

HOSPITALITY

Judges 19:1-21

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If you have your Bibles with you, I encourage you to turn in them to **Judges 19**. Because it has been since last February that we were in the book of **Judges**, allow me to remind you and our visitors of the historical context of our passage. The major theme of the book of **Judges** is the explanation of the “Canaanization of Israel.” In other words, how it is that God’s handpicked people became more like their godless enemies than like the set-apart people of God.

The book of **Judges** breaks into three parts. The introduction covers the first two chapters and part of the third. In it the writer tells us that from the outset, Israel failed to full take possession of the Promised Land. He illustrates this by pointing to the failure of two tribes to take possession of their assigned territories. As a result, they earned God’s disapproval. Immediately, this obvious failure intentionally raises the question in the reader’s mind, “Why did Israel fail? How did Israel fail?”

The rest of the book answers that question. In the second part of the book, the major body of the book, the writer lays out the reign of individual judges who were responsible for leading different tribes in different parts of Israel. When you read about each of these judges, you see that every one of them had some measure of spiritual and moral failure. In the beginning, some failures were minor, but as time moved on, their failures became horrendous.

The third section of the book, beginning with **chapter 17**, functions as an appendix, giving us some snapshots of the everyday life of the average Israelite from the very beginning of this period of the judges--even while Joshua might have been alive. In these closing five chapters, the writer once again focuses on just two tribes, using them as illustrations of the failure of all of the Jews who were living at this time.

Structurally **chapters 17-21** divide into two parts. The first segment, **17-18**, describes the fate of the tribe of Dan; the second segment, **19-21**, speaks of the

fate of the tribe of Benjamin. Numerous common features link the plots of these two segments.

Both tribes, Dan and Benjamin, were assigned territory in Israel's heartland. By selecting episodes that concern these two tribes, the narrator cleverly emphasizes that the Canaanization of Israel was not simply a problem in the fringe territories. It had instead infected the very heart of the nation.

Interestingly, in both accounts the central figure of the crisis, the one who precipitated the problems, was a nameless Levite. This is significant, because the tribe of Levi was responsible for keeping God's covenant with Israel so that people would honor God by their complete obedience to God's Law. Yet at this point, even the Levites have disregarded God's calling upon their lives. By their own example, they have led the people to pay no heed to God's instructions.

Finally, both accounts are punctuated by variations of the refrain, "**In those days Israel had no king**" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), meaning that Israel had denied God the rightful place as their king. They wanted to be like the other Canaanite nations and have a human be their king.

This morning we begin our study of the fall of the tribe of Benjamin. One observation that you might miss as you read **chapter 19** is that there is not one reference to God. This is significant, because the writer is attempting to communicate that what we are about to read is purely secular and ungodly. It stands out as an anathema to all that God expected of Israel.

In our section of study for this morning, **verses 1-21**, the problem of hospitality makes for an excellent two-part division of our passage. We will see that there is a serious malpractice of hospitality. The malpractice of hospitality is illustrated by two extremes. In **verses 1-10**, we have the problem of excessive hospitality. Culturally, if a stranger came to your home, you might provide him food and shelter for one night. If a family member was passing through, you might provide food and shelter for three or four nights. But in our event, the head of the home tries to forbid his guest from leaving his home for purely selfish reasons. In **verses 11-21**, the malpractice of hospitality is of the opposite concern. It was a deficient form of hospitality.

Let's begin our reading by looking more closely at the problem of excessive hospitality.

¹Now it came about in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, who took a concubine for himself from Bethlehem in Judah. ²But his concubine played the harlot against him, and she went away from him to her father's house in Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for a period of four months.

[This trip from Ephraim to Bethlehem was about thirty miles, a two to three day journey, depending upon what time of day you set out.]

³Then her husband arose and went after her to speak tenderly to her in order to bring her back, taking with him his servant and a pair of donkeys. So she brought him into her father's house, and when the girl's father saw him, he was glad to meet him. ⁴His father-in-law, the girl's father, detained him; and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and lodged there.

The young woman involved with the Levite is first identified as having been a concubine, but because the Levite had married her, he is later called her “**husband**,” and her father is called “**father-in-law**.” This term “**concubine**” was used earlier in **Judges 8:31**, and not in a good context. Hence, the moment we see this term used of a woman, the reader expects trouble. The fact that she is first introduced as a “**concubine**” rather than as a wife leads us to believe that she was not his first or only wife.

