

Time of Grace Ministry
That's Messed Up: God's Cleaning Solution
Judges 19
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Pastor Mike Novotny

Unchurched people, church people, religious people, spiritual people - we put an asterisk after every single commandment and we think that there's some exception. And without authority, without someone to say, "Hey, what are you doing?" Without someone overseeing our soul who's not just going to offer a suggestion and a nice message Sunday after Sunday, but will call you to repentance when you need it, your heart will deceive you and you might do what you see fit but God won't agree.

A few years ago, a female Christian blogger, Glennon Doyle, posted a picture; a picture of herself after her divorce snuggled up in the arms of another woman - soccer star Abby Wambach. I'm guessing Glennon knew that the topic would be controversial for her Instagram fans. And whenever we talk about spirituality and sexuality, the comment section fills up on either side of the issue lightning fast.

Let me show you just a snippet of what Glennon said to her online audience: "It's been my job for so long as a leader in this community to care deeply about what you think and feel about me and the way I live my life. Now it is my job as a leader not to concern myself too deeply about what you think and feel about me because what the world needs is to watch one woman at a time live her truth without asking for permission or offering explanation. The most revolutionary thing a woman can do is not explain herself. What I need you to know and what I know you need to know is that I'm deeply, finally fine." She continues: "Fine through my bones and soul and mind and just every fiber of me. You have the room to feel and react with your truth because I'm so unshakably certain inside of mine. I have officially become a woman who knows who she is and refuses to betray herself."

And I wonder what you think about that because that is a really, really common thing to believe here in our world. I mean, you've heard the phrases, right? You have to be true to yourself. You have to live your truth. You do you. You know, feel and react how you want but I've thought and I've prayed and I have to be real to follow this voice that's inside of my heart. And that's a really good thing for us to wrestle with today in the church. I mean, honestly, is it any of my business to know how you spend your weekends? What you post on the internet? What you do in the privacy of your own home? How you spend your money? Do you need anyone's permission, much less mine, or approval to just do you? To be true to yourself?

And I'm guessing you're very tempted to answer that question in a certain way. I mean, all of us know that people like me - pastors - and places like this - churches - do not have a flawless track record. How much hypocrisy, how many scandals, how many people like me just using God's name to get money, committing adultery, the abuse that's happened within the church - we've seen so much of it and so, I really don't blame Glennon for wondering if truth is to be found not

out there in some institution but in here as you wrestle with God in the quietness of your own heart.

But today, before we kind of dismiss the church and outside spiritual authority, I want to tell you a story. Because it turns out these things we hear in modern day America, it's not the first time that it ever appeared in the history of God's people. It started out bad and then it got worse and the story I'm going to tell you today is downright ugly. It happened in the book of Judges when there were no kings and when everyone did what they felt was best. Now, let me prove it to you. In the book of Judges, chapter 19, it says, "In those days, Israel had no king." There's no institution to report to. There was no guy who had spiritual oversight over your heart. It's kind of ironic, but in the days of the judges, there was no one to judge you. No one to be judgmental. No one to decide if what you believed and how you behaved was right or wrong and so, you can see the second passage: "Everyone did as they saw fit."

Back in Judges 19, there was a Levite. A Levite was like a person who was an assistant to a priest; like a worker in the church. And he had a concubine, which was kind of like a wife but not exactly; more like a really serious live-in girlfriend. And the concubine cheated on the Levite; she slept with another guy, she didn't want to be in a relationship with him anymore. In fact, she moves out and she goes all the way south to a little town called Bethlehem and she moves back in with her dad. But the Levite wants the relationship to work so he rides down on his donkey all the way to Bethlehem, he talks to her father day after day after day. He tries to work things out. We don't know if they reconciled or if he just forces her to come home but they begin their two day journey from way down south in Bethlehem back to their hometown.

