

First Sunday in Lent; March 6, 2022

Joshua 7:16-26

“God Makes Hearts Content – Even in the Wilderness”

Joshua got up early in the morning, and he had Israel come forward tribe by tribe. The tribe of Judah was identified. Then he had the tribe of Judah come forward, and he identified the clan of the Zerahites. Next, he had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by individual families, and Zabdi’s family was identified. Then he had Zabdi’s household come forward one man at a time, and Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, was identified.

Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory now to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him praise. Now tell me what you did. Do not conceal it from me.”

Achan answered Joshua, “It is true. I am the one who has sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: Among the plunder I saw an expensive Mesopotamian robe, a fine one, and two hundred shekels of silver and one wedge of gold – it weighed fifty shekels. I coveted them and I took them. Now they are hidden in the ground inside my tent, and the silver is underneath it.”

So Joshua sent agents. They ran to the tent, and there it was! The robe was hidden in his tent, and the silver underneath it! They took them from the middle of the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the people of Israel, where they poured them out before the LORD.

Then Joshua took Achan son of Zerah and the silver, the garment, and the wedge of gold, as well as Achan’s sons and his daughters, his ox, his donkey and his flock, and his tent and everything that belonged to him – so all Israel, led by Joshua, brought them to the Valley of Achor.

Joshua said, “Why have you brought disaster on us? The LORD will bring disaster on you this day!”

Then all Israel stoned Achan to death. They also burned him and them with fire, and they pelted them with stones. They erected a large heap of stones over Achan, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from the heat of his anger. For that reason the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor to this day.

Not many people watched this year’s Winter Olympics, for a combination of reasons. But every time they come around, I remember an article I read a long time ago in a psychology journal. Their findings were based on interviews with dozens of Olympians over two decades. When the Olympics end, some athletes are happier and more satisfied than others. You could probably guess that the happiest athletes are those who win gold. That makes perfect sense. And you might guess that the second most satisfied athletes would be the silver medalists. But according to this research, silver medalists are actually the least satisfied athletes.¹ In fact, bronze medal winners are significantly happier and more satisfied than those who win silver.

But how could that be? Silver is better than bronze. Why would bronze medalists be happier? Well, bronze medalists tend to think of themselves as “beating all the people who didn’t win medals.” They think of their results in positive terms. “At least I got third. At least I was on the podium.” But silver medalists tend to think this way: “I was so close to winning gold. I just had to beat one more person to be the best.” And so, generally speaking, bronze medalists are happier with less than silver medalists.

Medvec, V.H., Madey, S.F. & Gilovich, T. (1995). When less is more: Counterfactual thinking and satisfaction among Olympic medalists. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 603-610.

Would you like to be more like an Olympic bronze medalist? Would you like to be happier with less? How can you still be happy with what you do have, even if it's less than you had before, or less than you hoped you would have by now?

If only Achan had stopped to ask himself that question. Whether you have been reading the Bible for many years or are new to it, it is totally possible that you don't recognize Achan's name and that you have never heard his story. Achan lived at an critical time in history, over a millennia before our Savior was born. Achan was part of the nation of Israel, which was carrying the promise of that Savior.

After wandering in the wilderness for forty long years, God's people, the nation of Israel, had finally crossed over into the Promised Land. They had begun battling the people who lived there in order to take hold of this land God had promised them.

Achan and the rest of the Israelites, led by their general Joshua, started by fighting the battle of Jericho. The walls of Jericho collapsed miraculously after the Israelites marched around them, and the city fell into the hands of Joshua, Achan, and the rest of Israel. It was the first victory on their way to taking the whole country.

But after the battle ended, God gave Joshua, Achan, and the rest of Israel some very specific instructions: Do not take any of the loot from Jericho for yourselves. All of it belongs to me. Dedicate every little speck of Jericho's wealth to me and then destroy all of it. And everyone in Israel listened to God's command. Except Achan.

Not long after, the Israelites attacked the next city on their list: Ai. But something unexpected happened at Ai. Even though Ai was a smaller, weaker city than Jericho, Israel lost. So Joshua asked God why. And God told him why Israel's military campaign had hit a wall: **"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...That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies."**

And then God gave Joshua instructions on how to cast lots to find out who the perpetrator was. And when Joshua did, the lot fell on Achan. **Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, was identified.**

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In ballpark terms, the gold Achan stole is worth about \$20,000 and the silver about \$10,000. Plus one posh coat. Why would Achan jeopardize his entire nation's conquest of the Promised Land for *that*? Well, Achan told us why: **"I coveted them and I took them."** Coveting is not being satisfied with what you have, and being willing to break one of God's commandments to get more. Basically, it's being a spiritual silver medalist. It's saying, "I'm not satisfied with what God has given me. I want more, and I'm going to get more even if it means breaking one of God's commandments to get it." And notice what happened when Achan coveted, when he wanted something God did not want him to have. His coveting led directly to another sin: the sin of stealing.

So from the sad story of Achan we can learn quite a few serious lessons. First: coveting is a sin against the 9th and 10th Commandments. It is wrong all by itself, even though it is a sin that no one can see you commit. If you want something God doesn't want you to have because it belongs to God or to someone else who doesn't want to sell

it to you or give it to you, and if you let that desire continue to fester inside of you, you are sinning. And it isn't just things that people covet. People can even covet other people, like wanting another person's spouse.

Coveting is a sin all by itself, but it is especially dangerous because it very often leads directly to other sins – sins that do show themselves – especially stealing, like in Achan's case. It can also lead to fraud and shady deals, and potentially lying to cover those sins. Coveting a person can lead to adultery. Coveting is the gateway sin.

