

There is an old story... that has been going around for quite some time... about the CEO of a large American corporation... when he first took the job. ... The outgoing CEO advised him: "*Sometimes you'll make wrong choices. ... You will. ... You'll mess up. ... When that happens... I have prepared three envelopes for you. ... I left them in the top drawer of the desk. The first time it happens... open #1. ... The second time you mess up... open #2. The third time... open #3.*"

For the first few months... everything goes fine. ... Then the CEO makes his first mistake... goes to the drawer... opens up envelope #1... and the message reads... "Blame me." So he does: "*This is the old CEO's fault. He made these mistakes. I inherited these problems.*" Everybody says, "Okay." It works out pretty well.

Things go fine for a while... and then he makes his second mistake. ... So... he goes to the drawer and opens up envelope #2. ... This time he reads... "*Blame the board.*" ... And he does: "*It's the board's fault. ... The board has been a mess. I inherited them. They're the problem.*" Everybody says... "*Okay, that makes sense.*"

Things go fine for a while... and then he makes his third mistake. ... So... he goes to the drawer and opens up envelope #3. ... The message reads: "*Prepare three envelopes.*"

Justifying our wrong actions... will never correct past mistakes.

The authors of the book *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)* argue that our tendency to justify our actions is more powerful and deceptive than an explicit lie. They write:

[Self-justification] allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best thing they could have done. In fact, come to think of it, it was the right thing. "*There was nothing else I could have done.*" "*Actually, it was a brilliant solution to the problem.*" "*I was doing the best for the company... or my family.*" "*Those [jerks] deserved what they got.*" "*I'm entitled.*"

Justifying our wrong actions... will never correct past mistakes.

Two years ago in 2013... an online survey was conducted by New York law firm Labaton Sucharow among 250 financial professionals. It revealed the following:

- 52 percent felt it likely their competitors had engaged in unethical or illegal activity to gain a market edge.
- 29 percent believed financial services professionals may need to engage in unethical or illegal activity in order to be successful.
- 24 percent said they would likely engage in illegal insider trading to make \$10 million if they could get away with it.

The survey concluded: "A particularly troubling and consistent finding throughout the survey is that Wall Street's future leaders—the young professionals who will one day assume control of the trillions of dollars that the industry manages—have lost their moral compass, accept corporate wrongdoing as a necessary evil and fear reporting this misconduct."

Justifying our wrong actions... will never correct past mistakes.

As we come to the concluding chapter of the Book of Judges today... we come front and center to what this book has been about... without the right

standard of rule in our hearts... we will ALWAYS foul things up. We will. ... It is inevitable...! ... You and I will create terrible messes... whenever we ignore the proper authority of Christ's rule in our lives. ... And when we do this... we try to implement our own solutions... and often... our solutions employ behaviors that we KNOW are wrong... but we justify these actions... *"I had no other option... I exhausted all of my alternatives..."* ... *"I was actually doing it for others... (my wife... and kids...)"* *"Those wicked good-for-nothings deserve what I am about to give them..."* ... *"I'm entitled... I really do deserve what I am after..."* So we come to understand our wrongdoing as a necessary evil... justifying our wrong actions... as an attempt to correct a previous slip-up. ... And things go from bad... to WORSE.

I have just laid out for you... the entire story-line of Judges chapter 21. ... When I first started to preach through this book on Sunday mornings... some of you who knew what was coming... commented to me... *"Wow! There is some messy stuff... and ugly behavior in that coming up..."* And indeed... Especially as we come to the end of this Bible Book... we see God's people do some stuff that is... not only strange... but very repugnant to our most basic level of decency... It prompts us to ask... *"Why is this even in our Bibles...?"*

These discussions centered on the events of chapter 19... which we have already studied... and have led to the events of chapter 21... which was also the center of most of these discussions. These events ARE repulsive... and we NEED to feel the revulsion that the author intends. ... (You see) what we are about to read... in the chapter before us... is just as

repugnant... as the mess and the ugliness of our own behavior... whenever we ignore the rightful reign of Christ in our hearts. ...

