

May 21, 2017  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Judges  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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*To Ponder . . .*

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Judges 21.

1. Is it always necessary or even best to keep your word?
2. What can we make of v.15: *And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel (v.15).*
3. Would God ever allow one of His children to fail?
4. What would be God's point, what would He be teaching us, if God allows us to fail?
5. Instead of creating a sly way of getting around their oath (i.e. they allowed the Benjaminite men to kidnap their daughters), what should the people have done?

### **MY CONVOLUTED WAY Judges 21**

Do you ever suffer from Charlie Brown syndrome? According to Urban Dictionary, "Charlie Brown Syndrome" applies to the person who can never do anything right, who always gets the short end of the stick, or of whom the words of the country song are true: "If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all." Why does Charlie Brown always fall for the same bad trick of Lucy pulling away the football just as he is about to kick it? Why does every baseball season

begin with his hopes of a winning season, only to lose the first game 56-0? Why did Charlie procrastinate about introducing himself to the pretty red-headed girl until her parents moved her out of town and it was too late?

Maybe you feel like that sometimes. Maybe you know people whose lives look like that all the time. I used to work with a guy like that. No matter what he tried, he couldn't do the job right. At first, I was frustrated with the guy. But he was so incompetent that after awhile, I just felt sorry for him.

And I am beginning to feel sorry for the Israelites who lived during the period of the judges. Maybe this last chapter, this ending to the sad story about the nation's dealing with the rebel tribe Benjamin, highlights their inability to do right more than any other part of the book. "Right" for the people of God is always the will of God. But what can the people of God do when they have rejected God's law, rejected true worship of God, and do only what is right in their own eyes? Most of the time, when God's people are doing what is right in their own eyes, we can assume they are doing wrong in God's eyes.

What a mess Israel was in. They made foolish oaths and were determined to keep them at all costs. Then when it was impossible to keep their foolish oaths they pretended to keep them by inventing a sly way around them. They pretended to seek the LORD's will and pretended to worship the LORD. But all along they were doing what was right in their own eyes. If the story wasn't about real people who were hurt and destroyed in many different ways, it would be laughable. This is how we must look to the eyes of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit when we strain at gnats and swallow camels while we are determined to do our own will and call it God's will. Generally, we insist on doing life our way instead of submitting to God's way, the end is a tangled mess that is very difficult to unravel. The story of the Judges has one very clear message. Do what is right in God's eyes not what is right in your own eyes.

### **God's People Had Created a Big Problem.**

What did the Israelite's big problem look like on the surface? In a word, the Israelites had killed nearly all their relatives in Benjamin.

Back in chapter twenty we learned, *So all who fell that day of Benjamin were 25,000 men who drew the sword, all of them men of valor. But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon and remained at the rock of Rimmon four months. And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire (20:46-48).*

The whole terrible mess started when a Levite, who lived a questionable lifestyle, found himself in a dangerous situation. While he was a guest of an old man in Gibeah, worthless fellows determined they wanted to abuse him sexually. To protect his own skin, he gave them his concubine instead who the worthless fellows either killed or nearly killed. In response to the tragic crime, the Levite arrested the attention of the nation of Israel about this horrible crime the men of Gibeah had done.

The grisly message did indeed arrest the attention of the nation and all of Israel's leaders gathered to get more information. The requested the Levite to tell his story, which he did with some of the facts changed in order to stir up Israel to gain vengeance for himself against Gibeah. When he finished, the Levite challenged the people to do something about it. The leaders of Israel agreed. They chose to punish the people of Gibeah. As we might expect, when the rest of Israel threatened to annihilate the men of Gibeah, the fellow Benjaminites went to the defense of the city and an all out civil war erupted. Eventually Israel was successful in their endeavor to punish their relatives.

Suddenly, it dawned on the Israelites that they had created a great problem. Because they had listened to the Levite and might have reacted hastily, there was almost certainly going to be one tribe missing in Israel. Had the Israelites over reacted? Did their punishment go too far? Should they have treated their brothers differently than God's plan for the pagan Canaanites? How would the few survivors of the tribe survive?

