in a society. There is a kind of callous disregard of the normal standards of social responsibility. Etiquette is thrown out the window. Expressions of kindness are disregarded. Hospitality is withheld. A young man neglects to give up his seat on the bus to an older woman. Visiting family members are relegated to a sterile hotel instead of being invited into the warmth of a home. Children are not taught to wait until others sit down before they gobble up their meal. These may seem like petty things, but they’re indicative of the erosion of kindness in a society.

Finally, someone comes along who’s willing to take them in.

“Then behold, an old man was coming out of the field from his work at evening. Now the man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was staying in Gibeah, but the men of the place were

Benjamites. And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveler in the open square of the city; and the old man said, 'Where are you going, and where do you come from?'" (vv. 16-17).

After the Levite explained the situation, the old man said,

"...Peace to you. Only let me take care of all your needs; however, do not spend the night in the open square.' So he took him into his house and gave the donkeys fodder, and they washed their feet and ate and drank" (vv. 20-21).

Notice that this man was not a native of Gibeah, and he wasn't from the tribe of Benjamin. He's from the same place this Levite was from, and perhaps that's why he's so willing to take him in. Notice what he says, "Let me take care of all your needs...you don't want to spend the night in this open square." It almost sounds like an ominous warning. It's as if he's saying, "This is not a real safe place. You don't want to be stuck in the neighborhood at night!"

C. Sexual perversion: For good reason. As the Levite is enjoying the hospitality of this old man, look what happens next. **'While they were celebrating, behold, the men of the city, certain worthless fellows, surrounded the house, pounding the door; and they spoke to the owner of the house, the old man, saying, 'Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have relations with him.'"** (v. 22). You'll see here an echo of the story of Sodom. The big difference here, though, is that these are Israelites who are doing this; these are God's people. Remember, they came to this city because they would be safe among their own! Homosexuality was common among the Canaanites, but it was forbidden among God's people. That's why these Israelites are called "worthless fellows," which is way of saying they were morally depraved. When all hell breaks loose, we can expect there to be all kinds of expressions of sexual perversion: adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, sexual abuse of children. I don't think I have to describe for you the decadence to which our own society has sunk in this area.

D. Degradation of women: But it gets even worse. We're tempted at this point to think of the Levite and his host as the good guys in the passage; the victims. But look what happens next. Before I read this, I want to warn you, this is one of most brutal and shocking scenes in all the Bible.

"Then the man, the owner of the house, went out to them and said to them, 'No, my fellows, please do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not commit this act of folly. Here is my virgin daughter and his concubine. Please let me bring them out that you may ravish them and do to them whatever you wish. But do not commit such an act of folly against this man.' But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and brought her out to them; and they raped her and abused her all night until morning, then let her go at the approach of dawn. As the day began to dawn, the woman came and fell down at the

doorway of the man's house where her master was, until full daylight" (vv. 23-26).

We thought we'd sunk to the lowest possible place, but here is the ugliest moment in the story. The old man is so concerned about the laws of hospitality, and no doubt frightened for himself, that he offers up not only his own unmarried daughter but the Levite's concubine as well. And the Levite, who had gone to such great lengths to win her back, now saves his own skin by grabbing her and shoving her out the door, alone. So began her last night on earth in a small town inhabited by the people of God.

Throughout this story, this woman has essentially been viewed as an object; a piece of property. She's not named. She's never spoken to. When all hell breaks loose in a society, women are degraded. They're viewed as objects; pieces of property. For some of you women, if statistics are correct, for more than a few of you, this is a very painful story to read. In some way, you know what it's like to be her. You know what it's like to be betrayed by men you trusted, men who should have protected you. You know what it's like to be the victim of heartless and ruthless lust. Though you didn't die like this woman did, you wished you did, and a part of you did die. I can't even begin to pretend that I know what your pain is like, but I know this, what happened to you is an outrage to God. This story is included in the Bible, not to justify such things, but to uncover what is too often hidden; to disclose it as reprehensible and wrong. I don't know why God seems to stand by and watch, but I do know that it breaks his heart, and he will bring justice.

I know that because Jesus was the visible manifestation of the invisible God. In Jesus' day, women were degraded. That's why Jesus was considered such a radical. He lifted women up. In a culture that didn't allow women to be educated, he taught them. Think of the woman caught in the act of adultery. The religious leaders threw her before Jesus, demanding justice, for the law required such women be stoned. But where was the man who was caught with her? Jesus saw through the sham, and he became her protector. I imagine him stooping between her and her would be assailants. He demands, "He who is without sin, let him throw the first stone." One by one they slink away, the oldest first. No one else had spoken to her, much less listened to her. But Jesus speaks to her, "Where have they gone? Does no one condemn you?" He listens as she answers, "No one, Lord." And then he sets her free: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." He treats her as a responsible human being. But he also forgives her, and he sends her off with quiet dignity as one who CAN change! Jesus can restore and heal and transform those who are victims of abuse.

