

## WHEN FAITH COMPROMISES WITH CULTURE

Culture has a very powerful influence in our lives. What our culture dictates we often follow along with. If our culture says it is okay, then it must be okay. In some circles of church community smoking was considered a sinful practice. Now our culture says it is an unhealthy practice which can kill you, so thousands are trying to quit smoking.

Culture and faith vie for the place of authority in our lives whereby one or the other can dictate how we live. Culture is not evil; culture is what defines a people; culture is a good thing. It is when culture takes the place of authority in the life of Christians over and against faith that there is a clash.

The Apostle Paul charged the Philippians with this mandate: **“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe...”** (Phil 2:14-15).

That describes our own situation very well. The challenge of these words is threefold: our heart attitudes are revealed in our actions, so be careful how you live out your faith; second, this life is to be lived out in a crooked and perverse generation, one of such moral decay that it can't get any worse; and third, we are to live a quality of life that we shine in the darkness like stars in the heavens.

The problem is that when everyone is following the same path to depravity, when culture dictates what's okay and what's not in opposition to our faith, we can easily lose heart. When no one's trying to be holy, why be holy?

This is the story of the book of Judges. And it is our story, our generation, and our challenge. Where do we find real strength when our hearts have grown faint?

Our introduction to the book of Judges today sets the stage for our series on Real Strength and how God uses weak people to do his will. Let's explore this story together.

1. “Choose for yourselves this day...”

The book of Judges begins with these telling words, **“After the death of Joshua...”** This is a critical turning point for the people of Israel. Place this in the context of Israel's history: God promises to give Abraham many descendants, a land and to be his God; these offspring of Abraham grow into a nation but under Egyptian slavery; after 400 years Moses leads the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land; Joshua is the military leader who leads the invasion into Canaan. Now Joshua, the last figurehead of authority in Israel, is dead.

It is this Joshua who brings the people together at the conclusion of the book bearing his name, and says **“...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...”** Are you going to serve the idols of the popular culture around you, or are you going to serve Yahweh, the LORD God? Joshua then famously declares, **“As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD”** (Joshua 24:15). Enthusiastically the people respond that they will serve the LORD. Joshua replies that they should remember that God is a jealous God and will not tolerate them chasing after idols, if they so choose.

What happens when an authority figure exits the stage? Often the rules get slackened and the people drift from the truth. With authority figures like Moses and Joshua gone, the people began to disobey God and sinned with idol worship.

This is where we find the situation in Judges 2. We read a very odd little piece here: **“The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim...”** This is a monumental transition. What is significant about this? Moses and Joshua may be gone but in their midst seems to have been the presence of the angel of the LORD. This is not just any angel, but a human manifestation of God. Many believe that it is the Lord Jesus Christ himself who dwelled in their presence.

He goes up from Gilgal to Bokim. So what? Well Gilgal was the place where the people of Israel renewed the practice of circumcision and committed themselves to the LORD after having crossed the Jordan (Joshua 5). Gilgal was a place of victory and obedience. But something happened since then...the people sinned. So the angel of the LORD left Gilgal and went to Bokim, the place of weeping.

And yet, in this rebuke, the angel of the LORD reminds them of his perfect promises. He said, **“I will never break my covenant with you”** (2:1). A covenant is a two-sided arrangement. Each side vows to keep their promise no matter what. God is perfect and so he cannot go against his own character and break a promise. But the other party, the people of Israel did break their vow to God. Still God keeps his end of the agreement and will do so forever. But there are consequences for the people because they have sinned. The LORD says in v. 3 that he will not drive the enemies of Israel out but will leave them in the Promised Land to test them and pester them.

Is this what God wanted for the people he saved and loved? Certainly not. Did God do this to the people? It is obvious that the people did this to themselves by turning from the most powerful person in the universe to worship a lump of stone. How stupid. Then we look in the mirror and we see our own inconsistent dedication to the LORD who loves us.

## 2. Disobedience leads to defeat and assimilation

What did the people of Israel do that offended God? It comes down to the very simple explanation of doubt and disobedience. We read a repeat of the first words of Judges in 2:6 where it says, **“After Joshua dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land...”**

Chapter one of Judges reads like a battle report. A casual reading would suggest that the Israelites experienced great success. A closer look reveals an enormous problem.

Take a look at these indiscretions. The tribes of Judah and Simeon join forces to take the land that is their inheritance. No problem there. But in v. 6 they capture a king named Adoni-Bezek and they cut off his thumbs and big toes so that he is essentially crippled. He can't hold a sword or pull a bow string anymore. But here is the problem – they were supposed to kill him. His most dangerous weapon, the weapon that would undo his captors, was his mouth, not his thumbs. Adoni-Bezek lived to poison the minds of the Israelites.

Then in v. 19 we read that the tribes of Judah and Simeon decide not to continue their attack on the people of the plains because they had iron chariots. Yet how many times did God give the Israelites victory over enemies with overwhelming firepower? David defeated armies with iron chariots and he had none.

