

All in This Together  
Joshua 7:1-26

Now, before we go any further, we need to give Achan a little credit – I mean, he wasn't an idiot. For if it didn't make sense to God's people to walk around the city for seven days before God destroyed the walls of Jericho, it made even less sense to Achan to destroy all the spoils of war they found inside the city. Okay, maybe they did need to kill all the men, because they could always turn around and attack the Israelites. But why all the women and children? What harm could they do? And why kill all the animals? They were a principal form of wealth in those days, so killing them would be like us setting fire to a big pile of dollar bills. And some of the clothes were really expensive imports – surely they would look a lot better than the old slave rags the Israelites had been wearing for 40 years in the desert. And why did all the precious metal need to go to the Lord? What would the priests do with it? They had already built the tabernacle, and even before they had finished it, Moses had told the people they didn't need to make any more donations of construction materials.

No, none of the instructions God gave after the fall of Jericho made any more sense to Achan than walking around and around the walls did. But it's precisely Achan's sort of thinking that forms the foundation of all sin. For what Achan really did when he took some of the spoils of war for himself was essentially a repeat of what Adam had done so many years before when he ate the forbidden fruit: both men were deciding for themselves what was right and wrong. And both of them came to the conclusion that what God said didn't make sense so it really didn't matter. And in making such a decision, both men set themselves up as gods, gods for themselves alone.

And don't we all do the same thing in one way or another? Oh, sure, many of us can recite the Ten Commandments, but how many of us follow all of them? I mean do we really even try to avoid coveting what other people have? And how many of us live according to Jesus' summary of the Law, loving the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all strength and all our mind? And are we really all that interested in loving other people just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves? Oh, and when temptation comes along, don't we tend to do what Achan did, rationalizing it away, telling ourselves that we couldn't help it, or that the circumstances are unique, or if God really understood what was going on, He would overlook our disobedience, or....

It doesn't really matter what our excuses are. When we substitute our reason for God's revelation, we are just like Achan. We are just like Adam. And like both of them, we cut ourselves off from the miraculous, life-giving, victorious power of God.

Okay, so we can't let our own reason determine whether we are going to obey God. But there's something else in this chapter that doesn't make sense: If Achan was the only one who sinned, why would God make all the people lose the next battle they fought? If Achan was the only one who disobeyed God at Jericho, why did 36 other people have to die as they tried to take the city of Ai? Why did the rest of the people have to lose heart after the next battle was lost? And why did Achan's children get caught up in the consequences of his sin?

This may be hard of all for us individualistic Americans to believe, but we can't deny what we see in the text: sometimes God deals with His people collectively as well as individually. Now, this is not all bad. Remember, we Christians like God's way of blessing all of us as a group because of what Jesus did as an individual, right? We like the idea that because Jesus was obedient to go to the cross, God would consider all His people obedient. We like the idea that because Jesus died, God considers all His people dead to the power of sin. Oh, yes, sometimes we like it when God deals with a group because of what an individual has done.

But if all that's true, if it's true that those who trust in Christ are connected to Christ and all His benefits by faith, then it's also true that all who trust in Christ are connected to everyone else who trusts in Christ. And if all believers are connected to one another, it just makes sense that what one believer does will affect all the others in some way.

And if you think about it, that really does make sense. After all, if you have a cold, it isn't just your stuffy nose that's sick. No, your runny nose then irritates your throat, and that keeps you from sleeping, and that makes your eyes red, and on and on. The bottom line is that no one ever says, "My nose is sick." No, we say, "I am sick."

And this makes political sense to us as well. After all, Bennie Thompson is just one congressman, and we didn't all vote for him. But because enough other people in this district did, and because enough other people all over the country voted to elect other Democrats to the House, Congressman Thompson gets to be the chairman of the House committee on Homeland Security. And that means that, he has a lot of authority over issues like immigration enforcement and security at airports. As an individual you may not have voted for him, but you, and all the rest of the people in the United States, get to experience the consequences that flow out of the actions of those who did.

So I think we can understand how, when Achan sinned, other people could die, and the whole nation could lose hope in God. In a sense, one man's sin made the whole nation sick, and thus the whole nation suffered the consequences of his actions.

And the same sort of thing is true, even for the Church. Oh, we know there are lots of different Christian denominations with different beliefs. And we can probably explain the difference between Pentecostals and Presbyterians – there's that strange sort of shoulder

stiffness Presbyterians have that keep us from raising our arms more than this high, but just during morning worship. And of course we EPC types can tell you about all the subtle distinctions between our denomination and the PCA and the PCUSA and the OPC. And so it's easy for all of us American Presbyterians to imagine that the wackiness or stupidity or error or downright sin of other Christian individuals or groups doesn't affect us.

