

WHAT KIND OF PRIEST ARE YOU?

Judges 17:7-13

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I came across this children's story about a priest that attempts to teach a moral. It goes like this:

A long time ago there lived a priest who was extremely lazy and poor at the same time. He did not want to do any hard work but used to dream of being rich one day. This priest got his food by sitting outside the village gate and begging. One morning he got a gallon of milk as part of the alms. He was extremely delighted and went home with the milk. He boiled the milk, drank some of it, and put what remained in a pot. He added a dab of cottage cheese to the pot of milk to help it curdle, with the hope that he might make some butter the next day.

That night he dreamed once again of being rich, because then all his miseries would be gone. His thoughts turned to the pot of milk he had set to turn into butter. He dreamed on. "By morning the pot of milk would be ready to churn into butter! I will then go to the market, sell the butter, and make some money. With that money I will buy a hen. The hen will lay many eggs which will hatch, and there will be many chickens. These chickens will in turn lay hundreds of eggs, and I will soon have a poultry farm of my own." He kept on dreaming.

"I will sell all the hens of my poultry, buy some cows, and open a milk dairy. All the town people will buy milk from me. I will be very rich, and soon I shall buy jewels. I will be so rich that I will be able to marry an exceptionally beautiful girl from a rich family. Soon I will have a handsome son. If he does any mischief, I will be very angry; and to teach him a lesson, I will hit him with a big stick." During this dream, he involuntarily picked up the stick next to his bed, and thinking that he was beating his son, raised the stick and hit the pot. The pot of milk broke, and he awoke from his dream.

Moral: There is no substitute for hard work. Dreams cannot be fulfilled without hard work.

As I thought about this story, I realized that there is more to it than simply a lesson about hard work. This priest had some serious issues in his life! It reminds me of another priest I read about last week and that we are going to look at this morning. If you have your Bibles with you, please open them to **Judges 17**.

Last week we began looking at the closing five chapters of **Judges**. One of the interesting observations that we did not make last time about these five chapters as they compare to the rest of the book of **Judges** is that all of the other chapters deal with the external threats against Israel made by the surrounding Canaanite tribes who had previously possessed the land. In these last chapters, we see the threats against Israel that come from inside the nation. These signs of impending danger threatened the nation's unity and the very heart of their community--their worship of Yahweh. As a result, the most sordid and tragic stories of **Judges** are found in these closing chapters. The lesson we can take from this is that most often our greatest enemy or threat against living a meaningful and peaceful life does not come from outside the faith, but rather from within ourselves. Or, to put it another way, sometimes our greatest enemy is not Satan or the world, it is our hardened and rebellious heart that refuses to live life properly recognizing that our God is to be the center of our universe, not our plans, wishes, or purposes.

In these final chapters of **Judges**, we are given several examples of how the average Israelite was living his life, in relation to the living God who had rescued them and had blessed these newcomers to the Promised Land. As we began **chapter 17**, we read about an adult son of a wealthy mother who had built a shrine in his home. His name was Micah. Although God had forbidden private shrines and had ordered pagan cultic worship centers on tops of hills destroyed, Micah ignored God and chose to build a shrine in his home. Why? Presumably, he was too lazy to travel down the hill to the worship center of the common Israelites, the Tabernacle. Sometimes, wealthy folks are like that. They think because they have wealth, status, or power, they can ignore the law of the land without facing any consequence. Well, soon Micah learned the truth the hard way. No unrepented sin goes unpunished.

This morning, our scene shifts in **verse 7** with the writer introducing us to a

new character who comes into Micah's life. We learn later in **Judges 18:30** that this man's name is Jonathan, and that he is from the tribe of Levi. The Levites were the men who were responsible for maintaining the purity of the faith in Israel. They were the students and teachers of the Law. They were the religious counselors. They were the servants and priests that oversaw the worship in the Tabernacle. They were to be men whose lives demonstrated that their universe orbited around the worship of Yahweh.

Beginning with **Judges 17:7**, we read, "**Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there.**" More literally, the word means "sojourning there." The difference between the simple words "staying" and "sojourning" is critical. To stay someplace means that you have dug in roots there, and unless the Lord moves you, that is your present home. But to sojourn infers a state of temporarily locating someplace. If one is called a sojourner, he is considered a travelling man, restless, a drifter, one who is not sure where home is. In some cases, sojourners turn out to be mavericks, people who don't really listen to anybody or demonstrate deep loyalties or make lasting commitments.

