

## “Focus on the Family” (Judges 1–21)

There is an old Chinese story about a silly old man who lived in northern China. His house faced toward the south, and there were two large mountains that were more or less in his back yard. He wanted to see to the north, so one day he and his sons took their garden hoes and decided to remove the two mountains. One of his neighbors who had a reputation for wisdom said to the old man, “How absurd! You can’t move two mountains with nothing more than garden hoes.” The old man looked at him and said, “When I die, my sons will continue this work. When they die, my grandsons will carry on; and then there will be great grandsons, and so on. Even though those mountains are high, they can’t get any higher, but with every bit we dig they will be getting smaller.” The weakness in the old man’s reasoning, of course, lies in the notion of his offspring’s commitment to continue the work. What is a vision in the first generation tends to become *formality* in the next and *apathy* in the third.<sup>1</sup>

This ancient Chinese proverb has certainly been true throughout our study of Judges. The woes of Israel are nearly identical to our own as a nation. Aristotle once said, “Tolerance and apathy are the last virtues of a dying society.” This statement was true for Israel and is prophetic for the church. The greatest danger we face is becoming tolerant and apathetic. This is especially true in our relationship with Christ and our family. As a church our vision is “transferring truth to the next generation.” We are seeking to raise our children, grandchildren, and the next generation in the Lord. Yet, the sobering reality the Chinese proverb teaches is that the success of our vision is not guaranteed. It is critical, therefore, that we learn from the failures of the Israelites in the Book of Judges.<sup>2</sup> For when the foundation of a society based on God’s principles begins to crumble, the society begins to fall apart.<sup>3</sup> Or as I prefer: *As goes the home, so goes the nation*. Today we will “focus on the family”<sup>4</sup> and trace the family theme through the Book of Judges.

**Scene 1: The wise father, the respectful daughter, and the ideal husband (1:1–3:31).**<sup>5</sup> The Book of Judges begins well with the story of the godly Caleb offering his daughter Achsah as a reward to the man who conquers the Canaanite town Kiriath Sepher (1:12). A man by the name of Othniel takes the bait and is victorious in his quest. He is then given the undoubtedly beautiful Achsah as his wife (1:13). After their marriage, Achsah exhibits respect for her father, Caleb, when she steps off her horse and humbly requests a blessing from her dad. Caleb gives the young couple a generous spring so that Achsah can grow a garden and provide for her family (1:14–15). The implication is that Caleb is a wise and generous father. At first glance, it might seem that Caleb is not treating his daughter very well when he offers her as the prize for bravery, but it is important to recognize that Caleb’s challenge to the soldiers would ensure that his daughter married a strong and brave man who would be the leader of the family and provide for her.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, I think we can also conclude that the reason Othniel was able to take the city was because he had faith in God. That was the only way the Israelites ever won a battle. So the chances are also good that Caleb is providing a man of God for his daughter.<sup>7,8</sup> Each of the three characters in this initial narrative are spotlighted as examples.

Fathers, like Caleb, are you committed to finding a good husband for your daughter? Not that you have to meddle, if your daughter is older. But will you pray for her husband over the course of her young life? Will you set an example for her and explain to her what is important in a man? Fathers, are you committed to showing an interest in your daughter and giving her what she needs to be successful in her own marriage and family? Daughters, are you committed to displaying respect toward your father? Will you honor him and obey him? Will you humble yourself before him while you are single and when you are married? Sons, will you become the leader that God wants you to be *now* so that you can marry a godly woman who will not settle for anything less than God’s best? Will you be a courageous and honorable man? Will you pray that God will bless you with a young woman who far exceeds your own potential? The fulfillment of each of these family roles is essential and critical for *as goes the home, so goes the nation*.

Unfortunately, our story takes a turn for the worse. This wonderful account is followed by the saddest verse in the Book of Judges—Judges 2:10. The generation after Joshua “did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.” As a result of military compromises, this new generation “played the harlot after other gods” (2:17). They lived among the pagan nations “and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods” (3:5–6). The tragic events that follow in the book demonstrate that the absence of godly leadership in the family as well as in the nation resulted in everyone doing what was right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25).

