

RELIGION FOR RENT

by Steve Zeisler

Luke 6:46 records a penetrating question from the lips of Jesus. He says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?" He means it as a question primarily, not as a rebuke. He is asking us to think through why it is that we so often quickly say, "Lord, Lord," as we pray to him with our requests, honor him with our words, and sing his praise-yet don't do what he says.

I know very few Christian charlatans-double-dealers who deliberately use the name of Christ, knowing there is no responsiveness to him in their heart. But I know a great many hypocrites, including the person who wears my shoes every day-people who describe their faith with their words, but don't live up to it in reality. And we don't understand why it is that we say, "Lord, Lord," and yet treat him as if he weren't Lord at all. What makes that reality our experience? The section we've come to in the book of Judges will give us some insight into this.

Most of us do not often give the flesh, our rebellious old nature, anywhere near enough credit. Deep down, we don't believe that our estrangement from God, our self-love, is as serious an issue as it is. I think the virus that causes AIDS is a powerful metaphor of our spiritual condition. Perhaps one of the reasons God has allowed it to exist is to remind us of the virulent spiritual disease that exists at a very deep level within us. Scripture says that our life is in the blood; if there is anything that is central to our physical existence, it is our circulatory system. That is where the HIV virus, this life-threatening disease that is dangerous to others and dangerous to oneself, is carried.

When I was a little boy, I had a group of friends, and we decided to form a club. We thought of ourselves as the Young Boys Valiant or some such thing, and we were going to take on life together. We'd seen a cowboy movie about Indians being blood brothers, so we made little cuts in our wrists and put our blood together so we would all be blood brothers. How unlikely it is that anyone here would commingle his or her blood with that of any other adult in this room without asking some very serious questions, given the dangers involved today.

The virus that causes AIDS is a disease that exists at the core of our physical existence. Our sin nature exists at the core of who we are without Christ. As we encounter the issues in the book of Judges, we are reminded of how wretched we are without the Lord, how even our best intentions will do us no good at all. Jesus had to die for what's best in us, if you will. Our greatest accomplishments are riddled with sin without him, let alone the base things that we've done. If we lose sight of that, we've lost sight of a very important truth. God caused the book of Judges to be written to help us keep that truth in view.

Let's begin reading at Judges 17, verse 1:

Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it." And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD." He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, and his mother said, "I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you." So when he returned the silver to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith who made them into a graven image and a molten image, and they were in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a shrine and he made an ephod and household idols and consecrated one of his sons, that he might become his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

The narrator of this story (some claim it was Samuel, but scholars don't really know who wrote the book of Judges) was a brilliant storyteller. There are subtleties in the way he presents his material, and if we think about them, they will help us step back and see things that we might not otherwise see.

The tone of this story as it begins in chapter 17 is very upbeat. You have Micah returning the money, the mother invoking God's blessing, and so on. The tone suggests reconciliation, God, and positive things, but, against our expectations, this is really the story of all kinds of treachery, double-dealing, and manipulation. One of the reasons for that is that the narrative begins in the middle, with Micah returning the money; what we don't see is Micah stealing the money.

At the beginning of the story Micah rips off his mother for eleven hundred pieces of silver. When she finds out it was stolen, she pronounces a ringing curse, tellingly enough in the presence of her son (probably staring him in the eye). As the narrator implies, we ought to assume that she suspects it was her son who stole the money. Micah gets scared to death; he's superstitious enough to believe that if God is going to act on this curse, then he's in big trouble. So he returns the money to her. Her pronouncement of blessing on him is really removing the curse (their belief in those times was that the person who uttered a curse could cancel it with a blessing).

She says nice things about God in the course of all this and decides to commit idolatry in his name. She creates an idol that is to honor him, against the express statements by the Lord that idolatry was anathema, never to be considered. At the beginning of the Ten Commandments was the insistence that the Jews should never worship another god and should never make an idol in God's name.

In this opening episode in verses 1-4, there's an interesting play on words in Hebrew. The name Micah is actually a contraction, and through the rest of the chapter the contraction is used. The long form of the name in verses 1 and 4 is Miciahu, which is the statement, "Who is like the Lord?" or, "Who is like Yahweh?" One helpful translation of it is "Yahweh the Incomparable." So in verse 1 when we meet a man whose name is Yahweh the Incomparable, we expect much of the story; again, it's a positive beginning, but the story turns out to be much less than we expect.

