

THE SEEDS OF APOSTASY

Judges 17:1-6

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Two summers ago, I had the privilege of teaching the book of **Jude** to our adult Sunday School class. Previous to that, I had done what I call light studies in **Jude**, but had never taught the book in any forum. So when I was asked to teach it, I jumped at the chance to dig deeply into it.

As I did, however, I realized that Jude's letter would not be easy to teach. It's always enjoyable to teach on the power of the Gospel to change people's lives and to teach on what some may call positive subjects. But **Jude** is not one of those books. And I'm quite sure that as a pastor, Jude didn't enjoy having to write and send his letter to those Christians. Why? Because the point of Jude's letter was really a warning: We Christians must be careful to remain faithful to the faith. And that is putting a positive spin on what is mainly a negative subject. Jude's emphasis, according to **verse 3**, is a warning to Christians of the danger of departing from the faith. In other words, his subject is the perilous consequences of a Christian's apostasy.

What is apostasy? Apostasy involves a major departure from the faith that reveals itself in moral or spiritual failure. It is not a momentary lapse in one's spiritual walk like Peter's denial of Christ during His trial. Rather, it can be a slow, continual slipping away into rebellion against God and a denial of what His word says is true.

Jude makes it perfectly clear that a Christian can be saved, yet become an apostate. This truth drives home the point that apostasy is a matter of obedience, not salvation. History, as well as Jude's letter, reveals that Christians can depart from the faith almost as easily as non-Christians. Some Christian teenagers abandon their faith in college and university, and many never return to it.

Jude first defined the character of apostasy in **verse 4** of his very short letter. He states, "**For certain persons have crept in [into the church] unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and**

deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” Do you see the progression? According to Jude, apostasy is the result of one moving away from godliness to ungodliness, to licentiousness, and then to denial. Unfortunately, we don't have the time this morning to make a thorough exposition of this short epistle, but **Jude** goes on to reveal how, following this progression, a believer can become apostate.

An “**ungodly**” person is one who has within himself/herself refused to submit to God's authority. An apostate Christian, by the way he lives, does not have the appropriate reverence for God, His purposes, or His instructions. He has made the choice to ignore God, to ignore God's Word, and to go his own way.

Pretty soon, departure from God's will begins to mark his behavior. He or she takes license. His conduct often becomes marked by unbridled lust, excesses in the pursuit of fleshly satisfaction, and shamelessness. **Jude** goes on to show that apostasy moves from the volitional area into the moral area.

The next step is that he justifies his behavior with intellectual rationalization; he has to convince himself that what he is doing is right in order to silence his guilty conscience. Consequently, he figures out a way to convince himself that wrong is right. In so doing, he must also convince himself that right is wrong. This leads to a denial of God's Word. He has moved from volitional apostasy to moral apostasy, and then to intellectual apostasy. All three aspects of apostasy listed in Jude, ungodliness, licentiousness, and denial counter loving God with all one's heart, strength, and mind.

This means that heresy, which deals with your mind and what you think and teach, often has its ultimate source in personal failure to submit to God in some area of your life. This is the essential characteristic of apostasy. Many people have observed that moral failure frequently precedes doctrinal failure. Ungodly choices lead to mental denial of the truth.

The Old Testament has its own book dealing with the subject of how believers can become apostate. It is the book of **Judges**. In June 2012, I had to step away for a while from finishing up a study we had begun in the book of **Judges**. The period of the **Judges** covers one of, if not the most, spiritually dark periods in all of Israel's history. We worked through the first sixteen chapters of the book, when I finally had to say, “Time out! We need a break!”

And I moved over to finish up our concurrent study of the book of **Acts**, which is a really upbeat book to teach in comparison to the book of **Judges**. But this morning, we are going to return to **Judges**, and in the weeks ahead, we will faithfully finish the final five chapters.

For those of you who were not with us three years ago, and for those of you who were but don't remember what **Judges** is all about, allow me some time this morning to give you an overview before we dive into our passage.