Nevertheless, chapter 3 concludes with the first three judge stories: Othniel (3:7–11), Ehud (3:12–30), and Shamgar (3:31). Each of these judges is painted in a very positive light. They are men of valor who set the stage for coming stories by providing normative male roles and leadership, with only the beginnings of signs of decline.<sup>9</sup> Again, the warning sounds: *As goes the home, so goes the nation.*

**Scene 2: Two courageous women step up in significant ways (4:1–5:31).** God continues His original plan to use men to accomplish His purposes. Thus, He called Barak, Israel’s great general, to war. Through the prophet Deborah, He even promises Barak victory (4:6–7). Sadly, Barak responds to Deborah with these sad words: **“If you will go with me [Deborah], then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go”** (4:8). At first glance, it appears that Barak is a passive, girlie-man. However, it is more likely that he simply wants the assurance of God’s presence through the prophetess Deborah.<sup>10</sup> Instead of browbeating or ridiculing Barak, Deborah responds in 4:9 with patience and grace: **“I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.”** Deborah willingly accompanies Barak into battle; however she makes it clear that he will lose out on the honor God intended. Instead, God will raise up a woman that will receive the honor that Barak should have enjoyed. This is a terrible loss because the ancient near east culture is based on honor/shame. Nevertheless, Barak (and Deborah!) are victorious over Sisera and his men. But the honor goes to a woman by the name of Jael. Now, this is a bad mamajama! While Jael is minding her business, Sisera comes into her camp. She promptly invites the war-torn general into her tent and then proceeds to put a tent peg through his skull! I told you Jael was a bad mamajama. Who should have defeated Sisera? Barak, of course! But the honor went to Jael instead! Her face and bio were plastered all over the front of the Jerusalem Gazette. In light of these amazing victories, Deborah sings a song of praise giving the Lord glory and praise! Now who should have written this song? Barak, of course! But God raised up a woman to accomplish His purposes. Interestingly, Debroah concludes her song by including the sad words of Sisera’s own mother. In 5:28–30, she refers to her son as a violent womanizer. This mom didn’t raise her son well and as a result she lost out on a legacy. In contrast, Deborah is considered a “mother in Israel” (5:7) and Jael is a larger than life action hero! God uses two ladies to save the day and be a testimony of God’s power and glory throughout Israel.

The account of Deborah and Jael leads to a number of relevant applications. First, men, it is imperative that we “step up!” For too long, we have been passive and spiritually lethargic. Consequently, we have not fulfilled our roles and responsibilities as husbands, fathers, and churchmen. God wants to lead through men...He always has. But we need to step up in availability and obedience to Him. Ladies, it is likely necessary for you to “step down” or “step away” for a season. Perhaps you have covered up for your husband’s negligence for too long. I know many wives who have said, “My man will never change. He shirks his responsibilities as the spiritual leader of our home so I have to take up the slack.” While this sounds respectable, it typically backfires! What often happens is men will say to themselves, “My wife is stepping up at home and at church; I guess I can “step out.” This can further the demise of your man. Instead, step back and let him step up. Learn to respect him whether he deserves it or not. Biblically speaking, respect is not conditioned upon whether anyone deserves it or not. Our responsibility is to respect those in authority over us regardless of whether they deserve it or not. Ultimately, it is the Lord Christ we are serving (see Col 3:23–24). *As goes the home, so goes the nation.*

