



There are more than 500 species of sharks, but in most of our imaginations there's really only one. That's why when Pixar needed an underwater villain for *Finding Nemo*, it didn't look to the bull shark or the tiger shark. Instead, it was the great white shark—with its wide, toothy grin—that was plastered on thousands of billboards across America.

But the strange thing about that is the great white shark isn't a vicious hunter. If you look at a great white from the side, it's not scary looking; in fact, it looks like an overstuffed sausage. That doesn't mean they can't do some damage. If you look at one from the front, you'll see rows of sharp teeth capable of crunching down with two tons of force. But still, by nature great whites are more cautious than vicious.

Perhaps the most outstanding quality of the great white shark is secrecy. No one knows how long they live. No one has ever seen even one mate or give birth. And no one knows exactly where they spend most of their lives. You can hardly call that dangerous.

Or maybe it is. Maybe secrecy is the most dangerous thing of all when it comes to the great white shark. Maybe secrecy is the most dangerous thing of all when it comes to each of us. On the one hand, we all love a good secret. It's fun to be in the know about something few others are aware of. It makes us feel included, even loved. But sometimes secrets have the opposite effect. Sometimes we hide things, like our sin, out of shame. Our secrets become a powerful force, imprisoning us in a cell of guilt and fear. You know the old saying, "Your secret is safe with me." But I'd say, when sin is kept secret, it is never safe.

If you don't believe me, consider the story of a man named Achan. He was from the tribe of Judah. His father's name was Karmi. I wonder what Karmi was thinking when he named his son Achan. As far as we know, that's a variation of the Hebrew word *akhar*, which means trouble. I can imagine his brothers and sisters seeing little Achan running towards them and shouting, "Here comes trouble!" Little did they know!

Defeat

Achan's story is found in Joshua 7. The first word of the first verse strikes an ominous note: "But..." Chapter 6 described a miraculous victory. The walls of Jericho fell flat because God gave the city into Israel's hands. Israel didn't win because of her military prowess, but because she trusted in God and carefully followed his plan for victory.

But as that victory was won, there was another battle raging; not within the walls of Jericho but within the heart of Achan. In chapter 6 God said to Israel, "***The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord... keep away from the devoted things, so***

that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury." This was God's way of keeping his people holy and set apart from the detestable practices of the Canaanites. But here in verse 1 we read:

But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord's anger burned against Israel.

In this one verse we get the entire plot of what's to come. God is angry with Israel because one man was "unfaithful." That word means "to act under cover," hence "treacherously" or "secretly." It's a word that always describes a breach of trust against the Lord himself. Now, remember, no one knows this but God and Achan. Starting in verse 2 we're told how Joshua and the Israelites came to discover this as well.

You might say they learned the hard way. Look at verses 2–5:

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.

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

The Israelites suffered a humiliating loss at Ai. Thirty-six men were killed in battle. This was shocking because Ai was much smaller than Jericho. What happened? Some people think the problem was Joshua failed to pray and seek the Lord's counsel before sending his men to battle. Others say the Israelites were too self-confident. You can see it in the report the spies gave to Joshua, "This will be a piece of cake! We don't need the whole army, just send a couple of thousand and we'll take it, no problem." But even though those things may be true, the fact is we've already been told what the real problem was—Achan's secret sin. You might say what Joshua and the Israelites didn't know **did** hurt them.

Notice the dangerous impact secret sin has not just on the person who commits it but on those around him. Everyone is impacted. One guy acts up and gives into his desire, and the whole nation

suffers. It seems unfair. Why should everyone suffer because one guy blows it? Well, that's the nature of community. When one person sins, not only does he reap what he's sown, but everybody connected to him reaps what he's sown. One offensive lineman jumps offside and the whole team is penalized. This is true in the church. That's the point the apostle Paul made when he wrote the church in Corinth about dealing with a man in their fellowship living immorally: *"Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?"* (1 Cor. 5:6). You see this in our nation right now. Our nation has a history of racism. We've seen in some recent events that it still exists. In some ways, we're all responsible for that. You might say, "That's not true. I'm not a racist." But in some sense we're all responsible for it.