After Micah and his mother work out this business about the money and the making of the idol, we're told in verse 5 that Micah then has this shrine in his house. He consecrates one of his sons to be a priest; that is, he simply invents a priest out of his son. And worship is to go on in his backyard shrine with the idol, the ephod, the household gods, and the priest.

Verse 6 makes the point: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." This is the first time we encounter this statement in the book of Judges. Now, I've mentioned it throughout this series because it's really a theme for the whole book. The fact that there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes, was the problem. No one was greater than the individual. They had not bowed the knee either before a king who was the representative of God or before God himself. Every person consulted only his own heart, only his own interests, in determining what was right. There was spiritual anarchy.

It's important to note in chapters 17 through 21 that these final stories in the book of Judges are more or less addenda and probably would fall chronologically earlier in the book, not after the story of Samson, which we just covered. This is a series of stories in which there is no external enemy in place. You'll recall that whenever a judge was raised up to save his people, it was because somebody from outside the covenant people had attacked them and made their life miserable: Moabites, Midianites, Ammonites, Philistines, or somebody else.

These last stories are terrible and heart-wrenching. When you read them, especially the final chapter, you feel they shouldn't even be in the Bible. "What in the world is this doing here?" you wonder. In every case it is not an external oppressor that has ruined life for them; they are doing it to themselves. The people of God are oppressing themselves, killing themselves, manipulating themselves, and degrading and lying to themselves because there's something wrong inside. It reminds us again of the metaphor of the HIV virus, the disease that

is in the bloodstream, not airborne from outside. The problem is in their heart: There is no sovereign, no Lord, no one greater than the individual. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

Let's read the rest of chapter 17, and then we'll talk about the people we encounter. Verses 7-13:

Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there. Then the man departed from the city, from Bethlehem in Judah, to stay wherever he might find a place; and as he made his journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to stay wherever I may find a place." Micah then said to him, "Dwell with me and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a suit of clothes, and your maintenance." So the Levite went in. And the Levite agreed to live with the man; and the young man became to him like one of his sons. So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest."

You get a feel for Micah's orientation in life in the final sentence in verse 13. Everything he's done up to this point has been for his own prosperity. He stole the money from his mother to gain prosperity. He's created a priest in his son, knowing he was really cheating when he did that. Then a good deal comes along in the Levite, one of the people who are supposed to be priests, so he throws his son out of the priesthood and installs this man, saying, "Now that I have a Levitical priest [magic dust] serving at my [idolatrous] shrine in the back yard, God will be forced to prosper me." Prosperity was his great desire in life.

One of the things we can easily see in this story is that relationships in which you would expect trust, beauty, and life-giving are exactly the opposite. There are two such relationships. First, in the Scriptures and in our experience the essential human relationship characterized by caring and giving is that between mother and child. In Isaiah 49:15 where God is making a point about his commitment and love for his people, he says, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you." In order to underline the greatness of his love, he points to the greatest of relationships between humans, that between a mother and her child, and says, "I love you even more than that." And if mother and child is the relationship we expect to be most trust-filled, the relationship between a spiritual shepherd and a seeker of God stands out as well, in which an individual has taken the responsibility to speak for God and give life to those whose hearts are broken, who call out for compassion, and who want to worship. Surely that relationship ought to be one in which there is giving, trust, honesty, and hope. Mother and child, and priest and seeker are the two relationships that are exactly in focus here, and they are filled with manipulation and self-serving. They are the very opposite of what they ought to be. We are being made to face the human predicament, the tragedy of the human heart, by seeing these two relationships gone awry.

You might very well have a boss who is cruel. That's unfortunate, but life goes on. Your neighbor might be difficult; everybody periodically has a difficult neighbor in their life. You might even meet a dishonest cop. You can imagine all sorts of relationships in which people shouldn't treat you badly, but if they do you can manage without too much difficulty. But when the relationship between a mother and a child or between a spiritual shepherd and a seeker has become filled with self-serving, then we're pretty near the bottom of things. And that's exactly what we find in this story.

