

Dr. Steven D. Mathewson, Preaching Old Testament Narratives, Session 10: Sermon on Judges 17-18

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in a series on Preaching Old Testament Narratives. This is session number 10, an actual sermon on Judges 17 and 18.

In this session, I am going to preach a sermon on an Old Testament narrative. Now, there are a couple of things that you need to realize. First of all, in the previous session, I talked about maybe moving out from behind the lectern, and I'm not going to do that today just because of logistics here for our recording. So I'm going to stay put.

Ordinarily, I would move to one side and then to the other side of the lectern, but I'm not going to do that today. The other thing to be aware of is that I'm going to try to keep eye contact, looking at you, looking at the camera lens. Ordinarily, if you're watching this, you might see me look over here at this part of the audience and then back to you and then over here to this part of the audience.

But I'm pretty much going to stick with looking at the camera. So before we look together into God's Word, I realize that we're doing this to learn. But I hope that even as you listen to this sermon, that not only will you see here's how you can preach an Old Testament sermon, but I pray that God will use it in your life as well as in mine, because the text I'm going to preach is one that God has really used to help me to make an impact in my life.

So before I preach, would you please join me as I pray?

Father, we thank you for your Holy Word. We thank you that you have given us your Word in many different kinds of literature, including stories. I pray that as we look at one of the narratives, one of the stories today from a rather dark book of the Bible, that your Spirit will be working in our lives and in our hearts. I pray that we might receive this not as the Word of a human being, but for what it is, the Word of God, which has the power to do its work in our lives as believers. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols. John Calvin made that statement, and I believe he's right. The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols.

So what is an idol? Well, an idol is simply a substitute for God. It's anything that we look to that takes the place of God. We look to an idol for security.

We look to an idol for significance. A few years ago, Casey Musgraves, a country singer, wrote a song called, Mary Go Round. And there's a haunting line in that song that I think describes what idolatry is.

In her song, she said, Mama's hooked on Mary Kay, brother's hooked on Mary Jane, daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down. Well, that's idolatry, isn't it? Mama's hooked on Mary Kay. She's really into selling cosmetics.

Anything wrong with that? No, and not necessarily, but even the good things in our lives can take over, whether it's selling Mary Kay, or these days, it might be essential oils or something else. How about her brother? Brother's hooked on Mary Jane. Well, I don't think anybody in the medical field would argue that smoking weed is good for your long-term health.

And then how about daddy, hooked on Mary two doors down? I mean, that really flies in the face of what scripture says, right? That's what idolatry is, isn't it? But what are the consequences of idolatry? If you know the Bible, you know that the Bible is against idolatry. But why? I mean, really, is it going to be that harmful to you if you're hooked on Mary Kay? Does it really matter if, you know, you indulge yourself in a fantasy about someone else who's not your spouse? Why does it pay to keep ourselves from idols? We may think of idolatry as a problem in the Old Testament, but even in the New Testament, the end of the letter of 1 John says, little children, keep yourselves from idols. Well, why? What's the problem with idols? There's a story in the book of Judges towards the end that helps us understand what the problem with idols really is.

The story is in Judges 17 and 18, and I would invite you to find it in your Bible or on your Bible app. And we're going to look at this story together. The book of Judges is a dark book, and it's a book that tells us that God's people self-destruct when they become like the neighbors around them, who are totally opposed to following God and to following His ways.

And towards the end of the book in Judges 17 and 18, we see how bad the problem of idolatry had become in the nation of Israel. But even more than that, we see the consequences. We see why idolatry doesn't pay off, why we should keep ourselves from idols.

The story begins like this in chapter 17. Now, a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim said to his mother, the 1,100 shekels of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse, I have that silver with me. I took it.

So here is Micah, whose name means who is like Yahweh. Well, Micah really wasn't like Yahweh. He has stolen from his mother, but at least give him a little credit; he's confessed his sin.

And his mother said, verse 2, the Lord bless you, my son. So good, maybe this is going to turn out well. When he returned the 1,100 shekels of silver to his mother, she said, I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord.

Oh, and we all say amen to that. But then she says, I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord for my son to make an image overlaid with silver. I will give it back to you.

