

Great Sins, Greater Losses

*A Sermon from Judges 19-20 on Judgment, Repentance, and the
Cost of Spiritual Compromise*

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

Scripture Reading

Judges 20:21: "And the children of Benjamin came forth out of Gibeah, and destroyed down to the ground of the Israelites that day twenty and two thousand men."

Judges 20:25: "And Benjamin went forth against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed down to the ground of the children of Israel again eighteen thousand men; all these drew the sword."

Introduction

Great sins produce great losses. That is the lesson set before us in Judges 19 and 20. It is not an easy passage. It is one of the darkest accounts in Scripture, and we should approach it with reverence, grief, and fear. The Word of God does not hide the ugliness of sin. It exposes sin so that we may learn what happens when a people cast off restraint, ignore the worship of God, and do what is right in their own eyes.

Many people excuse what they call little sins. They overlook them, soften them, rename them, and learn to live with them. Yet every sin is a violation of the holy law of God. Song of Solomon 2:15 says, "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes." Little sins do not remain little. They spoil the vine, corrupt the heart, and prepare the way for greater rebellion.

At the same time, Scripture also teaches that some sins carry a heavier weight of guilt and judgment than others. Theft required restitution. Proverbs 6:31 says of the thief, "if he be found, he shall restore sevenfold; he shall give all the substance of his house." Other crimes in the law, such as murder, kidnapping, and violent sexual assault, were treated as capital crimes. Sin is sin before God, but not every sin is equal in its damage, its defiance, or its punishment.

Judges 20 records the death of forty thousand Israelite soldiers in only two days. That number does not include the Benjamites who fell on the third day. The question that must trouble us is simple: why would God permit Israel to suffer such a great loss in what seemed to be a righteous cause? Why would the people who rose up against wickedness be struck down so severely before they finally prevailed?

The answer cannot be understood from Judges 20 alone. To understand the battle, we must understand the crime that led to it in Judges 19. And to understand that crime, we must also understand the spiritual collapse described in Judges 17 and 18. The outward wickedness of Gibeah was not an isolated event. It was the visible fruit of a deeper inward corruption.

The Darkness at Gibeah

Judges 19 opens with a Levite from Mount Ephraim whose concubine had gone away from him to her father's house in Bethlehemjudah. The text uses severe moral language to describe the breach, and the relationship itself is shown to be disordered and troubled. Yet the woman is also called his wife, and her father is called the Levite's father in law. The man travels to Bethlehemjudah to speak kindly to her and bring her back.

Her father receives him warmly and persuades him to remain several days. At last the Levite insists on leaving. It is late in the day, but he takes his wife and servant and begins the journey home. As they draw near to Jebus, which is Jerusalem, the servant suggests lodging there. The Levite refuses because the city was then held by the Jebusites. He chooses instead to pass on to Gibeah, a city belonging to Benjamin.

That decision should have seemed safe. Gibeah was not a foreign city. It was part of Israel. These were not strangers to the covenant. They were not people who had never heard the law of God. They were Benjamites, brothers in the nation of Israel. Yet when the travelers entered the city, no one received them. They sat in the street until an old man, returning from his work in the field, saw them and brought them into his house.

The old man understood the danger. He said in Judges 19:20, "Peace be with thee; howsoever let all thy wants lie upon me; only lodge not in the street." He knew that the street of Gibeah was no place for travelers at night. The outward city belonged to Israel, but the inward condition of the people had become like Sodom.

While they were eating and resting, wicked men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that the Levite be brought out to them. The old man went out and pleaded with them not to commit such wickedness. His words in Judges 19:23 are clear: "Nay, my brethren, nay, I pray you, do not so wickedly; seeing that this man is come into mine house, do not this folly."

What follows is horrifying. The old man's proposal and the Levite's actions are not examples of righteousness. They are part of the darkness of the passage. The Bible records what happened, but it does not commend it. The woman was put outside, abused through the night, and left at the door when morning came. The Levite found her fallen with her hands upon the threshold. He spoke to her, but there was no answer.