By the end of the first day of travel, a really long day on the back of a donkey, they need to find a place to stay. Except, there's a problem. The problem is as the sun is setting, they are right outside the city of Jerusalem. And in those days, Jerusalem was where the bad people lived; the non-Israelite people; the pagan, idol-worshipping people. And the Levite did not want to take his concubine to stay there; they might not survive the night. And so he says to her, "Let's keep pushing north. Let's make it up to Israelite country. Let's get to a city called Gibeah where God's people, where good people, live." And so that's what he does. And kind of like the dad coming back from the spring break trip in Florida and he doesn't want to stay in an inner-city motel, he's going to push it another hour to get to the suburbs; that's what the Levite does. So he and the concubine get to Gibeah and what do you know - they meet a really good person. They meet an old man who invites them into his home, who prepares a meal, who shows him hospitality, who pours a couple glasses of wine. They're enjoying themselves and that's right when things get really, really, really messed up. I'll let the book of Judges tell you the story.

It says: "While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, 'Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.' The owner of the house went outside and said to them, 'No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this outrageous thing. Look, here's my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I'll bring them out to you now and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don't do such an outrageous thing.' But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at

dawn they let her go. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight."

That's messed up. But it's not even the most messed up part of the story. It gets worse as the story continues. It says, "When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way," apparently not caring one bit about her, "there lay his concubine fallen in the doorway of the house with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, 'Get up; let's go.' But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home. When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel. Everyone who saw it was saying to one another, 'Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since they day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine; we must do something. So speak up.'"

Well, that's messed up. When the bloody packages arrived in the mail, even Israel - who is so far from God - they know that this is outrageous and justice has to happen. And so they call the entire country, the entire army of Israel - 400,000 soldiers gather - and they march to Gibeah to pay them back. Except, Benjamin won't let it happen. Benjamin was the tribe; kind of like the state where the city of Gibeah was located. And they were not about to let the other tribes tell them what was right or wrong. They were going to do what they saw was fit and so they stood up to fight. Twenty-six thousand, seven hundred men in Benjamin try to take on 400,000 Israelites and it's a bloodbath. Sixty thousand people die; more than all the American soldiers in the Vietnam War combined. Benjamin is wiped out; only 600 Benjamite soldiers survive and they scurry to the desert like bugs just to live and see another day. They had lived as 12 tribes. It would be like us waking up tomorrow and there's not 50 states but 49; something wasn't right. God gave us 12 tribes, 12 sons of that ancient man named Israel and now we're down to eleven. We have to fix this. But they didn't know how to fix it. So how will they marry? How will they have children? How will they rebuild from those small 600 men? But then - then - someone has an idea. They say, "Oh, you know who didn't show up to fight? The city of Jabesh Gilead. And so they march to Jabesh Gilead, they slaughter all the men, the married women, and they take all the virgin girls that they can find from the city and they marry them to the Benjamites except they can only find 400 poor girls and there's 200 Benjamite bachelors left. Until someone comes up with the most disturbing idea of them all.

The men, the soldiers, said, "Look, there's the annual festival of the Lord in Shiloh, which lies north of Bethel, east of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem and south of Lebonah.' So they instructed the Benjamites saying, 'Go and hide in the vineyards and watch. When the young women of Shiloh come out and join in the dancing, rush from the vineyards and each of you seize one of them to be your wife. Then return to the land of Benjamin. When their fathers or brothers complain to us, we will say to them, 'Do us the favor of helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war. You will not be guilty of breaking your oath because you did not give your daughters to them.' So that is what the Benjamites did. While the young women were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife. Then they returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and settled in them. At that time, the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance."

Someone's sister, someone's daughter, was going to church to worship God and some creeps came running out of the bushes, kidnapped them, raped them, and made them their wives. And when the fathers and brothers went to get back the girls for their family, a massive army of hundreds of thousands said, "No, no, no." And that's what happened. They did what they thought was best; what they saw fit.

And in fact, there's just one last verse in the book of Judges; this is how the entire, sad, disgusting story ends. Judges 21:25 says this: "In those days Israel had no king and everyone did as they saw fit." And do you know what the most messed up thing of all is? These were spiritual people. Go home today and read Judges 17 through 21, the last chapters of the book, and you will find people who are praying, who say they believe in God, who had a very sincere personal form of spirituality but they did not have authority and the result is a complete tragedy. In fact, if you're taking notes, here's what I want you to take away from this story: That spirituality, trying to believe in God, trying to follow Jesus without authority, without structure, without someone overseeing your soul, is idolatry. We will idolize the things that we feel and think. We will assume that God just agrees with us and the end will not be the way and the will of God. It will not be the beliefs and the behavior that Jesus embraced. It will be something else as we call our own shots and play the role of God.