And as alert readers of scripture, we ought to be saying, what? You've got to be kidding me. One thing you have to understand about some of these stories in the book of Judges is that the writer expects us to be able to spot the problem. The writer expects us to know the first five books of the Old Testament, especially the book of Deuteronomy, so that we're able to spot the problem.

When I was growing up, we had a subscription to a magazine called Highlights. And in the Highlights magazine, there was always this feature. It was a page with a picture on it, and it would say, what's wrong with this picture? And there would be a bicycle in the tree, or there would be a banana on the windowsill, and all of these things that just didn't make sense.

There would be a sprinkler running, and the water was going in through a window. And so you were supposed to go through and circle all of these problems. And really, that's what the writer of Judges wants us to do.

The writer doesn't come out and say, "This is wrong. This is a violation of the command not to make a graven image. Exodus 20, verse 4. Deuteronomy 5, verse 8. No, we're supposed to be able to spot the problem.

And so this is the first big problem we see as we go. This money is going to be used to make an idol. So, in verse 4, after he returned the silver to his mother, she took the two hundred shekels of silver, gave them to a silversmith, who used them to make the idol, and it was put in Micah's house.

But it gets worse. Verse 5. Now this man Micah had a shrine. That's actually the expression, Micah had a house of God.

Or he had a house of gods, and some household gods, and installed one of his sons as priest. And once again we say, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's a violation of God's word. That's a violation of the law that God gave through Moses.

The people were to worship at one central place. They weren't supposed to have their own place of worship. And then he installs one of his sons as priest? No, we know from Numbers 3, verses 9 and 10, that the priests were supposed to be descendants of Aaron.

So why in the world is he doing this? Well, the writer tells us in verse 6 that in those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. Or as older translations say, everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

They didn't have a king. I think that's a reference not only to Israel not having a king at that time, because actually, we know that the kings didn't solve anything, but they also created problems. I think this is also a way of saying they weren't worshipping God as their king.

Well, now in verse 7, we meet a new character, a young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah who had been living within the clan of Judah, and left that town in search of some other place to stay. And once again we ought to say, no, no, no, that's not right. We know that the Levites were assigned to live in one of six towns throughout the land, and they had responsibilities then for the people, so a wandering Levite, that's not supposed to happen.

But here he is, he's wandering, and on his way, he came to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim. Micah asked him, where are you from? I'm a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, he said, and I'm looking for a place to stay. The first words out of Micah's mouth should have been, well, you need to go to the Levitical city to which you were assigned, but Micah says to him, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food.

Think about Micah at this point. Now he's got a better option; he has a legitimate priest, so he's going to replace his son and make this guy a priest. Verse 11 says, so the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man became like one of his sons to him, and even there we say, well, this isn't right.

Yeah, it's good that he has affection for this young man, but the idea is that the father-son relationship is supposed to go the other way. This priest is supposed to be the spiritual leader, but instead, here is this young priest who becomes like a son to Micah. Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house, and Micah said, now I know that the Lord will be good to me since this Levite has become my priest.

Again, we think the audacity to think that with all of these violations of the law that God would be happy because now he has a real Levite as his priest. Chapter 18, we meet another character, actually a group of people. We're told once again in verse 18-1, in those days Israel had no king.

But then we read this, and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking a place of their own where they might settle because they had not yet come into inheritance among the tribes of Israel. And again, as alert readers of Scripture, we're to say there's a lot wrong with that picture. Back in the book of Joshua, chapter 19, verses 41-48, we know that the Danites had received an allotment of land in the southern part of what we would call Israel, or the land of Canaan.

So when we read that they were seeking a place of their own where they might settle because they hadn't yet come into inheritance, the answer should be, well, they need to drive out the inhabitants of the place that God had given them. Instead, they did something different. Verse 2 of chapter 18, so the Danites sent five of their leading men from Zorah and Eshtaol to spy out the land and explore it.

These men represented all the Danites. They told them, "Go explore the land. And again, we ought to be shaking our heads, saying, " This is an unauthorized spy mission.

