

Religious Compromises; Their Folly and Fruits

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of absolute righteousness and the dangers of religious compromise and idolatry, highlighting the consequences of dishonesty, passion, counterfeit consecration, and ritualism.

Scripture: Judges 17:1, Matthew 6:24

Topics: "Integrity in Worship", "Religious Compromise"

Description

A.B. Simpson addresses the dangers of religious compromise through the story of Micah in Judges 17 and 18, illustrating how dishonesty, passion, counterfeit consecration, and ritualism lead to devastating consequences. He emphasizes that true worship must be rooted in integrity and divine command rather than human invention, warning against the seductive nature of man-made religion. The sermon highlights the tragic outcomes of Micah's compromises, including personal loss and societal corruption, ultimately leading to a legacy of false worship that affects generations. Simpson calls for a return to absolute righteousness and warns that the consequences of religious compromise can be dire, both for individuals and communities.

Transcript

"No man can serve two masters. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Matt. 6: 24. Compare Judges, chapters 17 and 18.

The remarkable incidents of these two chapters illustrate with great vividness the principles of our text. These chapters contain the story of Micah, and are a medley of sin and crime that not only condemn with the bitter irony of truth the follies and sins of the dark ages of the Judges, but apply with caustic severity and awful truthfulness to the social and religious abuses of our own times.

I. We have a picture of dishonesty.

Micah, a young man of Mount Ephraim, steals from his mother eleven hundred shekels of silver, and for a time conceals his ill-gotten gain. At length, alarmed by her angry curses, he comes and repents and restores the money.

Here we see a very common picture; dishonesty and crime commencing in the home circle, in the first penny stolen in secret from mother's drawer and leading to a life of lawlessness and crime.

Absolute righteousness in the minutest particular is essential to all religious character. We find a lack of righteousness today in the constitution of society, and singular corruption of conscience about right and wrong. There are men and women who can speak of deep religious experiences and extraordinary public services, who yet seem to be unable to appreciate the absolute necessity of strict integrity and uprightness in the matter of property, of debt and of business transactions between man and man.

II. We have here a picture of passion, in the story of Micah's mother. When she found her seven hundred dollars were lost, she was very angry, and she cursed so loud and so long that it seems to be the only thing remembered about the transaction. It made such an impression on Micah that he never got over it until he restored the money; but the moment she saw her shekels again she forgot all about her passion, and even about the crime of her boy, and she fell into another passion of delight, and blessed him as extravagantly as she had cursed him before. "Blessed be thou of the Lord, my son." The old lady had a little streak of religion running through it all, and probably thought that she was a very good sort of woman. It never occurred to her to sit down, and tell her boy about his wickedness and lead him to true repentance. All she could think of was that she had got the shekels back.

How like many a mother, alternating between the passionate love and the passionate anger, which are both alike natural, animal and devilish!

III. We see next a picture of counterfeit consecration.

"I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the Lord from my hand for my son, to make a graven image and a molten image." What a strange medley of religion and idolatry! Micah's mother had plenty of religion, but it was not any good because it was mixed. The need of the world is not religion; all people have religion, and the less a man has of God the more he has of religion, as a rule. The pagan of Africa, the heathen of China, have far more religion than we have. They sacrifice and give and do far more in the service of their idols than we do for Christ, but it is the devil's religion. Back of all their idolatry, they, too, like Micah's mother, have a dim idea of the Lord, and will tell you that these images and fetishes are but forms and stepping stones through which they rise to the true God. A Roman Catholic who mumbles her rosary and counts her beads and looks up to the saints and images on her altar, and the Buddhist who talks about Nirvana, alike claim that they are doing it unto the Lord; and above all and behind all religions there is the same deep sense of God and desire to meet Him. But this does not make it any better. The motive does not make the forbidden act right.

And so in our religious ceremonials, we may have much piety in building our chapels and erecting our altars, and contributing to the costly machinery of our splendid rituals and keeping our fasts and our Lenten services; but it is idolatry all the same. Oh, what a surprise will await many a devoted worshiper when he finds in the last day that God has accepted none of his foolish sacrifices, and all this expenditure of money and time and bodily exercise has been as vain as the grossest idolatry of heathenism and the licentious orgies of Baal worship.

