

## **Sermon Reading: Judges 10:6-16 (NIV2011)**

*Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, 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, <sup>7</sup> he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, <sup>8</sup> who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. <sup>9</sup> The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim; Israel was in great distress. <sup>10</sup> Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.”*

*<sup>11</sup> The LORD replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, <sup>12</sup> the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? <sup>13</sup> But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. <sup>14</sup> Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”*

*<sup>15</sup> But the Israelites said to the LORD, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” <sup>16</sup> Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.*

## **Sermon Theme: Continuing the Cycle of Sin**

Eventually, enough is enough. Eventually, there are no more chances. Eventually, patience runs out. Warnings were given, bargains are struck, but all it takes is one time too many and you are left to deal with the consequences. We’ve either heard it or said it, “Don’t do it again, or else...” It’s not only Jesus’ disciple Peter who wonders how many times he should be expected to forgive his brother who wronged him. We might wonder too and not just about forgiving others, but what about God forgiving me? When is enough, enough with God? At what point does God say there are no more chances?

I think the book of Judges could make an intriguing TV series. Here you have a set of stories about the heroes of the Israelites. The leaders—men and women—arrive when all seems to be lost and then—bam—here they come to save the day. You might recall the stories of Samson and his incredible strength. Maybe you remember Gideon, the reluctant leader, who takes that small army of men with torches hiding in the clay pots and attacks the enemy camp at night. Then there was Deborah, the prophetess who led the people of Israel when the men of Israel would not stand up. Or left-handed Ehud who walks right into the enemy’s house with a sword hidden on his leg, tells the king, “I have a message from God for you,” and proceeds to kill the king on the spot. Fascinating stories of those heroes of old!

But why did they need these different judges—individuals who led the people of Israel for a time and ruled the land? Well, after their leader Joshua had died and that whole generation had passed as well, another generation grew up. But we are told this next generation neither knew God nor worshipped him. All it took was one generation and the people fell away; a cycle that would continue over and over again over this 350 year period. Israel falls, God sends a foreign nation against Israel to wake them up, Israel cries out to the Lord, God sends a judge, judge saves the people and rules for some time. Hooray, peace in the land! But then the judge dies, that generation of people eventually dies, and the next generation of Israelites is back at it again.

And that's where the reading in Judges 10:6 starts, "**Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.**" As the cycle would continue the sinful actions continue to become worse and worse. The people abandoned the Lord and no longer served him. And here they are no longer satisfied with one false god. Seven different nations with seven different false gods are listed.

God had warned them this would happen before they entered the Promised Land: "**They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?' And I will certainly hide my face in that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods**" (Deuteronomy 31:16-18). And that's what is happening here in Judges. The Philistines come from the west and the Ammonites come in from the east. And for 18 years these foreign nations shattered the people's wills and crushed their spirits. All because the Israelites abandoned the Lord.

That's the story of the Israelites. But what if, in place of the Israelites, you put your name instead? Now the story is about you. But that doesn't seem very realistic or applicable. I highly doubt that you have a little figurine of a Baal or Ashteroth in your home. But then we remember that an idol or false god is anything that we love too much; anything we love more than the one true God. So in place of Baal or Ashteroth or any of the other idols, maybe your idol is wanting people to like you, your status among others, it's family or even your children. There's the god of money and having a certain amount of things. It maybe life experiences, alcohol, pornography, or work. Maybe it's the action of wanting only what you want and not what God wants for you. It might be sinfully refusing to change from a sinful way because you don't see it being that serious or don't think you should have to change. Maybe it's that just as damning of a sin of complaining and grumbling against the Lord. There are so many examples; we are idol-making factories that find all sorts of things to fear, love, and trust in more than the one Lord. If you are having trouble thinking of the one fashioned by you, consider the priorities in your life. Not just what you say or claim is the

most important, but what do your actions, your thoughts, or your attitude show is number 1 in your life?

And as God did with the Israelites he does with us. No, God doesn't send the Ammonites and Philistines attacking, but you know the very real consequences of your sins. Sometimes we don't always see how our idol and false god worshipping ruins our relationship with others...but you know it's there. We don't always realize what it's doing to our relationship with God. But as we chase after these false gods, we are turning our back on the Lord. And so, lovingly, God gives us these consequences to discipline us. We are stubborn people who too often only learn in the school of hard knocks. One doesn't learn until the ticket comes because you sped and you got caught. You don't see what your actions are doing until trust is broken and your loved one tells you, "I don't even know who you are anymore." Or it gets to a point where your decisions aren't just hurting you but now are affecting your work and family life and you are left feeling like a failure.