Additionally, she is repeatedly referred to in Hebrew as “the young woman” six times between **verse 3** and **verse 9**. For one thing, it fits the picture of this younger woman running back to her father’s house.

One last significance of the Hebrew term “**concubine**” is that its basic meaning declares that this young wife was formerly a prostitute; and after she was married, she had returned to those activities in Ephraim. To make a living at prostitution would have been really over the edge or “in your face” as a Hebrew toward God. According to the Law, she should have been stoned to death as an adulterer. These, indeed, were strange and evil times; and we should not be surprised if, when she returned home, her father sent her out to work as a prostitute to contribute to the family economy. Perhaps this explains why later in our story, the father is reluctant to let his daughter and her husband leave his home to return to Ephraim.

When reading these words, the first Jewish readers would have been appalled at this situation. They would have also realized that according to God’s Law, this Levite was not to have more than one wife. To do so was a blatant in-your-face sin to God. It speaks loudly of his personal disregard of and rebellion against God.

The reason that the writer chose this real life example of a couple was not to point out how bad this particular couple was, but how far from God all of the Israelites were. This couple was but a sample of the evil being practiced by many Israelites, just after they passed through the doors of the Promised Land. No one blinked an eye at their obvious indifference to God’s Law.

Interestingly, when the Levite arrived at her father’s home, both his wife and his father-in-law gladly greeted and welcomed him to the home. The attitude of the concubine’s father suggested that nothing serious was involved. Whatever the problem was that sent her running in the first place, it would not prevent a full reconciliation. He patiently waited four months for her to return before he finally went after her to bring about reconciliation. In **verse 3**, we read that he sought after her to “**speak tenderly to her,**” to be kind and affectionate so as to rekindle their relationship. Possibly, his lack of speaking tenderly or his emotional rejection is what caused her to leave in the first place.

But once the Levite arrived, he had a hard time getting his bride and leaving to go home. By **verse 4**, he had already been there three days. He hadn't gone there to live; he wanted to get home. So we read in **verse 5**, **“Now on the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go; and the girl's father said to his son-in-law, ‘Sustain yourself with a piece of bread, and afterward you may go.’”**

Now in that culture, having a piece of bread was not as quick as popping a prepackaged waffle in the toaster and heading out the door. Culturally, it was a prepared meal that took time to make and then sit down to eat. Hence, by the time they finished this meal, morning was over.

We continue reading:

⁶So both of them sat down and ate and drank together; and the girl's father said to the man, “Please be willing to spend the night, and let your heart be merry.” Then the man arose to go, [meaning that it was not near nighttime, and he got up to leave because he wanted to hit the road] but his father-in-law urged him so that he spent the night there again. ⁸On the fifth day he arose to go early in the morning, and the girl's father said, “Please sustain yourself, and wait until afternoon” [same chorus, different day]; so both of them ate. ⁹When the man arose [after they had breakfast] to go along with his concubine and servant, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said to him, “Behold now, the day has drawn to a close; please spend the night. Lo, the day is coming to an end; spend the night here that

your heart many be merry. Then tomorrow you may arise early for your journey so that you may go home.”

This was excessive hospitality even for a family member. To be sure, the reader’s sympathies are drawn toward the Levite, who is trying to put his family together again and would like to extricate himself from his father-in-law. This situation had gone from hospitality to entrapment. It was in violation of God’s Law for a couple to be forced to live with their in-laws. Once the daughter was married, her rightful place was at home with her husband. And likewise, once a husband is married, his rightful place is at home with his wife. But when you begin to ignore God’s order for life, things can unravel quickly. And tragically, they did for this couple.

The Levite finally decided he couldn’t remain any longer. In **verse 9** the redundant expressions of “**spend the night**” and “**Lo, the day is coming to an end**” are critical for setting the stage for the events to follow. Had the Levite left in the morning rather than so late in the day, he would never have arrived at night in the next destination, and put himself or his wife in the tragic situation that came next. But we must carry on and read in **verse 10**, “**But the man was not willing to spend the night, so he arose and departed and came to a place opposite Jebus [Jerusalem]. And there were with him a pair of saddled donkeys; his concubine also was with him.**”

The Levite and his wife had only traveled five and a half miles from Bethlehem to Jebus. That would have taken them four to five hours of walking. The sun would be down soon, and already most people were in their homes. We read on to find that they were running out of daylight and needed to look for a place to spend the night.