The period of the judges covers about four hundred years of Israel's history. The events of that period are spelled out for us in two books of the Bible, **Judges** and **Ruth**. We are going to finish up **Judges** and then move to the book of **Ruth**, which stands in stark contrast to **Judges**. The study of **Ruth** will absolutely bless your life. It's a fun book to teach. The book of **Judges** will bless your life though, if you are someone who can learn from other people's mistakes and not repeat them.

The book of **Judges** is twenty-one chapters in length and has three major parts. There is the introduction, which covers **1:1-3:6**. Then there is the body of the book, from **3:7-16:31**. Finally, there is the appendix, which is where we are, that covers **17:1-21:25**.

Historically and chronologically, the book of **Judges** follows the book of **Joshua**. The major theme of **Joshua** is the conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelites. **Judges** basically explains the failure of the nation of Israel to do the cleanup operation necessary to take full possession and control of the land. God's original idea was to set up his nation of Israel in this dark world, and for Israel to be salt and light for God in the world. It was to be through Israel that God would communicate His way of hope and salvation for the rest of the inhabitants of the world. But because God's people ignored Him, because they became apostate, God's goal was not met at that time. One day it will be, but not when it could have been. Instead, the Israelites didn't change the world; the world changed the lives of the Israelites. In short, **Judges** is the story of what one commentator calls "The Canaanization of Israel."

So, beginning with the introduction in **chapter 1**, the writer of **Judges** explains that from the outset, the Israelites failed to finish the job of making a

clean sweep of the Canaanites in the land. This is highlighted by the example of the failure of two tribes to complete the job.

Chapter 2 of the introduction reveals that at the close of the period, God disapproved of Israel's rejection of Him and their subsequent failure to get the job done. This leaves the reader with this question, "Why? How could this have happened? Did God fail the Israelites? What went wrong?" The rest of the book answers the question and explains the how of it.

In the body of the book, we have part of the explanation. The focus of these chapters is the reign of the judges. For the most part, these chapters reveal the failure of God's appointed leaders to seek out God and to fully obey His directives.

The appendix of the book covers the lives of the everyday people. These final five chapters take place chronologically at the very same time as the reign of the judges. They overlay the same time period as the middle chapters. In other words, the despicable stories that we encounter at the end of **Judges** don't take place at the end of the four hundred year period. They happened from the get go, shortly after Joshua died.

Hence, when you see what we are going to be looking at in these next five chapters, you are going to see the personal failures of the people that will absolutely break your heart. Once again, the writer is merciful, as he was in the introduction; he only relates stories of the lives of people from two of the tribes.

But I want you to notice something--a lesson we can take with us from this overview. So often people today complain about poor leadership at the helm of their nation. If the leaders were godlier, then the nation would succeed. There is some truth to that. However, if **Judges** teaches us anything it is this: National leadership is a mirror of the heart of the people. In other words, if you have a godly pool of people from which to draw leaders, then you will have godly leaders to lead the country in godliness! But if you have only unrighteous people in the pool from which you can appoint leaders, odds are you are going to have unrighteous leaders.

In addition, we learn from **Judges** that if you have righteous people who refuse to stand up and say something, then they are giving the unrighteous permission to take over the country. One illustration of the righteous not standing up and saying something in this country is when they refuse to vote. I won't bother you with the statistics that have come out year after year, but they reveal that if all Christians took seriously their privilege to vote and did so, we could literally turn this country around, morally speaking.

But even then, if the heart of the people is not to seek after the Lord, then even if you could raise up leaders like King David or King Josiah in the Old Testament, their leadership would bring about only a short-lived righteousness and success for the nation, because of the corruption of those beneath them! Once they died or left office, corruption would surely follow quickly, as was true during the divided kingdom of Israel.

In these final five chapters, there are two statements repeated over and over. The first is found five times in the section: “**There was no king in Israel.**” This statement is meant to reveal the heart of the people. They had rejected God as their covenantal King. Instead, they wanted to be like the Canaanite nations around them. They wanted and felt most secure when they had one man, a human leader they could go to, to be their king. Forget this invisible God who was to be their king. They wanted a man of flesh.

It is very much like the cry of the world which will one day demand one man to rule the entire world. And, our world will come to that. Unfortunately, the anti-Christ will be that ruler! And he won't be good! However, one day Jesus will defeat him and rule in the flesh on earth. But until He comes again, as God said to Israel, “You will have to put your trust in Me, not another individual human being.”

