



## **A Fork in the Word**

Judges 11:29-40

Sunday, September 8, 2024

Rev. Dr. David R. Schultz

### **Gospel Lesson, Matthew 5:33-37**

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

### **Sermon, “A Fork in the Word,” by Pastor Dave**

For months—if not years—I’ve wanted to tackle one of the most troubling—and controversial—passages in the Old Testament: Judges 11:29-40. The events recorded in that passage take place during one of the most troubled times in the history of Israel.

As the book of Judges opens, the Hebrews cross the Jordan River and enter their Promised Land. It is a time of hope; it is a time of miracles. It is also a time when good leaders are hard to find.

But the book of Judges is a book of downward spiraling. Life goes from good to bad and then from bad to worse. The final verse of Judges is not a statement of freedom; rather, it’s an indictment against the nation: *“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25).*

Judges 11 comes early in the downward spiral. It features the story of Jephthah, who is called to lead the nation after the Israelites began doing “evil in the eyes of the Lord: they served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and ... the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines.

And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites” (Judges 10:6-7).

That’s when God raised up Jephthah, “a mighty warrior” (Judges 11:1) and he led the Israelites into battle and delivered the nation from their oppressors.

<sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah...<sup>30</sup> And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, <sup>31</sup> whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”

<sup>32</sup> Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands. <sup>33</sup> He devastated twenty towns ... as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.

<sup>34</sup> When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. <sup>35</sup> When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.”

<sup>36</sup> “My father,” she replied, “you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. <sup>37</sup> But grant me this one request,” she said. “Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.”

<sup>38</sup> “You may go,” he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. <sup>39</sup> After the two months, she returned to her father, *and he did to her as he had vowed*. And she was a virgin.

From this comes the Israelite tradition <sup>40</sup> that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

That is such a disturbing turn of events; we in modern America simply cannot comprehend something so horrid. In fact, it’s so horrid that several years ago I attended a seminar taught by Dr. Lawson Stone, a United Methodist professor at Asbury Theological Seminary and an expert on the Book of Judges. He opines that rather than offering his daughter as a burnt sacrifice, Jephthah spared her life but would not allow her to marry or have children.

I disagree. I disagree because that would have meant Jephthah had broken his vow. And Jephthah was adamant: “I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” As horrific as it sounds, Jephthah did what Abraham almost did in Genesis 22: he sacrificed his only child as a burnt offering to God.

I know that parenting is hard. I know that as parents, we may be tempted to offer one or more of our children as a burnt sacrifice. But that aside, what’s this story doing in the Bible? And what are we supposed to learn from it? And how are we to apply it to our lives today in 2024 America?

I believe this story is incredibly relevant for us today, because what we have in this story is a fork in the Word. **There’s a fork in the Word.** In other words, the Bible—the Word of God—is presenting us with the choice that Jephthah had to make. And his choice ought to be instructive for us when we face our own fork in the road.

We all know what a “fork in the road” is: it’s a metaphor for a decision that we have to make at some point in our lives—where a person must choose between two or more options. It’s a metaphor drawn from travel where you come to a junction where one road splits into two roads.

In the words of the great theologian John Sebastian:

Did you ever have to make up your mind?

And say yes to one and let the other one ride.  
There's so many changes and tears you must hide.  
Did you ever have to finally decide?

Jephthah's fork in the road is that he was faced with a choice: he had to choose between word and grace. By "word" I mean the rash vow he made in the heat of battle—when victory was so close that he could taste it. So he makes a deal with God: "If you give me this one victory, when I return home in triumph, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me will be the yours, God, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

But here's the thing: God didn't ask for that deal. It was all Jephthah's doing. But once Jephthah made his vow, he created a law that he was to live by. And what we find throughout the scriptures is that a strict adherence to the law—whether it's the Word of God or our own words—especially in the form of law or vows—will inevitably lead us down a path where somebody gets hurt.

Words have meaning. And words can even kill. And that even includes the Word of God. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul writes that we as followers of Jesus Christ have become "ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit: for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The "letter" Paul is referring to is the old covenant of law. The "letter" kills because no one can be perfect enough to keep the whole law all the time, and the penalty for breaking the law is death.