Israel was in a real pickle because they had all taken an oath to destroy Gibeah. Again back in chapter twenty we read, *And all the people arose as one man, saying, "None of us will go to his tent, and none of us will return to his house. But now this is what we will do to*

*Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot, and we will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the people, that when they come they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin, for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel." So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one man (20:8-11).*

Because the whole tribe of Benjamin defended the people of Gibeah, it drew them under the ban of the oath. Now that the damage was done, the Israelites had to deal with the ramifications of their oaths. Now *the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel this day (v.6).* Yeah. What did they think was going to happen? In particular the people had also taken an oath to withhold their daughters from the survivors. Now *the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, "No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin" (v.1).*

As if that oath hadn't been bad enough, furthermore, *the people of Israel said, "Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the LORD?" For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death" (v.5).*

And so their rash oaths had come back to haunt them. *What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them any of our daughters for wives? (v.7). "Yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters." For the people of Israel had sworn, "Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin" (v.18).*

It is pretty clear that God's people intended to keep their oath. Their determination seems to indicate that they were really sensitive about God's law. God made it very clear that He intended for His people to keep their oaths when they made them. God's law requires, *If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth (Numbers 30:2).* Well, that is what the Israelites intended to do.

Are we different in that respect? We too expect people, especially Christians, to keep their word. However, we live in a world where even Christians do not dependably do what they say. Commitments to spouses, employers, fellow church members fall by

the wayside as easily as leaves falling in November. In fact, surveys now indicate that a well known trait among Millennials is their avoidance of making commitments. Many of them do not commit to marriage, they switch jobs on average in less than a year, they do not buy houses because they don't want to commit. Which is better: Not making a commitment or not keeping a commitment? Neither! God expects us to make commitments and God expects us to keep commitments.

Therefore, the Israelites must have pleased God very much as they insisted on keeping their oath not to let their daughters marry the remnant of the Benjaminites.

But that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that the people were not committed to God's will. That issue comes to the surface a bit in that the people blamed God for the crises they created. *And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel (v.15)*. But, was it not the people's choice to punish their brothers? The Levite challenged them to decide what they should do after he had told them version two of the story (20:7). The leaders had with one voice concluded that they would go up against their brothers. *And all the people arose as one man, saying, "None of us will go to his tent, and none of us will return to his house. But now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot" (Judges 20:8-9)*.

Yes, all of that is true, but didn't they consult God before they started the civil war? Yes, and God told the tribe of Judah to go into battle first (20:18). A second time God told the Israelites to go into battle (20:23). Finally God even promised to give Israel the victory over Benjamin (20:28).

So if it was God's will for them to go into battle, was it wrong for them to conclude that the LORD had made the breach? Often God allows His people to do things that are in keeping with their stubborn determined will. God allows the thing knowing well that it is not going to turn out well and that the result will be pain and suffering. This is called Fatherly discipline and is intended to get our attention. Failure is one of the best ways for us to realize that we need to back up and re-evaluate our plans and desires.

On the surface, the people of God's nation looked like they were quite devout. They reacted against gross sin. They vowed to

excise sin from their midst. They consulted God. They were determined to keep their oaths. And the Pharisees looked exactly like this. And professing Christians look exactly like this today. So what's the problem?

In response to Godly discipline the people pretended to have a heart for God's will. *And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. And they said, "O LORD, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?" And the next day the people rose early and built there an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings (vv.2-4)*.

No doubt the people were sincere in their worship. They were weeping bitterly. They genuinely felt the pain of losing a tribe in Israel. They were crying out to God. They were asking God questions about why this happened. They even built an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. God's law stipulated these offerings as expressions of fellowship with Him. They also could accompany a pleading with God for His help. How could we possibly doubt their sincerity?

It helps us to understand what took place in that day if we read ahead in Israel's history to consider God's response to their relatives hundreds of years later. In the last words God uttered to His people before going silent for 400 years God said, *"And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand" (Malachi 2:13)*. Well at least they were going to "church." Yes, but God was not impressed. Consider God's assessment of those people's hearts. *"From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'" (Malachi 3:7)*.

How often have we observed the response of a person who is caught in the consequences of doing what was right in his or her own eyes. Often at old fashioned revival meetings we have seen such people respond to the preacher's appeal, run to the altar, weeping and pouring out pleas to God. But two months later, we observe as the person continues to do what is right in his or her own eyes. Weeping, crying out to God, building altars, does not indicate a changed heart.

People in the age of judges and in our age still need to learn the eternal principle God spoke through Samuel to religious yet rebellious Saul: *“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry”* (1 Samuel 15:22-23a).

Because they did not heed God’s precepts and because they were determined to do what was right in their own eyes, after building a new altar in Bethel, after weeping and crying out to God, the people came up with their own solution.

### **God’s People Developed a Two Part Solution.**

The solution the foolish Israelite leaders came up with required more killing. In their opinion, another people group, the people of Jabesh-gilead, would have to be punished for not following the rules. Again the rub came down to the leaders of the people insisting on keeping their oath, whether or not it was wise or even godly. *And the people of Israel said, “Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the LORD?” For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah, saying, “He shall surely be put to death”* (v.5).