Look at the impact this defeat had on the Israelites: "the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water." Hmmm. Back in chapter 2 that's just what Rahab said the Canaanites felt when they heard Israel was about to enter their land. Now the tables are turned. Now Israel's hearts are melting! You can imagine how they felt. They'd crossed the Jordan and there's no turning back. Had God brought them this far, sucked them in with one easy victory, only to walk away and leave them to fend for themselves? That's what Joshua felt.

Dismay

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. And Joshua said, "Alas, 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! Pardon your servant, Lord. What can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? 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?" (verses 6-9).

One thing that's great about pain and defeat is God uses it to get our attention. It's been said pain is God's megaphone. That's what we see here. Joshua and the elders tear their clothes and fall to the ground before the ark because they're grieving over what's happened.

Most of all, they're perplexed and confused. Remember, they know nothing of Achan's secret. In their minds, they've done everything the Lord said to do. So in desperation Joshua brings this to God, "Why did you bring us here in the first place? To destroy us? If only we just stayed on the other side of the Jordan." Do you ever pray like that? Do you ever pray, "If only..." prayers? "Lord, if only I had taken that job..." Or "Lord, if only I had married that person..." It's not wrong to pray these prayers. It's always good to go to the Lord in prayer as Joshua did. And it's even okay to complain to God. These are words of despair, not unbelief. Complaining to God isn't the same thing as complaining about God.

Notice what's driving his disappointment. It comes out in verse 9. He says, *"Lord, if the Canaanites wipe out our name, what will happen to your name? What will happen to your reputation?"*

Joshua understood God and Israel are joined at the hip. They're his covenant people so what happens to Israel will reflect on the reputation of God. There have been times in my life when I've been utterly distraught over something, and in the end the only thing I could do is pray, "Lord, people know I belong to you. Lord, your reputation is at stake here. If you won't do this for me, do it for your own name; do it for your own honor."

Diagnosis

And God responds to Joshua in verses 10–12:

The Lord said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? 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. 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.

Don't you love this! There's a time to fall on your face before God but there's also a time to stand up and take action! God basically says, "Listen, this is on you guys. I haven't broken the covenant, you have." Notice again how one man sinned, but God holds the whole nation responsible. God says, "Israel has sinned. They have violated my covenant..." Then he gets specific: "They have taken... they have stolen... they have lied." The whole nation is culpable of stealing from God. And because of that, they're liable to destruction. So, Israel must either destroy the devoted things or God will destroy them as devoted things.

But I believe the thing that got Joshua's attention more than anything else are the words, "I will not be with you any more..." Remember the promises God made in chapter 1? He said over and over, "Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid!" But then he always added, "I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you." Without him, we can't be strong and courageous. But now God says, "I won't be with you **unless** you deal with this." I wonder to what degree the apparent absence of God in our midst is due to our unwillingness to really expose and deal with sin. No doubt there are churches far too judgmental and grace-less in dealing with sin in their midst, but I dare say the contemporary church errs more on the side of laxity. God takes sin seriously. Do we? When sin is kept secret, it is never safe.

Disclosure

And so, God instructs Joshua on how to deal with it. It will start with uncovering the secret. Listen to what God says:

"Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There are devoted things among you, Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them.

"In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe the Lord chooses shall come forward clan by clan; the clan the Lord chooses shall come forward family by family; and the family the Lord chooses shall come forward man by man. Whoever 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 an outrageous thing in Israel!" (verses 13-15).

It's interesting to me there'd be a time of preparation before the source of the sin was identified. God wants the people to have time to reflect on the truth that someone has kept the devoted things. Imagine hearing this! I remember sitting in a classroom and hearing the teacher announce to the class, "Some of you in this class cheated on this test. I can tell by the similarities in your answers." I remember thinking, "Was it me? I don't think I cheated, but maybe I did." That's probably how all of the Israelites felt.