**Scene 3: A father fails his son and his people (6:1–9:57).** This section focuses in on Gideon, a man that you are most likely familiar with. The story of Gideon observes three generations of a family and is the turning point for major family decline in the book.<sup>11</sup> Gideon was called by God to be a valiant warrior; however, like Barak, he lacked faith and confidence. Consequently, he fleeced God until he finally was persuaded to take a step of obedience. When Gideon finally obeyed God, he fulfilled the Lord's Word and became a valiant warrior and destroyed God's enemies. At the peak of his career, instead of investing in his children and grandchildren and persevering in his faith, Gideon became an idolater and a polygamist, adding a Canaanite concubine to the harem as well (8:30–31). Out of this illicit relationship, his son Abimelech was born. Abimelech decided he wanted to be a king, so he killed sixty–nine of his dad's sons. He continued to live a diabolical life. In the end, his own people began to turn against him. His life ended in shame when an unnamed woman dropped a stone on his head, which ultimately led to his death. Both Gideon and Abimelech failed to finish well. Their lives did not pass the legacy of faith on to the next generation. They were given great opportunity to influence countless people, but they chose to live for themselves. They will have to answer for this when they stand before Christ...as shall we.

**Scene 4: An Israelite warrior wins a battle but loses the war (10:6–12:7).** The story of Jephthah (10:6–12:7) is one of the saddest in the Bible. Jeff had a good grasp of Israel's past and God's working in and through the nation (11:12–27), but he suffered, like Barak and Gideon, with a lack of faith. Instead of believing God for the victory, he made a vow to the Lord to up the ante and secure the victory. In 11:30–31 Jeff said: **“If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.”** After Jephthah conquers God's enemies and returns home in a victory parade, his only child, his young daughter, runs out to meet him. No doubt she threw her arms around her dad's neck and then he realizes the extent of his blood-curdling vow! He's going to have to offer his daughter as a human sacrifice. Jeff may have assumed that he was obligated to fulfill his vow (see Num 30:1–2). Yet, in Lev 27:1–8 God provided a way out. As a successful soldier who had just returned from looting the enemy, Jephthah could easily have paid the redemption price to redeem his daughter. Jephthah knew his Old Testament, but he chose to disobey. Obviously, Jeff could have confessed his sin to the Lord and pleaded the fifth! I'm rather confident God would have forgiven Him. But Jeff was influenced by the Canaanite culture that practiced child sacrifice (10:6; cf. Lev 18:21; 20:2–5). Jeff murdered his only child and destroyed any potential for his lineage to continue in Israel. This was one of the most horrendous consequences that could ever face an Israelite man. The author of Judges makes this point by sandwiching two narratives about the secondary judges to the Jephthah account (10:1–5 and 12:8–15). In these two sections, three judges draw special attention: Jair had thirty sons (10:3–5), Ibzan had thirty sons and daughters (12:8–10), and Abdon had forty sons and thirty grandsons (12:14–15).<sup>12</sup> The secondary judges had large families, worked at increasing their families, and saw their influence even to the third generation (12:13–15), but Jephthah ended his line completely in one foolish move. As a result, there was no one to carry on the faith.

Admittedly, it can be hard to feel the full weight of this section of Judges. You may be thinking, “I would never sacrifice my child as a burnt offering. In fact, I can't believe you're even preaching this story.” Yet before you get too pious, I need to ask you a question: Have you ever sacrificed your child for your work? Maybe you have said to yourself, “I need to take this promotion or I need to work overtime because our family needs the money. After all, our economy is in a difficult spot, I want to ensure that we are secure. Besides, I want my children to have a better life than I did. I want them to be happy.” Sadly, these thoughts are generally off the mark. What your children really need is your time, energy, and love. Honestly, your kids probably don't need more toys, trinkets, and earthly treasures; rather, they need time with their dad and mom. Fifty or one hundred years from now, it won't make any difference how much money you acquired. It really won't matter whether you lived in a 1500 square-foot home or a 3000 square-foot home. Nor will it matter what make and model of car you provided your child. What will matter is how well you invested in your children's spiritual lives. *As goes the home, so goes the nation.*

