

BEING CLOSE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

• JUDGES 17–18 •

“Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. . . . In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (17:1, 6).

Confusion can produce tragic results. During the period of time reflected in Judges 17–21, confusion prevailed.

The events in these five chapters took place in the early days of the judges though they are recorded in the last part of Judges. Several hints lead to this conclusion. First, Aaron’s grandson is mentioned at 20:28, which indicates these events occurred near the days of Moses and Aaron. Second, in Hosea, the prophet refers to the sin that the tribe of Benjamin committed in Gibeah (Judges 19) in such a way as to indicate that this was the beginning of the rebellion of God’s people (cf. Hosea 10:9). It could be that this event occurred before any of the rebellions that are related in the book of Judges.

Two stories are told in these chapters to illustrate the confusion that existed among Israel. The first is a story of idolatry (Judges 17; 18); the second is a story of a heinous crime (Judges 19–21).

Micah lived in Mount Ephraim, the hill country of the region later known as Samaria, and located in the northern portion of the land of Manasseh.

Micah had stolen eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother, but he suffered from a

guilty conscience. Realizing how much the money meant to his mother, he returned it to her with his apologies. His mother immediately forgave him and used two hundred pieces of silver to build her son two idols. Micah placed these images in his house and then “consecrated one of his sons, that he might become his priest” (17:5).

As time passed, a young Levite traveled through Mount Ephraim out of Bethlehem, looking for a place to live. He came to Micah’s house. When Micah discovered he was a Levite, he convinced the young man to serve as priest in his house. Micah became very attached to him (17:11).

Meanwhile, the tribe of Dan sent out five spies from their cities of Zorah and Eshtaol in search of another place to live. The presence of the Philistines in their inherited territory made it impossible for them to live in peace. The spies went as far north as Mount Ephraim and arrived at Micah’s house. They recognized the voice of the young man who was serving as his priest. After asking why he was living in Micah’s house, the Danites asked the young man to consult with God to see if they would have success in their mission. Upon doing so, the young man told them to return with God’s assurance that their journey would be prosperous.

The spies continued north until they came to Laish, a city located at the foot of Mount Hermon, near the head waters of the Jordan. Judges 18:7 says that the inhabitants of the city lived in

security “after the manner of the Sidonians.” This word “Sidonians” refers to the Phoenicians, a people who lived several miles to the west of Laish on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Laish seemed to be so far removed from the main land of the Phoenicians that it would be easy for the Danites to conquer it. Consequently, the spies returned to their homeland and encouraged their brethren to send an army to conquer the city.

As the Danite army traveled north, they passed through Mount Ephraim. The five spies told the rest of the soldiers about the young man whom they had met on their first trip and how he consulted God for them. The army stopped at Micah’s house and convinced the young man to accompany them. Their reasoning was that serving as priest in the house of one man was not as prestigious as serving as priest over an entire tribe. Being ambitious, the young Levite left with the army, taking Micah’s idols with him. When Micah discovered what had happened, he formed a posse with his neighbors and pursued until they caught up with the Danites. The Danites pretended to be ignorant and asked what Micah’s problem was. Micah said they should know since they had stolen his idols and his priest. The Danites told Micah to be careful how he talked because some in the Danite army might get angry and kill him and his neighbors. This threat convinced Micah that he was outnumbered, and he returned home.

The Danites continued north until they came to Laish. They easily conquered it and took over the city as their residence. They renamed the city “Dan” after their forefather who was one of the twelve sons of Jacob (18:29). Dan became the northern boundary for the promised land with Beersheba being the southern boundary. When the length of the promised land is mentioned in the Bible, it is frequently referred to by the phrase, “from Dan to Beersheba” (20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20; 2 Samuel 3:10; 17:11; etc.). The Danites set up Micah’s idols and lived there the entire time that God’s tabernacle remained in Shiloh (18:31).

How could these Israelites worship God in such contradiction to the Mosaic law? They must have believed that being close was good enough. Many good people today live under the delusion that being close is good enough in their service to God.

BEING CLOSE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH IN WORSHIP

When Micah established his place of worship, he was not acting in accordance with the Mosaic law. First, he tried to worship God with idols. Second, he tried to imitate true worship by ordaining one of his sons as a priest (17:5) and later having a Levite for a priest. The Mosaic law specified that only Levites from the family line of Aaron could be priests among God’s people (Exodus 28:1; Leviticus 8:10-13; etc.). While the other Levites had duties in the temple (Numbers 4:1-49), only Aaron’s descendants were allowed to serve in the office of priest. Since the young Levite was not of the priestly line (18:30), he was not qualified to serve as a priest.

The laws concerning the priesthood applied only to the true worship of God. If a man chose to worship with idols as Micah was doing, what difference would it make who served as a priest? Once a man left the divine pattern and worshiped idols, even a descendant of Aaron serving as priest could not make worshiping with idols right.

In the New Testament, John 4 records a conversation that Jesus had with a Samaritan woman concerning worship. She questioned Jesus as to why the Jews taught that people had to worship in Jerusalem. Jesus simply said, “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23, 24). Jesus circumvented the importance of *where* one should worship (which was the emphasis of the woman’s question) and focused on *how* one should worship. He says that the true worshipers of God must worship in spirit and truth. He tells us the guidelines for acceptable worship. God accepts that which is done according to His specifications.

Judging from the practice of the first-century church, God instructed Christians to partake of the Lord’s Supper “on the first day of the week” (Acts 10:7). Since every week has a first day, we know how frequently we should partake of the Lord’s Supper. Being close is not good enough. It is not sufficient to partake of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week every three months.