This is not like the spy mission that Caleb and Joshua participated in. These Danites are doing something that God has not authorized. While they entered the hill country of Ephraim, they came to the house of Micah, where they spent the night.

When they were near Micah's house, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. Now, I don't believe that means that they knew him personally, and, hey, that's Bob. Hey, that's Levite Jim.

No, it just simply means he must have had an accent, and they recognized, hey, I think he's from our area. So they turned in there and asked him, "Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? Why are you here? He told them what Micah had done for him and said, " He has hired me, and I am his priest. Then they said to him, please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful.

Again, we just shake our heads at the spiritual insensitivity. I mean, they are setting out on a course of action that is in clear violation of God's word, and they are asking, they're seeking blessing for this act, really an act of disobedience. Verse 6, the priest answered them, "Go in peace.

Your journey has the Lord's approval. Again, how he came to that conclusion, we're not told, but we read that and say, "This is just wrong. Well, the five men left and came to Laish, where they saw that the people were living in safety, like the Sidonians, at peace and secure.

And since their land lacked nothing, they were prosperous. Also, they lived a long way from the Sidonians and had no relationship with anyone else. Why do we need

to know that? Well, it sounds like they're probably vulnerable to attack, aren't they? When they returned to Zorah and Eshtaol, their fellow Danites asked them, how did you find things? They answered, come on, let's attack them.

We have seen the land, and it is very good. Are you going to do something? Don't hesitate to go there and take it over. When you get there, you will find unsuspecting people and a spacious land that God has put into your hands, a land that lacks nothing, whatever.

And it's just stunning, isn't it? That they thought God was behind this. So what happens? Well, then, 600 men of the Danites, armed for battle, set out from Zorah and Eshtol. On their way, they set up camp near Kiriath-Jerim in Judah.

This is why the place west of Kiriath-Jerim is called Mahana Dan to this day. That means Camp of Dan. From there, they went on to the hill country of Ephraim and came to Micah's house.

Then the five men who had spied out the land of Lai said to their fellow Danites, do you know that one of these houses has an ephod, some household gods, and an image overlaid with silver? Now you know what to do. So they turned in there and went to the house of the young Levite at Micah's place and greeted him. The 600 Danites, armed for battle, stood at the entrance of the gate.

The five men who had spied out the land went inside and took the idol, the ephod, and the household gods, while the priest and the 600 armed men stood at the entrance of the gate. When the five men went into Micah's house and took the idol, the ephod, and the household gods, the priest said to them, what are you doing? They answered him, shut up. See, they said, be quiet, don't say a word.

Come with us to our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priests rather than just one man's household? The priest was very pleased. I don't know whether to laugh or cry at that.

I mean, one minute he's upset. What are you doing? You're taking my stuff. And they said, "Hey, do you want to be a pastor of a bigger church? Do you want to have a bigger ministry? Do you want to have a better opportunity? Come and be our priest.

And so within a matter of what, seconds? Now his attitude has shifted, and he's very pleased. What an opportunist. He took the ephod, the household gods, and the idol and went along with the people.

Putting their little children, their livestock, and their possessions in front of them, they turned away and left. When they had gone some distance from Micah's house, the men who lived near Micah were called together and overtook the Danites, and

they shouted after them. As they shouted after them, the Danites turned and said to Micah, what's the matter with you that you called out your men to fight? He replied, "You took the gods I made and my priests and went away.

What else do I have? How can you ask what the matter is with you? The Danites answered, don't argue with us, or some of the men may get angry and attack you. That's not such a veiled threat, is it? And you and your family will lose your lives. So the Danites went their way, and Micah, seeing that they were too strong for him, turned around and went back home.

Then they took what Micah had made and his priest and went on to Laish against a people at peace and secure. And the writer wants to remind us of that. He's repeated that.

These are a people at peace and secure. Israel was supposed to offer terms of peace to distant cities like this. And by saying there are people at peace and secure, these are not enemies.

These are not people who were supposed to be driven out of the land. But the men of Laish, Scripture says, attacked them with a sword and burned down their city. There was no one to rescue them because they lived a long way from Sidon and had no relationship with anyone else.

