

1 But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things ^[a]; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, ^[b] the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel.

2 Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, "Go up and spy out the region." So the men went up and spied out Ai.

3 When they returned to Joshua, they said, "Not all the people will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary all the people, for only a few men are there." 4 So about three thousand men went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, 5 who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries ^[c] and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted and became like water.

6 Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. 7 And Joshua said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! 8 O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? 9 The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?"

10 The LORD said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? 11 Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. 12 That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.

13 "Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: That which is devoted is among you, O Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it.

14 " 'In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe that the LORD takes shall come forward clan by clan; the clan that the LORD takes shall come forward family by family; and the family that the LORD takes shall come forward man by man. 15 He who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the LORD and has done a disgraceful thing in Israel!' "

16 Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was taken. 17 The clans of Judah came forward, and he took the Zerahites. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was taken. 18 Joshua had his family come forward man by

man, and Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

19 Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD, ^[d] the God of Israel, and give him the praise. ^[e] Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me."

20 Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: 21 When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, ^[f] two hundred shekels ^[g] of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, ^[h] I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath."

22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. 23 They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD.

24 Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. 25 Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today."

Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. 26 Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ^[i] ever since.

-- Jos 7

Membership is something we take for granted. At last count, I currently have membership in one church, two credit card companies, two banks, two video stores, three libraries, one gas station, one grocery store, three frequent flyer plans, Mountain Equipment Co-op, am an alumnus of UBC and Regent College, and receive 10% discounts from two clothing retailers—both of which are in Hong Kong. This is all, of course, without mentioning my family memberships: I am the son of two parents and the brother of one sister, the cousin of eleven others, uncle to two nephews, and cousin-uncle to ten other children. Even though I am inextricably bound up in all these

relationships, I haven't got half the memberships some of you do—and none of us would ever think that membership Costco will save us. Yet, Achan's story is not just one of a man who might think that his membership in the chosen people of God will save him, but that his sin was purely a private matter that would not affect the rest of the people.

It is not that Achan relied on his being an Israelite to save his hide, but we can only shake our heads at what was going through his mind as he took plunder from the ruins of Jericho. Perhaps he thought that he had special privileges since he was one of the desert generation, a child of the forty years of wandering that produced a people dedicated to the holy mission of God. Perhaps he didn't hear Joshua's command not to touch the spoils of Jericho, for they were to be given to God as firstfruits. Or maybe, just maybe, he thought God wouldn't see it and that the silver and gold would help him get ahead for life in a new land. After all, there's no telling now that the manna's stopped whether God will actually continue to provide for him—best to get a leg up on everyone else with a little bit (about 6lbs worth) of start-up capital once the rat race sets in. Achan was ritually pure and a member of the illustrious tribe of Judah—but his membership was not enough to save him.

Joshua 7 begins with the ominous phrase *“but the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things.”* The “devoted things” were the objects listed by Joshua in 6:19 as the things from Jericho that were to go straight into the Lord's treasury—all silver, gold, bronze, and iron. We may wonder what the big deal is about this phrase, but it is worth noting that not *all* the Israelites acted unfaithfully with regard to the

devoted things, just one man—Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zimri, son of Zerah, son of Judah, son of Israel. If Rahab could be described as the ultimate outsider—a woman, a whore, and a Canaanite—then Achan was the ultimate *insider*. His deep membership in the Israelite community meant that he was no longer free to simply act as he felt fit without regards for the consequences his behaviour would have for others. For, as an Israelite, Achan was one of the people chosen to become a light for the nations—yet as an Israelite, Achan’s disobedience shattered the holiness of the community from within.

The text centers around the “devoted things”, which in Hebrew is “*herem*”. *Herem* was a term not only used to describe plunder set aside for the treasury of the Tabernacle, but it is also used in the context of forbidden things and to tag things that were to be completely destroyed. In a sense, when God designates the spoils of Jericho as *herem*, he is saying “*this is so forbidden that it’s as good as gone to you.*” Yet by bringing these things into the camp, Achan violates the set-apart nature of the Israelites because of his direct disobedience. Even though his sin was hidden, the consequence of sin is always the same: separation from God.

We may ask “*who was he hurting, anyway? What’s the big deal with Achan’s little sin? It’s not like he killed or raped someone—he was just skimming a little off the top.*” Yet when we ask this question, we miss the point of the passage—indeed, of the entire book—because the question the book asks is “*who fights for Israel and who gives the land?*” Not Israel, but Yahweh—and since he is the one who does the fighting and gives the land, he also is entitled to the first and best of everything.

However, the problem does not stop here. By bringing the *herem* into the camp, Achan violates the covenant relationship that Israel has with Yahweh. Like a man coughing blood into the open wounds of others, Achan brings an infection of self-sufficiency¹ (which is self-idolatry) into the midst of the people. And since this is to be a people that are God's witnesses to the rest of the world, the problem of showing self-reliance is much deadlier than you think. This was not to be a nation that carved out its own niche in the world by dint of numbers or warrior mentality, but only by the grace of God would Israel come to possess the land and keep it. The ridiculous conquest of Jericho was to be a sign to both Israel and the watching world that the God who fights for Israel is not one who bows to military conventions, but rather gives out of grace and not out of compulsion. Yet even this giving was not so that Israel could retire and enjoy the land. The call of God is never simply a call to enjoy your own life and forget about everyone else—it is a call to action. More specifically, it is a call to bear the light of Yahweh to the people who were watching. This is the essence of Joshua's prayer to Yahweh in vv.7-9—he's afraid that God will embarrass himself by letting Israel fail.

