

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

Abstract:

In this instructional transcript, **Dr. Steven D. Mathewson** delivers a sample sermon based on **Judges 17-18** to demonstrate effective techniques for **preaching Old Testament narratives**. He explores the **dangers of idolatry**, illustrating how the characters' pursuit of religious substitutes leads to **spiritual emptiness, bondage, and the loss of God's presence**. Throughout the presentation, Mathewson pauses to provide **homiletical commentary**, explaining his use of contemporary references, strategic delays, and narrative summaries to engage a modern audience. He emphasizes that the biblical author expects readers to **identify moral failures** by comparing the characters' actions against the standard of **Mosaic Law**. Ultimately, the session serves as a practical guide for ministers to transform **ancient stories** into compelling, relevant messages that highlight the **supremacy of God**.

Briefing Document:

Briefing on Old Testament Narrative Preaching: Analysis of Judges 17-18

This briefing document provides a comprehensive analysis of Dr. Steven D. Mathewson's sermon on Judges 17-18. It examines the theological themes of idolatry, the narrative structure of the biblical text, and the homiletical techniques used to communicate these concepts to a contemporary audience.

Executive Summary

The central thesis of the discourse is that the human heart is a "perpetual factory of idols," and turning to these idols invariably leads to three destructive outcomes: spiritual emptiness, bondage, and the loss of God's presence. Through a detailed exposition of Judges 17 and 18, the narrative illustrates how Israel self-destructed by becoming like the surrounding nations, characterized by the phrase "everyone did as they saw fit." Dr. Mathewson employs a narrative-driven homiletical style that prioritizes storytelling and "strategic delay" over rigid, numbered points, encouraging

the audience to "spot the problem" within the biblical text by comparing character actions against established Mosaic law.

The Nature and Modern Context of Idolatry

The document defines an idol as a "substitute for God"—anything an individual looks to for security or significance in place of the Divine.

- **The Source of Idolatry:** Citing John Calvin, the sermon asserts that the human heart is a "perpetual factory of idols."
- **Modern Substitutes:** Idolatry is not confined to literal figurines. It often involves "good things" that are elevated to "God things."
 - **Examples:** Career success (e.g., Mary Kay/cosmetic sales), substance use, or extramarital fantasies.
 - **Biblical Parallel:** Colossians 3:5 is cited to equate "greed" with idolatry, illustrating that the obsession with possessions is a form of idol worship.
 - **Personal Application:** Even positive elements like grandchildren or hobbies (e.g., fly fishing) become idols if they are the primary source of one's security or significance.

Narrative Analysis: The Breakdown of Israelite Worship

The story in Judges 17-18 is described as a "dark book" depicting a period where Israel lacked both a central king and a spiritual devotion to God as King. The narrative progresses through three primary groups of characters, each demonstrating a distinct violation of God's law.

I. Micah and His Mother (Judges 17)

The narrative begins with Micah confessing to stealing 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother. While he confesses, the subsequent "consecration" of the silver is deeply flawed.

- **The First Violation:** Micah's mother uses 200 shekels to commission an idol overlaid with silver, violating the commands in Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8.
- **The Second Violation:** Micah establishes a private "house of gods" (shrine) and installs his own son as a priest, violating the law that priests must be descendants of Aaron (Numbers 3:9-10).

II. The Wandering Levite

A young Levite from Bethlehem appears, seeking a place to stay.

- **The Violation of Role:** Levites were assigned to specific cities; a "wandering" Levite represents a failure of the system.
- **The Opportunistic Priest:** Micah hires the Levite for ten shekels a year, food, and clothing. The Levite accepts, becoming "like a son" to Micah rather than a spiritual leader. Micah falsely concludes that having a "real Levite" will guarantee God's blessing, despite the ongoing idolatry.

III. The Tribe of the Danites (Judges 18)

The Danites, failing to take the land originally allotted to them (Joshua 19:41-48), seek a new inheritance through unauthorized means.

- **Unauthorized Mission:** They send five spies on a mission not sanctioned by God.
- **Spiritual Insensitivity:** The spies encounter Micah's priest and ask for a blessing on their journey. The priest provides an unauthorized "approval" from the Lord.
- **Theft and Coercion:** The Danites return with 600 armed men, steal Micah's idols, and entice the Levite to join them by offering a "bigger ministry"—serving a tribe rather than a single household.
- **Unjust Warfare:** They attack Laish, a "peaceful and secure" city that was not a prescribed enemy, burning it and rebuilding it as their own city (Dan).

