

## JUDGES 2:6-23 FOLLOW THE LEADER

So Garfield is sitting in his easy chair, watching television.

"We have a great show!", announces the announcer. "And we know you'll enjoy it!"

Garfield clicks away from that channel and mutters, "Nobody tells me what to do."

We say, "Nobody tells me what to do." Even if that somebody tells us we will like what they want us to do, we say, "Nobody tells me what to do."

We say it, but is it true? I am not so sure. Whether or not we know it, we are followers. We do let other people tell us what to do.

If you don't believe me, think of how much we do, because we see others doing it, or because others encourage us to do it.

Music. Cars. Food. Clothing. Electronic gadgets.

Young people, you can walk into any high school, and you can see all these high school students who claim to be independent, and they will dress, groom, pierce, walk, talk and live...just like their friends.

Adults, you can walk into any workplace, social gathering, or even church, and you will see individuals dressing, talking and acting a lot like each other.

We are followers. Others do tell us what to do. The issue is not, "Will we follow leaders?" The issue is, "Whom will we follow?"

In our Old Testament reading, we have reached the book of Judges. It is among the strangest, and saddest, books of the Bible.

God's covenant people, the people of Israel, have now reached the land God promised to Abraham, and provided through Moses. But the generation that entered the land is leaving the scene, and God's people begin a painful cycle of covenant breaking.

As one writer writes, it generally follows this pattern:

\* Sin: Israel sins by following other gods.

\* Slavery: Israel becomes subject to other nations.

\* Supplication: Israel cries to God for mercy.

\* Salvation: God saves Israel through people we call "judges", although they are more military leaders than lawyers.

\* Silence: Israel returns to old habits, leading back to sin.

Israel follows this pattern, because Israel follows the other nations, who lead them away from the Lord.

Whom will we follow?

Let's ponder these words, by noticing our need, and God's grace.

What is OUR NEED? It's obvious. We need to follow godly leaders. But why? Why do we need godly leaders?

**BECAUSE WE DON'T NATURALLY FOLLOW RIGHT.**

If you think about it, there are really only three options for describing how we are as people, especially when we are young:

1 - Maybe we are inclined to good. If left to ourselves, we will make the right choices.

2 - Maybe we are neutral. If left to ourselves, some will make good choices, and others will make bad choices.

3 - Maybe we are inclined to evil. If left to ourselves, we will make lots of bad choices.

Which is the biblical portrait? Which is what you see all through the Bible, and especially in the book of Judges?

The third option: we are inclined to evil. We are not neutral, and we do not naturally follow right.

Think of verse 10: "...another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel."

God's covenant people are supposed to pass on the truth about the Lord to the next generation! That must not have happened with Joshua's generation.

But for our purposes, think of what this says about that next generation. It was not automatic. Obedience to the Lord did not just "happen." When they were left to the inclinations of their own hearts, they were inclined to evil.

Our parents have "genes." They give us physical, mental, even emotional characteristics from their genes. It's automatic. It just happens. But the spiritual "genes" - the genes that lead us to follow the Lord - are not simply "caught." They must be taught.

We do not naturally follow right.

In fact, **WE DO NATURALLY FOLLOW WRONG.**

In verses 11 to 13, the writer describes how Israel began to follow the gods of the nations around them.

\* One god was Baal. He was the god of the storm and the rains - the god who supposedly provided for the growth of vegetation.

\* Another god was Astoreth. She was the goddess of war and fertility. She supposedly helped you fight, and she supposedly helped you make babies.

So what was it about these gods? Why follow them? They appealed to the needs and the wants of Israel. God's people needed food. God's people needed to win battles. God's people needed (and wanted) to make babies.

Thus we read, "They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them."

A couple of years ago, I read of a big disaster for a little town in Turkey. A large herd of sheep was grazing near a cliff, when one jumped off the cliff. Then another jumped. And another. Then still more, until something like 450 sheep had followed the first sheep over the cliff, to their deaths.

That cliff probably looked pretty good to the first sheep. But it was deadly, and it was deadly to those who followed.

