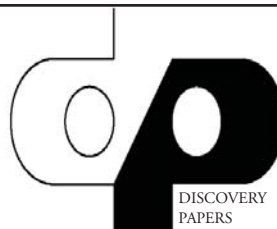


# MUDDY WATERS

**SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING**



Catalog No. 20120729  
Judges 17:1-13  
22nd Message  
Scott Grant  
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Throw a sponge into muddy waters, and it will absorb the mud. We are like sponges, thrown into the muddy waters of this world, absorbing all manner of values, often without even knowing it. The protagonist in Judges 17 exhibits all the characteristics of a sponge. As we enter into the narrative, this question emerges: is it possible to live without absorbing the values of the environment into which we are thrust? A follow-up question also emerges: if it is possible, how then should we live?

A two-part epilogue, Judges 17-21, together with the two-part prologue, Judges 1:1-3:6, brackets the main body of the book, Judges 3:7-16:31. The prologue and the epilogue relate to each other:

A Foreign wars: political compromise (1:1-2:5)

B Difficulties with foreign idols: spiritual corruption (2:6-3:6)

B' Difficulties with domestic idols: spiritual corruption (17:1-18:31)

A' Domestic wars: political compromise (19:1-21:25)<sup>1</sup>

By structuring his narrative in this way, the narrator highlights the spiritual and political corruption that overtook Israel in the period of the Judges. The narrator interprets such corruption with a refrain that appears in both full and partial forms in each part of the epilogue:

A In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit (17:6)

B In those days Israel had no king (18:1)

B' In those days Israel had no king (19:1)

A' In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit (21:25)

The first part of the two-part epilogue comprises two passages that parallel each other, the first of which is featured in Judges 17.

## Enablement for sin: a mother

Judges 17:1-5:

**<sup>1</sup>Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim <sup>2</sup>said to his mother, “The eleven hundred 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.”**

**Then his mother said, “The LORD bless you, my son!”**

**<sup>3</sup>When he returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, she said, “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.”**

**<sup>4</sup>So after he returned the silver to his mother, she took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to a silversmith, who used them to make the idol. And it was put in Micah’s house.**

**<sup>5</sup>Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some household gods and installed one of his sons as his priest.**

The name Micah means “Who is like YHWH (the Lord)?” The answer, of course, is no one, which should lead those who hear of the name into worship. It is more than a little ironic, and especially disappointing, then, that the man who bears such a name shows wanton disregard for the God whom it espouses.<sup>2</sup>

Micah steals 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother and only confesses after hearing her pronounce a curse on the thief. Seeking to undo his mother’s curse, Micah fesses up and returns the silver, neglecting to include the guilt offering that the law required (Leviticus 6:1-7). In Judges 16:5, the Philistine leaders each offered Delilah 1,100 shekels of silver to entice Samson. Judges 17 cast Micah, an Israelite, in worse light than Delilah, a pagan. At least Delilah earned her silver; Micah simply stole it—and from his own mother, no less. In one stroke, Micah violates two of the Ten Commandments: he steals and he dishonors a parent (Exodus 20:12, 15).

Micah’s mother, though, responds as if he has honored

her. Happy to have the silver back and worried to discover that her curse has landed on her son, Micah's mother not only seeks to undo the curse, she also seeks to turn it into a blessing. One gathers that this isn't the first time a transgression of Micah has gone unpunished. A history of getting off the hook would explain Micah's willingness to confess. He's a mama's boy, all right, and in her eyes, he can do no wrong.

Micah's mother dedicates the silver to the Lord not to honor him but in an attempt to secure his blessing for her son. She doesn't give the silver to the priests to help with the corporate worship of the Lord; her interests are much narrower. Like her son, Micah's mother shows contempt for the Ten Commandments: by commissioning the construction of an idol for her son, she violates the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4). (Actually, she may have commissioned the construction of two idols; the Hebrew words can be translated either way.) Micah's mother recapitulates the sin of the Israelites in the wilderness, who incorporated a golden calf into the worship of the Lord (Exodus 32:1-6).<sup>3</sup> Seeking to secure the Lord's blessing, she unwittingly invites a curse, for Deuteronomy 27:15 reads, "Cursed is anyone who makes an idol—a thing detestable to the LORD, the work of skilled hands ..." Seeking to bless her son, she only pushes him into idolatry. To make matters worse, she only parts with two hundred shekels, even though she had pledged to dedicate all the silver to the Lord. Who (or what) is like the Lord? Not a two-hundred-shekel silver idol, that's for sure.