But think of how Achan and his family felt. Most likely his family knew Achan hid the devoted things in the ground under their tent. Families know and families keep secrets, don't they? I just wonder if this wasn't an act of grace on God's part to get them to come forward on their own and confess their sin. We don't know what kind of rumination went on in Achan's heart that night. We don't know what kind of discussions they had as a family at the dinner table, if they could even eat. I'm sure no one in Achan's tent slept a wink that night.

Finally, at the crack of dawn Joshua carried out God's instructions.

Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was chosen. The clans of Judah came forward, and the Zerahites were chosen. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was chosen. Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was chosen.

Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me."

Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath" (verses 16-21).

You have to wonder why God had them go through this tedious process. God knew all along who did it, but he has Joshua go through this laborious process of whittling down the possibilities first by tribe, then by clan, then by family, then by man, until the net finally closes on Achan. And for the second time in this chapter the writer identifies him not as an isolated man, but part of a family: "Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah."

Joshua speaks to him as a father to a son, both tenderly and firmly: "My son, give glory to the Lord, honor him. Tell me what you've done." The demand for a confession is couched in terms of God's glory and honor. Keeping sin a secret is a denial of his glory and his honor. It's like we're saying, "I'm right and you're wrong. I'm in control and you're not."

Then Achan fesses up. He recognizes fundamentally his sin is against God. He's right. And notice how he describes his sin: "I

saw... I coveted... I took..." On the surface, we just think, "Well, Achan stole what was not his. He broke the eighth commandment, 'You shall not steal.'" But what I want you to see here is what we might call the sin beneath the sin.

It starts with being dissatisfied. Perhaps as Achan wandered in the wilderness, then crossed the Jordan with the Israelites, he thought, "You know, God really hasn't treated us all that well. We ate the same food for 40 years in the wilderness. Now he says we're going to each get some land here in Canaan, maybe build a house, but how do I really know? I've had enough of this trusting God. So, when I SAW this beautiful robe and the silver and gold, what was I supposed to do? Of course, I wanted it. Call it coveting. Call it whatever you want. Who wouldn't want it? After all, doesn't God help those who help themselves? I have to look out for my family. I have to take advantage of the opportunities before me."

Isn't that how sin always starts? It starts in a heart dissatisfied with God, ungrateful for his provision, and not trusting in his generosity. That's how Satan got to Adam and Eve. He sowed seeds of dissatisfaction in their hearts: "You mean God won't let you touch that beautiful tree? What kind of God is that? He knows when you eat of it you'll be like him. Do you know what you're missing?" If we're going to deal with the sin beneath the sin, we'll have to deal with our desires and with our dissatisfaction with what we have, and with our lack of real trust that God is good and gracious and generous; that he's enough. James Boice writes, "Nothing will so quickly destroy a Christian's life as dissatisfaction with God's arrangements for him or her, which leads to lust for what God has not yet given or has given to someone else."

By the way, it's interesting one of the items he coveted was a "beautiful robe from Babylonia." Babylon was one of the most highly regarded cities of that time; a cultural leader. It was like the cool place to live. It was also like a fashion center. Anything from Babylon was chic. It was like Paris and this robe was from Louis Vuitton. When Achan saw it, he knew it would make him a "man of the world" and would associate him with success and power. How often we fall prey to the same desire. John warns us not to love the world or the things of the world. He talks about "the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the boastful pride of life." It's not just the stuff we want, it's the feeling of importance, of being somebody that captures us.

And with that kind of thinking Achan says, "I took them." That which captures our heart will inevitably come out in our actions. He knew it was wrong. Why else would he hide them under his tent, much like we try to keep our sin a secret? But when sin is kept secret, it is never safe. Look what happens next.

Destruction

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

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and

daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. 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. 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 ever since (verses 22–26).