But notice in this old lady's consecration how she betrays herself by an act of real insincerity in the midst of her pretended sacrifice. "I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the Lord," she says, and yet, when it comes to business she only took two hundred out of the eleven hundred shekels and kept the rest. She was the grandmother of Ananias and Sapphira. She was not even honest in the little religion she had.

We see the same spirit in heathenism today. The Chinaman will try to cheat his god as openly as the Christian worshiper who puts a bad penny in the plate, if he can do it unnoticed. It is the custom of the

Chinese to offer clothing and articles of furniture at the graves of their ancestors. They are made of tissue paper and set on fire, that they may go up in smoke and reach the dead for their habiliments in the land of spirits, but I noticed that the Chinaman always made half a garment -- one side of a pair of pants or jacket. The reason given was, the gods would not notice it and he would save the other half.

How natural it is to let self come into our very devotions, and how much we need the faithful admonition of Paul to his brethren at Corinth: "Now, therefore, perform the doing of it, that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have."

IV. A picture of ritualism.

Micah makes the image and sets it up in his idol temple, with a whole ritual of idolatrous worship. He has a house of gods and an ephod and teraphim, and, to make the whole thing complete, he consecrates one of his sons to be priest. It is all a piece of man-made religion. Now, here is the point where the emphasis lies. Micah's religion was all manufactured according to his own patterns. And this is the essential defect of all forms of false religion -- they are all man-made. It matters not whether they are the grossest idolatries of pagan nations, with their common fetishism and priestly idols, or the licentious forms of gross idolatry, which but express the passions of the human heart, or the more artistic and ideal religious systems of more refined ages, with their Confucian morality, their Buddhist philosophy, or their ancient Vedas and Shastras; whether they be the dreams and pretended revelations of Mohammed and Joe Smith; whether they be the imposing ceremonials of the papacy, or whether they be the elaborate rituals of the modern Church; they are all but the thousand man-made forms of so-called worship. The essential fault of every one of them is that they are human, that they are based upon the traditions or inventions of man, and not upon the revealed word and authoritative commandment of Jehovah.

God's command to Moses was that he make all things according to the pattern shown him in the Mount, and Christ's command to His disciples was an echo of it, teaching them "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." And, therefore, the devil has tried to get into the very Church of Christ, and institute a whole system of theological teaching and ceremonial worship that God never revealed nor commanded, and change the whole divine system of the church into a piece of human machinery which he could manipulate at will.

How much of our religious work today is entirely human! Our revivals are gotten up by careful organization and artificial mechanism. Our worship is sustained at an enormous cost by trained performers who belong to the world, flesh and the devil on six days, and for a consideration give a few hours to the Lord on the Sabbath. And much of our so-called religion is what the apostle describes as "teaching for ordinances the commandments of men;" and, again, "ordinances which all are to perish with the using after the commandments and doctrines of men."

But after Micah had arranged his whole ritual, he felt that something was lacking. He wanted God to recognize his man-made church, and give it a touch of authority and sacredness. And so, one day there came along a young Levite from Bethlehem Judea, and sojourned a few days with him; and Micah, finding that he belonged to the Levitical line, invited him to become his priest and take charge of the temple and service that he had recently fitted up, and offered him a salary of ten shekels a year, equal to about \$6.40, besides a good suit of clothes and his board; and the young man considered the call, finally accepted it, and was installed as the hired preacher in Micah's church. Then Micah was at rest; he felt completely satisfied. He had got just enough of God in his man-made church to justify him in calling it a religious

institution. And so he rubbed his hands with delightful self-complacency and said, "Now I know that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to be my priest."