The Israelites were instructed to worship in a designated city (that city, Shiloh, was not far away), but Micah sets up shop in his own house, filling it with additional idols; making an ephod, a priestly garment; and installing his own son, not a descendant of Aaron, as his personal priest, all in violation of the law (Deuteronomy 12; Exodus 28, 29:9). Literally, Micah has a "house of gods."

## A sense of entitlement

Micah's mother fits the description of what we would today call an enabler. Ostensibly, she seeks to help her son, but in reality, she spoils him and makes it easy for him to sin with impunity. She would decry the sin of someone outside her family, saying something like, "Cursed be the one who took my silver," while at the same time turning a blind eye to the sin of her son, saying, "The Lord bless you, my son." Seeking to bless their children, parents such as Micah's mother in reality bless their children's sin. Some parents make all sorts of exceptions for their children's transgressions as long as they keep those grades up. Of course, without knowing it, by rearing a child in such a way and sending him out into the world, she's contributing

to the environment that she would decry.

If such parents invoke the name of the Lord, they do so, as in the case of Micah's mother, not to worship him but to secure his blessing, especially his blessing for their children, and often in blatant disregard for what he values. In a moment of desperation, when their children find themselves in dire straits, they might pledge their lives, or some large sum of money, to the Lord, but when the moment passes, they back away from their earlier commitment. In the end, they may give money to the church or religious causes, hoping that a few shekels here and there will grease the skids with God or whoever, or whatever, might be up there. A shekel here, a shekel there—that's about all some people think the Lord is worth. Such parents may go to church to worship, but in reality, they're worshipping their children.

Many children, like Micah, are being reared—and many of us have already been reared—in such an environment. We were thrust from the womb into the hands of overly permissive parents or caregivers, like sponges being thrown into muddy waters. Therefore, many of us believe that we can do no wrong. We grow up with a sense of entitlement. We expect to win all the time, and when we lose, we pitch a fit. The nightmare scenario for a kindergarten teacher is to have a roomful of "special snowflakes" who have never lost. If we confess wrongdoing, it's only for the sake of convenience, not repentance—because it will help us make our way in life, not because we're sorry for sin. We might go to church to worship, but in reality, we're worshipping ourselves. Indeed, like Micah, we set up shop in our own houses, so to speak, filling our lives with idols that serve our purposes, spending our resources on ourselves instead of investing in the kingdom of God.

Enabled by his permissive mother, Micah in the next sequence meets someone from outside his family. It's a big world out there. How will Micah—indeed, how will we—interact with it?

## Enablement for sin: a pseudo priest

Judges 17:7-13:

**<sup>7</sup>A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who had been living within the clan of Judah, <sup>8</sup>left that town in search of some other place to stay. On his way he came to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim.**

**<sup>9</sup>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.”**

**<sup>10</sup>Then Micah said 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.” <sup>11</sup>So the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man became like one of his sons to him. <sup>12</sup>Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house. <sup>13</sup>And Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest.”**

The beginning of the second half of Judges 17 looks a lot like the beginning of the first half. The words “A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah” echo the words “Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim.”

Both Micah’s theft of silver and the young Levite’s journeys indicate a disregard for the law of the Lord. Levites, who were not priests per se but performed priestly functions, including the teaching of the law, were supposed to reside in designated cities and live off the offerings of the people (Numbers 16:8-10, 35:1-8; Deuteronomy 18:1-8; Joshua 21:1-42). Bethlehem is not one of the designated towns, and the Levite is unconcerned with finding such a town, for he is simply looking for “some other place to stay.” The narrator doesn’t say whether the Levite’s disregard for the law or Israel’s refusal to provide for him motivated his wanderings. No matter who’s to blame, a disregard for the law is in view. In this part of the narrative, both the leading tribes in both northern and southern Israel, Ephraim and Judah, respectively, come up short.

Micah asks the Levite where he comes from, and the Levite answers the question and more, identifying himself, in so many words, as a Levite for hire. Micah can’t believe his luck. He has turned his house into his own personal temple, but he had to install his son as his priest. Now along comes a man with a priestly pedigree, so he offers him a job, even though the Levite, being “young,” has presumably not yet reached the priestly age of thirty (Number 4:3, 30). It’s the wrong place (a house, not the tabernacle) and the Levite is the wrong person (he’s not a descendant of Aaron and presumably not yet thirty), but who can be bothered with details?

