

## UNWISE COMMITMENTS

Judges 21:1-15

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Twenty-five years ago, the elders of Crossroads made a significant mistake. I was there and was part of the problem. At the time, we had just finished building this auditorium and found ourselves in debt, a debt that we could afford to pay. We were not in sin because we had taken on a debt, but having done that, it has made several of us think twice about whether or not we should go into debt again. But, we were not having any problems meeting our obligations.

Then one day, we received a letter of invitation from the CBNW headquarters to join them in a guaranteed investment that would return a higher amount than the percentage of our debt level, making it possible for us to retire the debt much sooner. The letter encouraged those churches that had debt from a recent building campaign to join them in taking advantage of this good deal.

After discussing this opportunity briefly among ourselves and passing it by some rather trustworthy businessmen in our fellowship, we decided to take them up on their offer. We announced it to the congregation, expecting a favorable response. At our next Elder Board meeting, which by the way are always open to anyone who wishes to attend, we had a guest show up who was not too happy. He let us know in no uncertain terms that we had been foolish to take the CBNW up on their offer. It was rather an unpleasant experience to have someone come to the meeting unexpectedly and breath fire.

As the elders sat there being torched by his words, I was humbled by two things: First, that this messenger, whose manner left much to be desired, had a message that was absolutely correct. We had blown it! The second thing I was humbled by was being surrounded by eight godly and humble men who ignored this man's manner and took hold of his timely message. Their response had no reviling to it. They genuinely thanked him for coming and giving us his perspective. Before he left, together we prayed that God would

show us how to proceed from that point on, since we had already committed verbally to join the investment.

What do we do when we make an unwise commitment, vow something foolish, or take an oath to do something, even for the Lord, before we have ever considered asking Him, “Is this something You want me to do?” Do we arrogantly plow forward, hiding our mistake? Or do we honor God by changing course?

We human beings can quickly make rash vows, even for good reasons, but we are not always in tune with God’s will. This morning, we are going to see just such a situation and learn what we can do and should not do when we find that we have made an unwise commitment.

Few historical events in the Bible based on human vows stir up more disgust, or more moral, spiritual, and relational outrage than what we read in **Judges 19-20**. Just when you thought Israel’s rebellion against God and His Word couldn’t get worse, it did. And yet, God providentially included this passage of Scripture in His inerrant Word to warn us--not those who are lost, but those who are part of the family of God who should know better--how quickly we can slip from being faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ to being just like the rest of the world who ignore or deny God exists and whose moral frame of reference shifts with the wind, rather than holding steady. Believers hold fast to the trustworthiness of God’s Word.

Unfortunately, we don’t see this happening much in the final five chapters of the book of **Judges**. What we do see is the grace of God patiently waiting and eventually bringing discipline to bear upon His people so that they will return to Him.

If you are visiting with us and you are stepping into the plot of our text in midstream, let me help you feel the powerful direction of the current of events that have already shaped our journey, so that you can better participate in the trip downstream God has for us.

Our story began with **Judges 19**, a true horror story. It is carefully and dramatically written, delineating the rape and murder of an Israelite woman by a gang of thugs in the Benjamite town of Gibeah. The deceased’s husband

bundled up her corpse, threw it over his donkey and took her a two-day's journey home. There he proceeded to butcher her body, cutting it up into twelve pieces, and sending one piece to each of the leaders of the tribes in Israel, making a statement that demanded a just response from the rest of the nation. This rape highlights the depths of perversion to which these Israelites from the tribe of Benjamin had plunged.

For the reader who is aware of their timing, these events are even more dramatic. This took place shortly after Joshua had led the Israelites in victory in taking possession of the land of Canaan. God had blessed all of the Israelites with new furnished homes, a land prepared with fields that produced a tremendous harvest, and walled cities. Even though some of the original Israelites who fought to take the land were still alive, people who loved the Lord and worshiped the Lord, the next generation of Israelis completely turned its collective back on Yahweh. The writer of the book of **Judges** portrays the Israelites as having become completely canaanized in their living within one generation. Rather than being salt and light to the world around them, the Israelites, chosen people of God, had become idol worshipers, immoral, ungracious, and selfishly vicious. They were nothing like the people God had called them out of Egypt to be.

In **chapter 20**, eleven of the Israeli tribes agreed that they must do something. So, they contacted the leadership of the tribe of Benjamin and asked them to turn over the guilty men to be judged according to the Law of God. But unexpectedly, the tribe of Benjamin decided to stand with this gang of rapists rather than punish them. As a result, all eleven tribes of Israel went to war against their fellow Israelite tribe of Benjamin, to avenge the rape and murder of the woman and to purge the evil from among their people.