**Scene 5: Passive parents and lonely lovers (13:1–16:31).** One gets the impression from reading the Samson narrative that Sam's parents didn't fight too hard to keep him on the straight and narrow. Yes, they raised him as a Nazirite and explained the Nazirite vows that Samson was called to keep, but when he chose to go his own way, it appears that they let him go sow his wild oats.<sup>13</sup> As parents, we can often grow weary and lose heart. When it seems that we are not getting through to our teenager or adult child, we are quick to hand that son or daughter over to his or her own devices. Yet, what we need to recognize is God wants us to fight for the morality and spirituality of our children. You may be saying, "But I don't want to alienate my child from me." I would counter with this truth, "It is better to risk your relationship with your child, to speak the truth in love." No one cares more about your child's spiritual well-being more than you! No one! We bear a special and unique responsibility to encourage our children to walk with the Lord and make wise decisions. If you refuse to speak the truth and influence your child, someone else will do it for you. Tragically, that someone may be an immoral person, a drug pusher, a cult member, or a thief. If you are a parent, I challenge you today to make a commitment to speak up in love and grace. *As goes the home, so goes the nation.*

Interestingly, Samson and Delilah both are looking for love in the wrong places. Samson is consumed with sex while Delilah is consumed with greed. Both have a God-shaped vacuum in their hearts that can only be filled by the Lord. Even though they seek to fill this void with other pursuits and pleasures, only God can satisfy. Both individuals sought happiness through illicit sex and money, yet they most likely could have found additional happiness in a marriage relationship with a person of God's choosing.<sup>14</sup> In the end, they never do find what they are looking for.<sup>15</sup>

**Scene 6: One mom and one husband destroy a nation (17:1–21:25).** The final five chapters of Judges form one long conclusion. In the first story, Micah's mom pays a silversmith to make her son idols. Micah then follows in his mother's footsteps and brings the idols into his house. Through a series of events, Micah's idols became an impetus for worship in northern Israel for hundreds of years (1 Kgs 12:25–33; 2 Kgs 17:22–23).<sup>16</sup> It was the sin of one mom that brought about this fate. In the other primary story, a Levite husband makes a series of wrong choices, culminating in handing his concubine (a legal wife) over to be gang raped by a group of rabid homosexuals. These men raped this woman throughout the entire night. They then released her and she collapsed dead on the doorstep of the home where her husband was staying. The husband then proceeds to cut her body into twelve pieces, which he sends to the twelve tribes of Israel. This sparked a civil war in Israel. Brother turned against brother and 100,000 Israelites died. The Book of Judges concludes with these tragic words: "**In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes**" (21:25; cf. 17:6). Family failure was common in Israel. People did what seemed right to them rather than obeying God. This results in the degradation of Israelite society. Initially, Israel was obedient to the Lord (chaps 1–3), yet by the end of the book Israel shows no respect for women or for human life in general. This is all the result of a failure to prioritize the Lord and the family. *As goes the home, so goes the nation.*

I would like to share three final family principles that emanate from the Book of Judges.

***Live the life before your children and grandchildren.*** As parents and grandparents, we must exude lives of humility, integrity, and purity. This does not mean that we have to be perfect. Young people are very perceptive; they know no one can achieve this standard. They are not looking for perfect believers; they are looking for authentic believers. This means we need to share our struggles with our children and grandchildren, yet also encourage them to imitate us as we imitate Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). In spite of our weaknesses and sins, our family members ought to know that we love the Lord Jesus Christ, obey His Word, are committed to our marriage, and have a heart for the local church. One wise man said, "If you don't make a habit out of going to church each Sunday, you shoot yourself in the foot, your children in the leg, and your grandchildren in the heart."<sup>17</sup> This is relevant not only to church attendance, but also to the entire spiritual life. God forbid that we fail our children where it matters most.

***Converse with your children and grandchildren about Christ.*** What do you talk to your child about: homework, chores, sports, movies, music? What about moral issues or situations, or spiritual issues and beliefs? If there is one topic that you need to address with your children and grandchildren it is the Lord Jesus Christ. We may choose to avoid a lot of topics, but that cannot be one of them. Tragically, most parents within and without the church want their children to grow up to lead successful, good lives. A new study from LifeWay Research, however, suggests that many don't consider faith as a measure of parental success. The study surveyed over 1,200 adults with children under the age of 18. The survey found that the most common definitions of parental success were their children having good values, being happy, and gaining success in their lives. Having faith was mentioned by only 9 percent of respondents. Although parents who attend religious services regularly see faith as important, only 24 percent said that it was a measure of their parental success.<sup>18</sup> You and I need to make sure that we are not typical Christians. Our passion must be that our children surpass us in godliness. The only way this is possible is if we are continuously discussing Jesus Christ with our children and grandchildren. This can be as simple as asking your son how he is doing in his relationship with Christ. Or perhaps asking your daughter what she learned in her Bible reading today. It doesn't take much, but God wants us to frequently talk about His Son, Jesus.

