

We're looking at Judges 11 today.

It's fairly graphic and some of you have little children close by so use your own discretion. I don't apologize for what the Bible says but just know that this is not a pretty picture of God's people at their best.

Please open your Bibles and follow along. I'll skip some of the verses and just tell you what's going on.

Let's start at chapter 10:17 to 11:6

v.7ff: In the following verses, Jephthah negotiates with elders of Gilead, then agrees to fight for them. He becomes their ruler, the judge appointed by God. Then he first speaks to the Ammonites to negotiate peace. But they won't hear of it, so he engaged them in battle.

Pick up our reading at v. 29-39

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Messy People & Merciful God: Jephthah's Daughter

Judges 11:1-40

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Judges Series for Lent (from RW 2019)

Friends in Christ,

Let's start off with a crazy question: Seat up or seat down?

Three very progressive women were having a conversation about the position of the toilet seat. One argued that it should always be down. Men should put it up when they use the toilet but the seat should go down when they're done. Another said, "Can't men aim? Is it that hard to get your little stream into the big opening even with the seat is down?" The third suggested, "Men should just sit all the time, just like women do!"

I found it interesting that no one talked about equality in this discussion. No one suggested that women could put the seat down all by themselves. If you find it up, then put it down! You just do what you have to do to use the loo! What these women seemed to be arguing for is simply respect.

I draw attention to that discussion as a starting point of thinking about how men view women. Does the guy not care if a woman sits on the porcelain instead of the seat? Does he not care if he makes the seat wet before she uses it? Does he think it's a woman's job to clean the bathroom so he doesn't care what mess he leaves there? Or does he just not think about anyone but himself?

From that relatively small issue, we go to the story of a man who couldn't swallow his pride and repent of a stupid vow he made. He sacrificed his daughter instead of going to God and repenting of a pagan vow he'd put on his lips. And his

daughter paid the price. Now, of course, that seems like a very strange story to our modern ears. We don't make child sacrifices to the gods, do we? We don't do that to our women.

The Me-Too Movement that started a couple years ago highlighted the abuse of women by men. Women in large numbers have made it known that men need to wake up and smell the coffee. Women are not men's possessions, to be used to satisfy a man's desires without being held accountable for abusive actions. Part of the result of this movement is that men like Harvey Weinstein are being charged, found guilty and sentenced for the sexual abuse and rape of women. Harvey bowed to the god of personal power as a Hollywood film producer to force sexual favours from women and tell them to keep quiet about it or lose their career.

Closer to home and horribly sad, a few weeks ago, an 8 year-old girl in the west end of the city was kidnapped and raped before being let go. The police arrested and charged a man in his 30s. What makes a man think he can use a grown woman or young girl—sacrifice her physical and mental health in doing so—and walk away as if it was his right?

The story of Jephthah's daughter is one more in a long history of men abusing women for one reason or another.

Yes, it's that bad

The good part about this story is that it's in the Bible. "Modern readers can be appalled that the Old Testament tells stories like this, but it is actually part of its greatness that it does so. It is not a book that provides us with a way of escaping the reality of how the world is but one that rubs our noses in the reality of how the world is." (J. Goldingay). That commentary is bang on! The Bible never shies away from showing us that sin is as bad as we see it here in Judges 11. You can think what you want about the story but it's in the Good Book for a reason. To tell us, "Yes, it's that bad!"

The whole book of Judges shows us that Israel repeatedly falls into sin. Things get really bad. Israel repents. God sends a judge to rescue his people and things are good for a time. But when the judge is gone, the cycle starts over. As this book progresses, we see that the sin gets worse and worse.

Here in chapter 11, the middle of the book, we find Jephthah. It's not his fault, but Jephthah is the son of Gilead and a prostitute. That's the message of verse 1. That already tells us about the place of women in that society. Jephthah is named, his father is named, but his mother is only identified as "a prostitute." In the same way when we get to the second half of this chapter, the girl is not named. She's only called "Jephthah's daughter".

If we look at the book of Judges as a whole, we witness the progressive decline of the Israelite nation, their slow but steady spin into deeper and deeper depravity. One of the clear ways it shows in this book is in how women are identified and treated.