We struggle with this. It seems to us the punishment doesn't fit the crime. Why did he and his whole family have to die like this? Our problem is we take sin far too lightly. To us this isn't that big of a deal. It's a victimless crime, so why would God react so severely? But look again at what God said back in v. 15, "*Whoever 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 an outrageous thing in Israel!*" The penalty is so severe because the sin is outrageous in God's eyes. This is just one of those passages where we say: "I'm not as serious about this as you are, God. You wanted purity in your people so much that when this one guy sinned and tried to hide it, his whole family was put to death. And yet the moment you got that sin out of the camp, you turned from your fierce anger and put your blessing right back on them."

We say, "Well, that's the Old Testament. God doesn't act that way any more." But look at the New Testament. Remember Acts 5? Ananias and Sapphira came before the apostles after selling some property, and they laid the money at the apostles' feet. They brought the money to the church and said, "Hey, here's all our money." Peter says, "Is that really all your money?" And they say, "Yeah." But they were lying. They'd kept some back. And both of them are struck dead by the Lord. They just collapsed. Then the Bible says, "And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of it." When sin is kept secret, it is never safe.

Now that doesn't mean God punishes us in the same way as Achan or Ananias and Sapphira. Each of these stories come at the very beginning of a new era. The people of Israel are beginning to take possession of the land and **must** know the danger of participating in the practices of the people around them. The early church is beginning its march into Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth and must know the same. In both cases, sin had to be dealt with severely at the start of a new era to prevent further compromise and defeat.

Having said that, God hasn't changed in his holiness. He's still a God with whom there are no secrets; a God who sees whatever we've buried beneath our tent. He takes sin every bit as seriously now as he did then. And without a real understanding of that I don't think we can begin to really understand the Gospel. Sin always must be judged by a holy God. So travel back with me for a moment to Calvary. Look at the spotless, sinless Son of God nailed

to a Roman cross because of my sin and yours. Look at him crying out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" And listen to the words of the apostle Peter, "*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed*" (1 Peter 2:24).

Every one of us here today is battling sin. Sin manifests itself in the world, our sinful nature, and in the temptations the evil one places before us. We're all a work in progress and we all fall from time to time. But the story of Achan reminds us that sin must be dealt with. It's always a big deal. When sin is kept secret, there's nothing more dangerous. Maybe some of us today need to go into our tent and bring out what we've been hiding and lay them out before the Lord. You see, when we repent and confess it, not just to God but to one another, it becomes an opportunity to experience his grace.

Though this is a story of judgment, it's also a story of hope for the blessing that will come again when sin is finally dealt with. There's something in the book of the Hosea I want you to see. Like Joshua 7, Hosea is a story of God's judgment. It's the story of judgment in the life of the unfaithful wife Hosea married, a wife whose betrayal represents the unfaithful actions of Israel towards God. In dealing with Hosea's unfaithful wife, God says something quite remarkable. He says in the midst of her judgment, "*Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope*" (Hosea 2:14–15a). Do you see it? That's a direct reference to the story of Achan and his death by stoning. Achan and Achor have similar spellings, and the place of Achan's death was called Achor—a pun on his name—because achor means "trouble," which is what Achan brought upon Israel and himself. The Valley of Achor was a place of judgment and death, and that seems to be where Hosea's wife is heading.

But right here, the inexplicable grace and mercy of God comes in. For although we expect the worst, God says, "I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope." Does sin bring judgment? Of course it does. This is the teaching of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. This is why we must never take it lightly. But judgment isn't the whole story. Sin does bring judgment, but God often graciously uses the judgment to bring about change in us that enables him to turn what otherwise would be the greatest of all judgments into blessed hope.

Who can turn the Valley of Achor into a door of hope? We certainly can't do it. But there is one who does: Jesus. He's done it by taking Achor's trouble upon himself. He was troubled for us. He went down into that dark valley of judgment, dying in our place, so that we might know the blessing of his grace and the hope of his resurrection.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2016 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1423–6FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, October 9, 2016 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.