⁸**Then 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.**" First, in verse 7 our new character, Jonathan, is labeled a "**young man.**" In addition, we are told that he was a Levite, an Israelite male born from the tribe of Levi. According to **Numbers 4:3, 30**, any Levite who wished to serve in the Tabernacle could do so when he reached the age of thirty, and he could only serve as one of the priests until he was fifty. But in **Numbers 8:24-26**, we are also told that Levites could actually begin serving in the Tabernacle as early as age twenty-five, but they would not be numbered as one of the priests until reaching the age of thirty. Hence, it is presumed that those first five years would have been something of an apprenticeship for a Levite who wanted to be a priest, because not all Levites rose to that position.

The writer's portrayal of this Levite as a "**young man**" indicates that he was young in the sense that he was now just of age to begin serving as a Levite. Because he left Judah looking for work, he probably had finished with his apprenticeship and was about thirty years old. So, he left Bethlehem to seek his future as a Levite. If he ever wanted to become a priest, he would have to

live closer to the Tabernacle, and that was about seventy-five miles north of Bethlehem.

Second, the writer tells us that Jonathan's geographic roots traced to Bethlehem of Judah, five miles south of Jerusalem. There were forty-eight Levite cities distributed evenly around Israel, close to major cities. There were thirteen Levite cities and their pasturelands in the tribal area of Judah. Bethlehem was not one of them. These Levite cities were places for the tribe of Levi to live and provide for themselves as they served the people. Contrary to what some commentators state, there is nothing in Scripture that demanded that the Levites live in Levite cities. They could legitimately marry a non-Levite and live elsewhere.

Of all Israelites, the Levites were to be the most spiritually focused on the proper worship of and obedience to Yahweh. They were to be the vocational, full-time ministers, so to speak, to positively influence and guide the people in their walk with the Lord. They could counsel, encourage, and sometimes help solve disputes based on the plain application of Scripture. They were to be able to answer the people's questions concerning the Law of Moses. Hence, since all of the Israelites needed spiritual direction, and since not all Israelites could live in Levitical cities but needed shepherding, it would have been only natural for some Levites to take up residence in cities other than Levitical cities.

In a similar vein, God calls each Christian to spread out and impact our world for Christ. The Bible teaches of the priesthood of all believers. That means that all Christians hold the same authority and calling of Jesus, to be His priest. Furthermore, that means that when you trust Christ as your Savior and Lord, even though you may not be paid as a vocational pastor, you nonetheless have a calling to be actively involved in your community, impacting your culture for Christ, rather than looking for a holy huddle of other Christians to hide amongst, separating yourself from the world, playing it safe. In addition, as priests, every believer is to be ready to come along side other believers who may be struggling or confused or hurting to offer a word of encouragement or counsel, based on God's Word. As these Levites were to live impactful lives, so are we.

The writer's note in **verse 7** that "**Jonathan was staying there**" suggests that

this man had left his Levitical city of origin, but he did not do so to make his roots of ministry in Bethlehem. He was looking over his shoulder for something better!

Unfortunately, today there are many Jonathans in ministry. They view ministry as something of an ambitious adventure, to climb a parochial ladder of prominence and influence rather than to be committed to the people they serve, digging in roots and becoming fully committed to them. Their eye is continuously looking toward that more highly visible position, often asking, “Lord, isn’t there something more important or exciting that I can be a part of?”

Jonathan personally saw Bethlehem as a mere stopping-off place before he moved on, literally, as **verse 8** states, “**wherever**” that would be. This young Levite was clearly a drifter, not one who was waiting on the Lord to give direction as to when and where to serve. Rather than waiting on the Lord to show him His will, this young man, like many of us, was going to step out and try to make something happen. This never ends up well for the church family who, when their Jonathan-type pastor leaves, feels more used than loved.

Mind you, God does call and move ministers, but over the years I haven’t been convinced that some pastors leaving a church to go elsewhere are moves of God. I remember meeting a new pastor who had come to Grants Pass many years ago. As I typically do for newcomers to town, I took the pastor out for lunch, introduced him to other pastors, and made myself available to him, with the desire to help him become more impactful for Christ in our town. On this particular occasion, the new pastor told me in confidence that he had decided to stay only five years in each place of ministry. He figured that by then, he would have taken that church as far as he could and would look for something else a little more challenging. It seemed odd to me that he never considered during those five years before he moved on that God had placed him in his church not just to influence the church, but so the church could influence his life. And just maybe, God had not finished teaching him what He wanted him to learn before this pastor sought out and found another church to “care for.” And as he promised, he left in five years.

