

Homiletics Analysis: Judges 21

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Judges 21 brings the book to its grim conclusion. Following the near-annihilation of Benjamin in the civil war of chapters 19–20, the assembled tribes discover they have made an oath at Mizpah not to give their daughters to Benjamin in marriage. The tribe faces extinction. The assembly weeps before the LORD at Bethel and asks how to preserve the surviving six hundred Benjaminite men. Two solutions are devised. First, discovering that no one from Jabesh-gilead attended the assembly at Mizpah, the tribes send twelve thousand warriors to slaughter the entire population of Jabesh-gilead — men, women, and previously married women — and bring back four hundred virgin women for the Benjaminites. This is still two hundred short. Second, the elders devise a plan by which the remaining Benjaminites will abduct women from the daughters of Shiloh who come out to dance at a yearly feast, so that the tribes technically keep their oath by not “giving” their daughters. Both strategies are executed, Benjamin is preserved, the tribes disperse, and the book closes with its epitaph: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

This Text — Intent

The intent of this text is not to provide a model or to narrate a triumph. It is to display, with devastating completeness, the spiritual and moral collapse of a covenant people left to their own devices. God is holding up a mirror. The assembly weeps, takes oaths, prays, and appeals to the LORD — all the outward forms of covenant life — while devising solutions that compound atrocity upon atrocity. The intent is to produce in the reader a profound discomfort with human autonomy dressed in religious costume, a recognition that religious activity without submission to God’s word produces monsters, and a desperate longing for the only King who can deliver Israel from itself. The chapter functions as a diagnosis that makes the remedy — and ultimately the Redeemer — not optional but urgent.

Subject Sentence: Israel’s self-governed chaos demands a King Israel cannot provide for itself.

Primary Claim: When God’s people abandon His rule and substitute their own moral reasoning — even in religious forms — the result is compounding destruction, and no human solution can arrest the spiral; only a King from outside the system can save them.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Narrative Voice and the “No King” Refrain

The central interpretive question in Judges 21 is how to read the book’s closing refrain: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (v. 25). Some interpreters read this as straightforwardly pro-monarchical — the narrator is setting up the need for the Davidic kingship that 1 Samuel will introduce, and the chaos of Judges is simply the period before the monarchy stabilized Israel. On this reading, the implied solution is the Davidic king, full stop.

This reading partially holds but overreaches. The refrain does not merely call for a human king. Samuel will go on to demonstrate that human kingship in Israel is no guaranteed solution — Saul fails, David commits adultery and murder, Solomon multiplies wives and horses in direct violation of Deuteronomy 17. The refrain functions as a redemptive-historical pointer, not a political prescription. What Judges 21 exposes is not the absence of institutional monarchy but the absence of a king who is himself perfectly submitted to God’s law — a king who does not himself “do what is right in his own eyes.” The Reformed reading holds that the “king in Israel” whom Judges ultimately anticipates is the one true King whose perfect obedience Israel never supplied from within her own ranks.

Moral Complicity and Narrative Distance

Some interpreters, particularly from a social-ethical tradition, read Judges 21 primarily as a text about violence against women — the women of Jabesh-gilead slaughtered, the daughters of Shiloh abducted — and argue that the narrator endorses or minimizes these atrocities. The text should be preached, on this reading, as a direct address to the ongoing problem of gendered violence.

This reading surfaces something the text genuinely contains: the women are victims, their suffering is real, and the text does not moralize it away. However, the narrator does not endorse these actions — the entire literary structure of chapters 19–21 is a descent narrative, and the passive reporting of these events is a technique of moral horror, not moral approval. The refrain “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” is the narrator’s evaluative verdict. To read the text as endorsing the violence is to misread narrative distance as moral neutrality. The text indicts the perpetrators precisely by showing the outcomes without validation. The Reformed reading acknowledges the text’s honest portrayal of sin’s effects while refusing to reduce the passage to a social commentary that detaches it from its theological frame.