Flip back in your Bible to chapter 4 where we see very clearly an honoured role for women. V.4 says, Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel. We must note that she is named along with her husband. She is an empowered, exalted woman in Israel. To use modern language, you could say she had broken the glass ceiling of her culture. She is a leader. Deborah is a God-fearing woman of faith and courage.

She also takes no glory for herself. She even tries to get a man in this story to take his God-given role seriously. She says to Barak in v.9 that a woman will get the honour of victory because he won't willingly—with faith in God—take on the enemy God is calling him to fight. So, when the chapter ends, another woman is named. A courageous woman named Jael, the wife of Heber, gives Israel victory over Sisera, a Canaanite army commander.

In Judges 4, the Lord chooses to show us the virtue of two women. But Jael is the last honourable woman named in the book of Judges. No other Israelite women are named. In chapter 13, Samson's mother is simply called Manoah's wife.

The only other woman named in this book is Delilah, the Philistine, whom Samson marries and who betrays him to the Philistines. She is clearly a dishonourable woman. Thus the naming of Delilah at this point in the book teaches us that Israel has clearly become corrupted. The book now names the dishonourable women where before it named Deborah and Jael as righteous, God-fearing women. The tables have turned sharply.

More evidence of how Israel has gone from bad to worse and how it shows in the role and treatment of women, can be found in chapter 19. There you find a story that is even more graphic and gross than the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter. There we find another unnamed woman, a concubine, also called the wife of a Levite (which is the priestly tribe of Israel). Echoing an almost identical story in Sodom and Gomorrah, her husband throws her outside to a sex-crazed mob in order to protect himself. She is sexually and physically assaulted all night and left for dead on the doorstep. Meanwhile, this Levite husband apparently slept like a baby without a thought for how his wife is being abused. In the morning he finds her on the steps, grumbles at her to get up, only to discover that she's dead. This is a sign that Israel has now become as bad as the nations of Canaan—as bad as Sodom and Gomorrah. Israel has fallen to that level! **Yes, it's that bad!**

This abuse of women in general and Jephthah's daughter in particular is a result of Jephthah making a pagan-type of vow. He could have repented to the Lord for making such a vow. But he keeps it which is a sign that Jephthah is bowing to multiple gods. He's not solely devoted to the Lord. He's acting like a Canaanite. They made crazy vows like Jephthah made because, **in their religions, gods had to be appeased.** You gave them things to keep them happy and win their favour so that you could have success and wealth and enjoy the pleasures of this world.

That so-called success often included using your power to trample on others. Your ability to use and abuse others was somehow a sign of the favour of the gods on your life. If you are the king of the castle and everyone else is grovelling at your feet, you can delight in stepping on them. It's that bad!

That's what we see on Palm Sunday too. The Jewish people rally around Jesus because they see him as one who will stomp on the Romans and make the Jews the king of the castle instead of Rome.

Likewise, in our society, we still have these pagan views of power. Women being degraded and abused as sex-slaves. We have abusers like Weinstein who act as if their power and fame entitles them to take from women whatever they want. We have pornography on a scale never before seen in the history of the world; **women and even children** are used and abused for the entertainment of others. We sacrifice millions of babies to abortion in the name of having things our preferred (selfish) way. Better to sacrifice a life than put up with a child you don't want. Similarly, we trample on the poor and broken in our society and often condemn them as being lazy. Meanwhile, we overlook the sexual, physical, mental, social and/or economic abuses that have put them in such a place.

Look at your own life, whether you're a male or female. How do you trample on others? How do you use your power to hold people down rather than help them up? What god do you serve alongside of Jesus? Is it greed, pleasure, power, just a few of the gods of our society?

My heart goes out to those godly employers among us and throughout society who are currently wrestling hard in this crazy economic depression to find jobs so you can keep your employees working and getting paid. You are servants. But there can also be selfishness and greed at work in our lives as Christians when we cave into the gods of our day. We might withhold what is due to someone so that we can have it because we serve the god of greed or materialism or power. We don't pay women or men what they are worth so that we can keep greater profits for ourselves.

