

The battle had gone well. A terrific understatement. Jericho, one of the most heavily fortified cities in Palestine had seen its walls crumble at a shout, had everyone inside but one family put to death, had itself burned to the ground and all its treasures carried away. By a nation of vagabonds who took forty years to figure out how to get from Egypt to Canaan through the desert. It seemed utterly impossible. And yet there it was. The Israelites had won, with not a man lost. The city was in ruins, its people dead. It was over and the only explanation was that the Lord did it. The Lord had promised this victory to his faithful and that's exactly what happened. All the treasure of the city was turned over to the Lord as a witness to his triumph and Israel made plans to continue their campaign against the godless of the land.

The battle had not gone well. A small city, perhaps just a military encampment, one that should've been taken with next to no human effort, repelled the attack of several hundred Israelites. Thirty-six of them dead. Tail between their legs they return to their main encampment. Word begins to spread that Jericho was probably just a fluke, these Israelites are nothing and are ripe for destruction. Joshua, the leader, despairs of what will happen now that the Lord's help seems to have been withdrawn, now that the surrounding nations think them so weak.

The Lord reprimands Joshua for his lack of faith and for not seeing the obvious. God is a god of his word. He would not arbitrarily withdraw his support. He would not just suddenly decide to leave Israel in the lurch. His promise to be with them was dependent on the covenant he made with his people. If he was not helping, it was because someone had broken the covenant. Joshua should've realized that. Now the Lord would show Joshua the one who had betrayed them and give him a chance to set things right.

The next morning God works Joshua slowly down the ranks. From tribe to clan to family to individual, the noose draws tighter until Achan is identified as the culprit. He stands before Joshua, the man responsible for the mess these people are now in. We can only imagine his heart at this moment. What Joshua does is somewhat surprising. With a pastoral heart, Joshua deals tenderly with the man. "My son," he calls him. And in that love and compassion, he calls for Achan to confess and repent.

Achan does. He confesses, and very specifically. He cites the root of the sin, he saw and he coveted. He wanted treasure that was not his, treasure that was to be devoted to the Lord. Treasure he had been specifically warned not to take but to give to God under threat of serious consequences. But how he wanted those riches. God had so much already. And he was God, it's not like he needed it. Think of what he could do for his family with those treasures. He could hide it for a while and then spend it off after this battle was forgotten. So he took the robe and the silver and the gold. He confesses exactly what he had taken, he confesses exactly what had been in his heart and he confesses exactly how he hid these things.

Achan's confession was honest and sincere. The messengers find the items exactly as described and exactly where they were told to look. They bring the plunder to Joshua. Achan's guilt is confirmed. And what happens next...well, I'd guess you probably found it shocking. Not just the stolen items but Achan and all his family and all his worldly possessions are taken far outside the Israelite encampment. And at the Lord's order, they are all put to death and what is left is piled up and burned.

Do you struggle with this? Does it seem unfair, over-the-top or cruel? Does it maybe even seem like this is not the same God that we worship today? These are all understandable reactions. This does not seem to fit our sense of justice, our standards of right and wrong and punishment. This does not seem to be the act of a loving God but rather a cruel and vengeful one. How do we reconcile the God we know to be true with what happened here?

We start by taking a step back and doing our limited human best to put ourselves in God's place. We look close and see almost tragedy. Yes, the man was guilty. But did that really warrant the death of his whole family after he'd confessed his sin? Isn't our God one of mercy and forgiveness? Why couldn't he be forgiven?

But forgiveness is what it's all about. The fact of the matter is that every infraction against our Lord deserves this kind of penalty or worse. Sin divides us from God. Sin makes unholy that which he created holy. A holy God cannot tolerate the unholy. To be unholy is to deserve being separated from him. To be separated entirely from God is a state we call hell. That's the stark truth of every one of our jealous thoughts, our little lies and our selfish actions makes us deserving of hell. The only way we can avoid this is if we are forgiven by the mercy of God. And the only way God can forgive us and still satisfy his justice is through Christ.

