*An old sailor repeatedly got lost at sea, so his friends gave him a nice compass. Sometime later, the old sailor he went out to sea again, and this time he took the compass with him. But as usual he became hopelessly confused and was unable to find his way home. Finally, he was again rescued by his friends. Disgruntled with him, they asked, “Why didn’t you use the compass we gave you?” “I couldn’t! I wanted to go north, but as hard as I tried to make the needle aim in that direction, it just kept on pointing southeast.”*

*The old man was so certain he knew where he should be going that he stubbornly ignored the guidance of the compass. In other words, he thought he was right in his own eyes – but he was all wrong.*

We are now entering the last section of Judges where we are no longer focused on a judge – instead the focus has shifted to a few individuals and their impact on others during this dark period of Israelite history. This morning we are going to tackle Judges Chapter 17 and 18 together, because Chapter 17 really serves as background information for Chapter 18.

Now it’s also important to note that the remaining chapters in Judges may not be in chronological order, so these stories could have occurred anytime during this dark period. Bible scholars suggest that our story for this morning may best fit shortly after Chapter 3 – so, keep that in mind. Okay, let’s get started and turn to Chapter 17, **verse 1**.

**1Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. 2He said to his mother, “The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it.” And his mother said, “Blessed be my son by the Lord.”**

Our story begins with the introduction of a man named Micah. Micah had stolen 1100 pieces of silver from his mother – a fortune in those days, so we can assume this family is very wealthy. When Micah heard his mother utter a curse against the unknown thief, out of fear, Micah confessed that he took her silver. Superstition had it that a parental curse was greatly to be feared.

As a reward for his honesty, his mother neutralizes her curse with a blessing by saying “**Blessed be my son by the Lord.**” In those days, a blessing was believed to cancel out a curse.

So, from our initial impression, this seems like a sweet moment of a man feeling guilty for stealing from his mama, coming clean, and then receiving his mother’s gracious forgiveness. It leaves you with a warm and fuzzy feeling doesn’t it? Let’s continue with this sweet and tender moment.

**3He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, and his mother said, “I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the Lord for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you.” 4So when he returned the silver to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith who made them into a graven image and a molten image, and they were in the house of Micah. 5And the man Micah had a shrine and he made an ephod and household idols and consecrated one of his sons, that he might become his priest. 6In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.**

What just happened here? The mother seemed to be devoted to the Lord, she mentions His name, so we were expecting something positive to occur, but instead, she gives a portion of the silver back to her thieving son to make a graven image, which is a wooden object overlaid with silver, and a molten image which is made of solid silver. And these where to be placed in a homemade shrine that Micah had set up on his property. We are also told that Micah had made an ephod, which was priestly vest, and he had some other idols in his possession as well – all of which were clear violations of the commands by God given through Moses.

But that’s not all. Then Micah ignored the Levitical priesthood and installed one of his own sons, who was not a Levite, as the priest for his shrine.

Now, it would seem that Micah and his mother were sincere in their beliefs – but they were sincerely wrong. They blended the worship of the one true God with bits and pieces from the pagan world until they came up with a religion that seemed right to them.

When I read this passage, the first thing I thought of was something that Paul later said in **2 Timothy 3**, when describing the moral and spiritual decay of humanity in the last days – and just so you know, we are in the last days. Anyway, in **verse 5**, Paul said that people in the last days would be ***“holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power.”***

What does that mean? There will be those who profess to know God, who have an outward likeness or appearance of godliness – but they do not necessarily possess a genuine relationship with the Lord. People in the last days will go through the motions of religion and spirituality, all the while refusing to trust and depend upon Christ and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of gospel to transform their lives.

Like Micah and his mother, they may be sincere, they may have an appearance of godliness, they may be spiritual – but they are not biblical.

Here’s a little example of just how spiritual but unbiblical our society has become these days. Have you noticed the number of paranormal shows on television? You can turn on almost any television channel on any given day, and find a paranormal show. And these people will name the name of Jesus, wear a cross, then pull out a Ouija board, hold a séance, consult a medium, and supposedly talk to the dead.

What does the Bible say about that? Here’s some pretty straight forward direction from **Deut. 18:10-12**. It reads, ***“There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination*** *(to predict the future)****, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD.”***

This is just one passage – there are others. These activities were strictly forbidden by God because they were a doorway into the occult, but many people who call themselves Christians today are involved in this very thing. They are spiritual but not biblical – so don’t confuse the two.