Dissatisfaction with any position, any job, is not reason enough alone to pack up and leave. I bet that Moses, several of the kings of Israel, and the prophets

would have loved to resign their jobs and go back to the simple life of picking figs, shepherding sheep, fishing, or farming. However, often times it is in the midst of hardship, challenge, dissatisfaction, and even boredom that God is screaming out loud for us to look to Him, to ask Him, “Lord, what do you want for me? Is there something you have to teach me in this present situation before I move?”

A third observation that we learn about Jonathan, that was he was living “**in Judah**,” does not mean that he was from the tribe of Judah. Because of what is stated in **18:30**, Jonathan is a direct descendant of Moses, who of course was from the tribe of Levi.

As a sojourner, the Old Testament Law had some instructions for the Levite concerning his travels from one place to another. We read in **Deuteronomy 18:6-9**, these words: “**6Now if a Levite comes from any of your towns throughout Israel where he resides and comes whenever he desires to the place which the Lord chooses, 7then he shall serve in the name of the Lord his God, like all his fellow Levites who stand there before the Lord.**” To “**stand before the Lord**” is a reference to those priests standing before Yahweh as they served in the Tabernacle. In other words, they were to take their jobs as seriously, as though Yahweh were right there observing everything they did and said, whether in the Tabernacle or in Bethlehem.

“**8They shall eat equal portions, except what they receive from the sale of the fathers’ estates.**” In other words, if their Levitical father had been able to profit on their side businesses of harvesting crops, then, in addition to their Levitical portion that came from the offerings of the people, the family could enjoy their father’s inheritance without feeling they had to share it with others.

Notice, back in **verse 6** we are told that the Levite can leave when he “**desires**” as well as when “**God chooses**” for him to leave. That raises the question, “How do we know when our desires equal the Lord’s choosing?” Or, to put it another way, “How can we really know if something is God’s will for our lives?” We find two clues in this passage that help us discern if we are being selfishly ambitious when we make moves, or whether God is really moving us forward.

The first is found in the statement, “**Then he shall serve in the name of the**

LORD his God.” To serve in the name of the Lord is another way of saying that one holds up God’s name, which stands for everything God stands for, but in this case represents God’s desired purposes. To put it in the form of a more practical question, “Is your move being motivated by your desire to better serve God’s purposes or your selfish ambitions disguised in His purposes? Or are you really going to make a move to do something because your heart is to serve the Lord or is it to make more money and be more personally profitable?”

Allow me to be very personal at this moment. Two of our earliest elders who are still alive and with us, Bruce True and Tim Zietlow, were serving on the Board of Elders when this event that I’m about to share with you took place. Hence, if their memories serve them well, they can verify this; but I don’t believe it was common knowledge among the congregation at the time. But early on, when Harry Olson and I agreed to work together, for me it was a temporary position. I was not sure at the time that I would stay in Grants Pass. Quite honestly, my personal desire was to flee from here, because I had been deeply hurt and only Harry knew that my working with him might not last long. But he agreed to help me work through the pain and walk with me in the days ahead to see what God would have for me. It was about three months after we had begun working together that, out of the blue, I was called by a church of 2,000 in Southern California, my old stomping grounds, to consider taking over its helm. One of the elders of that church was a good friend of mine and knew Ray Stedman and had heard of my situation. I was surprised by the call, encouraged, and affirmed that somebody might be interested in me. I quickly was excited about the possibility of moving closer to home. I told Harry about it, not sure what I ought to do, and Harry said, “Go take a look!” So, I did.

I flew down to find a brand new facility with lots of property for expansion, strategically placed across the street from a relatively new community college. My first impression was, “Wow! What an exciting opportunity.” Besides the residential neighborhood surrounding the rest of the church’s campus, all I could think about was how we could make an impact on the community college campus for Christ. You see, my roots of ministry were born outside the campuses of Stanford University and the University of California at Santa Barbara. I loved the challenge of preaching the gospel to university students and teaching Bible studies on campus. Some of my most memorable,

exciting, and successful early years of ministry took place in such environs. Furthermore, after meeting with the Board of Elders, I was very impressed with their commitment to Christ, their knowledge of the Scriptures, and their overall maturity. This was a dream come true. I left Southern California very hopeful.

But then I had one of those special encounters with the Lord; one in which the Spirit of God raised the question in my heart: “Bob, this may be a good thing for you and a good thing for the gospel; but is this the best thing for God? Is it the best thing for this start up church, Calvary Crossroads? Are you serving your interests first or God’s interests?”

