

A MISSTEP IN DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

Judges 20:1-22

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One of the more significant ongoing challenges in walking with Jesus is being able to discern His leading in your life. To be successful at deciphering the Lord's will requires several things:

- First, a willingness to do whatever it is that God would have you to do, before you ask Him. Because Jesus can read your mind, if you are only asking Him to lead you if He does it in a way that is pleasing to you, is not too difficult for you, doesn't inconvenience you, or doesn't push you out of your comfort zone, you probably won't find his direction for your life.
- Second, don't bother asking Jesus to lead you into sin, to do something He already has clearly said in scripture is wrong. He will never do that. But, if your desires fall in line with His promises or some action that God clearly puts His stamp of approval in His Word, then go for it! Don't even hesitate. He will bless you abundantly when you obey Him.
- Third, sometimes after you have genuinely sought after the Lord and are ready to do his will, He will put obstacles in your way, either to redirect you or because it is not the right time for you to move. Sometimes it won't be an obstacle so much as it will be a radical change in circumstance beyond your control that forces you to move in another direction.

There are more aspects to clearly discovering God's will for your life, and quite frankly it is one of the most exciting things about knowing Jesus Christ and following His leading. I often call it God's magical mystery tour through life!

But this morning, we are going to see a common trap or misstep that religious Christians often fall into when asking God to show them what to do. It happens so often in our lives that we need to constantly be reminded not to do it. It is one of the things as elders that we continually stop and ask ourselves before we make a mistake. And sometimes we make mistakes and have to take that class over.

This morning we are going to see a common mistake in discerning God's will illustrated for us by the tribes of Israel. Granted, they had strayed away from God and were living what they thought was the good life, but their world was suddenly coming unraveled. When that happens, they and we typically put our best heads together to make a plan to fix something, to prevent something, or to get out of trouble. We start with the assumption that, "God gave us some brains, so He must expect us to use them to figure things out and to get things done!" Not necessarily so, or maybe I should say, that is not quite accurate. I trust that by the end of our study this morning, you will see better how we are to deal with the tension of using our minds and trusting in the Lord to find answers to life's challenges.

As we return to our study of **Judges 20**, let's take a moment to reset the stage so that we can better follow the events of which we are about to read. Up until now, I have simply told you that **Judges 19-21**, which speaks of the terrible fate of the tribe of Benjamin, took place sometime during the first and second generation of Israelites who took possession of the Promised Land. I have not yet explained how we know that; but now is a good time, because in **Judges 20** we are given the clue to properly dating the events we have been studying. We are told in **verse 28** that these events took place during the High Priesthood of Phinehas. Phinehas was the grandson of Aaron, the first Israelite High Priest and the older brother of Moses. Aaron died before Moses during Israel's final years of wandering in the wilderness. This makes Phinehas a young man, born in the Promised Land while Joshua was still alive. Hence, by the time Phinehas became High Priest, it is probable that many of the Israelites who helped take possession of the Promised Land under Joshua were still alive.

The significance of this historical fact is that the events we read about in these three chapters are very early on, after Israel has received this gracious gift of the Promised Land, with its fully developed farms, homes, and previously dug wells and cisterns. All were a gift from God. Yet, early on in the period following the conquest of the land, the period known as The Judges, Israel as a whole turned their backs upon God and His covenantal agreement in order to live as they pleased. As a result, with the rising of the sun each day, the Israelites took on more of the lifestyle of their pagan Canaanites neighbors rather than being whom God had called them out to be, His people.

In the first chapter of the events that led to the fate of Benjamin, **chapter 19**, we have already seen a true horror story. It is very carefully and dramatically written, delineating the rape and murder of an Israelite woman by a gang of thugs in a Benjamite town called Gibeah. Two days later, this murder was followed by the woman's husband, a Levite, mutilating her body by cutting it up into twelve parts and sending one to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This atrocity so stunned all of Israel that it resulted in an Israeli unified call or demand for justice. Hence, we can summarize the events of **Judges 19** this way: Rape--Benjamin's perversion.

This morning in **Judges 20**, we begin looking at what becomes the rest of the eleven tribes of Israel's revenge against the tribe of Benjamin, the purpose of which was to purge the nation of the wickedness brought on by the blatant, godless acts of the Benjamites. The account breaks down into four episodes. This morning we will only have time to complete three of the episodes and introduce the fourth.

The first episode is laid out in the first seven verses, and it concerns the Levite's grievance, which is greatly distorted. The episode begins in the first two and a half verses, with the assembling of all the tribes of Israel at the hill of Mizpah to determine the facts as to what actually happened and to come up with an appropriate response. The writer throughout this chapter emphasizes the unity of all the tribes, except for the members of the tribe of Benjamin, who did not show up at Mizpah. We read:

¹Then all the sons of Israel from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, came out, and the congregation assembled as one man to the LORD at Mizpah. ²The chiefs of all the people, even of all the tribes of Israel, took their stand in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 foot soldiers who drew the sword. ³(Now the sons of Benjamin heard that the sons of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.)