The Role of the Oaths

A recurring question is whether the text treats the Mizpah oath as binding and the tribes’ solutions as legitimate attempts to honor it, or whether the entire oath-and-workaround structure is itself part of the indictment. Some traditions (particularly those with a strong

emphasis on vow-keeping as an absolute) treat the tribes' dilemma as genuine and their creative solutions as praiseworthy ingenuity.

The Reformed reading refutes this. The oath at Mizpah was itself rash and disproportionate — made in the heat of a tribal war that should never have occurred. The “solutions” devised to preserve it are transparently casuistic: slaughtering an entire town and abducting its virgins is not a righteous resolution of a vow, and the elders know this, which is why they construct elaborate technicalities. The text's irony is thick — the assembly that invokes God's name throughout cannot perceive that their solutions are as disordered as the original crisis. The oath is not the problem; the absence of God's governing word is the problem, and the oath becomes one more instrument of autonomous human reasoning operating in a vacuum.

Verdict: The Reformed reading that best accounts for the whole text reads Judges 21 as the deliberate, devastating capstone of a descent narrative: Israel's covenant structures (oath, assembly, worship at Bethel) have been hollowed out by the absence of a king — not merely an institutional monarch, but the Perfect King whose obedience Israel cannot generate from within. The refrain is a redemptive-historical wound that will not heal until 2 Samuel 7, and ultimately until the one who is both Son of David and Son of God.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 17:14–20** — The law of the king: Israel's king is to be one who reads the Torah daily, does not multiply horses or wives, and does not “lift his heart above his brothers.” Judges 21 shows the precise opposite — self-exaltation, ungoverned impulse, and multiplication of destruction. The contrast is canonical commentary.
- **1 Samuel 8:1–22** — Israel's demand for a king “like the nations” is the direct sequel to Judges' diagnosis. God warns that human kingship will replicate the oppression Israel experienced in Egypt. The longing for a king that Judges 21 implies is immediately complicated by Samuel — pointing the reader further forward.
- **2 Samuel 7:12–16** — The Davidic covenant establishes a king whose throne will endure forever. This is the canonical answer to the Judges refrain, but even David is not the final answer — the covenant points forward to David's greater Son.
- **Psalms 72** — The Messianic vision of the king who defends the poor, crushes the oppressor, and brings shalom from sea to sea. Every king in Judges (and in Israel's subsequent history) fails this standard. Psalm 72 names what Judges 21 shows is missing.
- **Revelation 19:11–16** — The final appearing of the King of kings — the one who judges in righteousness, whom no human king in Israel typified perfectly. Judges 21's longing reaches its ultimate answer not in the institution of monarchy but in the person of Christ, the only King who does perfectly what is right in God's eyes.

Aim: To bring the reader to a clear-eyed recognition that autonomous human moral reasoning — even clothed in religious forms — cannot save, and to drive that recognition toward Christ as the only sufficient King.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The oath at Mizpah: no Israelite shall give his daughter to Benjamin in marriage	Oath made in the heat of war; already foreshadows the crisis to come
2–3	The assembly at Bethel weeps and laments the near-extinction of a tribe; cries out “Why, O LORD?”	Religious form preserved; God does not respond — the question is itself disordered
4	They build an altar and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings	Covenant worship activity continues amid moral chaos
5	Query: Who among the tribes did not come up to Mizpah? Death was sworn against any absentee	A second rash oath surfaces, providing the pretext for the next atrocity
6–7	Compassion for Benjamin; “We have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them our daughters” — but they need wives	The self-made dilemma: oath + compassion = manufactured crisis
8–9	Discovery: no one from Jabesh-gilead attended the assembly	Jabesh-gilead’s absence becomes a pretext; the logic is now fully self-referential
10–12	Twelve thousand warriors sent to Jabesh-gilead; all except four hundred virgin women slaughtered	Mass killing justified by oath; the irony of destroying a city to save a tribe is unremarked
13–14	Benjamin offered peace; the four hundred women given to them; still two hundred short	The “solution” is incomplete — the self-created problem persists
15	Assembly grieves again	Theological passivity — the