E. The moral decline of religious leaders: But so often, those who are supposed to represent Him are part of the problem. Look what happens next.

"When her master arose in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, then behold, his concubine was lying at the doorway of the house with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, 'Get up and let us go,' but there was no answer. Then he placed her on the donkey; and the man arose and went to his home. When he entered his house, he took a knife and laid hold of his concubine and cut her in twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout the territory of Israel. All who saw it said, 'Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen from the day when the sons

of Israel came up from the land of Egypt to this day. Consider it, take counsel and speak up!” (vv. 27-30).

The Levite gets up the next morning; apparently he slept well. He packs up his bags and is ready to hit the road. He opens the door, and what an unpleasant sight. I wonder if he kicked her in the ribs when he told her to get up? When he sees that she is dead, he hauls her corpse home, cuts her up in 12 pieces, and sends one body part special delivery to each of the 12 tribes. In essence, he's saying, "We can't just let this go. Something must be done!"

Chapter 20 begins with all Israel, minus the Benjamites, gathering to figure out what to do. You get the sense that they know they have "hit bottom" as a nation. All the leaders are there; 400,000 soldiers are ready to be deployed. Someone asks the Levite, "Tell us, how did this wickedness take place?" Look what this angry Levite says.

"So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, 'I came with my concubine to spend the night at Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin. But the men of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me; instead, they ravished my concubine so that she died. And I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout the land of Israel's inheritance; for they have committed a lewd and disgraceful act in Israel. Behold, all you sons of Israel, give your advice and counsel here'" (vv. 4-7).

He's leaving a lot out, isn't he? He says nothing about his own cowardice, his own disgraceful behavior. He also embellishes the facts a bit: "I was in imminent danger! They intended to kill me!" But the text says nothing about that. His focus is really on the wrong done to himself, not his wife. One of the things that happens to a society in decline is that people like this Levite, who should be trustworthy, are selfish and deceptive. There was probably a time in America when ministers were among the most respected and trusted members of our society, but not any more. And we don't deserve to be. It's been awhile since the televangelist scandals of the 1980's, but the damage done to the credibility of pastors lingers on. The Catholic church's slowness in dealing with pedophile priests has dealt another blow. This whole picture is beginning to look a lot like today!

F. Excessive retribution and violence: What this Levite hopes to do is to rile up the whole nation against the tribe of Benjamin. And he succeeds. The events of chapter 20 reveal how this whole thing escalates into a national crisis. A war starts with all Israel taking on, not just the perpetrators, or even just the city of Gibeah, but the whole tribe of Benjamin. Eventually, all but 600 Benjamite men are killed. What started out as the sin of a few "worthless fellows" in one town, ends up in the killing of over 25,000 people! Having come to punish a town, they carry it to the last degree and destroy not only soldiers but cities, families, homes and everything else. They become violent destroyers themselves who claim the lives of women and children. The scale is far beyond the original loss of the one life. They're trying to set matters right and they can't stop the results, and it gets worse and worse. When all hell breaks loose, this is what happens. Violence escalates. Vengeance overtakes justice. I can't help but think of America in the aftermath of 9-11. Certainly, we should defend our country and deal with the perpetrators, but how far should we go? I

don't know the answer to that question, but I do know this: Judges 20 tells us that you can go too far.

G. Wrongful restitution: And they knew it. That's what chapter 21 is all about. When the dust settles, and a tribe is practically wiped out, they feel terrible. There are 600 Benjamite men left, but without wives the tribe will eventually die out. So now the question becomes how they will find eligible women for these 600 men. Then they recalled that they had vowed to wipe out any city or tribe that didn't help fight them. "Hey, I didn't see anyone from Jabesh-Gilead show up. Let's go massacre everybody in Jabesh-Gilead and take all the marriageable young girls." So they destroy another whole city, gathering up women for the 600 Benjamite soldiers to marry. But they only find 400 women in Jabesh-Gilead, so they're short 200. "Well, we'll fix that," you can hear them saying. They send men out in the night to a debutante ball in Shiloh, and they kidnap 200 innocent, unsuspecting girls, giving them in marriage to the remaining Benjamite men. Problem solved? They thought so. V. 24 says they all went home. Done deal. Now we can sleep. All is right.