Is there anyone in this room... who cannot honestly say... that at one time or another... you have felt that you made an extreme mess of your life...? ... We all have. ... And today... we are about to study what leads us to such circumstances.

As the curtain closes today on the book of Judges... we find the nation of Israel is in a state of turmoil. ... Last week... In Judges 20... we saw them go to war against one of their tribes... Benjamin... because some residents of Gibeah... (a city of Benjamin)... raped a woman... the concubine of a Levite. ... Although the Israelites suffered losses in the first two battles... they crushed Benjamin in the third battle... annihilated Gibeah... and destroyed the entire tribe... (except for six hundred fugitives.) ... The Israelites did to their brother tribe... what God had told them to do to their enemies... the pagans of the land. Then... in Judges 21... the Israelites try to solve the problem they created ... and make things worse.

There was a fear that the tribe of Benjamin would become extinct. ... Only the 600 fugitives from the war were left. ... EVERY LAST ONE of the other Benjamites... men... women... children... and even their animals... were mercilessly slaughtered... by the warriors of the 11 tribes... in their zealous rage... as they mopped up after the war. ... So... once these 600 fugitives died... the Tribe of Benjamin would be no more. ... Unless... Hebrew wives could be found... and given to these 600 men... to start new Benjamite families with... ... That would be the only way to preserve the

Tribe of Benjamin into future generations. ... But where to get these Hebrew women was a problem.

Judges 21:1-4

The narrator informs us that the Israelites... in a righteous zeal... before the war began... had made a solemn vow to keep any of their daughters from marrying a man of Benjamin. (They had an out-of-control fury toward the Tribe of Benjamin.) ... Much like Jephthah... who vowed to sacrifice whatever... or whoever... emerged from his house... if the Lord granted him victory in battle... this was another completely unnecessary vow... made in the fever-pitch of emotional buildup to war... ... And just like Jephthah... who regretted his vow after victory was won... because his daughter emerged from his house... the Israelites weep... just after their victory.

Back in Judges 2:4... the Israelites wept because they had failed to obey the Lord and destroy their enemies. ... Now they weep... because they have succeeded in destroying their brothers. ... They feel the pain that was the consequence of their actions... but it is important to see that... they were not weeping tears of confession... or acknowledgement of their own sin. ... It was only for their loss.

Judges 21:3

This question is one of complaint. ... First... the blaming in the complaining. *"Lord God... why is this come to pass in Israel."* ... This type of complaint is always an indirect blaming of God for the problem. ... Why did God allow this to happen is the complaint. ... It is a shameful attitude... for God did not

cause the problem... THEY THEMSELVES did. ... In the heat of their rage... they made unnecessary foolish vows... and then they went on an unnecessary rampage of killing soldiers... shepherds... farmers... wives... children... infants... and all their animals.

What an foolhardy question - "*Lord, why is this come to pass? How could you let this happen?*" ... The real answer is every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

But people still blame God today for their mistakes. They go their own way... make their own decisions without the Lord's direction and guidance and end up shattering their lives. ... They ignore what God's Word says about the proper use of finances... (for instance) and go out and over-extend themselves on credit... buying things they don't really need... with money they only hope to have in the future. ... Even believers... will ignore verses like Romans 12:14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not..." And when a family member upsets them... they let loose with their tongue – not with blessings... but with curses... and before you know it... World War III breaks out in the family. Still others like to press the pedal to the medal... and consistently drive at speeds they have seared their conscious to... and then one day... when they can least afford it... they get caught... and not only have to pay the court... but much higher monthly insurance rates. ... Or they fill their min with pornography... or they listen to and engage in gossip. ... Time and time again... people go their own way... knowing that the Lord's direction and guidance is different... then... with their life in shambles they blamingly ask the Lord, "*Lord, why have you done this to me?*" ... God gets the blame. ... (Listen)... blaming God never

solves the problems that you have created for yourself. Solving our problems begins with taking responsibility for our own actions.

A better question to ask God... **whenever** we want to ask God... “Why?” ... Is not “Why?” ... Even when we face circumstances that were not the result of our own foolishness. “Why?” – in nearly every case... is not the right question to ask God. Instead... it is “What?” ... What do You want me to do, Lord...?” ... And if the Israelites had asked that question... and waited for His answer... the messes we are about to see would have never happened.