By the end of the chapter, all but six hundred soldiers from the tribe of Benjamin were killed. The only reason those few were alive was that they had found a hiding place to live in for four months. This remnant of soldiers represented the total number of all men, women, and children that had previously made up the tribe of Benjamin. Not including the forty thousand deaths of the soldiers fighting in the three-day war, the estimated deaths of all the men, women, and children from the tribe of Benjamin alone that were killed was close to 200,000 people! At this point, the tribe of Benjamin was almost extinct. In short, God said the eleven tribes would have victory, but

He never intended for the other Israeli soldiers to wipeout the entire tribe. Hence, what we have here is a serious case of justice run amok into heavy-handed revenge. These things happen when saints don't stay tuned into the Lord.

When we come to our passage for this morning, **Judges 21:1-11**, we see the rest of the tribes of Israel realizing what they had done, that they had gone too far in killing off Benjamites. They had already won the battle; they didn't need to wipe out all of the tribe. The deep regret, the change of policy, and the preventive measures that followed in this chapter clearly reveal that Israel regretted the extreme extent to which they took their revenge. In the end, Israel actually attempted to do what they could to preserve the tribe of Benjamin. But in doing so, they unleashed even greater wickedness than before, if that could even be possible.

In this chapter, the eleven tribes faced the problem they had brought about--the possible extinction of the entire tribe of Benjamin. What had made this such a difficult problem was the Israelites' making two frivolous oaths, that if kept would guarantee the extinction of one of the original twelve tribes of Israel. In order to solve the problem, the Israelites took three unconscionable steps in an attempt to right their wrong. There is too much here to cover in one morning, so we will break down this last chapter into two studies: this morning, we will look at the problem, the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin in the first eleven verses, leaving next week to finish up with Israel's solution.

Beginning with **Judges 21:1**, we read:

**<sup>1</sup>Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpah, saying, "None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin in marriage." <sup>2</sup>So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening and lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. <sup>3</sup>They said, "Why O LORD, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be missing today in Israel?"**

<sup>4</sup>It came about the next day that the people arose early and built an altar there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. <sup>5</sup>Then the sons of Israel said, “Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who 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 at Mizpah saying, “He shall surely be put to death.” <sup>6</sup>And the sons of Israel were sorry for their brother Benjamin and said, “One tribe is cut off from Israel today. <sup>7</sup>What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the LORD not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?”

<sup>8</sup>And they said, “What one is there of the tribes of Israel who did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah?” And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-Gilead to the assembly. <sup>9</sup>For when the people were numbered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead was there. <sup>10</sup>And the congregation sent 12,000 of the valiant warriors there and commanded them, saying, “Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead with the edge of the sword, with the women and the little ones. <sup>11</sup>This is the thing that you shall do; you

**shall utterly destroy every man and every woman who has lain with a man.”**

The scene opens with the mention of the people of Israel’s weeping because they realized that in their over zealousness in seeking revenge, they had just about wiped out the entire tribe of Benjamin from the family of Israel. What caused this reality to be so deeply felt was the knowledge of their foolish oath or vow that was mentioned in **verse 1**, a vow not to allow any Israelites from the remaining tribes of Israel to ever marry a Benjamite. Understand, this reckless thoughtless vow was made before the war began. This vow had no precedent in the history of Israel and had no Biblical mandate to support it.

Also, don’t miss the tone of the Israelites’ crying out to the Lord in **verses 2-3**. Rather than humbly going to God, admitting their guilt, and confessing their sin for their wrongful oaths and overzealous revenge against their fellow countrymen, they asked God why these Israelites had to die, as if God had told them to do this. They were blaming Him Who had no blame. This blaming of God for their revengeful overkill is substantiated in **verse 15**. It’s obvious from their offerings and their weeping that they knew that they had committed a grievous mistake.

Before we look at what they should have done, let’s take a closer look at these oaths and why they were foolish. The oath mentioned in **verse 1** was not the first foolish oath that was made at this time. It was the second. The first foolish vow, called “**the great oath**,” was mentioned in **verse 5**. This first vow is unclear, but like the second, it had no historic precedent, nor did it have any Biblical foundation to support it. It demanded that any tribe that refused to send a representation of soldiers to stand against Benjamin would be put to death. What was unclear about this vow were the specifics:

Did every clan that made up the tribe have to have soldiers enlisted in this battle? Or did a simple contingent from the tribe satisfy the vow?

If it meant every clan, did that mean that every village that was part of a clan had to send at least one representative to avoid condemnation?

We really don't know the answers to those questions, thus we really don't know if this small village, Jabesh-Gilead, of the tribe of Manasseh on the eastern side of the Jordan, was guilty. What we do know is that the tribe of Manasseh, of which Jabesh-Gilead was a part, was well represented at the battle.

