**The Gibeonite Deception**

Of all the arcane rules of mathematics, none is more mysterious to me than the rule of negative numbers. I was taught (not saying it’s true) that multiplying 2 negative numbers will result in a positive number. I’m at a loss to understand the dynamics involved and I can truthfully say that I have never actually encountered a real life situation that involved such a maneuver. It seems fraudulent to me that by applying some hocus pocus that you could rid yourself of a troublesome negative number. I am of course familiar with negative numbers, having reviewed countless financial statements in my career. In my experience, the only solution to a negative number is to apply positive numbers until you’re back in the black. If a negative number could legitimately be eliminated by such a multiplication sleight of hand, I am sure an enterprising accountant would have tried it by now. This begs the question: Do 2 wrongs make a right? Until recently, I would have said no but a crime that I am about to confess has me reconsidering my position. A few weeks ago, I went through the self checkout at Publix and when I got to my car, I was appalled to find an unscanned item in the bottom of my buggy. My initial reaction was to take the item back in to scan it but then it occurred to me that on a previous shopping trip, I had double scanned an item of greater value. On that day, all the employees were busy so I just paid extra for it. As I see it, I am greater than square with Publix although they might not agree with my methods. Indeed, I am sure that I have been the object of Publix stink eye in my last few trips there (see Prov. 28:1). They seem to be the sort of folks who are more interested in judgement than grace. I eagerly anticipate the opening of the new Lowes supermarket so that I can start with a clean slate. In our study of Joshua chapter 9, we see how Joshua dealt with a situation where one possible solution was applying 2 wrongs in hope of making a right.

The chapter begins with the kings of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites joining together to go to war against the Israelites. These kings ruled territory extending from the hills west of the Jordan River all the way to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The people of Gibeon decided to attempt a ruse rather than going to battle against the Israelites. They sent a delegation to meet with Joshua to ask for a treaty with Israel. They were dressed in worn out clothes and carried cracked wineskins and moldy bread in old sacks to make it appear that they had traveled a long distance. They claimed to come from a distant country. Joshua and other men of Israel were slightly suspicious that they might have actually lived nearby and asked where they came from. As further evidence of their craftiness, the Gibeonites answered with a long winded response designed to avoid directly identifying their home country.

In verse 14, we read that Joshua and the other men looked at the Gibeonites provisions but did not consult God. They made a treaty which was ratified by an oath of the leaders of the assembly (see Matt. 5:34, James 5:12 and Ecc. 5:4-5). Three days later, the Israelites discovered the truth, that the men they thought came from a distant land were actually citizens of Gibeon and other nearby cities which were located only about 20 miles west of the Israelite camp at Gilgal. They refrained from attacking them because of the oath they had taken. The whole assembly complained of this but the leaders maintained that they could not break the oath they had taken. The people were somewhat mollified with the pronouncement that the Gibeonites would be required to serve as wood cutters and water carriers. Joshua summoned the Gibeonite leaders and asked why they had lied. Their reason was plain and practical, it was fear. It was not so much the Israelites they feared but God (see v. 9, 10 and 24). The chapter closes with Joshua upholding the treaty.

Some observations:

We see no mention of Gibeonite kings. The cities that planned to attack the Israelites were led by kings. It is often the leaders of countries who go to war against the wishes of their citizens. In WW2, 4.2 million Germans died because of the maniacal actions 1 man and I think most of those people did not desire war. Churches are not immune as leaders have sometimes taken congregations down paths the majority of members would not approve.

Joshua had 2 options, he could have honored the treaty or voided it since it was not ordained by God. He committed 1 wrong by not consulting God and he could have committed another wrong by violating an oath, hoping to satisfy God’s requirement that they not enter into treaties with Canaanite people (see Ex. 34:12 and Deut. 7:1-4). Two wrongs making a right.

Consider the motives of the Gibeonite people. They could have chosen the direct paths of making war or pursuing peace honestly. They did neither, choosing deception instead. Matthew Henry noted that had they dealt honestly with Joshua, the terms of peace offered to them may have been more favorable. Some consider the Gibeonite actions to be similar to that of the unjust steward (see Luke 16:1-13). It is ironic that people known for their idol worship would be employed in service at the tabernacle (see v. 27). Henry also noted that we must charitably consider that the Gibeonites came to a saving knowledge of God. There is some evidence of their right relationship with God (see 2nd Sam. chap 21 1-7).

Finally, Joshua was faced with a difficult decision. Would 2 wrongs make a right or should he honor the treaty? As Pastor Steve said recently, we take 3 approaches to decisions: 1. We don’t consult God at all. 2. We make a decision then ask God to bless it (the close cousin of asking for forgiveness rather than permission). 3. The best approach is seeking God’s will before we make decisions.