¹¹When they were near Jebus, the day was almost gone; and the servant said to his master, “Please come, and let us turn aside into this city of the Jebusites and spent the night in it.”

¹²However, his master said to him, “We will not turn aside in the

city of foreigners who are not of the sons of Israel; but we will go on as far as Gibeah.” [Staying in a city controlled by Canaanites, which Jebus was, was not a safe place for an Israelite man and his young wife. This Levite made the logical choice to move on.] ¹³**He said to his servant, “Come and let us approach one of these places, and we will spend the night in Gibeah or Ramah.”** [Both of these are walled Israelite cities.]

¹⁴**So they passed along and went their way, and the sun set on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin.** ¹⁵**They turned aside there in order to enter and lodge in Gibeah. When they entered, they sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night.**

In those days, there were no motels. Jewish hospitality was the culture. As a traveler, you would go into the city square and someone would typically invite you to come home with them. That was what a faithful follower of Yahweh did. It was called hospitality. But they would be disappointed. In contrast to the lavish hospitality the Levite had experienced at Bethlehem in the home of his father-in-law, no one invited them in. This situation would have been shocking anywhere in the ancient Near East during those days. But it was especially shocking in Israel. It is another evidence of the social disintegration that had infected the very heart of the Israeli community, because they were no longer following after Yahweh. One commentator put it this way: “The failure to offer hospitality . . . such a breach of etiquette was an indictment of the men of Gibeah and an ominous warning of what was to come.” (Cundall/Morris)

¹⁶Then behold, an old man was coming out of the field from his work at evening. Now the man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was staying in Gibeah, but the men of the place were Benjamites. ¹⁷And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveler [the Levite and his young wife] in the open square of the city.

But this old man, who was coming home after working in the fields all day, just happened to be like the Levite: both were sojourners from Ephraim. The only difference between the two of them was that the old man had been in Gibeah long enough to get work and make enough money to have his own lodging, and when he wanted to he could return home. But different than the Levite, the old man also knew these Benjamites, these Israelites who lived in Gibeah. He knew they were not known for their love of God or for hospitality. They weren't from the hills; they were city-folk who had less concern about the Lord and hospitality than country folk. Furthermore, he understood maybe more than the couple in front of him what serious trouble they were in.

¹⁷The old man said, "Where are you going and where do you come from?"

¹⁸He [the Levite] said to him [the old man], "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, for I am from there, and I went to Bethlehem in Judah. But I am now going to my house, and no man will take me into his house. ¹⁹Yet there is both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and also bread and wine for me, your maidservant, and the young man

who is with your servants; there is no lack of anything.”

Understand that the Levite was saying here, “We are not asking for any food for us or for our animals. We have enough food for ourselves and for you and your household. We just need a place to stay.” The Levite knew that they had been rebuffed by their own countrymen. With his comment, the Levite was subtly pointing out the social malignancy of this town. Another commentator put it strongly: “The mores of the nation have been infected at the most fundamental level—the people of one tribe sense no obligation to the members of another. There is no sense of community.”

As a resident alien living in Gibeah, the old man had learned that this town was deeply morally sick within and filled with wickedness. So he responded, ²⁰“**Peace to you. Only let me take care of all your needs; however, do not spend the night in the open square.**” ²¹**So he took him into his house and gave the donkeys fodder, and they washed their feet and ate and drank.**”

Now, that’s hospitality that is not too well known or practiced in the west. I experienced it on a smaller scale while in Israel, but not like the following encounter of the seminary president, and highly thought of Old Testament scholar, Dr. Terry Brensinger. He tells of his up-close and personal encounter with what Middle East hospitality is all about, even today.

While traveling through Jordan a few years ago, I was offered a ride by a Palestinian truck driver. After gladly accepting, Nyfe (the driver) and I stumbled through a conversation severely limited by a language barrier. That barrier, however, did not prevent him from extending to me the greatest demonstration of hospitality I have ever experienced. What began with a simple ride ended up including an impromptu dinner with his extended family, a night’s lodging, breakfast, and a valuable farewell gift! In much of the Middle East, hospitality is not a secondary and

often-neglected social grace, but a way of life.