Everyone is a user. Let's start with the mother. The mother is going to use her son Micah to her advantage. He steals the money from her, she suspects it was him and pronounces this frightening curse that terrifies him into giving the money back. She never once confronts him with the theft or goes to him with any kind of honest appeal. She doesn't expect him to change his evil ways. She just scares him into giving the money back. Once he's done that, although she takes the curse off by announcing the blessing, she then uses Micah to gain nine hundred pieces of silver for herself. She says all the money will be dedicated to the Lord, but she takes two hundred of it and has an idol made, gives Micah the idol, and keeps nine hundred pieces—perhaps she is off to the race track or something. She's brought God into the picture and handed Micah the responsibility of keeping him happy by having a shrine in the back yard, and thus she's protected from having to worry about Micah or anyone else taking the money again. There is nothing loving, up-front, or life-building about her relationship

with Micah.

What do we know about Micah from this story? Well, he's a thief to start with. We don't know how he does it, but he sees his mother's wealth and makes off with the money. When he has to give the money back, he gets an opportunity to create a "God center" in his back yard. He goes for that and puts his son in place in the priesthood. As soon as he has a chance to get a better priest, he throws his son out and installs this other man. He would use his mother, his son, the Levite from Judah-whomever and whatever he can get his hands on-all for the business of creating prosperity for himself. That's his goal as we see in verse 13. So he's a user; he probably learned it as his mother's knee from an early age.

What about the Levite, the third person in the story? He is a man who has the mantle of spiritual leadership because of his heritage. The Levites were the tribe in Israel who were not given a territory to inherit; they were to be sown throughout the nation to serve as spiritual leaders for their people. Some would serve in the temple and take care of the sacrificial system. Others would live out in the countryside and be a pastoral encouragement to people. This man, whose name we will finally uncover at the end of this story, has absolutely no sense of serving God. He has the religious vocation, the name Levite, the opportunity, and the standing to do it, but all he is interested in is finding a place of security for himself. He has not been called by God to act; he also is acting in his own self-interest. He jumps at the opportunity to live in Micah's house: "Oh sure, I'll run your idol worship in the back yard. No problem. I'm glad to do that." But you can imagine him striking for higher wages later on if the opportunity that is about to come up were not to present itself. He's there for the money. He will abandon Micah at the drop of a hat, steal all of his religious articles, and take off with the group that offers him a better deal in chapter 18.

Every one of these people is a user on the make in this story. There's nothing healthy about the way they relate to each other. The greatest tragedy in this, perhaps, is that every one of them invokes God to help them use the other people. Everybody is talking about God all the time. The mother is calling on God to curse and to bless, and she builds an idol in God's name. Micah gets his shrine and wants to make God happy with him, installs priests and takes out priests, and makes ephods and more household gods. He's got a molten image and a graven image. He's really interested in God and talks about God all the time. There are prophecies, priests, and shrines throughout the story. The Levite is a God-person and he's supposed to do God-things. And they are all serving themselves in the name of the Lord. They're not just using each other, but in the process they're trying to use God.

Perhaps most sadly of all, every one of them is doing what is right in their own eyes. None of them set out to be a "sleaze;" they didn't wake up and said, "I'm going to do something terrible today." Every one of them was trying to do what occurred to them was the best thing to do. You can imagine Micah, for example, thinking of his mother. Micah is old enough to have grown children, and his mother is probably much older. He thinks, "Ah, she's going to die pretty soon, and I'm going to inherit the money anyway. I can use it. She's a tightwad of an old bag, and she hasn't treated me very well. I might as well just steal the money and make off with it now. She'll never miss it. It's going to be mine and I deserve it." You can hear him running this whole argument through his mind as he takes the money. He's a thief, but presumably he's doing it because it's right in his eyes; it makes sense for him to do it. If you faced each of these people with their actions and told them that what they were doing was sinful and antagonistic to the purposes of God, they would just give you a blank look.

I had an experience this week that is reminiscent of this. I was really taken aback when I saw myself. If you had asked me early in the week, "Steve, are you the kind of person who would deliberately and loudly humiliate another individual who had never even done anything to you in front of any number of onlookers?" I would have said, "No, I'm not that kind of person. I wouldn't do that." But I was at a high school baseball game this week. And I remember saying, in front of a whole crowd of other people, fifteen feet from an umpire, "Hey, blue, punch a hole in that mask. That was a terrible call!" I was trying to humiliate the umpire, who had never done anything to me. He was doing the best he could. (It wasn't his fault that he was incompetent.) I wanted him to feel bad and to act differently, so I was denigrating him out loud in front of all these people. The custom allows for that; it's the way baseball fans act, etc., etc. I was doing what was right to me, but I was hurting another person, unless, hopefully, he'd gotten thick-skinned enough over the years that he paid no attention.