The Consequences of Turning to Idols

The narrative concludes with a sobering summary of what the characters gained and lost through their idolatry.

Consequence	Narrative Evidence
Emptiness (Nothingness)	Micah, after losing his idols and priest to the Danites, asks: "You took the gods I made and my priests... What else do I have?" The answer is nothing of substance.
Bondage	The Danites established a system of idolatry that lasted "until the time of the captivity of the land." Short-term security ended in brutal captivity by the Assyrians.
Missing God's Presence	The text notes the Danites used Micah's idol "all the time the house of God was in Shiloh." By choosing their own shrine, they missed the true presence of God at the Tabernacle.

Homiletical Strategy: Preaching OT Narratives

Dr. Mathewson's approach serves as a model for communicating complex Old Testament stories.

- **Creating Interest:** The sermon opens with a powerful quote (Calvin) and a contemporary cultural reference (a Casey Musgraves song) to raise a "need" for the message.
- **"Spot the Problem" Pedagogy:** Much like *Highlights* magazine's "What's wrong with this picture?" feature, the narrator of Judges expects the audience to recognize violations of the Law without explicit commentary. The preacher's role is to point these out using "Scripture fidelity."
- **Narrative Flow vs. Numbered Points:** The sermon avoids "Point 1" or "Point 2" structures, instead following the natural arc of the story and summarizing long sections where necessary to maintain engagement.

- **Strategic Delay:** Key thematic questions (e.g., "What happens when you turn to idols?") are raised at the beginning but only fully answered at the conclusion, using specific verses (Judges 18:24, 30, 31) that were read earlier but not dwelled upon until the end.
- **Connecting to the New Testament:** The sermon bridges the OT narrative to the NT by identifying Jesus as "Emmanuel" (God with us), presenting His presence as the ultimate remedy for the loss caused by idolatry.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Analysis of Old Testament Narrative in Judges 17-18

This study guide examines the themes, narrative structure, and theological implications of Judges 17 and 18, based on the homiletical analysis and sermon provided by Dr. Steven D. Mathewson. The guide focuses on the nature of idolatry, the breakdown of spiritual leadership in ancient Israel, and the consequences of departing from God's presence.

Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in 2-3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. **How does the text define an idol?** An idol is described as a substitute for God or anything that a person looks to for security and significance in place of God. It is often a "good thing" that is turned into a "God thing," such as possessions, family, or personal hobbies.
2. **What is the significance of the name "Micah" in the context of the narrative?** The name Micah means "who is like Yahweh," which serves as a sharp irony within the story. Despite his name, Micah's actions—stealing from his mother and establishing a shrine of idols—demonstrate that he is not acting in a way that reflects the character of God.
3. **What specific violations of the Mosaic Law occur when Micah establishes his shrine?** Micah violates the command against making graven images and ignores the law requiring worship to be conducted at one central location. Furthermore, he installs his son as a priest, which contradicts the law that priests must be descendants of Aaron.
4. **Why was the young Levite from Bethlehem wandering instead of staying in a specific town?** According to the law, Levites were assigned to live in one of six specific towns to fulfill their responsibilities to the people. This Levite's wandering indicates a breakdown in the established religious order and a neglect of his divinely appointed duties.

5. **Describe the offer Micah makes to the Levite to stay in his house.** Micah offers the Levite ten shekels of silver a year, along with his clothes and food, if the Levite will serve as his "father and priest." This arrangement turns a spiritual office into a hired, transactional position, highlighting the Levite's role as an opportunist.
6. **What does the phrase "everyone did as they saw fit" signify in the book of Judges?** The phrase highlights the moral and spiritual anarchy of the period, noting that Israel lacked a king to lead them. Beyond the lack of a human monarch, the text implies the people were failing to recognize and worship God as their true King.
7. **How does the spy mission of the Danites differ from the mission of Caleb and Joshua?** The Danite mission is described as "unauthorized," as God did not command them to spy out new land. Unlike the faithful mission of Caleb and Joshua, the Danites were seeking a new territory because they failed to drive out the inhabitants of the land God had originally allotted to them.
8. **What happened to the city of Laish when the Danites attacked?** The Danites attacked the people of Laish with swords and burned their city to the ground. This act was particularly egregious because the people of Laish were "at peace and secure" and were not enemies the Israelites were commanded to drive out.
9. **What shocking genealogical revelation is made at the end of Judges 18?** The narrative reveals that the young Levite who served as a priest for the Danites' idols was Jonathan, the son of Gershom and the grandson of Moses. This detail emphasizes how far the spiritual leadership of Israel had fallen, with the descendants of Moses himself leading the people into idolatry.
10. **According to the analysis, what is the "greatest gift" that is lost through idolatry?** The greatest gift lost is the presence of God. While idols may provide temporary comfort or security, they ultimately cause believers to miss out on the fullness of joy and the intimacy found in the true presence of God.