Two years ago I preached about singer songwriter Laura Nyro who, in her autobiographical song "Stony End" proclaimed that she was "raised on the good book Jesus" until she "read between the lines." That's when she realized that her growing self-awareness of her own sexuality did not align with what she read in the Law of Moses and she didn't want to go down to "Stoney End" because according to Law of Moses, those who broke the law were to be stoned to death. In fact, in the Old Testament a person could be stoned to death for any number of offenses ranging from sexual sin to breaking the Sabbath.

### **The letter kills but the Spirit gives life.**

I believe the story of Jephthah is a cautionary story warning us to be careful of the vows we make because vows have consequences. We all know people who have said, "I will never... (fill in the blank), and it's resulted in heartache and broken relationships. People have left the church because of words: not words spoken to them, but vows they made to themselves. "I will never set foot in that church again if... (fill in the blank). And relationships are broken, because of rash vows.

I don't know what kind of vows my mother made fourteen years ago. That was when our son proposed to his wife, and we wanted to introduce our future daughter-in-law to my mother and her second husband. (My father had died of a head injury in 1976; ten years later my mother remarried).

Anyway, Christmas was coming, and we usually went there for a short visit. When I proposed bringing our family—including our future daughter-in-law—my mother hedged. She didn't think that would work. I was welcome to come for Christmas, but not my family.

I said that if my family wasn't welcome, then I wasn't welcome either. Then I added, "Be careful what you say because what you say could change our relationship forever." The next thing I knew she put her husband on the phone, and he told me in no uncertain terms that my future daughter-in-law was not welcome in his house at Christmas.

After that, my mother wrote to me just once with some weak excuse about why she couldn't have my family there for Christmas. But she added that maybe it would work better at the July cookout. Of course, we never got that invitation. And we never spoke again. I continued to send Christmas cards, birthday cards, Mother's Day cards, and such for seven years. She never so much as sent us a

Christmas card, so after a few years, I didn't see any point in trying to keep up a relationship that she had clearly written off for the unpardonable sin of wanting my mother to meet her grandson's future bride.

In the years which followed, I'd periodically Google my mother's name. I did that sometime in 2015, and it popped up in her husband's obituary. My two sisters were listed among the survivors, but there was no mention of me, or my brother Pete, or our children. We were literally written off.

Two weeks ago, the hook into my sermon was the documentary, *The Man Who Saved the World*. It's the true story of Stanislav Petrov who, in 1983, prevented a nuclear holocaust. I'd never seen the movie; I didn't have to see it to mention it in my sermon. So that Sunday afternoon, Candice and I watched it. It included a subplot about Petrov's broken relationship with his mother. So once again, I Googled my mother's name and what do you know: her obituary popped up. She had died just nine days earlier, on August 16. And once again, my two sisters were listed as survivors, but there was no mention of Pete or me or our families.

My mother missed four wonderful, joyous weddings—three on my side; one on Pete's. She never met any of her grandchildren's spouses. She never once cradled in her arms even one of her seven great-grandchildren. She never watched them ride a bike or twirl a dance or giggle with magic in their eyes. Why? The best I can guess is that she made some vow to herself and chose to live by her vow instead of living by grace. The law kills, but grace gives life.

Jephthah's daughter didn't have to die. We need to understand that because some people might read the tragic story of Jephthah and his daughter and conclude that he did the right thing by sticking to his word and sacrificing his daughter. But he did not. The truth is that she died because her father did not live by grace. Jephthah didn't comprehend that even God broke his vows if it meant choosing grace.

God made a vow to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah; but he turned to Abraham in the hope that Abraham would plead him down to a place of grace. And he almost got there.

When the Hebrews made and worshipped a golden calf, God made a vow to destroy them all and start over with Moses as the founder of a reconstituted Israel. But Abraham reasoned with God and God broke his own vow and chose grace instead.

Words kill. A rash vow killed Jephthah's daughter. Rash vows have split churches and destroyed families. The lesson of Jephthah is this: when you come to a fork in the road, choose grace. Always choose grace.