The tragedy in this story is that these people think what they are doing is right, but it is filled with unrighteousness. Our predicament apart from Christ is so great that what we do best makes us deserve hell. Our noblest accomplishments are riddled with self-service. The kindest thing we'll ever do has huge measures of wanting to be appreciated or approved of or something else in the midst of it, if only we could see it from God's perspective. The problem is vicious, deadly, awful! Perhaps it's only when we encounter it in accounts like this in the book of Judges that we're able to see ourselves as we are in fact; it serves as a mirror for us.

I want to add one word of parenthesis here before we move on to chapter 18. The Levite in this story scares me personally, and I'm asking for your prayers. The opportunity to use spiritual leadership, spiritual standing, the respect and so forth associated with a Christian office, to get rich, to serve yourself, to advantage yourself is a temptation that everybody in Christian ministry faces. Pray for our pastors, elders, and everybody else who has any kind of responsibility in this church. It comes easily, without even the realization that you're doing it, to use the role of a shepherd to benefit not the sheep but the shepherd. I urge you to ask hard questions about anybody in any setting you're in who aspires to spiritual leadership. Ask whether they are motivated because they love God and have been called by him to the ministry they're in, whether (not perfectly, but essentially) their ministry is one of responding to what God has asked them to do. This Levite is using God's name for his own interest; we'll see it in spades in chapter 18. It's something that you don't want to see in the Christian leaders of your church. Anybody in leadership needs to be the kind of person who wants to please God more than he or she wants to do anything else. Only that desire allows for resistance to the temptation that comes up.

Let's pick up the story at chapter 18 verse 1:

In those days there was no king of Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel. So the sons of Dan sent from their family five men out of their whole number, valiant men from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to search it; and they said to them, "Go, search the land." And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there. When they were near the house of Micah, they recognized the voice [the accent] of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there, and said to him, "Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this place? And what do you have here?" And he said to them, "Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me, and I have become his priest." And they said to him, "Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous." And the priest said to them, "Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the LORD's approval."

The Danites, in fact, were given a possession. When the Israelites conquered the land, the Danites were told to occupy a region between Ephraim and Judah. It was filled with enemies, and the tribes of Ephraim and Judah were much more powerful than the Danites. The Danites didn't like the deal they were given and were never very successful in taking it over. So now they have decided that they want a different inheritance. They send out spies heading north to look for a different place for themselves.

On their way, these five spies hear a man with an accent that suggests that he is both not an Ephraimite originally and probably a Levite, and they strike up a conversation with him. Once they realize he's a "rent-a-priest," they say, "Oh, go inquire for us and find out if our way is going to be successful." Now, if they really wanted to find out, they would ask somebody who knew them better—a Levite or a prophet in their own region who would ask some hard questions of them. But they realize that this man is a mercenary, and so he's the one they ask the question of. He doesn't even bother to go into the back yard and consult the idol or do anything else. He immediately says, "Oh sure, go on your way. You have the Lord's approval." So they go trotting off to the north. As the story unfolds, they find a region (at the foot of what is now known as the Golan Heights) that is terrific and well-watered, and there's an undefended city there. They go back and don't even allow for discussion, but talk six hundred men into forming a war party. They're going to take this new region and move the tribe up there.

Let's read verses 19 and 20 from the middle of that account. These six hundred warriors are now on their way north to beat up the poor folks there.

And they said to [the Levite], "Be silent, put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?" And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image, and went among the people.

They rip off all Micah's religious articles, and the Levite falls in with these six hundred Danite warriors heading north. Of course it's a better deal: a whole tribe rather than just one man. Micah comes after him and says, "What do you think you're doing?" They laugh at him and say, "There are six hundred of us, Micah. If you want to get rough, we'll be glad to." So Micah, instead of prospering as he hoped, ends up with less than he had.

The Danites go north with this priest and Micah's idols. Verse 27:

Then they took what Micah had made and the priest who had belonged to him, and came to Laish, to a people quiet and secure, and struck them with the edge of the sword; and they burned the city with fire. And there was no one to deliver them, because it was far from Sidon and they had no dealings with anyone, and it was in the valley which is near Beth-rehob. And they rebuilt the city and lived in it. And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father who was born in Israel; however, the name of the city formerly was Laish. And the sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses [the New American Standard says Manasseh, but it should say Moses], he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh.