The second statement is mentioned twice in the final five chapters. It is made once at the beginning of the appendix and once at the end. Since these events take place at the very beginning, chronologically, of the period of judges, this concluding statement is the summary statement that describes the mindset of the people for the entire period of the judges: “**Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.**” That is the definition of apostasy!

So this period of apostasy, covering four hundred years, truly brought about “The Canaanization of Israel.” The book of **Judges** is just one of two books written about this period. It gives us the dark side. But the second book of the same period is the book of **Ruth** which gives us the bright side. It gives us just enough hope that we don’t have to fear the future. I’m looking forward to looking at **Ruth** with you in June.

But for now, let’s get to looking at our passage of study for this morning, **Judges 17:1-6**. The writer begins this appendix with a story to help the reader get a sense of how ordinary Israelites fared in these dark days.

We are going to be looking at the beginning of a story of a mother and her adult son. We know he is an adult because in **verse 5** we are told that he hires his son to be his priest. At first glance, both mother and son give the impression that they are genuine followers of Yahweh. But their subtle ungodliness is revealed in our passage. We have only enough time this morning to look at the first six verses of this story, which extends to the end of **chapter 18**. While we read these verses, I will be highlighting and explaining certain words that in English are vague, but are not so in Hebrew. Join me as we read:

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 [literally “stolen”] from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it. [A different word than “steal” suggests that the son was saying, “Oh, mom, I was only borrowing it!”]

And his mother said, “Blessed be my son by the Lord.” ³He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to this 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. [That is, one image was carved and then overlaid with silver.] **Now therefore I will return them** [meaning the pieces of silver] **to you.”**

So 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 [Something else was made and added to this original image, which is explained in verse 5.] **were in the house of Micah. ⁵And the man Micah had a shrine and he** [with his own money] **made an ephod and** [more] **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.**

In the ancient world, names with a reference to a god generally reflected the faith of the one who named the person. In this case, it was probably Micah's mother. "Micah" translates, "Who is like Yahweh?" a rhetorical question anticipating the answer, "No one!" To think a parent might name a child this could lead you to surmise that she was a devoted follower of Yahweh and considered Yahweh as God, in a class all His own, completely distinct from all the Canaanite gods.

However, there are a couple of things that later convince the reader that this is not the case. One of those things has to do with the use of Micah's name throughout this story. At the very beginning, in **verses 1 and 4**, the writer of **Judges** purposely uses the long form for Micah's name. The rest of the time he uses a shortened form, indicating he was aware that this person did not live

up to his name, meaning that he did not live like one who fully submitted his life to God.

The second clue that this Micah and his mother may have been believers in but not followers of Yahweh is that they were living as apostates. Their apostasy is revealed in this opening scene. It all begins with a mother's curse.

The power of a curse was considered to be very real in the ancient world--something not to be taken lightly, but to be feared. In addition, in the Hebrew this was a conditional curse. Its intended meaning was, "May the one who stole this object die a tortuous death if he does not return it." In this case, the potent but conditional curse proved highly effective for Micah. He quickly returned the money but did not admit that he stole it, but rather that he simply "**took it**," never explaining why. And his love-blind mother didn't bother to ask! This mother was no fool. She knew he was up to no good, evidenced by the fact that this curse was uttered within Micah's earshot. Mom knew who had the money. She was simply motivating her son to return it--no questions asked.

The size of the theft is extraordinary: 1,100 shekels of silver was equal to the amount each of the Philistine governors had given Delilah as a reward for delivering Samson into their hands (**16:5**). Obviously, Micah's mother was a woman of considerable wealth. Her son had stolen not a little pocket change, but a fortune from his own mother. The amount of silver he stole could have sustained one person for a lifetime in Israel.

Besides the obvious misuse of the curse, the mother revealed her apostasy in how she dealt with the money she had promised to give to God. Micah's mother "**wholly dedicated**" the money that was recovered to Yahweh. At first blush, this sounds great, very pious. But, her following actions quickly reveal that she had no spiritual compass governing her direction. For in the next verse, she did two things wrong: First, she didn't wholly return the silver to the Lord. She kept nine hundred pieces while yielding only two hundred.