This is our need: we live in a corrupt and corrupting world, and our hearts are inclined to follow the false gods of the people around us!

But, you say, "We don't worship Baal or Ashtoreth!" Yet do we not follow the false gods of the culture around us?

\* What about the "god" of comfort, who tells you to ignore your children, so you can relax? Or who tells you to spend money you do not have, for that overpriced gadget you want so much? Or who tells you to ignore that hurting person, so you won't upset your plans?

\* What about the "god" of achievement, who tells you to get that task accomplished, no matter who you hurt? Or who tells you that happiness will only be yours, when you have reached that position? Or who tells you to be hard-working, and high-climbing, so that others will see and be impressed?

\* What about the "god" of control, who tells you that no one can oppose you? Or who tells you that everything must be your way? Or who tells you that your spouse or your friend or your child cannot think differently, or you must somehow set them straight, on even the smallest details of life?

What about the "god" of excitement, or the "god" of sex, or the "god" of power, or the "god" of pride?

The writer of the Judges writes, "They refused to give up their evil practices and their stubborn ways." We follow, and we keep following!

This is hard stuff, but this is true stuff! This is why we need a Savior! Remember what we pondered in January: the Old Testament shouts in all of its pages, "We need Jesus!"

We do not naturally follow right. We naturally follow wrong. We need a Savior named Jesus to die for our wrong, and to lead us toward the right.

Where are you this morning? Where is your heart, as you sit here? Do you know yourself? Do you know your heart? Do you see your need? How do you follow? Whom do you follow?

Yet as we ponder these verses, we see not just our need, but GOD'S GRACE.

God's grace is first and always through Jesus, the Savior anticipated by the faithful in Judges and all the Old Testament. Indeed, he has suffered for our foolish following, and he now calls us to follow him.

But how will we do this? Partly through the leaders God provides. God's grace to us, includes the grace of godly leaders.

We will follow. How do we follow godly leaders?

It starts with our attitude toward godly leaders. WE EMBRACE GOD'S BLESSING, OF THEM.

In verse 16, we read of the "salvation" part of this five-part pattern: "Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders."

The people groaned under the oppression of the other nations. But God showed compassion, and blessed them with leaders who were called to direct God's people away from false gods, and back to the true God.

They were not perfectly godly! Judges is full of bizarre stories about bizarre people, and some of the judges are rather bizarre!

But God raised them up, and God still raises them up.

Let's get right to the heart of the matter. Do you embrace this blessing? Or do you ignore it, or even fight it?

Young people, I start with you, but I will not end with you! Most of you have parents who are striving to lead you in the ways of the Lord. They do not always do it well. They fail. They frustrate you. They may speak the truth, but they do not always say it as they should, and they do not always live

the way they tell you to live.

But do you embrace this gracious blessing, as a blessing? Do you know what a priceless blessing it is, to have parents who want you to love Jesus? When they fail you, will you forgive them? When they try to lead you well, will you strive to follow after Jesus, by following them?

Young people and the rest of you, what about other spiritual leaders in your life, especially the elders of this church?

As well, we do not always do it well. I will speak only for myself, but I believe I know these men well enough to know that we are painfully aware of our failures. The thoughtless words. The phone call we did not make. That decision that seemed so clever, but then was shown to be so foolish. Prayer that should be passionate, but is merely rote. And on and on and on.

We are mere men. But for reasons that we will never know, and that surely we will never understand, God has called us to lead you.

What is your response to that? Will you respond with hostility? Usually not. Most people are too polite for that.

But there is something just as destructive as hostility. It is indifference. It is a heart that cares little for the words preached from this pulpit, or for the counsel given in secret, or for the example that is imperfectly put before you.

What about that? We read in verse 17 that the people of Israel “would not listen to their judges.” They did not murder their judges. They just did not listen.

Am I asking for blind, unthinking obedience? I am the dictator, and these are my assistants, and you should do whatever we say, whenever we say it?