A quick review showed that no one from the city of Jabesh-gilead had joined in the punishment against Benjamin. *And they said, “What one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah?” And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead, to the assembly. For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there* (vv.8-9). Did anyone stop to wonder why they didn’t show up? Did anyone ask? Is it possible that the people had not received word? Were there extenuating circumstances that precluded their ability to show up? Apparently, the rash conclusion of the leaders (they made a lot of those) was that the people of Jabesh-gilead were rebels who they needed to punish. When a group of people do what is right in their own eyes as opposed to seeking God’s will, punishment for breaking arbitrary man-made rules is the only acceptable response.

So, the leaders sent 12,000 hatchet men to kill every male, and every person who was not a virgin in the city (vv.10-11). And what a wonderful coincident that 400 virgins were suddenly available for marriage. *And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him, and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan* (v.12). Right away, the whole nation of Israel sent the good news to the men of Benjamin who were hiding for their lives. *Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon and proclaimed peace to them. And Benjamin returned at that time. And they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead, but they were not enough for them* (vv.13-14).

Israel was sure that this was good news. Good news for who? Was it really good news for 600 men who had lost all friends, relatives, family and possessions at the hands of their unwise overly aggressive brothers? Was it really good news since the men didn’t really have a choice? What if the women were homely? It certainly wasn’t good news to the young ladies whose families had just been killed and who were snatched from their homes and forced to marry ugly, stinky left handed men who were hiding in the rocks.

And in spite of this foolish decision and action, there still were not enough young ladies to provide wives for the 600 survivors. Wouldn’t it have made more sense for the Israelites to acknowledge to God that they had acted rashly in making the vow? They could have humbled themselves and admitted that they were wrong. The leaders could have stood before the people, admitted that their previous decision was not wise and changed the rule to allow their daughters to marry Benjaminites. Pride would not let them do it. Human pride led to greater loss and pain and it wasn’t over yet.

It is human nature to make bad choices. When we do, it is a righteous thing to admit that we made a bad choice and need to change it. It is so important for leaders of the church and of the family to be able to admit that the first choice was not good and that change is for the better. That is why the Constitution of Community Baptist Church has been amended fourteen times.

Things went from bad to worse. The solution to the new problem required kidnaping. There was still a shortage of wives. Four

hundred virgins was two hundred short. Then the elders of the congregation said, *“What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin?”*(v.16). The overwhelming problem still existed, because 200 men were left wifeless. *And they said, “There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel* (v.17).

Still the leaders stubbornly insisted on keeping their vow. *Yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters.” For the people of Israel had sworn, “Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin”* (v.18). Again the foolish leadership came up with a plan, but we must conclude that authorizing kidnaping is not a good solution.

Here is the plan: *So they said, “Behold, there is the yearly feast of the LORD at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.” And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards and watch. If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. And when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, ‘Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle, neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.’” And the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them* (vv.19-23).

The plan involved an annual feast of the LORD. If kidnaping is connected with worship, God will approve it right? The “Feast of the Lord” was some kind of celebration (maybe required by God, maybe invented by the people). It would be a day of no work, just festivities with the young women hanging out at Shiloh. So the leadership would inform the Benjaminite men that there would be a bevy of beauties hanging out that day and they could go steal a wife if they wanted to. If their fathers or brothers complain or resist, not to worry. “We’ll explain that this is okay because *we* are being merciful to the poor Benjaminites who we made poor.”

This is the most mindless, stupid plan anyone could ever conceive! They were just like the Pharisees who would follow in their train, the elders of Israel split hairs about their vow. They concluded that if the Benjaminites stole their daughters with the leaders’ permission, the people would still be technically keeping the foolish vow. How ridiculous! Why didn’t they just throw out the mindless, foolish vow? Of course the fathers and brothers were going to be upset with the gorilla like guys rushed down from the mountains and hauled their beautiful daughters off by their hair. And how did the daughters feel? It’s pretty doubtful that any of the girls were thinking, “Oh this is so exciting! This isn’t what I planned for my wedding day at all!”

*And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and they went out from there every man to his inheritance. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (vv.24-25). The last verses of the book read almost as though “everything just kind of got back to normal.” When God’s people are doing what is right in their own eyes, nothing just gets back to normal. There are serious ramifications to deal with. Yes, people are adaptable and we do learn to live with our bad decisions. But what about the glory of God? If we live life in light of the eternal glory of God we will be more careful not to haphazardly make decisions according to what we think is right. We will be more careful to make decisions that are in line with God’s principles so that He will receive the glory.