And so men and women today are making up their various religious programs and wanting only to get ecclesiastical recognition, to get some Levite with real apostolic succession to countenance the thing, and it is all right, no matter whether God approves or disapproves; and, alas, it is only too easy to get ecclesiastical recognition for any form of doctrine or medley of so-called worship. Let a man of liberal mind and attractive personal qualities go forth among our people as a public teacher, and win their confidence and applause by his books and lectures, as one of our recent visitors from abroad has done, and then let him publish to the world a creed which could be accepted by a Unitarian, a Jew, yes, even a Spiritualist, as well as a Christian, if he is tactful enough in pointing his phrases and prudent enough in guarding his expressions, that man can stand as the acknowledged representative of the most conservative of the churches of Scotland and England, and be recognized as a true Levite. Let a man in the wild license of modern theological thought and the passion for freedom and originality, cut up this Holy Bible with his pen-knife until nothing supernatural is left, and laugh away the Pentateuch and the books of Isaiah and Daniel, and yet he can secure the highest place in our theological seminaries, and be recognized as a star lecturer at our Christian conventions and retain his standing without challenge. Nay, let the very sanctuary and temple of God be prostituted to religious entertainments and exhibitions that would scarcely be counted decent on the stage, and the regular program of parish work include the weekly dance as well as the weekly prayer meeting, and yet it may all be canonical; and the members and officers of this man-made medley fold their arms in self-complacency, like Micah, and say, "It is all right, seeing I have a Levite to be my priest."

V. We have a picture of the sad fruits of religious compromise. The sequel of the story of Micah is ironical and most tragical. A band of freebooters from the tribe of Dan pressing forward after new territory came to the house of Micah, and, finding his priest, asked counsel about their movements and were encouraged on their predatory expedition. They went forward, and finding a beautiful region returned to their own tribe and organized a powerful force, and these, following in the footsteps of the pioneer party, first came to the house of Micah, and stole his priest and his gods; and when he followed them, protesting and pleading, they coolly advised him to go home for fear he should get hurt, and marched on with his booty, leaving him only the cold comfort of their scorn. And then passing on, they invaded the peaceful territory that their pioneer party had discovered, and put the helpless villagers mercilessly to the sword, taking possession of their country where they, in turn, organized an idolatrous shrine and seat of worship which became in succeeding years the most corrupting influence in all the religious life of the nation. Thus we see Micah's sin and folly bearing fruit -- first, in his own suffering and loss, and the ruin of all his cherished hopes and plans, and the very loss even of his religion; secondly, in the cruelty and wrong which swept away a whole defenseless community; and, thirdly, in the long-continued and baneful influences which it started and kept in operation throughout all the centuries of Israel's history.

These are the effects of religious compromise and the sin of Micah in every age. First, they lead to the bitter disappointment and ruin of the worshiper, and the day surely comes when the devil will steal the worthless religion that he gave his wretched follower, and leave him nothing but scorn and despair. Secondly, superstition leads, and always will lead, to cruelty and crime. False religion becomes a persecutor and a destroyer of the rights and liberties of men. The two most cruel and destructive influences of medieval and modern history have been Mohammedanism and Romanism, and they are both forms of false religion, very similar in their history and religious principles to Micah's hybrid religion.

The early conquerors of South America took possession of the land in the name of God, and even the very geographical names of the country today bear witness to their pretensions of piety, but the ruin of the aboriginal races and the degradation which still rests upon the land today, bear witness to their cruelty, rapacity and wickedness. Thirdly, the leaven of false religion becomes a corrupting principle in all the future history of a people. Micah not only succeeded in corrupting his own family, but also in laying the foundation of evils that lasted to the latest age of their history and corrupted the whole nation, leading eventually to the captivity of the race and the sins and sorrows of threescore generations. And so when we defile the streams of divine truth and life we poison a whole generation. When we plant the tares in the midst of the wheat, we leave behind us the seeds of thorns and thistles for the eternal burning. Men may think it a very innocent thing to play with "higher criticism" and toy with ritualism, but they are undermining the faith of their own children, they are kindling the incendiary fire that will burn up their altars and their homes, and they are pioneering the awful procession of anarchy, socialism, immorality, crime and the very horrors of lawlessness and wrong which will usher in the days of Antichrist and the catastrophe of the world.

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