So, how did this “**great oath**” gain traction and acceptance among the tribes? The acceptance of both vows came about because the leaders of Israel never followed the procedure established by God for discerning His leading in such matters. They simply decided to act in the name of Yahweh without ever asking Him what He would have them to do.

The only possible support for the great oath, to put to death those Israelites who failed to come to war against Benjamin, could be **Numbers 32:20-33**. But there are two problems with using this passage in support of their actions: First, these instructions only concerned Israel's going to war against the Canaanites. These instructions were not geared toward wars among fellow Israelis. Second, the **Numbers 32** passage does not give the guilty tribe who refused to go to war with Israel the judgment of being slaughtered or annihilated. Hence, this oath was an ungodly oath.

Likewise, the second oath or vow was also without precedent. The “wife oath” that the Israelites had taken at Mizpah (**20:8-11**) forbade any Israelite to allow their daughters to marry a Benjamite. This oath may have had some connection with God's commands concerning Israel's treatment of the Canaanites in **Deuteronomy 7:1-3**. Israel was to destroy these enemies utterly, and was not to intermarry with the Canaanites. Ironically, whereas earlier in the book of **Judges** the Israelites had displayed few scruples in intermarriage with Canaanites, they now have agreed to a vow not to allow themselves to intermarry with their own kind! Never did Yahweh forbid or make provision for one tribe not to marry the women of another tribe. Again, this vow did not have the stamp of God's approval, thus making it a foolish vow.

So, what should they have done? In cases such as this, there was a prescribed action that the leaders of Israel were to take when wanting to know how to proceed. When the leadership of Israel was in a position to take a united action against anything, they were to seek out the High Priest, who would

consult Yahweh through the use of the Urim and Thummim to determine the will of the Lord. At the time Phinehas, a righteous man of proven character and love for the Lord, was the High Priest.

There is no record of anyone asking Phinehas to consult with the Lord. But what we do have is previously, in **verses 2-3**, the people crying out to God for an answer, but in desperation over God's silence, rising up early the next morning, and through ritual observance, trying to arrest God's attention. But God still did not answer.

So, what should they have done? What should you do if God does not give you an answer? Typically, you do not forge ahead. You stop and wait. And while waiting, you take a good look at what you have been doing lately. You look to see if there is any wrong doing you have committed and need to confess to God. If you find something, you confess it, make amends as God prescribes in His Word, and then ask for God's direction.

This is exactly what the eleven tribes should have done. They should have humbly approached the Lord and asked Him to reveal to them if there was something they missed, and He would have shown them and made clear what to do with a foolish vow. In fact, God knows us and our ability to make commitments and oaths that are unwise, sinful, or simply impossible to fulfill. Therefore, He made provision for what to do when an Israelite made an oath or commitment they could not or should not fulfill.

In such cases, God's requirement was spelled out in **Leviticus 5:4-5**, where we read:

**If a person swears [makes a vow] thoughtlessly with his lips to do evil or to do good, in whatever matter a man may speak thoughtlessly with an oath, and it is hidden from him [he doesn't realize it], and then he comes to know it [he suddenly realizes it], he will be guilty in one of these. So it shall be that when he becomes**

**guilty in one of these, that he shall confess that in which he has sinned.**

In **verse 10**, Moses goes on to describe the sacrifices that had to be made in addition to the confession. We read, “**So the priest shall make atonement on his behalf for his sin which he has committed, and it will be forgiven him.**” Once a confession was made that the oath was thoughtless, and the oath bearer had made amends through a sacrificial offering, the oath bearer was relieved of having to fulfill an ungodly oath. By the way, an ungodly oath is a sinful or evil oath, one that was impossible to fulfill. This is not an escape from a financial commitment that one could and should fulfill.

Instead, as we will see next time, they tried to save face through a subterfuge that seemingly left both of their foolish oaths intact and, in reality, reduced their oaths to a mere sham. Israel knew that they had entered into oaths that were unbiblical and would lead to full scale murder, kidnap, and the rape of six hundred unsuspecting young girls, all to avoid their humbling before God, admitting their oaths were wrong, and seeking His forgiveness and relief from having to follow through. But Israel didn't do any of this. Hence, the writer of **Judges** leaves the reader to conclude that Israel's oaths and approach was purely pragmatic and their actions were self-directed, not God-directed.

Have you ever made a foolish vow in a highly emotional moment? When working with young adults, from middle school to college graduates, I often came across students who would make quick and rash vows to never do something or to do something for various reasons. Sometimes, vows or oaths are made in reaction to a situation gone wrong. For instance, “I will never do that! I will never be that way as a spouse or parent when I get older.” Interestingly, often times without someone even knowing it, they become just like their parent in that area.