Second, she didn't even give the two hundred pieces to the Lord. If she had really meant to do so, she would have taken them to the only place all the Jews knew that offerings were to go. They were to be given to the priests at the Tabernacle in Shiloh, not far at all from where she lived. As a result, she

modeled apostasy in two forms before her son. First, she stole from God by not giving all that she promised Him, just as her son had stolen from her. Micah had evidently learned dishonesty at home.

Second, she modeled apostasy by denying God's command in **Deuteronomy 12:1-8** that clearly stated corporate worship was only to take place at the Tabernacle. There were to be no other shrines, private or public, like the "high places" established by the pagan Canaanites. The Tabernacle, with its all-important ark representing the very presence of Yahweh living in their midst, had been the sole place of worship during the wilderness journey. God wanted the same to continue now in the Promised Land. Corporate worship at the one and only Tabernacle served to unify the Israelites around their one God, Yahweh. Thus, Yahweh wanted it to be central in all their thoughts and activities.

Micah's mother's lack of respect for God's commands about worshipping at the Tabernacle was obviously picked up by her son, who decided to build his own private shrine at his home. Her failure teaches us that uncorrected apostasy breeds more apostasy.

Micah established a cult center at the place of his own choosing, like the judge Gideon did in **8:27**, who chronologically lived years after Micah. That cult center became the downfall of Gideon's family.

According to **verse 5**, Micah had already begun work on his own shrine before he had taken his mother's silver without permission. With his own money he had made an ephod and several household gods or idols. These were typically associated with divination, a Canaanite practice. The ephod was a device used for answering questions. The household idols were little statues that represented the heavenly host around the throne of the Canaanite's god, which was a perverted mimicking of the angels around God's throne, worshipping God. In essence, Micah made his own false tabernacle. The only thing missing to finish the job of having his own home-made tabernacle was a priest. So, he made his son the priest, at least temporarily, as we will see next week, until an older man, a Levite wanna-be priest, showed up and was hired by Micah to be the high priest at the family shrine.

Micah's mother's money did not initiate the building of Micah's private shrine; her contributions only enhanced it. She provided the icing on the cultic cake, so to speak.

For Micah, the shrine at home was a matter of convenience. He would never have to leave the house for the short trip to Shiloh. For him, worship was based on convenience, not sacrifice. Like today, some people who are quite capable of driving to church find it easier to worship at home on TV than to drive to church. They never have to get out of their pj's and they can enjoy a meal while watching TV.

With **verse 6**, the writer of **Judges** comes up with his own commentary on this scene. First, he says that there was "**no king in Israel.**" That was true, but not really true. For there was, in fact, a king in Israel. Yahweh had established a unilateral agreement with Israel known as the Ten Commandments, a contract between God and the Israelites, and He, their deliverer from the Egyptians, was to be their sovereign King. But they had refused to submit to Him, as this mother and son exemplified. The Israelites didn't want a king they couldn't see; they wanted one they could see, like the other Canaanite nations that surrounded them.

However, the statement that "**There was no king in Israel**" is also true, in that the writer of this book was someone who lived during period of the first two kings, Saul and David. His additional point was that if there had been a godly king on the throne, like David or Josiah, any Israeli who had built their own private shrine would have been executed in accordance with God's law, as recorded in **Deuteronomy 13, 17.**

So, when there is no threat of punishment or of being caught, the law, practically speaking, becomes null and void. And as a result, the writer of **Judges** sums up what the first ungodly step toward apostasy is: "**Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.**" That means that everyone thought they were the exception to the rule--that they could ignore the rule. And that spirit of rebellion is the attitude of the ungodly.

Looking back on our passage for this morning, we can't help but see all of the ironies which produce a farcical tone in this paragraph. First a woman, who in her namelessness represents any female head of the household in Israel,

openly confesses her devotion to Yahweh in blessing and dedication, but her actions run directly counter to that confession. The signs of an apostate.