Judges 21:5-7

OK... now they get the question right... “What are we to do...?” ... But they don’t ask it of the Lord. They ask *themselves*. They turn to human understanding.

Also in these verse... we learn... for the first time... about another vow. Here is an ADDITIONAL vow... that was probably just as unnecessary. The Israelites did not want any city in Israel to not participate... they wanted full participation... so before the war... and in another display of overzealousness... they vowed to kill any draft-dodgers. Refusal to come to battle... was looked upon as having no concern or anger toward the crimes that were committed.

The narrator tells us about the “Draft-Dodger Vow... Because... in their human reasoning... it begins to dawn on the leaders of Israel... that this second vow... may be the solution for the problem that was created by the first vow. Their war oath... might solve the problem of the wife-oath. ...

Judges 21:8-14

Sure enough... Jabesh-Gilead came to light... as the justifiable loophole to the wife-vow. Ingenious!... (But yes... an absolutely perverse plan.)... The Israelites reason... that they can keep their vow to prevent their women from marrying the men of Benjamin... by following through on their oath to kill those who didn't attend the assembly in Mizpah. ... So... the Israelites instruct their soldiers to kill everyone... but the virgin women... then the Israelites can offer the virgins of Jabesh Gilead to the men of Benjamin... and the Tribe of Benjamin can now exist in future generations.

But they end up killing more of their own people. Appalling... unspeakable... and evil behavior. ... And it is all due to worldly reasoning and over-zealousness.

This action... taking the 400 women to the remaining men of Benjamin... is far worse than the sin that was committed by the Levite... when he gave his concubine to men of Benjamin... who raped her. ... Here we see the Israelites give not just one woman but four hundred women to the men of Benjamin... who tolerated and defended the rapists. ... Some of the remaining Benjamites... for all the Israelites know... may have been among the rapists. ... One can only imagine what it was like for these young women to watch everyone else die... and then be carted off to these men of Benjamin. ... They had to be driven 40 miles. ... They are orphaned... homeless... in a state of shock and terror.

Then the Benjamites are summoned... after four months of hiding at the Rock of Rimmon... after fleeing the war. ... Wives are given unto them.

Imagine their surprise at this offer! ... They most likely thought they were going to die.

All of this insanity was because the Israelites were doing what was right in their own eyes. ... Instead of getting direction from the Lord... the eleven tribes depend on their own wisdom. Notice again that no one sits down to seek God's will. ... No one sought to find out why they did not attend the battle. ... God's people go from bad to worse. ... They want to solve the problem about wives for the Benjamites by killing more people. ... They reasoned they would kill two birds with one stone by destroying Jabesh-Gilead. ... They would wipe out the city and find four hundred wives for the Benjamites.

There are all sorts of moral difficulties with this solution... ingenious though it may have seemed at the moment. ... And there was also a practical problem. ... It turns out there aren't enough women to go around. There are six hundred men and only four hundred women. ... Oops...! ... 2/3 solution is no solution. ...

It's amazing how smart sin makes us when we are serving its purposes. Like the Israelites... we can conjure up ingenious solutions to the predicaments we find ourselves in. ... We can remember technicalities that serve our purposes and forget those that don't.... Isn't it amazing how we can be sticklers for certain principles that we know from God's Word... but we dismiss and ignore principles we don't like? ... We can find ways to justify or even sanctify our sinful actions... as if taking the virgins to Shiloh makes things right... or as if so-called spiritual activities give us cover for questionable behavior.... We're so smart that we can absolve ourselves for

the same sin we condemn in others... like the Israelites who condemned the rape in Gibeah but allowed for multiple abductions (after multiple murders) in Jabesh Gilead. ... Justice... mercy... and faithfulness are nowhere to be found in Judges 21.

Our ingenious efforts to justify wrong actions... as attempts to correct our past mistakes... often leave us where they left the Israelites - with more problems to solve. ... Let's return to the narrative... and see how they... again try to employ more wrong actions... to solve this.

