"Right In Our Eyes"

There's a verse of Scripture that's been on my mind for some time now. I've been thinking about it and mulling over it a lot. It's the last verse of the Book of Judges in the Old Testament: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

The setting for this verse is the period of the Judges in Israel's history. Through Moses, God had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, but Moses had died. Joshua became Moses' successor, and led the people into the Promised Land of Canaan, but then Joshua died. During this period of their history Israel had no king to set the rules and govern them. People used their own judgment, and did what they thought was best. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

How was that working out? It sounds like it could be a good thing. People were given the freedom for self-expression, to do their own thinking - to set the rules and standards for their lives.

But if you read the Book of Judges, you'll see that it wasn't working out very well. A predictable cycle of behavior developed. People would stray from God and adopt the morals of the pagan culture around them. Disaster would follow. They would cry out to God for help. God (being the merciful God He is) rescued them and restored them. But before long they would drift back into their evil ways, chaos would follow, they would cry out for help, God would help them, and the pattern kept repeating itself. Disobedience, disaster, deliverance. Disobedience, disaster, deliverance.

And as you come towards the end of the Book of Judges, things get really bad. The events described get more disgusting, perverted, nauseating. Read Judges 19-21! And probably through all of these disgusting actions everyone involved thought they were doing what was the right things to do. But chaos reigned. And the writer of the Book of Judges sums it up in these words: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

What troubles me about these words is this: *I think in many ways this describes life today in the United States!* See, the Israelites had no king at the time, because *God was to be their King!* God would be Israel's King, and the people would be governed by God's laws.

Before Joshua died he warned the people of Israel not to forsake God and serve the false gods of the surrounding cultures, and adopt the moral values that went with it. The people promised to do that: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods" (Joshua 24:16). Joshua reminds them again of the bad things that will happen if they turn away from God. Once again, they insist: "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey" (Joshua 24:24). But, they didn't. They did what was right in their own eyes.

The crux of the matter is this: As individuals, and as a society, are we going to do what we think is best in our own eyes, or are we going to govern our personal lives and civil life by God's laws

and commands?

I believe this critical issue is being played out in our country today. *Our country was founded on Judeo-Christian, Biblical, principles.* This isn't to say that all of our founders were Christians. They weren't. But there was a common belief that the Bible contained a set of moral and religious values that, if followed, would result in a sane and orderly society. For instance George Washington said, "It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible." Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of the persons who ratified the U.S. Constitution, wrote: "The gospel of Jesus Christ prescribes the wisest rules for just conduct in every situation of life. Happy (are) they who are enabled to obey them in all situations!" Joseph Story, a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, called the "Father of American Jurisprudence", said, "There never has been a period in which the Common Law did not recognize Christianity as lying on its foundations. I verily believe that Christianity is necessary to support a civil society."

Now the Founding Fathers are taking a beating today! They are being maligned and discredited. They were not perfect, by any means. But they understood the importance of God, and religious faith, and the Bible, in governing a nation. Our nation's laws and values have been rooted in Judeo-Christian principles. *Today, that foundation is eroding*.

Current research indicates that in the U.S. the fastest growing religious category is the "nones" – those who claim no religious affiliation. Studies tell us that atheism and agnosticism are on the rise, and that fewer people believe the Bible to be any special or divinely inspired writing.

Secular Humanism has gained a foothold in our culture. In the humanistic philosophy, we humans are the center of existence, not God. We set the rules. It's telling that in the Adam and Eve story, this is the essence of Adam and Eve's sin: they wanted to play God. They wanted to set the rules. They wanted to put themselves at the center of life instead of God!

Twenty years ago I was teaching and preaching about *Postmodernism*. Many observers believe we are living in a "postmodern" world. The "modern era" has passed. One of the hallmarks of postmodernism is that *there are no moral absolutes*. Each group, each community, decides for itself what's right and what's wrong. How did this worldview get started? It began decades ago, primarily in academia (colleges and universities), and the arts. So we've had a number of generations now indoctrinated into this way of thinking and looking at life. It has since filtered out to the entertainment industry, and more recently into the mainstream news media, and certain political philosophies.

So, traditional values, rooted in our Judeo-Christian heritage, are giving way to a *relativism*, where we humans decide what's best, and what's right and what's wrong. "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Our adult Sunday School class has been doing a six-week DVD study by Andy Stanley, based on this verse of Scripture and the Book of Judges. The study is called "Right in the Eye". It's been a

very profitable, provocative study. He talks about how prone we are as human beings to live this way – to base our life decisions and moral values on what's right in our own eyes.