How different this is from life as many Westerners know it. Given busy schedules, rampant individualism, and the apparent lack of safety in many of our neighborhoods, hospitality has often become a forgotten art. At best, hospitality is relegated to occasional visits from those who are already family and friends. What we can learn from many Middle Easterners is what the Bible has been teaching all along: hospitality involves extending life to those who are otherwise unknown to us.

Recently, our Adult Sunday school class has been finishing their study of the book of Hebrews with **chapter 13**. Here we Christians are given an excellent reminder: **“²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.”**

In **Genesis 18**, the man dubbed “the friend of God,” “the man of faith,” Abraham, had three uninvited, total strangers show up to his home. **Genesis 18:1-5 (NLT)**:

¹Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door during the hottest part of the day. ²He looked up and noticed three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran to meet them and welcomed them, bowing low to the ground. ³“My lord,” he said, “if it pleases you, stop here for a while. ⁴Rest in the shade of this tree while water is brought to wash your feet. ⁵And since you’ve honored your servant with this visit, let me prepare some food to refresh you before you continue on your journey.” “All right,” they said. “Do as you have said.”

And then the whole household jumped into action to prepare a meal that

would take hours to fix, and they served these total strangers. Now, that's hospitality.

David Legg, an Irish preacher at the Iron Hall Assembly in Belfast, Northern Ireland, explained hospitality this way, "Being hospitable is not just about laying a meal down for someone, it is about being mannerly and courteous, and showing common courtesy towards one another." Then he went on to make this observation about Christians today:

Now isn't it interesting that the more affluent and pleasure-centered a society, and even a church, becomes, the more selfish and self-centered it becomes as well. I think as the church has become more middle-class and upper-class, it has less time for looking after other people: widows, orphans, you name them, people in society that need help today.

Today, we allow our fears rather than our faith in God to control our lives. What is it that prevents us from helping others, being generous and hospitable? Fear of self-harm or loss. Yes, we need to be wise, but don't allow your being wise prevent you from being gracious, generous, and hospitable. Yes, if you choose to be hospitable, you will get burned. Becky and I have many times. But we don't let that prevent us from being ambassadors of Christ by being hospitable to those who are strangers, not friends or family. As a result, we have discovered many new dear friends.

Our story this morning began with a man and a woman, the first or second generation of Israelites who entered into the Promised Land. This generation of Israelites took possession of the land, but they forgot their God and disregarded His clearly-laid-out instructions as to how men and women are to live and how communities are to function. As a result, we see just one example in the next nine verses of the moral, social, and spiritual sickness that ensued. It will be hard to swallow when we look at it next week.

How does this pertain to us? For many in our town, and even for some Christians, the actions thus far of this Levite and his wife, their immoralities,

are considered no big deal. They are of minimal or minor concern. We have just read about a woman who has played the role of a prostitute, gotten married, ignored what it means be married, and carried on as a prostitute. Her husband, who wasn't such a great catch himself, disregarded God's Word that teaches that to be married to more than one woman is forbidden and thus wrong, even if he "loves" her. Maybe like too many today, he thought, "This remaining faithful to my marriage partner is just so old fashioned!" This man, this woman, and even her father winked at what they knew God's Word said is right and wrong. They deliberately chose to ignore God and to do "**what was right in their own eyes.**"

I close with a passage of Scripture that the very characters we studied today had heard, because there were others who were still alive when God gave these words to Joshua. Joshua heard these words, took them to heart, and received what God promised if Joshua would believe them and put them to work in his life. As Joshua was preparing to enter the Promised Land, our God, Joshua's God, who wants so much to bless people's lives amidst a wicked generation, said this:

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:8-9

Joshua heard these words, obeyed them, and was blessed. The characters in our text heard and knew these same words, but they ignored them. Instead, they followed the doctrine of their politically correct culture; they followed the dogma of "be tolerant at all cost, regardless if you must ignore what is right morally." And how did that fare in the end? They personally suffered dearly for it, and as a result of their foolish actions, set off a civil war in Israel that nearly wiped out the entire tribe of Benjamin.

So, who was right in the end, Joshua or the characters in our text? Who do you choose to emulate? Just understand that even as Joshua found others standing in opposition to his leadership and times got difficult for him, yet he stood with our strong and courageous Lord, who made him successful and prosperous in the end. It's hard to be gracious toward those you love who ignore what God says is right. But gracious you must be. But no matter how much it breaks your heart to disagree with those you love, you must not give in. Be strong and courageous and loving, but stand for what God says clearly in His Word is right.

