

THE DOMINO EFFECT JUDGES 17:1-13; 18:30-31

The possibility of grievous errors arising out of well-intentioned ignorance is an ever-present threat to individuals, to the church and to an entire culture. You can probably think of modern-day examples of such errors. The good intention might be “freedom of speech” and the error would come from lack of restraint as a result of being ignorant of what is appropriate and what is abominable. We could give multiple examples from our knowledge of what is happening all around us. In the Law of Moses, sins of ignorance were to be atoned for and they would be forgiven. The problem comes when there is no correction to the sins of ignorance and these sins become part of the culture or the lifestyle of the society or the individual. The error is eventually accepted as “truth” and even if the actual truth is introduced it is rejected. The sin then changes from sins of ignorance to sins of presumption and such sins would result in those who practice such behaviors being cut off from the congregation of the Lord.

Part of the problems that plagued Israel during the time of the Judges stemmed from ignorance of the people. When people with knowledge fail to pass it on to the next generation and the accumulated wisdom died with the passing of a generation, then ignorance is not surprising. With the passing on of the generation of Israelites that conquered the land of Canaan, the admonition of God through Moses to them to teach their children was not heeded. The reason it was not heeded was because of lack of leadership. There was no one in authority. Before Moses died, he appointed Joshua to be the leader. His assistant was Caleb. When they died there was no one appointed to be the leader of the nation.

People will normally take the path of least resistance. Unless someone holds us accountable, then only the very disciplined and committed will work toward improvements, toward greater morality, toward taking the high road in life rather than the low road, toward humility rather than toward pride, toward generosity rather than toward greediness.

The events described in Chapter 17 and the following four chapters fit chronologically somewhere where around the time of Judges 2:10-13. This time was before there were Judges appointed to deliver the people from the oppression of their enemies.

When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel. Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals; and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. They forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. (Judges 2:10-13)

The reason the passage in Chapter 17 is placed after the story of Samson may be due to the fact that the situation with Micah and his mother gives us some background as to why there were problems in the tribe of Dan of which Samson was a part. It may be totally coincidental but the amount of money (1100 shekels) mentioned in the story of Micah is the same amount that each of the Philistine princes paid to Delilah to betray Samson (see Judges 16:5).

Disintegration of a Family – 17:1-6

¹ Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. ² 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.” ³ 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.” ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.
⁶In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. Judges 17:1-6 (NASB95)

This story sounds like something we might read about in the local paper. You can see the headlines: “Man Robs Mother.” She apparently suspected her son (Micah) of taking the silver so she pronounced a curse upon the money and probably upon the one who stole it. When she pronounced the curse, she made sure that he heard it.

The problem of materialism is as old as mankind. Not only did the love of money drive this man to steal from his own mother, but it also drove the mother to pronounce a curse upon her own son. Where are the priorities in life if money and materialism can ruin a relationship between a mother and her son? Someone has said that “losses drive good people to prayer and bad people to curses.”

Apparently, the curse was taken seriously by the son. He confessed to having taken it and gave it back to his mother. Notice now the immediate change of her attitude. She changed the curse into a blessing based upon the behavior of the son. So much for unconditional love!

What we see in verse three through five is a rather sad situation. When the mother discovered that her money was missing, she apparently made a vow to do something religious with part of it. It is not clear whether she had dedicated the silver to the Lord before or after it was stolen. Based on what we see of her character, it is likely that the dedication was made after the silver turned up missing. This might be a classic case of bargaining with God so that we can have what we want.

She was determined to do something to honor the Lord; however, what she chose to do was an abomination to Him. She created her own little system of worship complete with an idol and sacred garments. Was she sincere? Maybe! Was she wrong? Very much so.

This raises a good question: “How does one honor God with his material possessions?” Let’s see what Micah’s mother did. She made a religious object with the money. Where did she get that idea that an idol would honor God? This practice was what the Canaanites did to honor their gods. She also made a sacred garment that was like that which the priest of Israel wore in carrying out their religious duties. She was attempting to cover all bases. We take a little bit of this religion and a little bit of that religion and some from another religion and we just blend it all together because we think it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. NOT!

Are we guilty of making religious objects with our money in an attempt to honor God? Can you think of any examples? [Stained glass windows, steeples and crosses on church buildings, church buildings, statues and paintings of religious heroes, etc.]

It wasn’t enough to have the idol, but there was a special place designated for it. He dedicated part of his house to be a shrine or sanctuary. You would think that dedicating your house to be a holy place in honor of the Lord would be a good thing. However, the trappings of religion without the purity of heart and dedication to the principles of the Kingdom of God are a shame rather than a shrine. In ignorance, people mix the observances from paganism with Christianity and it is done even today. I don’t think that such syncretism honors God.

What about this business of Micah consecrating his son to be a priest? This is presumption at its worst. God had already set aside the descendants of Aaron to be the priests for Israel. To just declare a person to be a priest other than those whom God had ordained to the job does not make it so. But, he had a priestly garment that he wore, so doesn’t that make it OK? NO! If someone tells you that you are a Christian and you dress up in nice clothes on Sunday and go to church and sing in the choir and serve on the board, then doesn’t that make you a Christian? Not so! You must be born again of the Spirit of God. (Story of the Masai - a missionary visited the region decades ago and told the chief that he (the chief) was a Christian.

In the mind of the chief, all his people were Christians, and all their children for several generations were Christians even though they did not know anything about Jesus.)