***Prepare your child for hardships.*** In light of the state of our country, it is critical that we warn our children about the days to come. I don't want to sound like an alarmist, but I suspect that the day is coming when our children and grandchildren will be called upon to deny Christ. At the very least, Christianity will grow less and less acceptable. Therefore, we must prepare our children and grandchildren to stand strong in the faith. We must infuse courage and valor into them. Spiritually speaking, we must train them to be *spiritual* warlords—men and women who are willing to exercise faith and stand strong against Canaanite culture.

In the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, the American women's 4 x 100 relay race was favored to win the gold medal. The team featured Marion Jones, a sprinter who had won four gold medals at the previous games in Sydney. The American team was already off to a strong start when Jones took the baton for the second leg of the race. She gained ground as she ran her 100 meters and approached Lauryn Williams, a young speedster who would run the third leg. Williams began running as Jones drew near, but when she reached back to receive the baton, they couldn't complete the handoff. Once, twice, three times Jones thrust the baton forward, but each time it missed William's hand—she couldn't seem to wrap her fingers around it. Finally, on the fourth try, they made the connection. But by that time, they had crossed out of the 20-yard exchange zone and were disqualified. Everyone knew they were the fastest team on the track. The night before, they'd had the fastest qualifying time. But when they couldn't complete the handoff, their race was over.<sup>19</sup>

As disappointing as it would be to lose out on an Olympic gold medal, Olympic disqualification is not the worst thing in the world. Far more devastating and eternally consequential is being disqualified as a parent or grandparent because you haven't effectively passed the baton to the next generation. Transferring through to the next generation is where our time, energy, and focus must be spent. *As goes the home, so goes the nation.*

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### **Scripture References**

Judges 1–3

Judges 4–5

Judges 6:1–8:21

Judges 8:22–9:57

Judges 10–12

Judges 13–16

Judges 17–21

### **Study Questions**

1. How would I describe my family? What are our strengths and weaknesses? How would an outside observer answer this question? What might others see that I am oblivious to or in denial of? Who can help me see clearly the areas that need growth?
2. Am I a student of my spouse? Do I know his or her preferences, goals, strengths, and weaknesses? Have I been guilty of no longer trying to win my spouse? What strides have I taken to demonstrate love and care?
3. Am I investing in my children? In what tangible ways am I spending time and energy with my kids and grandkids? Are there some areas of my life that need to be eliminated so that I can be more devoted to my family? If so, what needs to go? Will I do it today?
4. Have I talked with my kids about significant personal and biblical issues? What topics immediately come to mind? Have I discussed issues such as spiritual disciplines, church involvement, dating/marriage, friendships, ethics, etc.?
5. How would I describe the current legacy that I am leaving my family? What am I doing particularly well as a spouse/parent? What areas need drastic improvement? Is there a fellow believer I know who can help me grow to be an even godlier spouse/parent?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Inrig, *Heart of Iron, Feet of Clay* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 21–22.

<sup>2</sup> See Rom 15:4 and 1 Cor 10:6, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ps 11:3 declares, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

<sup>4</sup> Courtesy of Dr. James C. Dobson.©

<sup>5</sup> The Book of Judges can be divided into several sections by noting the repetition of the phrase, “Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord...”

- 3:7 before Othniel is introduced
- 3:12 before Ehud is introduced
- 4:1 before Deborah and Barak
- 6:1 before the account of Gideon
- 10:6 before Jephthah is introduced
- 13:1 before the story of Samson.