However, it is not God who makes Israel fail, but Israel's unfaithfulness through Achan. Achan, the insider—the upstanding member—has infected Israel and now puts the entire mission at risk because all of Israel is under the same ban as the booty of Jericho. Achan dooms all of Israel because his sin does *not* just affect himself, but it affects the entire community. This is why when Joshua is told root out the identity of the

¹ Deut 7:26

unfaithful one he is to go down through the successive families: Judah, Zerah, Zimri, Karmi, and finally, Achan. The disobedience that has spread all over Israel is buried so deep that in order to absolve Israel, Achan must be rooted out like a pig looking for a truffle.

It is ironic that Achan and his family are executed while Rahab and her family are included. Yet the story for Achan does not end with his heap of rocks—rather, in Hosea 2:15 we read of the Valley of Achor² now becoming a place of hope. Even though disaster and ruin overtake Israel once one of their own proves his unfaithfulness, God's covenant has always *been* one-sided and guaranteed by God himself. We see this when we think of how God seals a new covenant for us by his work on the cross, bringing all strangers and all outsiders to the inside of his loving grace.

I imagine that some of you are now asking the question “*what's the big deal with a few bars of gold and silver and a nice coat? And why is God so picky?*” In order to answer this, we need to look more carefully at what Achan takes. Sure, there's the money, but he also takes a Babylonian coat, signifying a turn to idolatry. Now, maybe Achan would have kept on giving lip service to Yahweh, but in his heart, he sets himself up as his *own* means and his *own* God—the ultimate idolatry, and the same sin of Adam and Eve that we stumble into today. We can deduce this all with a little thought: After all, what use would he have for silver and gold while they were tramping around Canaan, bringing all the petty kingdoms under Israel's banner? It would not be until he

² Hb., “trouble”

had a chance to stop and use the money for his own gain that it would really be worth anything. Then, he would have a competitive edge over his neighbours, thereby creating injustice.

Yet it wasn't this inequality alone that was dangerous, it was Achan's attitude that was worse by far. By taking the silver and gold, Achan becomes a self-made man. Yet this is never what God wants for Israel. What he wants for them is to have them become *God-made people* such that when other nations ask what's so special about Israel, they immediately know the answer: Israel is special because their God is the gracious and good God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel's identity is to be bound up in its relationship with God, not in their own strength or talent or inherent worthiness. The same can now be said of the new Israel in Christ, the Church, the people of God.

So we need to ask: what things am I bringing into a community of followers that infect the community? In all truth, none of us is absolved of guilt in doing this. Whether it is an implicit assumption of physical wealth in the cars we drive or the houses we live in; or whether it is an attitude towards what the church should look like or what *ought* to take place within its confines, all of us come overloaded with the baggage of expectations. In Achan's case, he not only brought in the physical *herem* of the goods dedicated to God, but also the attitude of ruthless practicality and self-sufficiency that are not hallmarks of people after God's own heart. Rather, these are the telltale signs of a people who say with their lips they love God but live their lives as though they were independent of Him.

As we build this community together, we need to pay attention to what we bring in. Although the surrounding culture will often tell us that we ought to have confidence in our strengths and abilities, a true Christian perspective is to be appropriately suspicious of ourselves and our motivations. In light of our fickle God-rejecting hearts, this can be the only response: a distrust in ourselves and our own ability to “get it done”, to be replaced with a radical trust in God. Yet it does not stop with the dispositions of our hearts, but how we live out our lives together. For as much as Achan took money to possibly fuel his future life at the expense of social equality with others, so it is that a truly God-loving community will be the one that does not merely speak of love, but perform it.

How many times have we spoken rashly or thoughtlessly to each other? How many times have we failed to look after the interests and needs of our neighbours—our new family in Christ—above our own? How often do we insist on our own ways and our own rights over against what God is doing in this church and with these people? In other words, are we sure that the change we want to bring to the congregation is the change that God wants to bring? For even as love of money is the root of all kinds of evil³, our attitudes, presuppositions, and carelessness with each other are the things that can choke the life out of a church.

Every church—and all the people within it—need to examine themselves for *herem* of different kinds. Why do I think we should do things a certain way? Why am I

³ 1 Tim 6:10

so concerned about this or that happening? Why am I so restless in the face of being told to rest and receive? These are questions not meant to keep you up at night, but they are meant to humble you before your need—*our* need—for God. You see, the church is not a community under siege from the outside, but very often, our greatest enemies are ourselves and the things we track in with us.

- 1.) Pray for us, that we might be a people of God's own heart, not a club of people with bright ideas.