Judges 19 shows how far a people can fall when there is no fear of God. The woman's death was not merely the act of a few violent men. It exposed the moral collapse of a city, the cowardice of men who should

have protected the innocent, and the failure of a nation that had drifted far from the worship of the Lord.

The Levite then did a shocking thing. He took her body, divided it into twelve pieces, and sent the pieces throughout the coasts of Israel. The message was unmistakable: such a deed had not been done or seen since the day Israel came up out of Egypt. Judges 19:30 says, "consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds." Israel had to decide what it would do with this evil.

A Nation Rises to Judge Evil

Judges 20 begins with Israel gathering as one man, from Dan even to Beersheba, before the Lord at Mizpeh. Four hundred thousand footmen that drew sword assembled to hear the matter and act against the wickedness in Gibeah. The Levite testified concerning what had happened, and the tribes determined that the evil could not be ignored.

Their demand was just. Judges 20:12-13 says, "And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What wickedness is this that is done among you? Now therefore deliver us the men, the children of Belial, which are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death, and put away evil from Israel."

If Benjamin had surrendered the guilty men, the war could have been avoided. Thousands of families would not have mourned. The tribe of Benjamin would not have been brought to the edge of ruin. But Benjamin refused. The tribe chose loyalty to its own people over loyalty to the law of God. They protected the wicked rather than putting away evil from Israel.

That is a fearful thing. A person may not personally commit the crime he defends, but when he shields wickedness from righteous judgment, he becomes a partaker in it. Romans 1:32 warns of those "who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them." If having pleasure in evil is condemned, how much more serious is it to defend and protect evil against the command of God?

Benjamin's sin was not only the sin of Gibeah. It became the sin of the tribe. The men of Gibeah had committed the deed, but Benjamin as a tribe stood between the guilty and judgment. By doing so, they turned a local crime into a national war.

Forty Thousand Fallen

Israel asked counsel of God, and Judah was appointed to go up first. Yet on the first day Benjamin came out of Gibeah and struck down twenty-two

thousand men of Israel. The people wept before the Lord and went up again the second day. Again Benjamin came forth, and eighteen thousand more Israelites fell. In two days, forty thousand men were dead.

The number forty often appears in Scripture in connection with testing, trial, and judgment. In Genesis 7:4, God said, "I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights." In Deuteronomy 8:2, Israel was reminded of the forty years in the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 25:3, the law limited punishment to forty stripes. Goliath defied Israel for forty days. Nineveh heard the warning, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Our Lord Jesus Christ was tempted in the wilderness forty days.

We should be careful not to build doctrine on a number alone. Yet when Judges 20 tells us that forty thousand Israelites fell in two days, the number should make us tremble. Israel was not merely fighting Benjamin. Israel was being examined by God. The army that came to judge sin was itself under judgment.

This brings us back to the great question: why would God allow such loss among those who were seeking to correct such wickedness? The answer is not that Benjamin was innocent. Benjamin was guilty. The answer is not that Israel's cause was false. The demand to surrender the guilty men was just. The answer is that Israel's hands were not clean.

Clean Hands Before Judgment

The Lord Jesus taught this principle plainly in Matthew 7:4-5: "Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

Christ did not forbid all judgment. He forbade hypocritical judgment. He did not say that the mote in the brother's eye was imaginary. He said that a man with a beam in his own eye is not fit to correct another until he has first dealt with himself. If we are going to judge sin, we must first bow before God and ask Him to judge us.

This is where modern Christians must be careful. We are often quick to condemn outward, visible, public sins. We see crime, corruption, violence, and immorality, and we rightly call them evil. But we can be much slower to confront inward and spiritual sins: idolatry, prayerlessness, pride, worldliness, unbelief, compromise, and the forsaking of God.

Israel was ready to march against Gibeah, but had Israel already mourned over its own idolatry? Had the people put away their false

worship? Had they returned to the Lord with all their heart? Judges tells us repeatedly, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." That sentence is not a small detail. It is the spiritual diagnosis of the age.