The city was in a valley near Beit Rehov. The Danites rebuilt the city and settled there. They named it Dan after their ancestor Dan, who was born to Israel, though the city used to be called Laish.

There, the Danites set up the idol for themselves and get ready for a shock. And Jonathan, son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land. They continued to use the idol Micah had made all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.

End of story. So what happens when you turn to God from idols? What do you end up with? Well, let's start with Micah. What did Micah end up with? He tells us, basically, in chapter 18, verse 24, he said, You took the gods I made and my priests and went away.

What else do I have? And the answer is nothing. Friends, that's one of the things that happens when we turn to idols away from God. Idols leave us with nothing.

Nothing of substance. Oh yeah, for a while, they might bring some comfort, some security, some pleasure, some joy. But eventually they leave us empty.

What about the Danites? Well, you read this, it sounds like they lived happily ever after, right? Man, they're living the good life in this city. But did you hear the little expression at the end of verse 30? Maybe we're so struck by the fact that when the idol was set up, the priests were from the line of Moses, that we miss the last words of verse 30. It says, until the time of the captivity of the land.

We know that the Assyrians eventually came through and wreaked havoc in the northern kingdom. Eventually, the people of Israel, the nation of Israel, divided into the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom of Judah. And eventually, the Assyrians took away the northern kingdom, took them into captivity, and it was brutal.

So what did the Danites end up with? Well, for a while, things went well. But for the Danites, idolatry ended in bondage. And friends, that's what idols do.

They put us in bondage. Oh yeah, they bring us some joy, some comfort, some security in the short term. But eventually, we become slaves to the things that we look to as substitutes for what God can only provide.

So what happens when you turn to God for my idols? Well, you end up with nothing, and you end up in bondage. But there's something even more serious at the very root of this. And we see it in the last line of this narrative at the end of verse 31.

We're told that they continued to use the idol Micah had made, and here it is, it says, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh. You remember back in the beginning, in chapter 17, verse 4, where we are told that this man Micah had a house of God, or a house of gods? The expression here in verse 31 of chapter 18 is identical to that expression, except it has the word the " at the beginning, referring to a specific place. All the time, the house of God was in Shiloh.

The tabernacle was there. This is the place where God was sharing his presence among his people. The tragedy is that because they worshipped in their shrine at Dan, they missed the presence of God.

They had the opportunity, but they could have gone to Shiloh to worship at the true tabernacle, but instead they didn't. Friends, when we turn to idols from God, we miss out on God's presence. That's what this narrative is teaching us.

Sobering lesson, isn't it? When we turn to idols from God, we miss out on God's presence, and God's presence is the greatest gift that we have. Psalm 16:11, In your presence there is fullness of joy. At your right hand, there are pleasures forevermore.

Throughout the scriptures, we see the promise. God says, I am with you. I will never leave you.

I will never abandon you. We think of Jesus who came as Emmanuel, as God with us. Friends, the greatest gift we have in our lives is the presence of God.

That's why Jesus came as Emmanuel, and of course, he died on Calvary's cross and was raised to life so that you and I can experience the presence of God right now and throughout eternity when we live in the very presence of God in the new heaven and the new earth. That's what's so tragic about idolatry. When we turn to idols from God, we miss out on the presence of God.

We miss out on experiencing that presence. Again, idols are simply substitutes for God. We might be tempted to think of idolatry as a problem in the Old Testament, and it's true that a lot of us today, as followers of Jesus, don't struggle perhaps with having figurines, literal idols on our mantles or on our dressers.

But then again, maybe we do. Because a lot of times those substitutes for God are good things that we turn into God things. I think about that sometimes.

I see on our mantle a picture of our grandkids. And I love our grandkids, and they're great, and they're a real gift from God, but I could turn them into an idol. I look at another photo and see a picture of me when I was on a fishing trip in the rivers of Montana, and I think that is a gift from God.

It's something that I enjoy. I like fly fishing, but that could be an idol. If I look to that for the security and the significance that only God can provide, that good thing, that gift from his hand, can turn into an idol.