Now there is one more thing I want to bring up before we move on. Micah was from the territory of Ephraim, and in Ephraim was the city of Shiloh, and at that time, the tabernacle of the Lord was in Shiloh. This is where the Ark of the Covenant was at, this is where the Levitical priests would be performing their duties of worship before God, and this is where the all Israelites were to come to worship the Lord and give their offerings and make their sacrifices.

Micah was living fairly close to the tabernacle, but instead of worshipping the Lord at Shiloh as he should have, it seems that Micah preferred to worship God on his own terms, in his own shrine – and he made his worship of God a matter of convenience.

I’m a fan of conveniences just like most people are, which is why we have convenience stores, microwave ovens, and have remotes for our televisions. They are convenient – nothing wrong with that. But sometimes following Christ is anything but convenient. Sometimes our commitment to Christ involves inconveniences and discomfort as the road we called to travel can be very hard and rocky and demanding at times.

Convenience tells you to go to the right or to the left or just to stay put if it is comfortable for you, if it makes life easier for you, but commitment to the Lord tells you do not stray from God’s Word, and do not wander off the path even though it may be difficult, and rocky, and uncomfortable, and inconvenient.

Micah had turned his worship of God into a matter of convenience as he sought an easy way to worship by staying at home and following his own religious rituals.

Okay, let’s move on to **verse 7** as the scene shifts with the introduction of a new character in our story.

**7Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there. 8Then the man departed from the city, from Bethlehem in Judah, to stay wherever he might find a place; and as he made his journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. 9Micah said to him, “Where do you come from?” And he said to him, “I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to stay wherever I may find a place.” 10Micah then said to him, “Dwell with me and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a suit of clothes, and your maintenance.”**

We are told that a Levite from Bethlehem who had apparently been living amongst the tribe of Judah, is wandering around looking for something. Although we are not told his name until the end – his name is Jonathan.

Well, Jonathan has this chance encounter with Micah, and Micah offers him the job of being the priest at his do-it-yourself shrine. I suspect Micah believed that having a Levite priest onsite, instead of his own son, would give his shrine some real legitimacy.

Now we know that any Levite, who knows the Word of God, would know that Micah had broken God’s Law by possessing his religious items, and any Levite would know that the only authorized place to worship the Lord was at the tabernacle in Shiloh – surely, Jonathan is going to refuse his offer and set him straight, but look at **verse 11**.

**11The Levite agreed to live with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. 12So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in the house of Micah. 13Then Micah said, “Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest.”**

Surprisingly, Jonathan agrees to be his priest, and as a result, Jonathan does not serve in the name of the Lord but in the name of Micah. Jonathan is just as wrong as Micah. Oh, just to give you some idea of how far these people have fallen away from God – Jonathan is the grandson of Moses. That’s how bad it had gotten for God’s people.

But the plot thickens. Let’s move to **Judges 18**, **verse 1**.

**1In those days there was no king of Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel.**

Now wait a minute. Why is the tribe of Dan seeking territory when we know that God already allotted to them the land of their inheritance?

Because they did not obey God and drive out the Amorites from the territory they were given in the Promised Land. If you recall in **Judges 1**, it was the tribe of Dan who was chased out of their assigned territory by the Amorites, and so they just headed for the hills. Now, they want to go somewhere else, some place other than where God had chosen, and they are going to have to go to a territory in the Promised Land already allotted to another tribe.

**2So the sons of Dan sent from their family five men out of their whole number, valiant men from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to search it; and they said to them, “Go, search the land.” And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there. 3When they were near the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there and said to him, “Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this place? And what do you have here?” 4He said to them, “Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me and I have become his priest.” 5They said to him, “Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous.” 6The priest said to them, “Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the Lord’s approval.”**

So, five scouts, set out to explore land to settle in, and as they are making their way, they entered the land of Ephraim and go figure, they find themselves at Micah’s “bed and breakfast and shrine”, and to everyone’s surprise, the scouts recognized the accent of Jonathan. The scouts began to question Jonathan as to why he was there, and Jonathan explained he was hired as a priest for Micah.

The scouts then asked if their journey would be a success. They want God’s favor while they are disobeying Him and seeking territory somewhere else. Well Jonathan quickly replies that they had the Lord’s approval. They didn’t. I suspect Jonathan knew exactly what they wanted to hear – so guess what, he told them exactly what they wanted to hear.