Before Judges 19 and 20, the Holy Ghost gives us Judges 17 and 18. Those chapters show a man named Micah who made a graven image, a molten image, an ephod, and household gods. He even consecrated one of his sons to be a priest. Later, a Levite came along, and Micah hired him as his personal priest. Micah thought the Lord would bless him because he now had a Levite in his religious house, even though the whole arrangement was contrary to the worship God had commanded.

Then men of the tribe of Dan came through the land. They found Micah's idols and his hired priest. Instead of rebuking the idolatry, they stole it. They took the images, persuaded the Levite to become priest to a whole tribe, and carried that false worship with them. Judges 18:31 says, "And they set them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh."

That verse is astonishing. The house of God was in Shiloh, but the people were building their own religion. The true worship of God had not disappeared from the earth, yet Israel was ignoring it. The tabernacle stood, but idolatry spread. The commandments of God were known, but every man did what was right in his own eyes.

Spiritual Adultery and Its Fruit

The Bible often describes idolatry as adultery, whoredom, and harlotry. These are strong words, but God uses them because idolatry is covenant treachery. It is the soul turning away from the Lord to give its trust, love, fear, and obedience to another. Jeremiah 3:8-9 says that backsliding Israel "committed adultery" and that Judah "played the harlot also." It goes on to say that the land was defiled when she "committed adultery with stones and with stocks."

That is spiritual adultery. When a people forsake God for idols, they are not merely making a religious mistake. They are betraying the One who redeemed them, commanded them, and called them to Himself. They are deserting the Lord in the heart long before their outward conduct collapses.

This is why Judges 17 and 18 matter so much. The outward violence of Judges 19 grew in soil already poisoned by spiritual adultery. The people had turned from the Lord. They had created convenient worship. They had tolerated false priests and false gods. By the time Gibeah's wickedness became public, Israel's inner life was already diseased.

Hosea 4 gives the same warning. Hosea 4:12 says, "My people ask counsel at their stocks, and their staff declareth unto them: for the spirit of whoredoms hath caused them to err, and they have gone a whoring from under their God." Then verse 13 says, "therefore your daughters shall commit whoredom, and your spouses shall commit adultery." The order is important. Spiritual unfaithfulness bears physical fruit. The corruption of worship becomes the corruption of life.

We should not imagine that a nation, a church, or a family can be false toward God and remain pure in everything else. When the fear of God is rejected, the restraints on man's heart begin to fall. When worship is corrupted, conduct follows. When truth is exchanged for convenience, righteousness is soon exchanged for appetite.

The physical sins that grieve us are often the evidence of a prior spiritual sin. Public wickedness is the smoke; spiritual adultery is the fire. We can denounce the smoke all day, but until the fire is put out, the smoke will continue to fill the house.

When Chastening Ceases

Hosea 4:14 contains a dreadful word from God: "I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom, nor your spouses when they commit adultery: for themselves are separated with whores, and they sacrifice with harlots: therefore the people that doth not understand shall fall." At first, that may sound like mercy. It is not. It is judgment of the most fearful kind.

Where there is loving correction, there is hope. Hebrews 12:6 says, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." Chastening is painful, but it is proof of fatherly care. God corrects His children because they belong to Him. Hebrews 12:8 warns, "But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons."

One of the most frightening judgments God can give is to let a people have what they insist upon. Romans 1 says more than once that God gave them up. He did not need to strike them with lightning. He handed them over to the path they had chosen. When people reject God persistently, He may remove restraints and let them taste the fruit of their own rebellion.

That is what we see in Judges. The people had drifted from the Lord, embraced false worship, and lived without godly order. Then the outward consequences came into the open. Gibeah was not an accident. It was a revelation.

The Warning for Our Own Day

We do not need to repeat every headline or chase every scandal to understand the lesson. When a society is filled with violence, exploitation, corruption, sexual confusion, family collapse, and the casual defense of evil, those things are not random. They reveal a deeper spiritual sickness. They show what happens when men forget God, reject His Word, and refuse His rule.