Answer Key

1. An idol is a substitute for God, taking His place as a source of security and significance. It can be a literal figurine or a "good thing" (like family or hobbies) that has been elevated to a "God thing."
2. Micah's name means "who is like Yahweh," which is ironic because his behavior—theft and idolatry—is entirely unlike God.
3. He violates the prohibition against graven images, the requirement for a central place of worship, and the requirement that priests descend from the line of Aaron.
4. Levites were legally required to live in specific assigned towns; a "wandering Levite" signifies a departure from God's established order.

5. Micah offers a salary of ten shekels, food, and clothing. This demonstrates the Levite's opportunism, as he accepts a hired position to serve a private household.
 6. It signifies a state of spiritual and moral anarchy where people ignored God's law. It also suggests they were not recognizing God as their King.
 7. It was an unauthorized mission prompted by their failure to take the land God had already given them. This contrasts with the mission of Joshua and Caleb, which was commanded by God.
 8. The Danites slaughtered the unsuspecting, peaceful inhabitants and burned the city. The text notes these people were not enemies, making the attack an act of disobedience and unprovoked violence.
 9. The priest is revealed to be Jonathan, the grandson of Moses. This shows that even the family of Israel's greatest lawgiver had descended into idol-worship.
 10. The ultimate loss is the presence of God. The narrative contrasts the Danite shrine with the true "house of God" at Shiloh, showing that the people chose a hollow substitute over God's actual presence.
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Essay Questions

1. **The Narrator's Strategy:** Discuss the literary technique of the "spot the problem" or "spot the lie" approach used by the writer of Judges. How does the author expect the reader's knowledge of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) to influence their understanding of Micah's actions?
 2. **The Progression of Idolatry:** Analyze the ripple effect of Micah's personal idolatry as it expands to the tribe of Dan. How does the text demonstrate that individual spiritual compromise can lead to national or corporate bondage?
 3. **The Opportunistic Leader:** Examine the character of the young Levite. In what ways does he represent a "hired hand" rather than a shepherd of the people, and what does his transition from Micah's house to the tribe of Dan reveal about his priorities?
 4. **The Loss of the Presence:** Contrast Micah's "house of gods" with the "house of God" in Shiloh mentioned at the end of the text. Explain the theological tragedy of the Danites continuing their idolatrous worship while the true Tabernacle was available to them.
 5. **Modern Parallels of Idolatry:** Using the sermon's references to John Calvin, Kacey Musgraves, and common modern interests (like family or hobbies), argue how "good things" can become "idols" today. How does the sermon suggest these modern substitutes mirror the consequences seen in the book of Judges?
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Glossary of Key Terms

- **Bondage:** A state of slavery or spiritual entrapment; the text argues that while idols promise freedom or comfort, they eventually lead to the "captivity of the land."
- **Danites:** Members of the tribe of Dan who, failing to secure their original inheritance, conducted an unauthorized spy mission and established a center of idolatry in the north.
- **Emmanuel:** A Hebrew name meaning "God with us," used to refer to Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of God's desire to share His presence with humanity.
- **Ephod:** A priestly garment; in this context, it was part of the ritual items Micah created for his unauthorized shrine.
- **Idol:** A substitute for God; anything created or pursued to provide the security, significance, or comfort that should come from God alone.
- **Laish:** A city of peaceful, unsuspecting people that was destroyed by the Danites and renamed "Dan."
- **Levite:** A member of the tribe of Levi set apart for the service of God; the narrative focuses on a wandering Levite who becomes a "hired" priest for Micah and then for the Danites.
- **Micah:** A man from the hill country of Ephraim whose theft and subsequent creation of a household shrine illustrate the spiritual decay in Israel.
- **Shiloh:** The location of the true "house of God" (the Tabernacle) during the time of the Judges, representing the rightful place of worship and the true presence of God.
- **Strategic Delay:** A homiletical technique where a speaker introduces a key point or text early on but waits until the conclusion of the sermon to fully explore its significance and impact.