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	because the LORD had made a gap in the tribes	LORD's action is acknowledged, but no return to His word
16–18	Elders devise the Shiloh plan; acknowledge they cannot give their daughters because of the oath	The casuistic workaround: abduction is technically not “giving”
19–22	Instructions for the abduction at the annual feast at Shiloh; elders promise to handle any protests	The plan is deliberate, institutional, sanctioned by elders — not the act of rogue individuals
23	The plan executed; Benjamin rebuilds, returns to inheritance	Surface restoration; no repentance, no return to God's word, no acknowledgment of sin
24–25	Tribes disperse; closing refrain: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”	The narrator's final verdict — the book's definitive diagnosis

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	The Self-Made Dilemma: The Assembly Weeps Over the Consequences of Its Own Oaths
2	8–14	The First Solution: Jabesh-gilead Destroyed to Preserve Benjamin
3	15–23	The Second Solution: Shiloh's Daughters Abducted by Institutional Design
4	24–25	The Closing Verdict: Everyone Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel's self-governed chaos demands a King Israel cannot provide for itself.

Primary Claim: When God's people abandon His rule and substitute their own moral reasoning — even in religious forms — the result is compounding destruction, and no human solution can arrest the spiral; only a King from outside the system can save them.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that religious activity without submission to God's word is not worship — it is self-management with a theological vocabulary. (*Mind/belief*) The assembly in Judges 21 weeps, builds altars, offers sacrifices, and calls upon the LORD's name — and does all of it without once returning to what God has actually said. The form of covenant life is fully intact; the substance is completely absent. Examine whether your prayer, your church attendance, your religious vocabulary is orienting you toward what God has actually said, or whether it is functioning as a sophisticated way of seeking divine endorsement for decisions you have already made.

2. Feel the weight of what autonomous moral reasoning produces in those around you — and let it grieve you rather than merely appall you. (*Affections/worship*) The women of Jabesh-gilead and the daughters of Shiloh are never named. They are the voiceless casualties of a system that congratulated itself on its covenant faithfulness while dismembering them. The reader is meant to feel this — not as an abstraction about violence but as a wound in the human community caused by the absence of God's reign. Christians who have been delivered into the kingdom of God's Son are called to grieve, not merely critique, the compounding damage that human autonomy produces in the world around them.

3. Identify the rash oaths and self-constructed moral frameworks in your own life that you are now managing consequences of rather than repenting of. (*Will/behavior*) The tribes were not trapped by God's law. They were trapped by their own words, spoken in their own heat, defended by their own ingenuity. The text invites honest examination: Where have you constructed obligations, commitments, or self-justifying narratives that you are now building elaborate systems to maintain — because true repentance would cost too much? The exit the text offers is not more clever management. It is return.

4. Rest the longing that Judges 21 produces — for order, for justice, for a ruler who will finally get it right — on the only King who does. (*Affections/worship*) Judges 21 is designed to produce ache. The reader finishes the book wanting something that Israel could never provide — a king who is himself perfectly submitted to God, who does not do what is right in his own eyes but only what is right in God's eyes. That King has come. Jesus Christ is the one ruler in the entire biblical narrative who perfectly fulfills Deuteronomy 17

— who does not multiply horses or wives, who does not lift his heart above his brothers, who governs by God’s word alone. The longing Judges produces is intended to land on Him.