Or sometimes, one makes an oath or vow to do something good in a highly charged emotional moment. Maybe it is in response to a compelling speaker at church, a conference, or a youth camp. Many times I have heard a committed young follower of Jesus say, “I committed myself to becoming a foreign missionary for Jesus!” I think we can all say that that would be a righteous commitment. However, what if God were merely impressing upon

someone the importance of being committed to missions, but not to be a missionary on a foreign field? What if that person took God's instruction or directive to an unintended conclusion? It is one thing to say, "Lord, I am willing and desirous of serving you and your kingdom by being a missionary to Latin America. If you want me to, I'm all in." But it is another thing to say, "I'm going to be a missionary to Latin America," when God has not asked you to do so.

How often I have come upon adults who have failed to raise the financial support necessary to get to a foreign mission field, and take it as some sort of spiritual failure, because they had committed themselves and taken a serious vow to become a missionary. Other adults, who did everything they financially could to get themselves on the field, have discovered that one way or another, their missions experience was short-lived and they were forced to return home, feeling guilty that they had failed miserably, when possibly God never intended them to be there.

Here's another common well-meaning vow, oath, or commitment people make without first checking in with the Lord. They hear of a worthwhile Christian plea for financial support from someone or some Christian organization whose work they highly value. They are already tithing of their income, but really don't have the wherewithal to give more than 10% without literally taking food off the table or preventing their family from having their needs met. Suddenly, it comes to crunch time and they have run out of money and cannot make their commitment. What do they do?

All of this raises the question: What do you do when you make a vow that proves to be rash, unwise, foolish, or based on a false Biblical precedent? Even though Jesus says, "Make your yes be yes and your no be no," are we always to keep a rash or wrong vow? When we see we have overstepped our bounds and have gone too far in a commitment, what recourse do we have?

The following are some general guidelines. With such a large subject matter, there can be exceptions, so seek godly counsel before you take action.

From what the Lord told Israel in **Leviticus 5**, we can take with us these guidelines:

First, admit it to the Lord. If you have not sought out His direction before making a vow, and it turns out to be a hasty one that you cannot fulfill because it is immoral, in violation of Scripture, or simply impossible to fulfill, admit it.

Second, ask for forgiveness for having made God a party to a rash vow He never intended. Because whenever we make a vow as believers, who are owned by Jesus, we make Him a party to that vow.

Third, if the vow is immoral or impossible to fulfill, seek release and forgiveness from the injured party. Seek to make amends if possible, but do not do what God's Word says is wrong. Take the consequences for having made a rash vow.

Fourth, if your vow is not immoral or impossible to fulfill, but merely challengingly inconvenient, follow through with your commitment. You can always admit to the person that you were hasty in making your commitment, and if they are gracious so as to release you from your commitment, then humbly accept their release.

Twenty-five years ago, when we elders simply accepted the CBNW offer to join in on an investment without ever seeking out the Lord first, we blew it! It was humbling as entrusted leaders to see our mistake. Once we did, the elders committed to do what was right. Regardless of how it would turn out, we committed to admit to our failure to the congregation that we had not checked with the Lord before making the decision.

Second, we went to the CBNW and let them know our situation. First, we had failed to seek the Lord's direction before we verbally committed to the investment opportunity. Second, we sought permission to remove ourselves from the investment opportunity. Third, we shared our concerns based on the lesson that we had learned from one of our church members.

Thankfully, the CBNW understood and supported our decision to pull back until we received confirmation that the Lord would have us move forward with the investment.

We then went to the congregation and admitted our basic blunder of trusting in what others were choosing to do without first seeking the Lord. As a result, we let them know that we were not going to invest in this opportunity. Less than two years later, this investment opportunity proved to be a Ponzi scheme in which several highly visible Christian organizations across this country got unwittingly caught up. God showed mercy to our church and leadership through our humbly admitting our foolish mistake, seeking His forgiveness, and changing our mind about such an action. Further, He offered us a way of escape.

Remember the Lord and His graciousness in the past, present, and future. He will continue to be the same for you.

Let's pray. Oh Lord, this story of Israel's foolish oaths exhausts our souls. We sometimes forget that in our hearts resides the potential for great wickedness (**Jeremiah 17:9**). We acknowledge that we are saved by grace, not by any merit of our own. We confess that at times we are apathetic to your commands and more attuned to the lure of the culture than to the love of the cross. We thank you today that as we remember our final and true High Priest, Jesus Christ, and His finished work on the cross, His resurrection, and His promised return, that one day we will get to see and serve You face to face. Father, we admit that our confession of Christ is not always matched by authentic obedience. May we be warned. May we be aware. May we be alert. May we be authentic followers of Jesus, so that in the end, Lord, you are lifted up and glorified on earth as you are in heaven. Amen.