But we know that all is wrong. This is a society where all hell has broken loose. Remember, Psalm 11:3, **"When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"** Here we have a society where the foundations are destroyed. But the real tragedy is that the would be righteous, God's own people, are the problem. It's like the old saying, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." I don't think I have to tell you that our own society mirrors theirs, and sometimes God's people are the problem. I want to ask the question, why? How can that happen? And then, after we diagnose the problem, what is the solution? How do we avoid this? How can we rebuild the foundations?

II. The need for a king.

The answer to that question is found both at the beginning and at the end of this story. Our writer is no fool, and he wants us to know the root of the disease. Look at 19:1. Our story starts out with these words, **"Now it came about in those days, when there was no king in Israel..."** Now skip over to the end of the story. Look at 21:25. **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** Do you see it? That's the problem. There is no king. At that time, it was true in Israel. The monarchy had yet to be established. When there is no king, every person just does what is right in their own eyes. And when every person does what is right in their own eyes, all hell breaks loose.

Notice that it does not say, "Every man did what was *wrong* in his own eyes." These people weren't trying to do wrong. They were trying to do right...in their own eyes. Call this consecrated blundering, meaning trying to do right but ending up all wrong. I'm sure that it seemed right to the concubine to leave the Levite and go home to her father. It seemed right to the old man to protect his guest, the Levite, and sacrifice his daughter and the Levite's concubine in the process. It seemed right to take revenge on the Benjamites. It seemed right to wipe out Jabesh Gilead so 600 Benjamite men could have wives and the tribe wouldn't be wiped out. But in each case, what seemed right was really wrong.

We live in a society where doing what is right in our

own eyes has become a creed. It's dogma. It's the American way. Our children are taught, "What seems right to you, IS right." That may be different than what is right for someone else. What is right and wrong is determined by personal taste rather than by a greater authority outside of ourselves. I hear this all the time in counseling: "I don't know what went wrong. I meant to do right. I did what I thought was best. But it all went wrong."

The problem with this philosophy is that it's based on a faulty assumption that people really are at the core of their being good. Why else would we encourage them to "be true to yourself" or "listen to your heart." If you do that, you can't possibly go wrong because you're good and your heart wouldn't possibly tell you do something bad. But this is a pernicious lie from the pit of hell. Listen to how the word of God describes you and I in our fallen state: **"There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks after God. All have turned aside, together they have become useless. There is none who does good, not even one"** (Rom. 3:10-12). Do you want to tell that person to do what is right in their own eyes? When that person does what seems right in their own eyes, all hell will break loose.

So what's the remedy? If we don't do what is right in our own eyes, how do we decide what to do? It's no different today than it was then. We need a king. We need someone to tell us what is really right. We need to surrender what we think is right to what he thinks is right. You say, but Israel got a king; kings like Saul, David and Solomon, and that didn't solve all their problems. That's true. The problem is, those men did what was right in their own eyes too. We need a king greater than them. We need a king who is wise and just and merciful. There is a king like that. His name is Jesus.

So we need to surrender our lives to him and to what he thinks is right. For those of us who call ourselves followers of Christ, that means we do exactly that. We follow him. It's not about what I think is right. It's about what he says is right. What he says is right is found in his word. So we have to be constantly allowing the word to correct what we think is right. That's not always easy to do. It takes humility. It takes faith. How do you respond when someone gossips about you? As a single person in your 40's, how do you handle your love life? What is a worthy investment of your money? How do you raise your kids? What do you do when telling the truth will get you in trouble? You do what he says is right in his word, the Bible.

For some of you, that surrender has never happened. You've come to church, you may have even thought of yourself as a Christian, but you've never surrendered to him as your king. When Jesus began his ministry, he kept saying the same thing over and over again, "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand." To repent is to change your mind; it's to turn in the other direction. It's to leave the kingdom of self-rule to that of His rule. It's to say what seems right to me is no longer the bottom line. The good news is that he is not just a king, he is also a savior. He doesn't just rule us; he forgives us and redeems us. The king of kings and lord of lords is also the one who died on the cross for you. But in order for him to be your savior you have to trust him; you have to surrender to what he says is right, even when it seems wrong.

CONCLUSION

There is an old, silly story about a young man driving an open sports car far too fast along a mountain road. He misjudges a bend, spins out of control, and the car plunges over the cliff. But the driver is flung clear and manages to grab the branch of the tree that dangles him over the chasm. "Help, help, help!" he shrieks. "Is anybody there?" His cries bounce back as echoes from the empty cliffs. "Oh God," he cries, "If you're there, please help me." And a voice answers, "I will help you, but you must trust me." " Yes, yes, anything!" "Right, first you must let go of the branch." A long silence follows, then the man gasps, "Is there anybody else out there?"

God says to us, "Trust me! Let go of what you think is right. Let go of the kingdom of self. Do what is right in my eyes."