5. Stop constructing workarounds to avoid the cost of obedience, and submit your unresolved moral dilemmas directly to God’s word. (*Will/behavior*) The elders of Israel in Judges 21 are not villains in the mustache-twirling sense — they are people who care about the tribe, who want to solve the problem, who feel genuine grief. And they never once ask: “What does the LORD require here?” They ask only: “What can we get away with given what we have already committed to?” This is the precise failure that Christian discipleship is designed to address. When you face a genuine moral dilemma — competing obligations, past mistakes with ongoing consequences, situations where every option seems to cost something — the first move is not ingenuity. It is the word.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Judges 21 teaches that the image of God in human beings does not prevent the horrific — it shapes the horrific into recognizable forms: grief, ceremony, compassion, communal decision-making, oath-keeping. What is missing is not human capacity but divine governance. The passage reveals that covenant structures (oath, assembly, sacrifice, the name of the LORD) are not self-sustaining — they require the living word of God to animate them from within; without it they become instruments of self-justification. The passage also teaches that sin compounds: the crisis of chapter 19 generates the war of chapter 20, which generates the extinction crisis of chapter 21, which generates two new atrocities as “solutions.” This is not incidental — it is the theological logic of autonomy. Every departure from God’s rule produces a disorder that human ingenuity can only relocate, not resolve.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Judges 21 is a sustained display of what Reformed theology calls total depravity operating at the corporate level — not the absence of moral capacity or genuine emotion, but the thorough corruption of every faculty so that even religious devotion serves the self rather than God. The passage also demonstrates the insufficiency of the law as external constraint without an internal king — what Israel needed was not merely a written Torah but a ruler who was himself conformed to that Torah from the heart, which is precisely what the Davidic covenant anticipates and the new covenant in Christ fulfills (Jeremiah 31:33). The “no king” refrain is therefore not merely political commentary — it is a redemptive-historical pointer to the one who perfectly fulfills Psalm 72 and Deuteronomy 17. For Reformed preaching, this means Judges 21 must not be preached as a morality tale (“don’t make rash oaths”) but as gospel preparation — a wound that makes the Physician necessary.

Main Takeaway

You cannot solve the problem of a world without God's rule by trying harder, grieving louder, or constructing more elaborate workarounds. Judges 21 ends exactly where it began — with more casualties and no redemption, because Israel kept appealing to God's name while ignoring God's word and refusing God's King. The only exit from the spiral Judges describes is the King who has actually come — the one who did not do what was right in His own eyes but only what was right in the Father's, and who did it perfectly, in your place, at infinite cost. That King reigns. Submit to Him.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Judges 21 as a morality tale about rash oaths.** The practical lesson (“be careful what you swear”) is not wrong, but it is catastrophically small for this text. If the sermon lands primarily on oath-keeping caution, the preacher has taken a scalpel to a text that is wielding a sword. The passage is not a case study in decision-making failure; it is a theological indictment of a covenant people who substituted their own judgment for God's governance. Reduce it to vow management and you have missed everything.
- **Treating the “no king” refrain as a simple endorsement of human monarchy.** If the sermon implies that Israel's problem was solved by David's coronation, the preacher has left the congregation with a smaller gospel than the text demands. The Davidic kings failed too — and the narrator of Samuel knows this. The refrain points forward, past David, past Solomon, to the son of David who is also the Son of God. Preach the refrain with its full canonical weight.
- **Moralizing the applications as “do better.”** The Reformed homiletical principle from Clowney applies with full force here: this text must not be preached as “be like X, don't be like Y.” The application is not “be a better decision-maker” or “consult God more often.” The application is “you cannot save yourself from the spiral that autonomy produces — you need the King who has already come.” Application must be grounded in gospel indicative, not bare imperative.
- **Glossing over the violence against women as mere background detail.** The women of Jabesh-gilead and the daughters of Shiloh are casualties, not props. A faithful exposition must name their suffering honestly — the text does not minimize it, and the preacher should not either. However, naming it should serve the text's theological diagnosis (what does this tell us about what sin produces and who God's people had become?) rather than reducing the sermon to a social commentary that detaches the passage from its redemptive-historical frame.

- **Failing to let the text produce the ache it is designed to produce.** Judges 21 is written to leave the reader undone. A sermon that resolves the tension too quickly — by moving to application before the weight has landed — robs the passage of its intended effect. The preacher should let the congregation sit in the final image: the tribes dispersing, Benjamin rebuilding, no repentance, no resolution, just the closing refrain over a landscape of unburied grief. *Then* point to the King. The ache is not a homiletical problem to be solved; it is the passage's primary instrument of grace.
- **Ignoring the canonical placement and preaching the chapter in isolation.** Judges 21 cannot be fully preached without at least noting that it is the conclusion of the Gibeah narrative (chapters 19–21) and the conclusion of the entire book. The sermon should locate the congregation within the downward spiral that has been building, so that the closing refrain lands with the force of a verdict, not merely an observation. The congregation should feel that they have arrived somewhere — and that somewhere is the end of what Israel could do for itself.