At this point, we might remember the 1,100 shekels of silver that Micah’s mother solemnly consecrated to the Lord, two hundred of which went to the making of an idol and the remaining nine hundred of which went to . . . wait a minute, what happened to the remaining nine hundred shekels? Apparently, Micah has enough silver on hand to

offer the priest ten shekels a year, plus food and clothing, leaving us to wonder whether the Lord’s funds have been diverted, once again, to fund yet another illicit enterprise.

Instead of denouncing Micah, the Levite, a supposed teacher of the law, endorses Micah’s idolatry because he stands to benefit from it. The Levite has found the place he was looking for, and he moves in.

For the second time in Judges 17, Micah installs a priest. One wonders what happened to the first “priest,” Micah’s son, especially inasmuch as the Levite “became like one of his sons.” One also wonders about the future of Micah’s son, surrounded as he is by idolatry, being inappropriately elevated as a priest, and being inappropriately dismissed as a son. Micah also wanted the Levite, though he was a young man, to be his “father,” not in actuality but in an honorary sense. Nevertheless, this is an upside-down arrangement, for the “young” Levite becomes a “father” to Micah. Furthermore, the Levite has to fulfill three roles he’s not fit for: father, son, and priest.

Micah, though, is convinced that the Levite’s presence will secure for him the favor of the Lord. If Micah happens to prosper, however, it won’t be because he hired a pseudo priest to endorse his idolatry. Micah thinks the Levite gives him legitimacy; in reality, the Levite is nothing more than a good luck charm, and the Lord doesn’t deal in luck.

## Searching for legitimacy

Micah, first enabled by his mother, is now enabled by the wandering Levite, a pseudo priest. Many of us are also enabled by the pseudo priests of our day: certain talk show hosts, self-help gurus, politicians, and preachers. They are, so to speak, Levites for hire. They wander through the airwaves, the internet, or sanctuaries, seeking to capitalize on our longings by offering to sanctify sin, especially idolatry of the self, though they call it neither sin nor idolatry, of course.

In fact, that’s one of the ways to recognize them. Listen carefully, and you will rarely, if ever, hear them speak of something like sin or wrongdoing or idolatry. If they do, the sin they speak of is the sin of depriving yourself, holding yourself back, failing to reach your potential. Why denounce sin when to do so cuts into your audience? They will often use spiritual language, with an emphasis on the word “spiritual,” which is now employed to encourage awareness of some vague non-material world that exists for no other reason than to foster self-actualization. You will never hear them use the words “religion” or “religious,” unless, of course, they’re speaking against dogmatism and narrow-mindedness.

A self-help guru, Tony Robbins, recently conducted a four-day gathering at the San Jose Convention Center, during which attendees were invited to walk on hot coals in order to look inward for power. The result? Fire officials said twenty-one people were treated for second- and third-degree burns. One witness said he heard screams of agony. In this case, self-help turned out to be self-hurt.

The pseudo priests who call themselves preachers may invoke the name of Jesus and some verses of Scripture, but you won't hear much, if anything, about taking up your cross and following Jesus. Christ isn't the focus of their teaching; you are the focus of their teaching. If Jesus makes an appearance, it's only to help you get to where you want to go, and where you want to go is never the road to Calvary. Rarely, if ever, will such preachers teach from an extended text in the Scriptures, lest we discover the context from which they have cherry-picked their favorite verses. They preach what is most appealing, not what is most true, even if they have convinced themselves, and their followers, that what is most appealing is most true.

If a certain upbringing predisposes us toward sin, especially idolatry of the self, the pseudo priests of our age reinforce our sinful proclivities. They inhabit the muddy waters we are thrust into as adults. When we hear one of them that suits our fancy, our ears perk up. Behold, someone who speaks our language! Someone who endorses what we've always believed! What luck! What a gift from God! Pseudo priests make us feel just fine about diverting resources, in the manner of Micah, to serve the self. They help us believe that we deserve whatever we have heretofore denied ourselves. We assume their expertise in multiple fields, as Micah fit the Levite for multiple hats, though in reality, they lack the credentials, even if they know how to talk a good game. We do all this because we're looking for the same thing Micah was looking for: legitimacy for our sinful desires.

Some of us were reared in a way that predisposes us to sin. All of us are exposed to pseudo priests who legitimize sinful desires. What's a human to do? Ah, we skipped a verse, didn't we? (I did what I'm accusing the pseudo priests of doing. I repent in sack cloth and ashes!)