If you know the answer to that question, if you know why Jesus and the apostles and the prophets continually rejected that kind of thinking, you will become desperate for something more than your own heart. You will learn to embrace the community of faith and spiritual authority despite all of its flaws. Here, maybe more than anything, is what I want you to remember - this passage from Jeremiah 17 - where the prophet Jeremiah said, "The heart," your heart, my heart, "is deceitful above all things and beyond cure."

See, here's what I've seen time and time again with church people and unchurched people. When we separate ourselves from community, when we stop feeling the need to offer an explanation and get permission from God himself through this book, we end up making 100 exceptions to the 10 Commandments. And I know this is a heavy thing to think about but I want you to examine your own heart right now. Do you make your own personal exceptions to God's commandments? Let me test your heart: God says you shall have no other gods. And our hearts want to say, well, that's just like bowing down to gold statues, right? That's not like what I spend the most of my money on and my energy and where my thoughts go when I'm just daydreaming. That's not the thing I trust to give me a good life, the thing I fear losing more than anything else, is it?

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. Well, that doesn't count if you're just joking or you're not thinking about God, right? Oh, my God, or I swear to God and I mean, I'm not breaking that commandment if I just assume Jesus takes my side because I'm doing the best I can.

Or remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy; sacred time to gather for worship. Well, unless it's busy. Unless friends are in town. Unless the kids have a game. Sorry, church family. Unless it's beautiful out. Unless you're on vacation. Unless there's a boat to spend a great day on.

Unless you had a bad experience. Unless you met a hypocritical Christian. You know, those are all asterisks, right?

See, we do it every day. Every day. It's messed up. Unchurched people, church people, religious people, spiritual people, we put an asterisk after every single commandment and we think that there's some exception. And without authority, without someone to say, "Hey, what are you doing?" Without someone overseeing our soul who's not just going to offer a suggestion and a nice message Sunday after Sunday, but will call you to repentance when you need it, your heart will deceive you and you might do what you see fit. But God won't agree.

Pastor Dale Davis wrote a really intriguing commentary about the book of Judges and in response to these final, sad, messed up chapters, he wrote these words. He says, "The problem is not sins but sin. That declaration of independence, whether stated viciously or politely." And we've all done one of the two. You know, some of us hate church and we might kind of put up the façade, it's all hypocrisy, it's all about greed, but deep down I'm guessing there's something more. It's that we don't want anyone telling us what to do. We don't want any pastor, any church family, any doctrinal statement, any book try to tell us how to live our life because we're going to do us. And others of us, we've just stated it more politely. We make a post about love and tolerance and living your truth and accepting every lifestyle. But either way, it is the sin of all sins; it's trying to take the place of God.

So where's the good news? You know, every time I get ready to talk to you, every time I study the Bible and prepare a message, I'm always asking one question: Where's the good news? Where's the hope and where's the forgiveness? Where's Jesus in this part of the Bible? And can I be really, really honest with you? When I opened up the Bible to this page, I couldn't find it. There was no happy ending. There was no, "Look how this all worked out after those terrible, terrible things." It just ends, "In those days, Israel had no king and everyone did as they saw fit." I couldn't find the good news for the longest time until I saw it. Can I show you the good news in the book of Judges? Here you go. You see it? Let me show you one more time. This is the messed up story of Judges and that is the good news.

The good news is there's a book called Ruth and 50-plus books in the following pages. The good news is that as dysfunctional and messed up and corrupt and idolatrous and independent as God's people were, he was so messed up in his commitment to them that he would give them another chance and another page. Ruth 1:1 says, "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land," and the story continued. In fact, if you want some good news today, I want you to write this down in your programs. The good news is thank God for Ruth. Thank God there's another book, right? Thank God this is not the end of the story. There's another page, there's another chapter, and there is another verse. And isn't that such good news for you? I know some of you; I've heard some of your stories. I got texts and emails this week and some of you - you know that you're messed up, right? You're facing jail time and you're battling addiction and you're so far from God and you know it. Some of you were doing so well with pornography and then you relapsed like a day before a church service and you know it's messed up. Some of you are trying to forgive from the heart and someone wronged you and you just can't get past it and you hate that thing inside of you because it's so messed up.