But those 36 people who died as a result of Achan's sin would remind us that just isn't so. After all, many Muslims believe that all Christians are just like those Medieval Crusaders, who used force to spread the gospel of Christ. And to the increasing number of Americans who don't belong to any church, when a Roman Catholic priest abuses an altar boy or when a Mainline Protestant seminary encourages students to confess their environmental sins to plants, they think that's what all Christians do – they don't know that we Evangelical Presbyterians are different.

Worse yet, when you or I say we love God with all we are and all we have but then other people see us acting in selfish ways, well, we aren't the only ones who get called hypocrites – all Christians get tarred with the same brush. And when we say that we love other people just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves but then when we avoid or look down on those who disagree with us, well, we aren't the only ones that unbelievers call judgmental. No, our individual actions can tarnish the witness of so many other Christians around us, can't they?

No, we individualistic Americans may not want to believe it, but the reality is that the Body of Christ is one. I am part of all who trust in Christ, and all who trust in Christ are part of me. That's why when they hurt, I should hurt. Because, like it or not, when they are cut, I bleed.

Okay, so what can we do about all of this? Given how connected we all are to each other in spite of our individualism, how can we help one another obey God if we are all so good at the kind of rationalizations that Achan made? Well, what did the people of God do in response to Achan's sin? And how can what they did help all of us become more consistent Christians, both as individuals and as a whole congregation?

Well, in verse 11, we see that God told Joshua what sort of sin had brought on such terrible consequences. Then starting in verse 16, the people of God conducted an investigation to determine exactly who the culprit was, probably using a ceremony somewhat similar to drawing straws. In any event, the process exposed Achan as a liar and a thief.

What can we possibly learn from this strange series of events? I mean, it's not like God speaks to us in the same way that He spoke to Joshua. And we certainly don't think that casting lots is the best way to determine the truth about any sort of wrongdoing. But we do have another way of measuring human behavior, don't we? For we have access to the infallible Word of God. And that means that we individualistic Americans don't need a prophet to tell us what we've done

wrong, and we don't need to flip a coin or draw straws – we can read the Bible for ourselves and determine whether our lives are in agreement with what God has said.

Of course, given our penchant for rationalization, sometimes it's helpful for us to help one another see the sin in our lives. And it's always useful to get an educated opinion on what the Bible may say about any given topic. But the fact is that the Church in every age has access to the same gift that God gave His people starting in verse 11 – the gift of the truth, the gift of the light of God shining into even the dark and hidden parts of our lives and our communities.

Okay, so what are we supposed to do once the Word of God has exposed our sin to us or to others? Well, what did Achan do in verse 20? He confessed his sin. He told the rest of the people what he had stolen and where he had hidden it. Just so, when God's Word shows us an area of our lives that needs to come into greater conformity with His will, we shouldn't just shrug it off or pretend that it doesn't matter. No, if we are going to love God with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength, then no sin is too insignificant for us to confess. No sin is too unimportant to be rejected. No deviation from God's will, however slight, can be tolerated if we are going to stay on the course of love and service God has plotted for all of our lives.

And that, I think, is what we can learn from the rather ruthless way that the people of God dealt with poor Achan. No, since Jesus now offers forgiveness to all those who love and trust Him, regardless of anything we've done, it's just not appropriate to mete out such harsh penalties anymore – remember, even the thief on the cross was promised that he would be in Paradise with Jesus because of his last-second conversion.

But if we are called to extend God's grace and mercy to the sinners in our midst, we are also called to be just as pitiless and merciless with our sin as those people were with Achan. If we must be loving and patient with those who have fallen into sin, we must not make any compromise with sin itself, either in our personal lives or in our life together as a congregation. And if that means sometimes allowing our elders to have some uncomfortable conversations with us about our priorities that might need to be adjusted or our actions that might need to be changed, then so be it. For remember what Achan's sin has taught us – it doesn't take much sin to compromise the mission of the Church. And even one secret sin can have huge consequences for us as well as for others.

So, just as God's people removed Achan from their midst, let's be equally determined to rid ourselves of anything in our lives that is out of accord with God's will. Let's turn away from all our rationalizations and seek together to follow God's perfect Law of Love, pressing on to the higher ground of living the life of Christ in all its fullness.