## The verse we skipped

In Judges 17:6, the narrator renders comment on this story; indeed, he renders comment on the entire story of the book of Judges:

**‘In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.**

Literally, “everyone did right in his own eyes.” The players in this sorry little episode typify all Israel. Samson, for example, said he wanted a pagan woman because she was literally “right in my eyes” (Judges 14:3). The Lord was supposed to be king over Israel, but his people rejected him, which explains their atrocious behavior (Exodus 19:6, Deuteronomy 33:5).

Perhaps, the narrator hints, things would be different if a righteous king ruled over Israel. Later, the writer of 1 Kings would note that David did right in the eyes of the Lord (1 Kings 11:33, 38). David improved upon the judges, but he too, had his failings, and he sowed the seeds for the decline of both the monarchy and the kingdom of Israel. Most of the kings of Israel who followed him did right in their own eyes and led Israel astray (1 Kings 14:8; 2 Kings 10:30, 16:2). If during the period of the judges there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes, then the narrator is also saying that the Israelites don't need a king to lead them astray; they can go astray on their own, thank you very much.

Verse 6, then, illustrates the need in Israel not only for the divine king but also for a righteous human king. No one could have imagined, however, how this need would be met, for it was met in a manger in Bethlehem, where the Levite hailed from, by the way, and on a cross outside Jerusalem. It would be met in the Messiah, the king who was somehow, incredibly, both human and divine.

## The antidote

What's right in God's eyes? He tells us in the Scriptures, the word of God. It stands to reason, then, that the antidote to doing what's right in your eyes includes regular exposure to the Scriptures.

For me, such exposure features in-depth, word-by-word consideration of extended sections of Scripture. Such an approach keeps me from cherry-picking texts that suit me and avoiding texts that challenge me. When I study, the Scriptures define for me what's right in God's eyes and expose my proclivity to do right in my own eyes. For as much as I've studied the Scriptures, I know that I still don't fully know what's right in God's eyes. I know my tendency to equate what's right in my eyes with what's right in God's eyes. Therefore, I need to keep studying, especially in the midst of a community that is doing the same. Considering the Scriptures in such a way both safeguards me (I pray) from absorbing the values of the muddy waters and (please help me, God) from becoming a pseudo priest who preaches what's most appealing, not what's most true, and mucks up the waters even more.

What's right in God's eyes? He tells us in the Scriptures. What do the Scriptures say? From start to finish, the word of God tells a story that climaxes in Christ, the human and divine king. Christ, supremely, is right in God's eyes. Dive into the Scriptures in search of the king, and the king will help you see and do what's right in God's eyes. We need the word of God: the Scriptures. We need the Word of God: Christ.

Do you in some way think you can do no wrong? In the gospels, the king won't enable your sin; he'll call you on it, just as he called his disciples, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees on it. Do you think you should win every time out? The king won the world by losing everything. Do you acknowledge wrongdoing mostly for sake of convenience? Behold the king upon the cross, and you will mourn for your sin and bring forth the fruit of repentance. Do you spend your resources mostly on yourself? The king will put not only your resources but also your entire life in the service of God. Do you think you deserve to get what you want? Because of your sin, you deserve condemnation, but if you believe in the king, you will receive eternal life. He will teach you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him—and you will wake up from your sleep-walk to come alive, alert to heaven all around you. Do you want legitimacy? The king legitimizes, not your sinful desires, but something much deeper: your very humanity. He will turn worship of the self into worship of God, by which you will be revitalized in your humanity, for he is the human and divine king.

## Saturate yourself

Is it possible to live without absorbing the values of the environment into which we are thrust? The answer, according to the apostle Paul, is yes. How then should we live? Listen to Paul: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

Renew your mind not least by saturating yourself in the Scriptures, absorbing the glory of God, especially as he is revealed in Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6). If a sponge is first dipped in oil, it can be thrown into muddy waters without danger of absorption.<sup>4</sup> You are the sponge, and the word of God is the oil. Saturate yourself. Absorb the glory of God.

Beginning September 9, our church will embark on a

nine-month journey through the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. We will make available a Bible reading schedule that follows and complements our teaching schedule so that we can saturate ourselves in the same Scriptures together. When the schedule comes out, start soaking.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>K. Lawson Younger Jr. *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002), 31.

<sup>2</sup>This man is not to be confused with the prophet Micah, author of what we know as the book of Micah, part of the Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>3</sup>The words normally translated "graving/graven" and "molten" appear both in Exodus 32:4 and Judges 17:3).

<sup>4</sup>Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 184.