Eleven times in the New Testament something is said regarding the singing of the first-

century disciples. In every verse, their action is described by the words, “sing,” “sang,” “sung,” or “singing.” Not once in any of these verses is it even implied that a mechanical instrument of music was used. It is a matter of secular history as well that the first-century Christians did not use instruments of music. One must remember that these early Christians were Jewish people. Under the Mosaic law, they were accustomed to using instruments of music in their worship of God. This practice was common among the Jews since the days of King David. Why was this practice eliminated when they were converted? The only plausible explanation is that they were instructed just to sing. Their practice is consistent with the instructions we read in the New Testament:

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

... I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also (1 Corinthians 14:15).

Do we want to do exactly what God says to do in our worship, or do we just want to be close? From Micah’s example we can clearly see that being close is not good enough in our worship!

BEING CLOSE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH IN SALVATION

Many believe that being close is good enough regarding the plan of salvation. What do we have to do to be saved? That question was asked by three different types of people in the first century: the Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37); Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:10); the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:30). That question still resides in the hearts of men. However, a clear-cut answer is hard to come by in the divided religious world of today.

Some say you must only believe. Others say that you have to invite Jesus to come into your heart. Still others say that you must have some religious experience to show that you are one of God’s elect. What does the Bible say?

One must believe in order to be saved. Many passages in the New Testament make this clear

(John 3:16; 8:24; Mark 16:16), but none of these passages say that one is saved by faith alone. Indeed, if they did so, they would be in direct contradiction with James 2:24 where James specifically says that one is not saved by faith alone. While faith in Jesus as God’s Son is vital to one’s salvation, if that faith never moves one to obey Jesus, it will not save!

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Jesus plainly said that repentance is also necessary in order to avoid eternal death (Luke 13:1-5). When Saul of Tarsus (Paul) asked the risen Savior what he had to do to be saved, Jesus told him to go to Damascus and wait for someone to tell him what he must do (Acts 9:1-6). As Paul retells the story of his conversion in Acts 22, he gives some details that are not given in the first account. Acts 9 says his sight returned and he “was baptized.” No record is given of what Ananias said which led up to that act of baptism. In Acts 22:16, Paul tells what Ananias said: “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”

Acts 22:16 links two important elements of salvation. First, Ananias said that baptism has something to do with the “washing away” of our sins. Only the blood of Jesus can wash away sins (Hebrews 9:11-28). However, Ananias said that our sins are washed away at the moment of baptism. How can that be? Obviously, in baptism we contact the soul-cleansing blood of Jesus. Second, Ananias linked being baptized with “calling on the name of the Lord.” Romans 10:13 makes it plain that calling on the name of the Lord is necessary for salvation. If that is the case, how can one be saved without baptism? Neither of these questions can be answered by the doctrine that teaches faith alone can save. The reason is that this doctrine is only a close relative of the teachings in God’s Word concerning salvation. When it comes to obtaining salvation from our sin, being close is not nearly good enough!

BEING CLOSE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH IN PRIORITIES

Some believe that being close is good enough in their priorities of life. God plainly says, "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). God does not want us to make the material things of this world a priority in our lives. Jesus was even more specific when He said, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). The word translated "mammon" literally means wealth or property. Thus, Jesus affirms unequivocally that our priorities cannot be divided between serving God and accumulating material possessions. One must make a decision as to his reason for living and give himself wholly to that pursuit. God allows no room for mixed priorities or divided devotions in His army. He said, "He who is not with Me is against Me. . . ." (Matthew 12:30). It is impossible to stand with one foot in the church and the other foot in the world.

Have you heard the saying, "God is my co-pilot"? If God were your co-pilot, you and God would direct your life in a joint effort. God is either your pilot, with full control, or He is not in your plane!

CONCLUSION

Micah shows that being close to what God wants is unacceptable. Too many people are like the old woman who came to a fork in the road. An observer watched as she threw her cane up in the air and then looked at it on the ground. She picked it up and threw it into the air again. She did this several times. The observer walked over and asked her what she was doing. "I am throwing my cane up in the air, and whichever way it points when it comes down, that is the way that I will go," she answered. The observer continued, "Why have you thrown it up so many times?" The woman replied, "It took that many times before it pointed the way that I wanted to go."

When someone believes that being close is good enough in his service to God, it is probably because he is more concerned with what he

wants to do than with what God has told him to do. Many "Micah's" are among us today!

—Craig Tappe

QUOTATIONS

"There is no point in cutting off a person's nose and then giving him a rose to smell."

Indian Proverb

We must always be fresh in our study of the Word.

"For a godly man it should be as it was with Moses. When a godly man sees the Bible and secular data apparently at odds, well, he does as Moses did when he saw an Egyptian fighting an Israelite: he kills the Egyptian. He discounts the secular testimony, knowing God's Word to be true. But when he sees an apparent inconsistency between two passages of Scripture, he does as Moses did when he found two Israelites quarreling: he tries to reconcile them. He says, 'Aha, these are brethren. I must make peace between them,' And that's what the godly man does."

William Bridge

"Suppose you and I could go to the archives of heaven and ask for the book which gives the meaning of history as God sees it. It would not be a book about 'The History of the British Empire' or 'The Growth of America' or 'The Spread of Marxism' or 'The Influence of the Non-Aligned Nations' or 'The Development of the Two-Thirds World.' Those would merely be tributaries. That key book would probably be entitled: 'The Spread of the Gospel Among the Nations.'"

Leighton Ford

Jim Bishop, the American columnist, interviewed President Kennedy three weeks before he was assassinated. President Kennedy said this, "Almost all presidents leave office feeling their work is unfinished. I have a lot to do, and so little time to do it."

Our Lord told fifty parables, about 35 percent of His teaching.