And the sons of Israel said, “Tell us, how did this wickedness take place?”

There are five different Mizpahs mentioned in Scripture. It is a common name, because it describes a high point, a visual perch, from which one can peruse a battlefield and easily defend oneself. It literally means “watch tower.” The top of the hill was spacious enough to hold the chiefs of the Israelite tribes and clans, but not large enough to host 400,000 soldiers. Hence, it is presumed that the soldiers waited at the base of the hill until the leaders had come down with a plan of action. Mizpah is located eight miles north of Jerusalem and about three miles northwest of Gibeah, close to the boundary between the tribes of Benjamin and Ephraim.

Again, note the unanimity and comprehensiveness of the Israelite tribes. After this event, which is at the beginning of the period of the judges, never again for the next four hundred years do all the tribes of Israel come together for anything. Also, note the absence of the tribe of Benjamin, who lived the closest to this spot of anyone. Israel’s unity is both impressive and tragic in that it is a unity of Israel against Israel. It causes the reader to ask, “Why couldn’t Israel ever get that united against the Canaanites or the Midianites or the Moabites or the Philistines? Why is it that when Israel can really get itself together, it pits itself against itself?”

This meeting of the tribes was no casual gathering. The terms used to describe it paint it as both a military and a spiritual gathering of the covenantal people of Israel. The writer refers to this gathering as an “**assembling of the people**,” an expression that identifies the nation as a body “**called out**” by Yahweh to engage in holy war as well as a favorite expression designating the gathering of the religious community to worship Yahweh. The phrase “**to the LORD at Mizpah**” is the first time in this story that Yahweh’s name is mentioned, indicating that this spot had become a sanctuary for the people of God.

Once all of the leaders arrived, the first order of business was for the Levite to explain himself. What happened so that he would do such a thing to his wife’s body? So he gave them a report, a rather distorted reported. Beware, you are about to enter what one news channel calls “the spin zone.” We read:

⁴So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, “I came with my concubine to spend the night at Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin. ⁵But the men of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me; instead, they ravished my concubine so that she died. ⁶And I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout the land of Israel’s inheritance; for they have committed a lewd and disgraceful act in Israel. ⁷Behold all our sons of Israel, give your advice and counsel here.

The Levites testimony is filled with noticeable distortions and glaring omissions.

- He omitted any reference to his family problems, such as his own sin of having taken multiple wives and having emotionally abused the one in question. If it had not been for his sin, none of the ensuing atrocities would have taken place.
- He made it sound as though Gibeah was his intended destination, omitting any mention of his ignoring advice to spend the night in Jerusalem.
- He inflated his personal danger by claiming that the men of Gibeah intended to kill him, when the culprits never stated such intentions.
- He omitted the fact that he traded his wife’s skin for his own, and that he was the criminal who thrust her out of the door.
- He added that his wife was dead when he found her the next morning on the doorstep as he was leaving for home.

From this point forward, the Levite, the catalyst of all of the tragedy, disappears from the story.

In **verse 6**, the writer uses two noteworthy Hebrew words. I say noteworthy,

because today there are many liberal Bible scholars who want to cover up or re-explain what God’s Word clearly states is sin. The two words are “**lewd**” and “**disgraceful.**” The term “**lewd**” is frequently used in the Old Testament describing various forms of sexual perversions which God calls sin. It is a term like the Greek New Testament term “pornea,” in that it refers to any sinful sexual relations outside marriage between a man and a women, such as incest (**Leviticus 18:17; 20:14**), homosexuality (**Leviticus 18:22; 20:13**), the giving of a daughter into prostitution (**Leviticus 19:29**), and premarital or extra marital sex (**Job 31:11**). God considers these sins so perverse that He warned that if they are allowed to persist, they could bring a curse on the entire nation. And according to **Leviticus 18:29**, those involved in such sexual activity were to be “**cut off from the people,**” meaning executed.

The second term, “**disgraceful,**” references sexual promiscuity (**Deuteronomy 22:21; Genesis 34:7**), premeditated rape (**2 Samuel 13:12**), adultery (**Jeremiah 29:23**), and homosexual relations (**Judges 19:23-24**).