The story of the Danite migration ends here by making a number of tragic statements. It's clear that the narrator is sympathetic to the cause of the people in Laish. In the wars of conquest, when Joshua led the people into the land of Canaan, it was said that the iniquity of the Canaanites had risen to the point that God himself brought judgment upon them. They had acted wickedly and deserved the treatment they got during the conquest. They were armed cities, people who could fight back, and God led his people (when they obeyed him) in either destroying or thrusting out the Canaanites who were in the land. This group of people far in the north was not part of the territory of conquest. They are, as the narrator describes them here, "a people quiet and secure." Their city is undefended, and they are causing no trouble to anybody. The Danites ruthlessly kill them, not because God sent them on that errand, but because they didn't like the deal they had in the south, which involved fighting tough enemies like the Philistines and Ammonites. So they lay waste these innocent people in Laish. And then in their pride at what they've done, they name the city after their great ancestor Dan. It's as if they don't see what they're doing in the light of history. They think they've done something good.

We're told that the leader in the worship of the idol that would stay in Dan and be a source of problems in generations to come was a descendant of Moses. The ancient scribes were so embarrassed by this that they actually stuck in a little letter at one point to make it look like the name was Manasseh, but it's clear to every scholar who has ever looked at it that the name is really Moses. Our narrator doesn't give us that until the very end. This Levite is Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses. He is a direct descendent of Moses himself, and he is the one who is leading this people in the godless use of religion for self-benefit.

The last statement here is a chilling and sad note as well. It says that all the time that these things are taking place, the house of God or the tabernacle is at Shiloh. Now, Shiloh is in the hill country of Ephraim. Micah's house could not be not more than a few miles from Shiloh. There the idol is made, the Levite who has no place to go sets up his initial business as a "rent-a-priest," and the events at the beginning of this tragic story take place: theft, manipulation, and naming God while denying his value in their lives. All of that happens within just a few miles of the very place the tabernacle is located. If Micah's name, "Yahweh the Incomparable," represented his heart, if anybody really cared about God, they could easily go and worship God in the place where he said he should be worshiped.

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" The answer suggested in this story in the

book of Judges is that we have a very serious problem: Our hearts are more desperately wicked, more self-serving, more willing to use religion without encountering God than we will admit to ourselves. Let me read the rest of the paragraph in Luke 6 that I quoted from earlier:

"And why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? Everyone who comes to Me, and hears My words, and acts upon them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation upon the rock; and when a flood rose, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard, and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house upon the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great."

Jesus envisions a life that is stable because its foundation is on the rock, and a life that is unstable and likely to be forfeit or lost in a moment of difficulty. The tribe of Dan is going to be lost in the history of Israel. There's a genealogy in Chronicles and later in Revelation in which it is not even mentioned. It is not worth mentioning anymore. It is part of a northern kingdom that was carried off and lost. It has forfeited its right to a stable place among the covenant people of God. The house will come down when the storm hits for them.

Jesus tells us about the man whose life is stable and obedient. There are three steps to his life. First, that individual comes to him; secondly, he hears his words; and thirdly, he acts on them. We need, first, to come to Christ with a recognition of how bankrupt we are; we need to stop believing that we can discover something of value in ourselves even in our best intentions, our highest moment of doing what we think is right. We have to come to Christ with a sense of our need for him. Secondly, we need to hear his words. We need to let him tell us what life is like, what's valuable and what isn't; to stop caring so much for the advantages of this world and the prosperity that's offered us here; and to stop taking all our cues for life from the world around us. We need to come in humility, hear him, and change our thinking. Then thirdly, we need to act on what we've heard, to begin the process of having a sovereign Lord who can command us.

The problem of the ancient Israelites in the book of Judges is that there was no one greater than they. There's no possibility of having a stable life that honors God without a commitment that Jesus Christ will be our Lord: We come to him, we hear him, and we act on what we've heard. Spiritual words, shrines, prophets, prophecies, priests, curses, blessings, religion in all its glory, good intentions, doing the best I can—none of these will accomplish anything worthwhile. We need to be sure of our conviction that Jesus is Lord, that when we say to him, "Lord, Lord," we're also willing to go through the process of learning to do what he says.

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