Judges 21:15-24

They instruct the remaining men of Benjamin to abduct the young women of Shiloh while they are dancing in worship. ... The leaders of Israel know how upset their fathers and brothers will be... all will be well... because they will simply fix things with the families — They will employ their perversely ingenious... human reasoning.

These fathers and brothers who will be upset... had taken the vow to keep their women from marrying men of Benjamin... but they won't be breaking their vow... because they won't be "giving" their daughters to the Benjamites... the men of Benjamin will simply abduct the women.

In Judges 19... some men of Benjamin raped a woman... and we have the whole series of events leading to this civil war and subsequent actions we have been reading. In Judges 21... after the Israelites have prosecuted their case against Benjamin, the remaining men of Benjamin forcibly abduct (rape?) six hundred women, four hundred from Jabesh Gilead and two

hundred from Shiloh. The tribe of Benjamin, as a whole, enabled the men of Gibeah to violate one woman. The other eleven tribes, as a whole, enable what's left of the tribe of Benjamin to violate six hundred women! The best of human reasoning has created FAR MORE victims... That's justice in the period of the judges for you.

In the end, everyone goes home as if justice has been served and order has been restored. In reality, however, the Israelites have papered over their problem and created more problems. With that, the book of Judges comes to an end—except for one final observation from the narrator.

When it comes to fixing our own problems through wrong actions that we feel the need to justify... our brilliance knows no limits. ... If our first human reasoned answer doesn't do the job... we can come up with a different approach or... if necessary... multiple additional approaches. ... We too can fix things with those who stand in our way... get around a promise... find the necessary loopholes... find the loopholes in the loopholes... and congratulate ourselves that order has been restored. ... We do this while completely ignoring the fact that our ingenious solution to the problem... has created more problems... hurt more people... and dishonored God.

The Book of Judges begs you and I to beware of shallow solutions... Beware of any solution that is validated by such thinking as “The end justifies the means...” ... Count on it... It will lead to a repulsive mess...!

Judges 21:25

What a thought to end the Book of Judges with... it leaves a ringing in our ears. ... The horrendous behavior on display in the book of Judges... culminating in with these last five messy... ugly chapters... can only be understood... by the absence of a king. ... Everyone literally did what was “right in his own eyes,” not what was right in the eyes of the Lord... because there was no king in Israel.

Does that mean that if there were a king... everyone would do right in the eyes of the Lord?

Well... it does eventually happen. ... the Lord finally gives Israel a king. ... Saul... Israel’s first king... did what was right in his own eyes and led Israel astray. ... David... was the next king. ... He was an improvement. David was a man after God’s own heart. (That is what Scripture says about him) but by no means... did he ALWAYS do what was right in the eyes of the Lord... nor did leave Israel in a good place when he left the scene. ... Not long after his death... the northern tribes split from the southern tribes... and most of the ensuing kings went their own way... not the way of the Lord.

Is our time all that different from the time of the Judges? ... Don’t most people do what is right in their own eyes? ... Didn’t you see so much of our own world... in the Book of Judges as we studied it...? ... For example from our passage today... We weep for our losses but not so much for our sins. We refuse to take responsibility for our sins and shift the blame. ... Our solutions not only leave us with more problems... they also create more problems. What a mess! We need a king. ... We need **the** king.

The Christmas story that we just finished celebrating... is about the incarnation... God is willing to dive into the mess with us. ... It is a mess of our own creating... but He is willing to enter into it with us. ... An alternative name for Jesus is Immanuel... which means “God with us.”

Jesus goes where no one else wants to go... where no one else can go - to the depths of your heart. ... If you give any attention to your heart... you probably know... better than anyone else - it's pretty messy in there. ... You know all the thoughts and first impulses... you know all the selfish motivations... you know all the wrong decisions and how you justified them. The place where your thoughts and intentions originate... the depths of your heart - that's where Jesus wants to go. ... That's also where He wants to stay. ... That is where He wants to rule from... as your King. The Apostle Paul calls it a great mystery.

Colossians 1:27 (ESV)

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

– *Christ in you, the hope of Glory.*” Now listen to the words of Jesus:

John 1:12 (ESV)

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,