Likewise, we degrade others instead of lifting them up. We act angrily and abusively to our children and use our power to hold them down in fear. We try to say it's love but it's not. Our children don't know the comfort of our arms but only the fear of our hands or sharp tongue! We sacrifice our kids or others whom God calls us to serve. Like Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, we have consciously or unconsciously devoted ourselves—at least in part—to gods other than Jesus which lead us to do ungodly things. **It's that bad!**

That was a very long first point. We'll speed it from here 😊. Now that we've considered the messiness of God's people, let's consider the mercy of God in his choice of a judge. And I want you to notice how God chooses one of the least likely to be his rescuer-judge here.

God's Choice of Judge—the least likely

Let's start by clearly saying we can't—cannot—justify any of Jephthah's idolatry-induced, sinful actions. We must always be appalled at his treatment of his daughter. But we can also look for and see what God is doing through a broken piece of pottery like Jephthah. We're all broken as we've just been reminded. You may recall on our first Sunday of Lent that we used a smashed clay pot to remind us of all the messiness in our own lives.

These are us, according to some of what we wrote on those pieces of pottery in the front of our sanctuary. This is the messiness of our lives for which we feel unworthy of God's mercy.

- Proud: looking down on others
- Thoughtless
- Unaffirming of others
- Seeking approval of people instead of God
- Addictions—to alcohol, porn, food and other things
- Broken family relationships
- Envy, jealousy, anxiety, anger
- Selfishness
- Laziness
- Doubt
- Fear of COVID-19
- Bad thought-life
- Watching too much or bad TV

Perhaps all there are summarized in this one:

- Guilt-ridden: "O God, I don't deserve You!"

Friends, we see over and over in the Bible that the Lord chooses the least to lead his people and Jesus emphasizes that the least will be the greatest and the last will be first in the kingdom of God. Well, Jephthah is another in that series of broken creatures. He's incredibly flawed and in desperate need of salvation himself. He was a self-made man who climbed from the bottom up, but for all his human strength, he was still in desperate need of God's mercy.

Think back to v.1 again. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. He could have been a nobody. V.2 says that Jephthah's wife had other children. She bore him sons and they drove Jephthah away. They said to their half brother Jephthah, also in v.2, "You aren't going to get any inheritance in our family because you're the son of another woman!" So, says v.4, Jephthah fled to the land of Tob and became a sort of gang leader. To quote the opening verse of the chapter, he "was a mighty warrior." He was a nobody in Israel among his family who became an outlaw and gangster. He was the least likely in his family to be used by God.

Jesus was the least of these. His lineage marked by flawed people: A prostitute—Rahab; an adulterer and murder —King David; and many more. He came from Nazareth, and people of the day said, "Can anything good come from

Nazareth?” Like Jephthah, Jesus came from a family where he was a half-brother. We know that his half-brothers—for a time at least—rejected him, thinking he was a mad man.

Like Jephthah, Jesus drew a band of followers around him. But unlike Jephthah, he was not a mighty warrior of physical enemies. Rather, he was the pure Son of God who became a sacrifice. Jesus, the humble Son of God took on the role of a servant for us! He called disciples to himself to teach them how to wage spiritual warfare to save humanity from our sin by turning—repenting and surrendering—to the humble Shepherd-King who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of peace, not war. A king who lays down his life to save others, rather trampling on them.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus shows us that he’s not the kind of king that beats people down to gain power for himself. That is not the spirit of Jesus’ kingdom. He is a humble self-sacrificing, servant-King, a loving leader, a restorer of broken hearts and lives. He’s a rescuer-judge and a peace-giving and ever-loving King over those who realize they cannot save themselves, no matter how strong and mighty we might be in this world.

We must remember that our sins are forgiven through Christ alone. In his great mercy, he fully paid for them all on the cross. The gods of the Canaanites who Jephthah tried to worship alongside of the LORD God, required sacrifice and Jephthah offered his only child to appease and win the favour of some dumb idol! Not so with Jesus, dear friends. He serves us, sacrificing himself to reconcile us to God. What a Saviour! Hosanna! He’s that good! Because of his self-sacrificing humiliation we can be exalted.