So here's what I want to tell you: That God is so good. He's so good that he brought you here. He tuned you in. He heard the sound of my voice so that you would know that if you have the most messed up night, there is good news in the morning. In fact, in one of the darkest chapters that comes after the story of Judges, there's a man named Jeremiah; the guy who said your heart is deceitful above all things. His heart would trick him and he was messed up and he knew it but he wrote these incredible famous words in the Old Testament. Let me show you Lamentations chapter three. He says, "Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." And maybe if you have space and you get that tattoo right here, "The heart is deceitful," maybe you can put this beneath it: "Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed." And when you stumble into a church and you know that you don't belong, you don't fit, it's messed up. When you think God's going to send a roof collapsing down on your head, he's going to consume you with justice and anger. No, because of the Lord's great love, it's not going to happen. And when you wake up and you feel guilty and you wish you wouldn't have said it and you wish your life would have been different, there's new mercy every single morning.

And so if you battle envy, if you battle lust, if you battle anger, if you just can't get your heart passionate about God, I want to tell you thank God for Ruth. Do you know why I thank God for Ruth? Because the book of Ruth ends with a name. Does anyone know it? In the day of Judges, there was this woman named Ruth and it's one of the most romantic, like not messed up stories, in the Old Testament. She meets a guy named Boaz and they have a baby named Obed and Obed has a son named Jesse and Jesse has a son named David. And he would become the second king of Israel. There was no king but God was going to send one. And David would be messed up but 1,000 years after David, someone from Ruth's family line, a son of David would be born in that city of Bethlehem, where things were so dysfunctional and his name would be Jesus.

The reason that God's mercy is new every morning is because Jesus came into this world. God left heaven, a perfect place. He came into this dysfunctional, messed up human family and it got messed up. He didn't keep his hands clean. I mean, if your heart breaks for that poor concubine, her hand stretched out on the threshold of the door - think of Jesus; his hand stretched out on the cross. If you cringe as godless people ravaged that woman for hours and hours, think of Jesus ravaged by godless people and hanging on a cross. Except Jesus wasn't a victim of it; he chose it so he could take all the messed up things that you and I do and he could give us in return something beautiful that the Bible calls righteousness. That you can look in the mirror after everything that's happened and know that you are right with God. That he feels compassion towards you. That his great love will never - it will never fail you. And therefore, God's anger will never consume you.

Here's the good news: There's a story called Ruth and there's mercy new for us every single day. And so, I know, I know, I know - that pastors are messed up, too. Some of you have seen my sins and as hard as I work on it, I'm going to fail you, and organized religion will fail you, and the people who come to this church are messed up and they're going to fail you, too. But don't walk away from it; God has good advice. Don't trust your own heart. Live in community, live under spiritual authority because one day you're going to need it. You're going to do something that's messed up and you're going to stumble into a church and there's going to be a person like

me who's going to open a book like that and instead of giving you just some nice suggestion, I'm going to speak with all the authority of God himself. And I'm going to say, "Because of his great love, we are not consumed. His mercy is new every morning. You're forgiven of all of your sins so leave here with joy and peace." And I'll say it not as a suggestion but as a word from God. Thank God for the book of Ruth. Thank God for the grace of Jesus. Amen.

Let's pray.

Dear God, the devil must be so happy; there's so many people who are so disconnected from you and they don't know it. And they think they're good but they're not and they don't confess their sins and they need to. And they come to church and they think they're good Christians but, God, they haven't really repented and they haven't owned their stuff and so I pray that you would help a church like this and every church around the world; that you would give us integrity and that you would help us speak with authority.