The scouts departed and headed to Laish, which was at the most northern part of the Promised Land. The scouts spied out the land and were excited about it, plus it seemed to be easy pickings because the people were quiet, and peaceful, and unsuspecting, so they returned to the tribe and reported their positive findings, and they decided to go up and take the land.

So, the tribe of Dan, with 600 armed warriors set out for Laish, and they came to Micah’s “bed and breakfast and shrine” again. The scouts entered the shrine and stole all of the religious items that belonged to Micah, and since Jonathan’s words seemed to be true, and they believed he had access to God, they offered him a huge promotion to be the priest of their entire tribe. Jonathan happily accepts their offer and takes off with the tribe.

A little later, Micah returns home and realizes his religious items were stolen and his priest is gone. So, he assembles some boys from the hood, and they catch up to this much larger tribe with 600 warriors. And look at what Micah says to them in **verse 24**.

**He said, “You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and have gone away, and what do I have besides?**

The more I read this, the more ridiculous it sounds. I guess that if you are going to make your own gods, then you should be responsible to keep track of them. We don’t want our gods getting lost or stolen. I mean, you can’t expect man-made gods to care for themselves – so how in the world could they take care of you?

Aren’t you glad that we serve the God who made us, who watches over us, who loves us, and cares for us? Quite frankly, in my opinion, Micah had nothing to begin with and he lost nothing when he returned home empty-handed.

We are told that the tribe of Dan continued north, came to the city of Laish, killed all of the people in it, and burned the city with fire. Then they rebuilt the city and lived in it. But it goes from bad to worse. Look at **verse 29**.

**29They called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father who was born in Israel; however, the name of the city formerly was Laish. 30The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. 31So they set up for themselves Micah’s graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh.**

Not only did the tribe of Dan take the idols from Micah, they set up a shire for themselves in their new city called Dan, even though the tabernacle of God was in Shiloh. We are also told that Jonathan and later his sons would serve as the priests.

Now let’s fast forward about 400 years. There came a time when the Promised Land was split into two kingdoms – the Southern Kingdom called Judah and the Northern Kingdom called Israel. Jeroboam was the king of the Northern Kingdom and he didn’t want his people to go down to Shiloh to worship God because it was in the Southern Kingdom.

So, in spite of God’s Word, the king set up two main worship centers, each with a golden calf – one in the city of Bethel and you guessed it – one in the city of Dan. And the people of Dan led Israel into idolatry and pagan worship (**1 Kings 12**) and unbeknownst to them, there were far reaching consequences.

Turn with me to **Revelation 7:4-8**, and I will show you what I mean. In this passage we find the reference to the 144,000 who are the chosen ones from the 12 tribes of Israel that God uses to share His message during the time of tribulation. These are not Jehovah Witnesses as they claim. These are Jewish evangelists. What do you notice? Dan is not mentioned amongst the other tribes because they led Israel into idolatry. They led God’s people astray and they did not follow God’s Word.

*Imagine, if you will, that you work for a company whose president found it necessary to travel out of the country and spend an extended period of time abroad. So, he says to you and the other trusted employees, “Look, I’m going to leave. And while I’m gone, I want you to pay close attention to the business. You manage things while I am away. I will write you regularly. When I do, I will instruct you in what you should do from now until I return from this trip.”*

*Everyone agrees. He leaves and stays gone for a couple of years. During that time, he writes often, communicating his desires and concerns. Finally, he returns. He walks up to the front door of the company and immediately discovers everything is in a mess – weeds flourishing in the flower beds, windows broken across the front of the building, the receptionist at the front desk sleeping, loud music roaring from several offices, and two or three people engaged in horseplay in the back room. Instead of making a profit, the business has suffered a great loss.*

*Without hesitation he calls everyone together and with a frown asks, “What happened? Didn’t you get my letters?” You say, “Oh, yeah, sure. We got all your letters. We’ve bound them in a book. And some of us have memorized them. In fact, we have a ‘letter study’ every Sunday. You know, those were really great letters.”*

*I think the president would then ask, “But what did you do about my instructions?” And, no doubt the employees would respond, “Do? Well, nothing. But we read every one!”*

We are God’s people, and God’s will for our lives is expressed in His Word. God’s desire is that we know His Word so that we will follow His will – which is ultimately best for us. Yes, obedience can seem difficult, and sometimes it may be uncomfortable and inconvenient, but if we are truly going to be people of the Word – of God’s Word, then we can’t be like Micah, and Jon, and Dan. We actually need to trust what God tells us in His Word and follow it.

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