The calling of Jephthah to be a judge seemed like the most unlikely choice for God. But he used the least and the broken. Indeed, dear people, our God became the least and broken in Jesus. And through him our lives are redeemed and given fresh power and purpose.

God’s Exaltation of People for His Kingdom Service

That brings us to see, thirdly and finally, that Jesus exalts people for service in his kingdom. Some have said that God can shoot straight with a crooked arrow. That’s true. That’s all he’s got to work with in this world!! It’s his grace and mercy in our lives that allows for that to happen. Jesus enables us—with his power in us—to be of service to God. He not only forgives us, he helps us put sinful actions to death—to live lives that are being transformed by the Holy Spirit and God’s word. As he lifts us up, he invites us to be agents of his kingdom who lift up those who are broken and weak and suffering under the burdens of sin and the oppression that our sinful world heaps on us.

Think of Jephthah’s daughter’s friends for a moment. They are examples again of good women who get it. The nameless daughter’s friends grieve with her. They remind us that part of our calling in our broken world is being there for one another when nothing makes sense. That’s kingdom work too.

Jesus chose, saved and reshaped broken people for the service of his kingdom. He still picks up broken pieces of pottery like us, puts us back together as much as possible in this world. We still have our flaws that will only be fully redeemed in the next life. But never forget how Jesus chose and used the least of them, forgiving sins and lifting up the least likely to service in God's kingdom.

He chose from the lowest rungs of society:

--lonely and rough fisherman and crooked tax collectors. Cracked pots in their society.

--He reached out to prostitutes and women caught in adultery, not to condemn them like the world around them had done. No, he exalted them. We know of the Samaritan woman at the well who Jesus freely chose to talk with despite her low social status and the scorn with which people looked down on her. This woman was a cracked pot too. But Jesus lifted her up.

--Mary Magdalene is thought by some to be the adulterous woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and anointed them with perfume. Jesus lifted up that broken pot and gave her a place in his kingdom. She became one of his faithful followers.

--He repeatedly exalted women. In fact, he gave them the honour of being the first to see him resurrected on Easter morning, the first to bring the good news.

Friends, Jesus served the lepers, the blind, the lame. Every cracked piece of pottery was embraced and loved by our Lord. No one was too low for him. No one too addicted. Too depressed. Too hurting or too broken. No one too dejected for the kingdom of God. No, Jesus exalts the lowly.

But he also brings down the proud and welcomes these humbled people to himself and his service. Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, cracked and then restored. Most notably the Apostle Paul who hated and opposed Jesus until Jesus lovingly met him on the road to Damascus. There Jesus cracked him, blinded his physical eyes until Paul saw the spiritual reality that he was a desperate, broken man in need of God's mercy to truly live.

That's the way of God's kingdom, dear friends. **It's that good!**

So what does life under the kingship of Jesus look like today? For Jephthah's daughter's friends, it meant grieving with their friend, rather than simply abandoning her.

In our day, this story can obviously remind us to repent of our sins, whether they have been committed against women or anyone else. Ultimately, our sin is against God. Then in turning to Jesus, let us seek his power and grace to treat women with love and respect and partners in God's kingdom.

But the implications go far beyond the treatment of women. Today, in particular, let us suffer with others who are hurting. This COVID-19 pandemic is not greater than the kingdom of God. We must weep with those who weep. Do what we can to help the desperate and hurting. Of course, we need to observe social

distancing rules. But we must also be intentional and creative about caring for our neighbours, the elderly, the hospitalized, those in care homes and the very vulnerable on the front lines.

We live under the rule of King Jesus. We realize that we are not waving palm branches for Jesus who will smash all our enemies. Rather, we go where Jesus went—in our own creative ways today, using technology and our imagination—to support the broken and grieving daughter of Jephthah and so many others today who need a voice of love, a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, or virtual pat of encouragement on the back.

While some may be trying to take advantage of others to serve their own god of self-reliance or personal pleasure, we look to love in the name and in the power of Jesus, our humble and holy King. We seek to be self-sacrificing agents of his peace-filled kingdom.

So, seat up or seat down? Not that important! But let it remind us to serve and love others as our humble servant-King has done and empowers us to do.

Amen