God, there is not a single person in this world that you want to go to hell. You want to call everyone to repentance. And so, I pray that we could be the church; that we would speak not suggestions but the word of God to call the people that we love back to you not so that we can control them, but so we can bless them with a word of grace and mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus, I thank you for being you. I've done so many messed up things in my life. I'm 37 and sometimes, I think about the decisions I made when I was 18, the decisions I made when I was 21, the decisions I made last week. And yet, there is joy for us; for everyone who believes in Jesus. There is no guilt, no shame, no regret; there's just you and your face is shining on us and you are so gracious to us. And so, I pray for every heart who hears this prayer, that even as we go back to the war and to the struggle against that thing in our hearts, that more than anything else, we would know that you are pleased with us because of what Jesus did.

Thank you, Jesus, for being our Savior. Thank you for not giving good advice but giving good news to messed up people. We pray this all in your powerful, your beautiful, and your saving name, Amen.



TIME OF GRACE®

That's Messed Up: God's Cleaning Solution

Study Notes

Summary

The ending of Bible book of Judges requires an adult I.D. to read. A woman chopped into pieces and mailed throughout Israel? That's really messed up! But the Spirit inspired this story to prove two points. First, that life falls apart when everyone does what he or she thinks is right. Second, that God does not give up on people after the most disgusting sins.

- “It has been my job for so long as a leader in this community to care deeply about what you think and feel about me and the way I live my life. . . . Now it is my job as a leader not to concern myself too deeply about what you think and feel about me. . . . Because what the world needs . . . is to watch one woman at a time live her truth without asking for permission or offering explanation. The most revolutionary thing a woman can do is not explain herself. What I need you to know—and what I know you need to know—is that I am deeply, finally, FINE. Fine through my bones and soul and mind and just every fiber of me. You have the room to feel and react with your truth . . . because I am so unshakably certain inside of mine. I have officially become a woman who knows who she is and refuses to betray herself.”—Christian blogger Glennon Doyle
- **Judges 19:1:** In those days Israel had no king.
- **Judges 21:25:** Everyone did as they saw fit.
- **Judges 19:22-26:** ²² While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, “Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.” ²³ The owner of the house went outside and said to them, “No, my friends, don’t be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don’t do this outrageous thing. ²⁴ Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don’t do such an outrageous thing.” ²⁵ But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. ²⁶ At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight.

- **Judges 19:27-30:** ²⁷ When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ²⁸ He said to her, “Get up; let’s go.” But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home. ²⁹ When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel. ³⁰ Everyone who saw it was saying to one another, “Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine! We must do something! So speak up!”
- **Judges 21:19-24:** ¹⁹ But look, there is the annual festival of the LORD in Shiloh, which lies north of Bethel, east of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.” ²⁰ So they instructed the Benjamites, saying, “Go and hide in the vineyards ²¹ and watch. When the young women of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, rush from the vineyards and each of you seize one of them to be your wife. Then return to the land of Benjamin. ²² When their fathers or brothers complain to us, we will say to them, ‘Do us the favor of helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war. You will not be guilty of breaking your oath because you did not give your daughters to them.’” ²³ So that is what the Benjamites did. While the young women were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife. Then they returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and settled in them. ²⁴ At that time the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance.
- **Judges 21:25:** ²⁵ In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.
- Spirituality without authority is _____.
- **Jeremiah 17:9:** The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?
- “The problem is not sins but sin, that declaration of independence—whether stated viciously or politely.”—Dale Davis
- Thank God for _____!
- **Lamentations 3:22,23:** ²² Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Points to Ponder

1. Why do you think being “spiritual but not religious” is an increasingly popular point of view? What can our church do to encourage people to reconnect with a church home, accountability, and spiritual authority? What other insights does Jesus give on this issue in John 3:19,20?

2. Evaluate the common expressions “living your truth” and “being true to yourself.” What logical flaws do you find in these beliefs? (Hint: what happens if my truth hurts other people?) Based on his words in John 17:17, what would Jesus think of these phrases?

3. Check out Paul’s words in Romans 7:21-25. When we realize how messed up our hearts are, where can we turn?

Homework for Next Week

Read Genesis 25:19-34.

*“God justifies the ungodly.”
—The apostle Paul (Romans 4:5)*