Each of these sections is similar to the sections in this sermon. See also Hampton Keathley IV, “The Role of Women in the Book of Judges”: [http://www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=1481](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=1481).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 95.

<sup>7</sup> Keathley IV, “The Role of Women in the Book of Judges.”

<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 1: Jephthah.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:647 (July-September 2005): 279.

<sup>9</sup> Keathley, “The Role of Women in the Book of Judges.”

<sup>10</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 199.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel I. Block, “Will the Real Gideon Please Stand Up? Narrative Style and Intention in Judges 6–9,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (September 1997): 354–75; and J. Paul Tanner, “The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (April-June 1992): 146–61.

<sup>12</sup> See also Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges,” 283.

<sup>13</sup> Judges 14 presents Samson’s marriage and the disastrous results. After going to a Philistine city and seeing a Philistine woman, Samson returned to his parents and told them to “get her for me as a wife” (14:1–2). His parents objected, asking whether there was not someone among their own people he could pick rather than “a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines” (v. 3). Apparently they knew that intermarriage was not permitted in Israel (Deut. 7:1–3), but Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 425 faults them for not standing firm. On the other hand, what Samson’s parents do not say is as significant as the words they utter. They do not say, ‘Intermarriage with non-Israelites is forbidden by the Lord’ (cf. Deut 7:1–5). Nor do they say, ‘The Lord has called you to a special Nazirite status within Israel. This is one huge step lower even than compromising that call.’ They do not say, ‘The Lord’s agenda is for you to deliver us from the Philistine oppression, not to marry them’ (13:5). All this remains unsaid. To Samson’s parents his proposition is simply a cultural and ethnic issue. They sinned by following through with his demand. Deuteronomy 7:3–4 instructs parents not to give their children in marriage to the nations in the land, and Manoah and his wife failed by going ahead with the arrangements for the marriage. They were part of the problem in Israel (Judg. 3:5–6), and it was a Nazirite judge, their own son, whom they were giving in marriage to a Philistine. This giving in to Samson’s wish was not just the condoning of an unwise move: it was participation in a moral error. How could a Nazirite judge create future godly homes in Israel by marrying a pagan Philistine? Such a marriage is a strike against the central component of the nation, the home. Samson’s interactions with his parents indicate that not all was well in this parent-child relationship. He demanded that his parents follow through on his desire for obtaining a Philistine wife (14:3). Further, three times the narrator noted a specific lack of communication between Samson and his parents. When Samson killed a lion, he did not tell his parents (v. 6). When he returned and found honey in the dead lion’s carcass, he gave some to his parents but did not tell them where he got the honey (v. 9). In this instance he broke his Nazirite vows and kept that fact from his parents. Then when his wife was pressing him to tell her the riddle, Samson told her that he had not told it to those closest to him, his parents, so he would not tell her either (v. 16). Samson seems to fit the picture of a rebellious son, in line with Deuteronomy 21:18–21, who is a threat to the advancement of the home. See Michael J. Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 2: Samson,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:648 (October 2005): 430.

<sup>14</sup> Samson lusted after Philistine women only. This final judge was constantly pursuing the very sin the narrator identified in the first introduction, namely, intermarriage with the Canaanites in the land.

<sup>15</sup> In the end a foreign woman, Delilah, acted the part of Jael in bringing down the man who was an enemy to her people. Ironically in this event Samson paralleled the Canaanite commander, Sisera, and died a shameful death.

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<sup>16</sup> The narrator's climactic note was that this center of idol worship was staffed by none other than Moses' own grandson (Judg. 18:30). The failure of the family was evident in all strata in the nation, even in the family of Moses.

<sup>17</sup> Preaching Today citation: Harold Korver, Paramount, CA: <http://preachingtoday.com>.

<sup>18</sup> SermonNews: Faith and Parental Success: <http://www.sermonnews.com/MembersOnlyStory.asp?ID=2215>.

<sup>19</sup> Preaching Today citation: Bryan Wilkerson, "From Generation to Generation," [www.PreachingToday.com](http://www.PreachingToday.com).