Lesson number two from Achan: coveting can land you in a giant mess. It landed his nation in a big mess, and it landed Achan in a big mess, too. After he was caught, here's what happened to him: **Then Joshua took Achan son of Zerah and the silver, the garment, and the wedge of gold, as well as Achan's sons and his daughters, his ox, his donkey and his flock, and his tent and everything that belonged to him – so all Israel, led by Joshua, brought them to the Valley of Achor.**

Joshua said, "Why have you brought disaster on us? The LORD will bring disaster on you this day!"

Then all Israel stoned Achan to death.

Coveting, and then following it with other sins, can destroy marriages, reputations, and entire lives. Coveting causes serious trouble.

And finally, we learn this about coveting from Achan: like all sins, God hates coveting, and he takes it deadly serious, even if we don't always. Did Achan's punishment seem harsh to you? Stoning him and his whole family, and even his cattle, and even his tent for goodness sakes, and then burning it all instead of burying them? Seems awfully rough, doesn't it? Especially since Achan admitted his guilt to Joshua.

There are several mitigating circumstances that might help explain why the punishment was so extreme, and for the sake of time we won't get into all of them. The most important, though, is that Achan's sin had huge and dangerous ramifications. He jeopardized the entire conquest of the Promised Land by God's nation, and thereby jeopardized the promise of the Savior that Israel was carrying. Because God always keeps his promises, he reacts strongly when people get in the way of his promises, especially *that* promise, the most important one ever. Under those unique circumstances, God didn't think the punishment was too rough. See in the story of Achan just how seriously God takes this sin.

And he takes this sin so seriously because coveting is really an attack on God himself. Whenever we covet something, we allow that thing that we are craving to become the most important thing in our life. That thing we covet becomes even more important than God himself. Coveting, really, is allowing something to become bigger than God in our hearts. And God won't stand for that.

Still, there's something about Achan that bugs me. And maybe it bugs you, too. Why did Achan covet in the first place? Why wasn't he just happy with what God had given him? Didn't he know that God had promised to give him and his whole nation a beautiful Promised Land, and that they were in the process of receiving it right then? Didn't he trust God to give him all that he needed, to come through and deliver on this promise of a beautiful homeland?

Well, I don't know the answer for sure, but think about what Achan and the rest of Israel had been doing for the past 40 years. Wandering through desert. Endless wandering. With nothing but the bare necessities. After all that time wandering in the wilderness, Achan was probably tired of having to do with less. He may have been doubting if God's plans for him and Israel would ever come to pass, if they'd ever get settled in that Promised Land. He was probably tired of waiting for God to come through and keep his promises. He was ready for more. And he was ready to covet it and take it.

Do you ever feel like you've been wandering in the wilderness the past couple of years? Are you where you thought you would be in life by 2022? Or have you had to do with less lately, like Achan after he wandered in the wilderness? Are you tired and sick of having to do with less? If you are, how are you going to avoid coveting, and all the other sins that often follow right behind it? How will you be satisfied with what God chooses to give you, even if it feels like you've been in the wilderness, even if it's less than you want?

We've all been in our own little wildernesses, feeling deprived by God, doubting that our best interests are in his mind. Sometimes we react by eyeing something up that God didn't want us to have, and letting that desire take over. And just like Achan, I'm sure we've all seen some bad results.

But there was one man who stood in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights with absolutely nothing – and refused to covet. He refused even to make a piece of bread for his own starving body, because he knew his heavenly Father didn't want him to have it at that time. He refused to ditch God's plans and seize wealth for himself – even the wealth of the whole world – because he knew God didn't want him to have it at that time. Jesus did the exact opposite of coveting. He showed true, perfect contentment, even as he stood with nothing in the wilderness.

Even when God's plan for his life involved extreme suffering, even later in life when God's plan involved death on the cross, Jesus trusted his Father's will for his life and was content with it. Even in the wilderness, even when God's plans meant doing with less, doing with nothing, even later when God's plans meant suffering and dying.

Jesus is God, but he also took on our humanity. It was not easy for Jesus to trust his Father in heaven, to trust that the Father's will was best. We know it wasn't easy by the temptations Satan threw at him in wilderness. We know it wasn't easy by the prayer he said in the Garden three years later, where he remained content with his Father's plan. Even as he sweat drops of blood and pleaded for relief, he remained content with what his Father was giving him: **“Not my will, but yours be done,”** he prayed.

Contentment says: “I can ask God for different; I can ask for more; I can work for more; and I can want more. But I will be satisfied with what God gives me, even if it's less than I want. I will still be satisfied if he chooses to take away everything from me. Even if I'm in the wilderness, without the things I want, I will trust his plans and his will.”

To shut coveting down cold and to keep contentment, we need to do what Jesus did: trust God and his plans for our lives, even when we are doing with less, even if we are suffering in our own little wilderness. We do not know God's plans for us exactly, but we do know this about his plans: they're always best for us. Look no farther than the cross of Jesus, marked so clearly for us in this season.

We know his plans for us are good, because they include eternal life, and they come with a promise that no matter what happens God will always work it for our good. Knowing that satisfies our hearts. It fills us with true contentment. It kicks coveting out of our hearts. Jesus and what he won for me makes me say: God, give me a little in this life or give me a lot, because I have my perfect Savior Jesus and I have heaven, too. I know that heaven is in your plans for me. So I know all your plans for me are good. So I will be content.

Jesus remained content with God's plans, even in the wilderness. And he did it to save us. In that salvation, even when we are standing in our wildernesses, we remain content, too. Amen.