I know that we live in confusing times, and for some, trying to figure out what is proper human sexuality is difficult. But for the Christian, there should be no confusion, for God’s Word is quite clear. There is no hiccup in the terms His Spirit has chosen to use to describe the godly and ungodly use of one’s body. This may not be popular to say in some circles today, just like it was not popular to say during the period of the judges. But behavior that flies in the face of God’s righteousness is well accepted by those who have chosen to suppress the truth about God. And God’s truth is true whether we want to accept it or not. If you want to disagree with what I have said, I accept that. Just keep in mind, that I am not the originator of such words. God is, in His written Word.

Beginning with **verse 8**, we come to the second episode. Having heard only the testimony of one man against others, and not doing anything to research whether or not this man had told the truth, (which is another violation of God’s Law), the unity group of leaders of Israel quickly reacted in outrage. Beginning with **verse 8**, we first find that their outrage is aimed at the city of Gibeah. We read:

⁸Then all the people arose as one man, saying, “Not one of us will go

to his tent, nor will any of us return to his house. ⁹But now this is the thing which we will do to Gibeah; we will go up against it by lot. ¹⁰And we will take 10 men out of 100 throughout the tribes of Israel, and 100 out of 1,000, and 1,000 out of 10,000 to supply food for the people, that when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin, they may punish them for all the disgraceful acts that they have committed in Israel.” ¹¹Thus all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, united as one man.

The Israelites seem to have anticipated a difficult and protracted campaign. Therefore, realizing that “an army travels on its stomach,” the Israelites wisely set aside a tithe of men to maintain provisions for those who were doing the fighting. By casting lots to see how they should proceed against Benjamin, the tribes were dealing with Benjamin as they had dealt with the Canaanite towns they had attacked years earlier. But in this case, they had clearly not asked God what they should do or if they should do anything. No attempt was made to ascertain the Lord’s direction until verse **18**, after the decision to fight had already been established. Furthermore, God did not tell them in His Word to deal with their fellow Israelites this way. They were now, for the first time, going to battle against their brethren as they had engaged their enemies (**verse 18; cf. Leviticus 19:18**).

Before they actually launched an attack against the city of Gibeah, the tribes of Israel first tried to talk the leaders of the tribe of Benjamin into turning over the evil gang of men. We read:

¹²Then the tribes of Israel sent men through the entire tribe of Benjamin, saying, “What is this wickedness that has taken place among you? ¹³Now then, deliver up the men, the worthless fellows

in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and remove the wickedness from Israel.

We read of the tribe of Benjamin's unfortunate obstinate response beginning with the middle of **verse 13**.

¹³But the sons of Benjamin would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the sons of Israel. ¹⁴The sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah, to go out to battle against the sons of Israel. ¹⁵From the cities on that day the sons of Benjamin were numbered, 26,000 men who draw the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah who were numbered, 700 choice men. ¹⁶Out of all these people, 700 choice men were left-handed; each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.

The Benjamites should have sided with “**their brothers**,” the other Israelites. But they decided to support their kinsmen, their relatives, instead. Rather than standing up for what was morally right, they approved of their brothers' right to do as they pleased, to do evil in the sight of the Lord. Again, this is the same kind of action we read about last week in Paul's letter to the **Romans**.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, . . . and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

Romans 1:28, 32.

The extent to which these Benjamites stood up to defend evil and the evildoers was a measure of how deeply rooted in Israel was the Canaanizing rot in the culture.

Similarly today, the degree to which we are afraid to approach others, even in love, to tell them the truth, is the degree to which we have become more like the ungodly rather than followers of Jesus Christ. Our desire to be accepted and loved by those who defy God, rather than out of love to stand up for Jesus, tells us who we really worship: we either worship the approval and acceptance of others, or we hold highest the approval of God. The wise man Solomon warned that, **“The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.” (Proverbs 29:25)** Here’s a question for you to consider: Whose approval do you seek after most? God’s or someone’s who is significant to you? How you answer that question defines whether you truly worship God above all else or you worship an idol, violating the very first commandment, of having **“no other gods besides me.”**

Jesus never dodged the opportunity to speak the truth in love to those who were doing wrong. He did not come down harshly on them, but he spoke the truth in grace. We are called to do the same.

Returning to our text, we read in **verses 15-16** that the Benjamites proved to be a challenging foe for the rest of the Israelite tribes, for a couple of reasons. First, this battle would be fought on their home turf. Their familiarity with the hilly surroundings would make guerilla warfare defense and sneak attacks acutely successful.

Secondly, in **verse 16**, the writer tells us of 700 left-handed soldiers forming an elite Navy Seal-like corp. With a sling, it has been estimated that they could throw a one pound stone ninety miles per hour at a hair and not miss! Putting this together with guerilla warfare tactics, they were a formidable enemy.