To be honest with you, I didn’t know how to answer this. When I got home, I sent them my resume and contact information and waited to see if anything would come of it. Still, only Harry and I knew what was going on. During that time, the Lord gave me a plan to discern how I would know whether this move was something I desired and God had chosen for me, or if it was just something I desired.

About a month later, the chairman of their elder board of the church in Southern California called me and said after listening to my sermons and having reviewed my references, they wanted me to become their pastor. Now was the time to put my plan into action. I told them, “Gentlemen, I want you to consider two things first for two weeks. After you have prayerfully considered these two things, then call me back. In the meantime, I’m going to ask my elder board to consider the same two things and in two weeks, tell me what they think would best honor the Lord.” They all agreed.

You see, I had learned that such a decision was not just about me. This decision was about me, two churches and what was God’s best for all. I told our elders at the time that I would only do what they agreed would be best for me and Calvary Crossroads. The other church was to fully agree with what would be best for their church and Calvary Crossroads. Two weeks later, the other church called. It was my friend on the phone. He said, “Bob, I would never have thought this possible, but every one of our elders said, ‘We were selfishly looking out for our own people without ever considering what would be best for both churches.’ Bob, even though we know what has happened recently in your life, we think God wants you to stay where you are so that He

can use you there.” I thanked them very much for offering me the opportunity to serve them, and I would take this as a gift from God that He had assigned me to serve in Grants Pass.

Without saying anything to our elders, I went to them and asked them what God had showed them. And, without any sense of church selfishness, our elders said, “Bob, God is doing something special in your life and in Harry’s life right now, and in our church’s life. We have no sense within any of us that this is the time for you to leave.”

Folks, when your desire is to do, not just what might seem good to you, but what is best for the Lord and how He wants to use your life, that’s when you can be confident about your decision of when or if it is right for you to move on.

The second clue in this passage that helps us discern if we are being selfishly ambitious when we make moves, or whether or not God is really moving us forward, is found in the words of **Deuteronomy 18:9**, in which we read, **“⁹When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.”** How would the Israelites know that something was detestable to God? The answer to that would be to see if anything they were doing was in violation of God’s Word. In other words, to get the job you wanted, to get into the college you wanted, did you have to lie, cheat, take advantage of someone, or do anything that would be in violation of the Word of God? If you did, you probably were not waiting on the Lord or seeking after His best interests. And thus, your move would not have been of God’s choosing. It would have only been of your desires.

As we get back to our passage in **Judges**, a Levite could leave his place of sojourn any time to go and live in the place he desired and that Yahweh chose, as long as in doing so he did not violate the Lord’s purposes. As our present story progresses, we will see that Jonathan’s conduct did violate those instructions in several vital respects. In short, this Levite did not go to a place that Yahweh chose. Instead, he lived as a drifter, searching for a more stable position, feathering his own nest while appearing to be righteous, rather than waiting on the Lord. He was in a hurry to make his mark and his own way.

Let's continue with the story and see what happens. Jonathan the Levite drifted north to Ephraim, happened upon Micah's home, and met Micah. We read, **"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.'"** By this Jonathan meant wherever he could find a ministry as a Levite. Unashamedly, he confessed his shiftlessness but also his openness to any opportunity that might come his way.

Micah, realizing that this man was a Levite, jumped on the opportunity to make a quick offer to him.

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." So the Levite went in. 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 a priest."

Micah proposed a threefold job description that may be summarized as follows: Micah's first offer of **"dwell with me"** should be interpreted as an invitation for Jonathan to give up his unsettled life and find a true home in Micah's household. In other words, **"Be my companion."**

Next, he asked Jonathan to be a **"father"** to him. The term **"father"** is a spiritual title of honor, analogous to the identification of Deborah as a **"mother"** in Israel in **Judges 5:7**. Here, as in **18:19**, it applies to Jonathan being a priest who exercises spiritual authority and care over others. Micah's use of the title also suggests a willingness to subordinate himself to and be

dependent upon this Levite. In essence, Micah was asking Jonathan, “Be my spiritual leader.”

With the call to “**be my priest**,” Micah hereby invited the Levite to serve as his personal representative before God, to be his mediator, and to see to it that cultic activities were performed at his shrine on his behalf.

As we read on in **verse 11**, the writer tells us that Micah treated him as one of his sons, in the sense that a father would offer a son a sense of financial security, provision, and protection. It’s very clear that as a priest, Jonathan was a spiritual mercenary for hire. Some of us as Christians treat God the same way: “Lord, if you bless me more than the world does, then I will follow after you. But if you demand too much of me, I’ll walk away.”