No! Never! I am no hero, these elders are no heroes, and those judges were no heroes. Jesus is the only hero.

But I do ask you to search your heart, and to ask if you are embracing God’s rightful spiritual authorities, as the blessings they are.

We embrace God’s blessing, of them.

Then we receive the grace of godly leaders, when **WE SEEK GOD’S BLESSING, THROUGH THEM.**

What is the point of all this? Why all this talk about godly leaders?

Verse 10 again: “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.”

This is about knowing the Lord! He saved his people from slavery in Egypt, and he saves his people from slavery to sin, so that we may know him, and live in covenant relationship with him, now and forever.

You follow godly leaders, because you are hungry for God. You follow them because you know God has given them to you, to lead you to know him better!

This places a great responsibility on us as leaders! We must make sure we are leading you toward Jesus Christ. We only do this as our words and actions lead you toward what God has revealed in his Word.

We may err. You are not called to follow us over a cliff! Yet when we speak God’s truth to you, and live God’s truth before you, you are called to seek the blessing of God, which is the blessing of himself, by following us.

So how do you seek this blessing, through godly leaders?

\* You seek this blessing, with lips that pray.

Do you pray for your spiritual leaders? Young people, do you pray for your parents? Do you all pray for the elders of this church?

When you pray for us, God works in us, that we may lead you well, and when we lead you well, you are blessed!

I know of no more delightful words, than to hear one of you say to me, or to one of the elders, “I am praying for you.”

\* You seek this blessing, with a heart that respects.

We are creatures of a culture that does not respect authority. But our Lord calls us to respect the authorities he has put over us.

You respect, when you trust, unless you have good reason not to trust.

You respect, when you think the best, unless you see the worst.

You respect in your thoughts. You respect in your words.

You say, “This is God’s appointed spiritual leader for me. Whether it is a parent I do not always understand, or a leader who I do not always like, I will strive to respect this leader, as an act of respect for the Lord.”

\* You seek this blessing, with ears that hear and heed.

Maybe this is the sermon. Maybe this is Sunday School. Maybe this is while you talk in the foyer or a restaurant. Maybe this is in your home.

Maybe this is during a very hard time in your life. Maybe this is when you are out-stubborning everybody around you. Maybe this is when you are trying to make a decision. Maybe this is when you are just carrying on, and doing what you usually do.

You say, "God has placed this person in my life, for my good. If these words are true to his truth, I heed them. I consider them. I pray about them. I seek to follow them.

"I hunger for the public preaching and teaching. I desire to absorb the wisdom that is in this conversation. I long for it, to know Jesus more."

\* You seek this blessing, with eyes that see.

Godliness is taught, but godliness is also caught.

Who is godly in your life? Maybe it is a parent, or maybe it is an elder, or maybe it is someone else, who holds no title, but is living in ways that are honoring to Jesus Christ.

Watch. See. Ask yourself, "What is he or she doing or being, that I can do or be, to grow in my love for Jesus, and service to Jesus?"

How does he handle his children? How does she speak of her sister-in-law? How is he dealing with his grief or disappointment? Watch. See.

You see, you are watching. The question is not, "Will we follow leaders?" The question is, "Whom will we follow?"

Not long ago, Beth Ann and I were out walking, and we saw a woman and her young child walking ahead of us on our street. Running behind, along with, and ahead of them, was a cat.

Beth Ann asked the woman, half-jokingly, "Is that your cat, or is he just following you?" She expected the woman to say, "He's just following us."

But the woman said, "No, that's our cat! We go out and walk, and he stays right with us!"

Whoever would imagine a cat following along like that?

Whoever, in a culture like ours, could imagine people following spiritual leaders?

Who could imagine such following, when a leader says, "You should marry only in the Lord"?

Who could imagine such following, when the leader says, "You must control your tongue with the people who work for you"?

Who could imagine such following, when the leader says, "Let me show you how I speak to that nasty neighbor, who needs Jesus Christ"?

Jesus imagines it. Jesus commands it. Jesus helps us do it.

We follow him, by following godly spiritual leaders.