The disgusting and frustrating thing is that we know better! We have the warnings. But the cycle continues. I promise to myself, to someone else, even to God that I'm going to do better. We promise the next time is going to be different. And then I find myself in that situation again but instead of resisting the devil, I'm curious. Maybe it will be a little different this time--so I want to explore just to be sure. And before you know it, you are back in the sin and it starts all over again. Then comes the shame, and you wonder why did this happen, again? Because the sin isn't forcing you to do anything. Yes, the temptation drags on us and yanks at us, but it can't force you to do anything. But then I get tired of fighting against the temptation, I feel like I deserve to let my guard down a bit, I've done pretty well for a while now. And then it's back in the cycle again. But why?

Because sadly and perversely a part of me likes the sin. And so we want to believe there is plenty of time to change. We want to think that there is going to be some wake-call up call later in life, and then I'm going to be different. But what we fail to see is that right now, today, enough is enough. We see that in Judges when the Lord tells the people in v.13, "**I will no longer save you.**" At what point will God say the same to me, to you if we continue in this cycle of sin? At what point will he leave us alone chasing after those gods? Because as it was for the nation of Israel so it is for you and me, eventually enough is enough.

So what are we supposed to do when even my best intentions aren't good enough? In the face of God's just judgment the people of Israel recognize there is only one thing to do. They put their trust in God's merciful hand and confess, "**We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.**" And that's all we can do too. James writes, **Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord** (James 4:9-10a). Don't downplay the seriousness of your sin;

don't try and ignore it. Grieve, mourn, and wail, you have sinned against the Lord. Recognize your sin, confess it, and trust in God's merciful and gracious hand.

And the Lord does something that doesn't make sense. It doesn't seem fair. But when the Lord saw the misery of his people Israel, Judges tells us, "**And he could bear Israel's misery no longer**" (Judges 10:16). Even after how far they had sunk, even after he told them he wouldn't save them again, the Lord would no longer bear Israel's misery. It's not like God had a change in attitude or had a lapse in judgment. Instead, think of it as God looked at them through the lens of the cross where God's just judgment and his hatred for sin would be appeased by his Son and sinful mankind's status was changed. This means that God cannot bear your misery in your sin either because when he sees you he doesn't see the sinner. Instead he sees the lost who has been found, the dead who has been made alive. When he looks at you he doesn't see a child of the devil. He sees his child who was made his own in baptism. He sees someone who has been washed in the blood of the Lamb and whose sins are forgiven. When he looks at you, he sees someone who his own Son Jesus lived, suffered, and died for. Yes, he is the just God; he doesn't ignore sin. So he punished Jesus in your place. Jesus was crushed under the weight of your sin on that cross. But because Jesus suffered for you, your sins are not held against you. Because of the punishment placed on Jesus, your debt was paid and you have the pledge of clear conscience before God.

It doesn't seem fair that the sinless should suffer for the sinful. It doesn't seem right that he who is the Life should die. It doesn't make sense when I see my sin, see what my sin does, to me, to my loved ones, to my relationship with God. But our hope isn't based on what I think or what you feel is right. Our confidence is that Jesus did enough and all for you. And we know that it was enough because Jesus was raised to life again on Easter morning. God doesn't ask your opinion when it comes to what is fair and what's not. The fact is Jesus takes your sin-stained hands into his nail-marked hands and washes them of every sin. He pleads with the Father on your behalf, points to the cross where payment was made and then to the empty tomb where he rose as the evidence that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

This doesn't give us a license to do whatever we want or to think it's fine to continue this cycle of sin. Fight against temptation. Resist the devil. And as we continue to fight and even after we have stumbled and fallen into that pet sin again, be reassured that your Father in heaven celebrates and is glad to give you his forgiveness. Breaking this cycle of sin doesn't come from who you are, how determined you might be, from you trying to be better a person or Christian. Stop looking to yourself and instead lift your eyes to the cross where Jesus destroyed the devil's work and freed you from sin. Thanks be to God he then gives us that victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.