We do this as individuals. I can do what I want, when I want, with whom I want....(what follows?)...as long as it doesn't hurt anybody. In these 6 messages Andy Stanley does a convincing job of pointing out the fallacy of that approach. For one thing: Often doing the thing we want, when we want, with whom we want, doesn't give us freedom, but winds up binding and controlling us. We get hooked. Or, it doesn't give us the long-term satisfaction that it did initially.

And the other outcome is that we may think what we do isn't going to hurt anyone, but often that is simply not the case. How many as adults are living with scars because a parent, or both parents, did what seemed right to them in raising us, but it *hurt us*. How many of us in some relationship, or some setting in life, did what looked like the right thing to do, and we wound up hurting someone. Or we were the one who got hurt. We did what seemed right at the time, but at some point we look back and ask, "Why did I ever do that?" "How could I have been so stupid?"

I went through a four-year training program to become a psychotherapist. Prior to starting the course we went to an introductory session over the summer to get us acclimated to what was ahead. I still remember something the instructor said. He said, even for people acting out in strange and destructive ways, what they do makes sense to them. As foolish and irrational as it may seem to us!

Doing what's right in our own eyes also has massive implications for *a community or nation*. Who sets the rules to govern our society, our moral values? Who determines what's right and what's wrong? Our local government? Community standards? The governor and state representatives? Congress – the House and Senate? The President? The Supreme Court? The court of common opinion?

Who decides, for example, whether *abortions* should be allowed? In 1973, 7 of the 9 Supreme Court Justices voted that every woman in the U.S. had the legal right to an abortion. 7 lawyers. On the flip side, by a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court overturned Roe vs. Wade in June of this year. The court didn't rule out abortions; it said *each state* is to set its own laws regarding abortion. 5 conservative justices carried the day.

Who decides *how marriage is defined?* In 1996 Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, defining marriage as "only the legal union of one man and one woman as husband and wife". That act was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2013. And in June of 2015, by a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court of the U.S. legalized gay marriage. Nine people, by a margin of one vote, decide what constitutes marriage! Really?

Likewise, who decides whether Christians in the military *should be allowed to share their faith?* The President and Secretary of Defense, who in 2013 said you aren't permitted to do that? Who

decides whether or not high school football teams should be allowed to *gather in a circle on the field and pray* before or after a game? The coach? The school administration? The Supreme Court (as it made a ruling on this issue just recently)?

Every community, every state, every nation, has to decide how to govern its people, what's permissible and what's not permissible, what's right and what's wrong. *But the underlying question is: How do you decide? On what basis do you decide?* Is it just the political bent of our elected representatives? The lawmakers or judges in our courts? Is it the personal views and opinions of the majority of the people? Often the majority can be wrong. Or is there a higher law, a higher authority?

When you read through the Book of Judges you see that when people are left to do what's right in their own eyes – and there is no higher authority than people's own opinions – chaos ensues. Why is that? Because we are flawed human beings. We are prone to operate out of self-interest. We are often blind and short-sighted in our judgments. We are *sinners*.

And it can be healing for us – individually, and collectively as a society – to heed the ancient words of Joshua. "Fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness...if you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you" (Joshua 24:14, 20).

We need a moral compass more reliable than ourselves. We need a more accurate gauge of right and wrong than just the shifting sands of the latest cultural trend. We need God – and God's laws and commands - if life is to be sane and good. And we find these laws and commands in the Bible. The Scriptures offer a time-tested, reliable guide for both personal conduct and the ordering of society. The Bible is God's message to us, and every generation.

Now I realize that more and more people today don't agree with this. As I've already said, an increasing number of people in the U.S. don't accept the authority of the Bible, or believe the Bible represents God's Word and message to us. In fact, some argue that the Bible actually *gets in the way* of human progress and the rights of individuals. For instance, all of the Bible was written in patriarchal cultures, where men ruled and women had few rights. There is slavery in the Bible. Some people use the Bible as a weapon against gay people, interracial marriages, equal opportunities for women, etc. I get it! And I don't agree with them! In next week's sermon, I want to talk about the Bible, how to interpret it, and why I believe it is still God's voice and message of truth to every generation.

"In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). There's something better than just doing what's right in our own eyes. Seeking and following God's laws and commands can bring healing and wholeness and goodness to life!

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