Her son, who bears a thoroughly orthodox name, “Who is like Yahweh? No one,” commits the ultimate crime. He establishes a cult system in direct violation of Yahweh’s explicit command not to worship any gods besides Him, nor to make any physical representations of deity. The seeds of the mother’s apostasy have sprouted in the fertile soil of her son’s life. The tragedy in this account is that both the mother and son see nothing wrong with what they have done. Most apostates don’t.

We have shown from both **Jude** and **Judges** that ungodliness leads to apostasy. Ungodliness is the idea that, “The law at my work only counts if the boss is watching or is there to enforce it.” Well, guess what, if you are a Christian, then your Boss is always on duty. His eye moves to and fro across the earth, looking for the righteous who will serve Him with his/her whole heart. And furthermore, His eye doesn’t miss a thing!

Ungodliness is too common among us Christians in this room, including myself! I am surprised by how often it shows up in my life and yours. Here’s a question that will reveal some ungodliness that probably will make a few of us, if not all, squirm. Have you ever considered how many laws, rules, or regulations Christians ignore?

If the police are not there to see you run a stop sign, run it! That’s ungodliness and it represents a small step toward apostasy.

If the rules of the test at school say that you can’t copy someone else’s work or you can’t sneak in cheat notes, and you do because the teacher isn’t looking, that’s ungodliness. It’s another small step toward apostasy. It doesn’t matter if everyone else is doing it. If you are a follower of Christ, don’t cheat! Or you may end up like Micah and his mother.

If the Y says, “Take a shower before you use the pool,” the ungodly ignores the sign and does what’s right in his own eyes. Honestly, that has been something in my recent past of which I’m personally convicted. I have committed to stop doing that. Why? Because it is ungodliness driven by a spirit of rebellion and would lead me one step closer to apostasy. I don’t want

to nurse a spirit of rebellion in my heart. I want to uproot it. Allowing your spirit of rebellion to go unchecked is ungodliness at its height. If it continues, you may end up like Micah and his mother.

If a neighbor puts a sign on their lawn that clearly states they don't want your dog to leave his piles there, don't let your dog do his duty in their yard, or at least clean it up! The ungodly ignores the sign and does what's right in his own eyes. That is a step toward apostasy.

Or, if church leadership states that guest parking spaces are for guests unless you have specific permission from the elders, don't park in the guests' spots if you are not a guest. If you have been here more than three times, you are no longer a guest. You are an attender. The ungodly ignores the directives of the elders, and does what's right in his own eyes. That is a step toward apostasy.

So often we do things because it is a matter of our own personal convenience, rather than whether it is right or godly. If you are having trouble figuring out whether something is right or not, simply ask yourself, "Would Jesus park here? Take a shower? Run a stop sign?"

Let me put this warning in the form of a principle: One's worship is not about convenience, but about what is right and sometimes is sacrificial.

Here's another observation about apostasy: Ungodliness that leads to apostasy always begins with small decisions. As I referenced as we began this morning, the book of **Jude** makes this clear. When you are struggling with ungodliness fueled by a spirit of rebellion, go to the Lord and repent for taking short cuts of convenience when God says "No." They can be seriously detrimental to your spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and relational health.

Matthew's gospel clearly portrays Jesus as King. As a Christian, does the way you are living reveal that He is King over your life? What authority figures has The King placed over you? Will you allow that authority to tell you what to do? Will you do it?

The prideful assertion, “No one has the right to tell me what to do,” is as ungodly as Micah and his mother in the days of the judges. The book of **Proverbs** has a warning for the believer who wrestles with ungodliness. The wise man writes, “**There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.**” (14:12) When an individual follows his own instincts, her own inclinations, it leads to ruin. We need to follow God’s way, not our own.

Let me put it this way: Do you all know what a tire blowout is? Well, if apostasy is a blowout, then “There are no blowouts in the Christian life or in the life of the church--just slow leaks that go ignored.”

My friends, God’s Word warns us that in the last days, the church in general will head in the same direction as the Israelites did during the period of the judges. The church will become more apostate, because Christians will grow cold spiritually, lose their love for Jesus, and begin leading ungodly rebellious lives. This will lead them to errant theological thinking, which in turn will lead to licentiousness, which will in turn lead to apostasy. To what degree do you want to allow your ungodliness to go unchecked so that the generations who follow after you will follow your example and go one step further?