Forgiveness without Jesus is impossible. Without his life and death, there is no forgiveness for anyone. And without the faithful to spread the news about him, no one can have faith, no one can be saved. God's absolute priority over everything throughout history is to bring about the right circumstances for Jesus to carry out his work and that the

message of him be spread. This is very, very serious business. Should either point of this fail, all people for the rest of time would be lost. To ensure that this nation remained faithful to the true God, that his word was preached and taken seriously, God needed to impress on the people just how seriously he took his commands, and just how serious any sin against him was.

God's actions with Achan may strike us as an overreaction, our response might be, "What was the harm?" But that's exactly typical of why God needs to show us just how serious sin is, just how much it can cost. Achan's covetous greed multiplied into theft from God and deceit against his people. He brought his family into the crime and tempted them to comply with what he had done. We know that God does not punish children for the crimes of their fathers, this was actually part of God's law given at Sinai. The fact that his family was executed with him shows that God knew their hearts were just as guilty as Dad's.

And that string of sin and deceit not only brought others to sin with him, but by breaking God's covenant, Israel was defeated in their next engagement and 36 men who trusted God died as a result. The resulting aftermath endangered the entire nation of people as the enemies heard of Israel's weakness. And above it all, every sin that goes without consequence or without repentance only allows us to think we can get away with it again. And again. And then maybe something bigger. Persistent sin drives a wedge between a person and God, and it encourages others to do the same. Achan's sin threatened not just himself but the faith-life of the entire Israelite community, and as the keepers of the Word of God, it threatened the entire plan of salvation.

Achan's unchecked covetousness resulted in tragedy for others and threatened much farther-reaching consequences. The punishment it brought down on him and his family in the end was stark and sudden. But the point was made. Sin has a cost. There is no such thing as a "free" sin. There is no victimless crime in God's eyes. There are no sins that stay hidden or hurt just ourselves. It is a corruption that spreads and grows when left unchecked. God could not just let this go. There needed to be an example made so others weren't tempted to do likewise. What happened here was done out of love for all people.

Yes, Achan was put to death. That was the consequence of his actions. But did he die? Scripture does not tell us explicitly. But when confronted with his sin, Achan confessed it clearly and openly. He knew what he did was wrong, he did not try to shift the blame or make excuses. This is very indicative of a heart that trusted the Lord. Achan was put to death, but there is every reason to believe that he died trusting in the mercy of his God nonetheless. It is quite likely that he enjoys the comforts of heaven right now with all other believers.

And this is true because the ultimate cost of sin has been paid. Jesus came to this world in our place. He was tempted, same as we are. But he never gave in. He was holy. And then he paid the price. On the cross he was separated from God as one unholy. Cut off there he endured hell as he cried out in agony, that God had forsaken him. That, there on the cross is the cost of sin. His suffering and death paid the price. For your sins there is forgiveness through Jesus.

And that means sin doesn't matter anymore, right? If there is forgiveness then it doesn't matter if we sin? Quite the opposite in fact. God wants us to take sins just as seriously now as ever. Every sin we ignore or downplay, every sin we defiantly choose in God's face is something that pulls us away from our Lord and brings down consequences on us and those around us. There are no small crimes, there are no sins that "don't really hurt anyone." Every sin threatens us, every sin has a cost. Look to the cross to see the cost. See there your Savior who paid that cost. Don't let his death for you be in vain. If we allow our sin to run rampant, if we don't take it seriously when it rears its head and stamp it out at the source, then we run the risk of driving ourselves away from our God and losing the faith he has given us by grace. And without that divinely given faith, we will still need to be cut off from our Lord, wasting the price our Savior paid for you.

It's a delicate balance, to be sure. We should never take our sins lightly. We should never forget the cost of sin. We need to repent of the sins we commit and humbly recognize our need for God's forgiveness every day. We need to empty ourselves of ourselves by taking our sins seriously and recognizing their cost. But we mustn't stop there. We should fill ourselves back up with Jesus, with his perfect life and his free forgiveness from his death. We should take our sins seriously, but we should just the same live confidently that we are forgiven and that cannot be taken away from us by force. Remember the cost of sin, but never forget that cost has already been paid for you by your Lord. Amen.