The tribe of Joseph went up to attack a city and found a man from that city who could tell them its secrets. They let that man live and he went off and established another city by the same name, Luz. What resulted was instead of destroying the influence of Luz with its depravity and immorality, they transferred it (1:26).

Tribe after tribe failed in the same way. The Benjamites allowed the Jebusites to live and they retook Jerusalem (1:21). And Manasseh allowed the Canaanites to live (v. 27); Ephraim allowed the Canaanites to live (v. 29); Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali all allowed the Canaanites to live, sometimes as slaves. The Danites were forced to live in the hills out of fear of the Amorites.

God said to kill them all; destroy the culture of the Canaanites and the Canaanites with it. Why? Because they were a sinful, immoral, depraved people that were a stench to God's plan for his model nation, Israel. To let them live was to allow their sinful influence to degrade their calling to a holy life. Instead of establishing a new nation under God, they became like the people they were supposed to annihilate. Cutting off Adoni-Bezek's thumbs was a Canaanite practice – already they were assimilating into the culture of sin.

Disobedience to God leads to spiritual defeat and assimilation to ungodly practices.

## 3. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Syndrome concerning faith

There is an explanation for this disobedience, though not an excuse. It is something called the 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Syndrome. This syndrome is a perpetual problem for every family and people.

Here is how it is explained in Judges: **“After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel”** (2:10). They did evil things and started worshiping Baal, a popular pagan god of that time. They provoked God to anger by their ignorance of him. And as a result God allowed the pagans around them to raid and plunder them all.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Syndrome is where one generation turns to the LORD in great enthusiasm and commitment to faith, while the next generation fails to capture that zeal. It happens with revivals in our times as well. Back in the 1950’s there were several revivals and a renewed excitement for Jesus. The people who experienced this renewal thought that it would last forever. But their children didn’t have that experience and did not share that fervor.

Someone once said there are no grandchildren in God’s family. Each generation must discover Jesus Christ for themselves. Our children cannot live by our faith; they must receive from God their own faith. We can teach them about Jesus; we can raise them with the right morals; we can bring them to church. In the end they must make their own decision for Christ.

It is hard to know what happened in Judges as far as why the knowledge of the LORD was not passed on. One thing we know is that they didn’t have the Bible like we have it. For some reason the stories of the LORD’s great work for them were lost and they rejected his authority in their lives. Sadly, while our nation was built on Christian values, we too have rejected the authority of God when it comes to morality.

#### 4. Sin’s downward spiral

Sin has terrible consequences. Not only does it stand between us and God in terms of relationship-building, sin alone brings awful results. Our text says that the people were in great distress.

**“Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD’s commands”** (2:16-17).

This marked the beginning of a cycle of sin in the book of Judges. Israel would rebel against God; the LORD would respond in retribution, using Canaanites to punish his people; Israel would turn in repentance to God crying out for his help; God would answer by raising up a judge who would rescue them; then the people would rebel again in a short time.

But while we could call it a cycle of sin, in reality it was a downward spiral of sin. That’s how sin works. It begins with one step over the line of obedience to disobedience, then it becomes 10 steps over. And as each generation stepped a little further away from God, the next generation carried it further yet. What was iffy for our parents became okay for us and absolutely normal for our children.

Sin is a downward spiral. If we allow ourselves a taste of what is forbidden, an appetite grows from that little taste. Addictions begin this way and soon we are under the control of that behavior or substance that seemed so innocent. We end up not just repeating the action but engaging in that sin at deeper and deeper levels.

That’s the story of Judges. That’s the story of our society, our culture. We have as a nation spiraled so far down in sin we don’t know the way back up again. The story of Judges is a story of hope too. We find that God is always willing to turn to his people who repent and save them. Through Jesus Christ we know this unbreakable promise as well: If we repent, confess our sin and acknowledge our need for Christ’s authority in our lives, he will rescue us and put our feet on higher ground. And higher ground is the place to be when we are talking about obedience.

Finally...

Gary Inrig said of Judges, “It is a part of Scripture which describes a time of moral, spiritual, and ethical anarchy, a society without standards whose lifestyle is captured in a thoroughly modern phrase, found at the back door of the book: ‘Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.’”

It’s scary but it’s true. The book of Judges speaks to our era. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. We have become our own authority on matters of right and wrong. Judges calls us back to obedience in the face of a culture that neither recognizes God’s authority nor wants it. We are called to obedience when it will be the unpopular choice in our schools, workplaces and neighborhoods...even our churches.

Ultimately culture has no right to dictate what is acceptable or not acceptable to God’s people. If God tells us something is wrong who are we to question it? If God tells us to do something, who are we to do nothing?

As our summer series progresses we will study two of the judges in this book: Gideon and Samson. Gideon was a weak man who became strong. Samson was a strong man who became weak. In both cases whether weak or strong, confident or not, trusting God is always a challenge, obeying him is a must.

AMEN