If you're thinking, well, I'm not really sure if that's true, think about Colossians 3, verse 5, where Paul lists a number of things that we need to put to death, and one of those things is greed. And then Paul says, "Which is idolatry? Greed is a form of idolatry. It's fine to have possessions.

They're gifts from God, but when we are obsessed with getting more and more and more, that's idolatry, isn't it? Friends, when we turn to idols from God, we miss out on God's presence. My prayer for you and my prayer for myself is expressed in the words of an old Irish hymn. One of the stanzas says, Let's pray.

Father, will you help us, as your children, to stay away from idols for our good and for your glory, that we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. All right, maybe just a few comments about that sermon.

You'll notice that the introduction was pretty quick, right? I didn't spend a lot of time. I tried to get into the narrative. I began with that quote from John Calvin.

I realize that some listeners may not even know who John Calvin is, and that's fine. But the quote was so powerful that's why I started with it. But then I moved quickly to a line from a popular song that I think people can relate to in trying to talk about real life.

And in doing that, I hope I created interest. I hope I raised a need for the sermon. And then I got right into the story.

Notice that I never said point one or point two. I had an outline, and we talked a little bit about that outline in a future session, didn't we? But I just went through and told the story. In fact, I read a lot of the story.

I read all of the story. There are some times when you preach more than one chapter, or maybe a long chapter like 1 Samuel 17, where you have to summarize part of it in your own words. And that's okay.

You don't always have to read every word. It's fine to summarize sections, but then point people to key statements made by the narrator or dialogue between the characters. That's a skill.

And if you do that, people won't feel like, well, you didn't read the whole story. They'll know that you were in the text. So I did that.

You notice I really only used about one formal illustration. I talked about the highlights magazine and the spot the lie picture because I thought that explained what I think the writer is doing here. He expects us to spot the lie.

At a few places, I would point out when a new character entered the scene, whether it was the young Levite or the Danites, and then what you might notice is, and I talked about this in a previous session, that idea of strategic delay. In verse 24, where Micah says, You took the gods I made and my priests and went away. What else do I have? I read that as I worked through the story, but I didn't stop and linger on that.

I came back to that at the end. Did you pick that up when I raised the question, what happens when you turn to God from idols? By the way, did you notice that I raised that question right at the beginning of the sermon? I said, "That's what this passage will tell us. So that's going to be in people's minds.

They want to hear the story because they want to know what happens to us when we turn from God to idols. And so at the end of the sermon, I went back to verse 24 and highlighted that. And then I did the same thing at the end of the verse, well, both verses 30 and 31 of chapter 18.

I highlighted that little expression until the time of the captivity of the land. I had already read that. And then in verse 31, they continued to use the idol Micah had made all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.

And I made a big deal about that. And I connected it with that statement back in chapter 17 and verse 4. So those are some of the things I did notice, too. I never said, so here is the big idea.

I simply worked it in. I did say, this is really the message of this story. When we turn to idols from God, we miss out on God's presence.

And I restated that two or three times in my conclusion. But I tried to wrap that up quickly. And then I just ended with the words of that old hymn, Be Thou My Vision.

And then I prayed. One thing that I should point out, too, in some traditions, you might have the entire passage read before you preach. And I've had people who worry about that, saying, oh, well, that gives away the whole story.

Well, in most stories, Bible stories, people have already heard them. Now, not this one. But that's no worry at all, because people read this, but I'm not sure that all the details register.

And in fact, think about a favorite movie you have or a book that you've read, and when you watch it or read it for the fifth time, you have the same set of emotional reactions, don't you, as you go through that story. You feel it all over again. You know what the outcome is, but you still track with it emotionally.

So that's why I don't worry. If you're in a tradition where the entire scripture is going to be read before you get up to preach, no worries at all. You just preach it, work through it.

Maybe you'll be able to summarize some things. But that story is going to land with power. All right, so those are the kinds of things that I try to do when I preach this.

And I hope that by watching that, it will help you. And I hope that these ten sessions have given you more confidence to preach the Old Testament narrative. Or, if you still have questions, again, there are other good resources out there.

And I wish you the best as you continue to proclaim the Word of God and as you preach the narrative portions of the Old Testament.