Dr. Daniel Block explains further:

Whereas the 26,000 men appear to have been ordinary soldiers, the

Benjamites could send into the battle a special contingent of 700 soldiers. These men were unique because they were all left-handed, like their fellow Benjamite, Ehud, in 3:15. Alone a left-handed person was considered handicapped and in a contingent of right-handed troops an actual liability; but if enough left-handed men could be assembled to make up an entire contingent, a disadvantage would be transformed into a distinct advantage, physically and psychologically.

As a result of the Benjamites' refusal to hand over their criminals, we come to the fourth episode, the attack of the eleven tribes of Israel on the Benjamites. They do so in three battles. We only have time this morning to look at the first battle, found in **verses 17-22**. We read:

¹⁷Then the men of Israel besides Benjamin were numbered, 400,000 men who draw the sword; all these were men of war. ¹⁸Now the sons of Israel arose, went up to Bethel, and inquired of God [Elohim] and said, "Who shall go up first for us to battle against the sons of Benjamin?" Then the LORD said, "Judah shall go up first."

We learn during this episode that the Tabernacle, with the Ark of the Covenant, had been moved to Bethel, a short distance from Mizpah. It would be at Bethel that they could seek God's direction. Mizpah served as the gathering place for the tribal assembly; Bethel was the place to meet with God. This move of the Tabernacle to Bethel is surprising, because it had been at Shiloh both before and after this event. There had been no reference from God that when war came they were to move the Tabernacle. Hence, this may have been a move encouraged by the leaders, because with the Tabernacle at the place of conflict, they may have thought it would serve as a good luck

charm. In any event, it was an unprecedented move.

On the surface, the fact that the Israelites approached God for guidance in the conduct of the war appears hopeful. But the manner in which the writer of **Judges** casts the inquiry of God raises several concerns. First, the Israelites do not ask, “Shall we go up against our brother?” but “Who shall go up first?” Their decision seems to have been made without ever asking God.

Second, in contrast to **Judges 1:1**, when the tribe of Judah properly sought direction from God, they did so calling out to God by his covenantal name, Yahweh, not as they have done here, calling Him by the generic designation for God, Elohim. In doing so, the writer of **Judges** gives his own subtle hint that something isn’t right here.

Remarkably, Yahweh answers, “**Judah shall go up first.**” This response is appropriate because the victim, the concubine, was from Bethlehem in Judah. The Judahites had a personal reason for demanding justice in the land. Furthermore, the tribe of Judah had played this role of deliverer earlier and had demonstrated its effectiveness in battle in **Judges 1:1-10**.

We continue.

¹⁹So the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah. ²⁰The men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel arrayed for battle against them at Gibeah. ²¹Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and felled to the ground on that day 22,000 men of Israel. ²²But the people, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and arrayed for battle again in the place where they had arrayed themselves the first day.

The results of the first battle proved disastrous. The vastly outnumbered Benjamites struck down 22,000 Israelite soldiers—almost one for every

Benjamite that went out into the field.

Now God's response to send Judah to fight becomes puzzling, because Judah is handily defeated in the war. How come? The answer reminds me of a similar mistake that Jesus' disciple Simon Peter made in **Acts 1**. If you remember Jesus' instructions, the disciples were told by the Lord to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit was poured out on them. But Peter got anxious and decided something had to be done. There were supposed to be twelve apostles, but since Judas had betrayed Jesus and killed himself, there needed to be another. So, Peter, not God, called a selection committee together, in **Acts 1:23-26**.

So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "You Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

In other words, Peter was praying, "Lord, we're not praying about whether there should be twelve. Lord, we're not even praying to ask you to select candidates. We've got this all taken care of. No, Lord, what we're praying today is for you to pick from these two. You can have any apostle you want as long as it's one of these two guys."

Too many Christians live their lives like this. We make our decisions, we go about our lives, and suddenly we decide that we need God's direction or stamp of approval on a decision that is already in the works. But often, because we haven't let God lead us to this point, we're asking Him for direction from a place He didn't want us in in the first place! Jeremiah wrote, **Jeremiah 10:23**, "I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself; nor

is it in a man who walks to direct his steps.”

The mistake of the leaders of the tribes was they did not begin by seeking God’s direction before they made a plan or considered a decision. We need the Lord to direct all of our steps, not to walk where we want and then ask for help when we get there. Before you need to make a decision, before you devise a plan, before you reason your way through something, humbly pause and ask God, “Lord, what would you have me to do?” Wait for him to guide you.

Our text today reveals what happened when a group of leaders failed to begin the process properly of seeking God first before devising their plans. As a result, 22,000 men of Judah died--22,000 fathers, husbands, brothers, and loved ones--because of failure to pause to seek God’s direction. **“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding, acknowledge Him in all your ways and He will make your path straight.” Proverbs 3:5-6.**