Verse six pretty much sums up the root of the problem. People empowered themselves without being principled in the precepts of the Holy God. Ignorance leads to deception. The self deception did not end there. The family went so far as to hire a priest and to carry out their religious observances in a big way. It was born out of ignorance and the lack of leadership. How many religious cults have gotten started in our times because of well intentioned but seriously flawed philosophies? A sad situation, indeed.

Corruption of a High Calling – 7-13

⁷ Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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*.” ¹⁰ 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*. ¹¹ The Levite agreed to live with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. ¹² So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in the house of Micah. ¹³ Then Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest.” Judges 17:7-13 (NASB95)

Some commentators have suggested that the young man’s mother was of the tribe of Judah and his father was a Levite. Bethlehem was not a Levite city and the reason he was there is speculated to be that since the religious system has broken down in the nation, the Levites were not supported by the tithes of the people. Consequently, the Levites had to fend for themselves and probably move from place to place to find a job.

How he wound up at Micah’s home is uncertain. However, it may have been a result of his asking around the area if anyone had work for a Levite. People probably knew that Micah had a shire in this house and the Levite went to see if he could find work and a place to live.

The problem with ignorance again shows up starting in verse ten. Maybe Micah knew that his son was not a legitimate priest. But here we have a Levite – so that is OK! Wrong! Only the direct descendants of Aaron were to be priests. (The Levites could serve in the Tabernacle but they were not priests.) Maybe the young Levite did not know any better (ignorance). Maybe he did and was in such financial need that he decided to take the job even though he was not called by God to do it (presumption). There are people today who have a job but not a calling to be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is hard to tell the difference at first glance. They seem to have the right credentials. In fact, you can see the diploma from the seminary hanging on their wall. You can hear the words spoken from the pulpit. You can see the person going through the motions of being a minister. However, it is difficult to see a calling from God without extended observation of the faithfulness and effectiveness of the ministry.

The invitation to the Levite was that he was to be a “father and a priest” to Micah and his family. The idea of his being a “father” was simply that he was to take on a role of being a mentor for Micah and his family. He was to be a spiritual advisor. He was apparently incapable of providing truthful spiritual advice. There was obvious spiritual error which he either ignored from his ignorance or choose to overlook lest he offend the one who was providing his food, clothing, housing and spending money.

Micah was pretty satisfied with himself. He had a Levite as his priest and thought that would bring God’s favor. He thought it was a sign of God’s favor to him and his image that God had sent a Levite to his door. How many times do we embark upon something that is questionable and if things go well, then we tend to think that what we are doing must be OK or

else God would not be blessing through the good turn of events.

You cannot discern God's will by opened doors and closed doors. It depends on WHO opened and closed the doors. How do you tell the difference? What God opens, no one closes AND what God closed, no one opens. So, an opportunity comes about in your ministry and the thought that most of us would have is that "this must be God's will." That was certainly not the case in the life of this young Levite or in the life of Micah.

He thought now that the error of his choosing his son to be a priest was corrected (even though it was not); however, he still retained his graven and molten image. The lesson for us: Many people will deceive themselves into a good opinion of their situation by a partial repentance. They think they are as good as they should be, because, in one particular instance, they are not so bad as they have been, as if the correcting of one fault would atone for their persisting in all the rest.

Micah thought making the Levite into a priest was a very admirable act, but it really was a presumptuous usurping of a prerogative that belonged to God. Matthew Henry observed that "Men's pride, ignorance, and self-flattery, will undertake, not only to justify, but magnify and sanctify, the most daring impieties and invasions upon the divine prerogatives." If Micah had fully understood what he had done, then he should have been concerned that he would experience a curse rather than a blessing since he led other people to worship a false god. However, in his ignorance and pride, he hoped that God would bless him.

He thought that having a Levite in the house with him would entitle him to divine favor. Again quoting from Matthew Henry, "Carnal hearts are apt to build too much upon their external privileges, and to conclude that God will certainly do them good because they are born of godly parents, dwell in praying families, are linked in society with those who are very good, and sit under a lively ministry; whereas all this is like having a Levite to be their priest, which amounts to no security at all and that God will do them good, unless they are good themselves, and make a good use of these advantages."

Degeneration of an Entire Society – 18:30-31

³⁰The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. ³¹So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh. Judges 18:30-31 (NASB95)

The ignorance this one family along with their misguided good intentions had far-reaching consequences. Eventually, the graven image that Micah had in his home was adopted by those in the area and a temple was built to house it. It is thought that Jonathan was the same person who was hired by Micah to be his priest sometime earlier. Here we find out more about this person. All we knew before was that he was a Levite. His father's name was Gershom. If he were a Levite then he was not the son of Manasseh since Manasseh was the son of Joseph. There was a Levite who had a son named Gershom and his name was Moses. It is likely that this Jonathan was the grandson of Moses. There is only one character difference in the Hebrew word for Moses and Manasseh and some of the older texts have that character insert above the word which would have changed the name from Moses to Manasseh. This was thought to have been done in deference to Moses. Think about it: who would have thought that the grandson of Moses would have been involved in such a practice as being a priest to a false system of worship?

It is difficult to know the far-reaching extent of an error at the time the error is committed. Here we see that the Danites engaged in this false worship as long as the Ark of

Covenant was at Shiloh. This was a period of around 360 years. That is longer than the United States has been in existence. This is scary to even think about what practices we have adopted (with all good intention) that put us at odds with what is pleasing to God. This should be motivation for each of us to examine our lives in light of the word of God to determine where we may be in error and what the domino effect might be for the world around us.