Overall, there was absolutely nothing right about Jonathan’s job selection. The only thing he was looking for, and apparently had found, was financial security by way of a sweet easy job! He was functioning just like the story I told you at the beginning of this message about the priest. He was not at all interested in personally seeking after Yahweh or challenging others to do so. Rather than serving in the name of Yahweh, he served under the name of Micah. To serve in Micah’s shrine was in violation of God’s Law.

Looking at it from the Biblical perspective, I find it ironic that Jonathan, whose name means “The Lord has given,” hasn’t been given anything by the Lord. Instead, Jonathan has taken matters into his own hands and done that which was in violation of God’s Law.

In the end, according to **verse 13**, to Micah, the Levitical priest represented a good luck charm that brought his sanctuary legitimacy. Micah believed that having a Levitical priest to do his bidding would give him automatic access to the resources of heaven.

Micah felt that all was good because he had religiously showed interest in God. Wrong! False security. No different than today, when someone gives what they think is a significant financial gift to God and expects that God will be pleased and bless them because of it. They think that good works rather than genuine obedience and submission to the will of God pleases God. Elsewhere, the scriptures teach, “**Obedience is always better than sacrifice.**”

And the best gift to God is obedient sacrifice!

How could Micah, Jonathan, and Micah's mother so easily lose their way spiritually and travel off course to their own disaster? That is a worthy question for us to consider today. I believe there is a course we need to navigate over the treacherous seas of this world. To stay on course, one needs a compass. Our compass is the Word of God, and it keeps us on track. Should we fall asleep at the switch and not momentarily be looking at our compass, we have a God-designed alarm bell that will wake us up and tell us we have gone off course. But if we turn off that alarm bell, we will not realize we have drifted. That emergency alarm bell is the fellowship and accountability of other believers. When we quit going to church, it's like turning off your God given alarm. You have no one around you who can see that you are possibly in danger of spiritual shipwreck.

In the mind of the writer of **Judges**, the Levite's acceptance of the position represents one more symptom of the pervasive Canaanization of the Israelite society. As a Levite, he should have been protecting the Law of God and denouncing Micah. However, this Levite had himself joined the ranks of the apostasized, those who "**did that which was right in his own eyes.**" The religious establishment in Israel had been thoroughly infected with the Canaanite disease.

In a simple review of **chapter 17**, we see the Canaanization of Israel, the apostasy of Israel, the turning of Israel's back on God in three observable trends. The first trend was revealed in **verses 1-5**, where we see religious syncretism. Syncretism is the merging together of different religious practices. In those verses we saw three generations ignoring some of God's Law so that they could bind pagan worship practices together with the true faith practices of worshipping Yahweh. Similarly today, we have religious cults using some of the same terminology we use from the Bible and copying certain rites like baptism, but their rites and their religious terms take on totally different meanings than what the Bible explains. When Mormons speak of baptism, they have a totally different understanding of its purpose. When they speak of salvation or justification, their understandings of those terms are not what we know the Bible to clearly teach. Their meanings for those terms do not find their basis in Scripture but perhaps in politics or patriotism.

The second trend of Canaanization is mentioned in **verse 6**: moral relativism. Everyone is doing whatever they think is right in their own eyes. They are ignoring what God says is truth and believing what sounds good at the moment. It is people looking for preaching that doesn't offend their ears, or is politically correct, or does not convict or expose guilt in any way. Moral relativists enjoy only the preaching that promises blessings, not messages that instruct, correct, warn, rebuke, or challenge.

The third trend toward Canaanization is the extreme worship of materialism. Finding purpose, security, and happiness in wealth is the thing that motivated Jonathan to ignore God's Law and take the job of a cultic priest.

As a result, this Levite is demonstrating that his spiritual life had gone from being theocentric, or God centered, to being anthropocentric, or man centered. What this means is that this priest perceived that life for him revolved around what he wanted rather than what God wanted. This Levite went from sacrificially serving God to hedonistically serving the god of his own pleasure.

Unfortunately, these very same trends of apostasy can be seen in the lives of Christians in most evangelical churches across this country. So how do we avoid becoming a casualty of Canaanization? Only when we as individuals are willing to take a hard look at our own lives as we examine the Word of God can we see those places that are off course and that need adjustment in direction. Only as we genuinely seek after what the Lord says is best and listen to the conviction of the Holy Spirit in our hearts in such a manner that we are ready to obey will we avoid spiritual ship wreck in our lives.

Jesus once said, with a hint of warning to his audience, these words: **“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:21**

Honestly evaluate your own heart. Do so often. Answer the question for yourself, “Do I have the heart of a worshipful priest or the heart of Jonathan?”