But it is not enough for believers to point at the world and say, "Look how wicked it is." The sharper question is this: have we forsaken the Lord in our own hearts? Have we allowed idols into our homes? Have we made peace with secret sins? Have we turned worship into convenience? Have we treated obedience as optional? Have we expected God to bless what He has commanded us to forsake?

Israel could see Gibeah's wickedness, but Israel had tolerated its own. That is why the sword fell so heavily. The army of Israel was right to demand justice, but it was not right to ignore the spiritual adultery that had already spread through the land. God used the battle to teach Israel that judgment begins with the people who know His name.

First Peter 4:17 says, "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God." That should humble us. Before we ask why the world is so dark, we should ask whether the church is shining. Before we rebuke the nation, we should repent before the Lord. Before we condemn the sins outside our doors, we should search our own hearts, families, and assemblies.

Lessons from Judges 20

First, God's judgments are deep, but they are never unrighteous. Psalm 97:2 says, "Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne." We may not understand at first why Israel lost forty thousand men while fighting against a genuine evil. But God saw more than the crime at Gibeah. He saw the idolatry, compromise, hypocrisy, and spiritual carelessness of the nation.

Second, we must not trust in numbers, strength, or outward advantage. Israel had four hundred thousand men. Benjamin had far fewer. By human calculation, the matter should have been settled quickly. Yet forty thousand Israelites fell before the battle was won. Ecclesiastes 9:11 says, "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." Victory belongs to the Lord, and no army is safe when God is dealing with sin in its own camp.

Third, we should not think it strange when a righteous cause suffers painful setbacks. Israel's first two defeats did not mean Benjamin was right. They did not mean Gibeah was innocent. They meant God was working in a deeper way than Israel first understood. Sometimes the Lord humbles His people before He uses them. Sometimes He causes us to weep, fast, and seek Him before He grants victory.

Fourth, public evil must be confronted, but it must be confronted by people who are willing to be searched by God. Psalm 139:23-24 says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." That is the spirit we need. Not proud denunciation, but humble obedience.

Fifth, repentance must begin personally. If there is no personal repentance, there will be no family repentance. If there is no family repentance, there will be no church repentance. If there is no church repentance, there will be no national repentance. We often want God to begin somewhere else, with someone else, in some other house. But the call of God comes first to the man or woman who hears His Word.

The Call to Repent

The message of Judges 19 and 20 is not merely, "Look how wicked Gibeah was." The message is, "Consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds." Consider what sin does. Consider what compromise costs. Consider how far a people can fall when they forsake the Lord. Consider the losses that follow great sins.

We must turn back to God. We must turn back to His Word. We must bring our private lives, our homes, our worship, our speech, our desires, and our decisions under the authority of Scripture. We must stop asking God to bless what He has forbidden. We must stop defending what He condemns. We must stop excusing in ourselves what we denounce in others.

Repentance is not merely sorrow over consequences. It is a turning from sin unto God. It is agreeing with God about our sin, fleeing to Christ for mercy, and walking in new obedience by His grace. The gospel does not make sin small. It shows sin to be so great that nothing less than the blood of Christ could atone for it.

The hope of the sinner is not that his sins are little. The hope of the sinner is that Christ is mighty to save. First John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us

from all unrighteousness." That promise is not an excuse to continue in sin. It is an invitation to come into the light.

Great sins produce great losses. But great mercy is found in Jesus Christ. If we continue in rebellion, the losses will grow. If we humble ourselves before God, there is cleansing, restoration, and grace. The God who judges sin is also the God who receives the repentant.

Closing Prayer

Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we bow before Thee. We thank Thee for Thy Word, even when it searches us and wounds our pride. Give us repentance. Give us faith. Cleanse us from secret sin, false worship, hypocrisy, and compromise. Bring our lives, our families, our churches, and our nation under the authority of Thy truth. Help us to love Thee, obey Thee, and honor Thee. We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.