



Good morning everyone! My name is McKenna Mitchell and I am one of the Directors here at CPC North. Back in June, Rob came into my office and told me to take a look at the preaching schedule the pastors had just finished for Fall. He slid it across my desk and I was like, "Cool, we're doing Joshua!", and I scanned the list and saw my name listed there. I almost started crying I was so excited! I looked at Rob and said, "Really? I am preaching?" He said, "Yeah, you are." I flipped my Bible open and looked at the passage... and my heart dropped. "Rob, the passage is Achan's sin." He kind of snickered a little and said, "Well, you have three months, it better be good." And then he left my office.

It might surprise you, but this passage is not my new favorite. This is a hard part in the story of Joshua. It offends our cultural sensitivities, it begs questions of God's justice and his mercy and in many ways, it throws our sense of individualism into confusion. But I think the real part of this story that messes with me is it deals with secret, hidden sin and the way the consequences play out for God's people.

Secrets are very tempting little things. On the one hand they're kind of exciting. We love having secrets and holding on to things no one else knows about. They give us a sense of power. They also give us a rush and make us feel included. Sometimes, secrets even make us feel loved. But other times they are quite the opposite. Sometimes secrets don't give us power; they leave us powerless. Sometimes the kinds of rush they give us comes with a deep sense of anxiety and the scary part is sometimes we don't even realize it. It is very clear throughout scripture that all sin that is kept secret has power over us and let me tell you, the old saying, "Your secret is safe with me" well, we are going to see in this next portion of the story of Joshua that secret sin is never safe.

We are picking up on the high note we left on last Sunday. In a miraculous campaign, Israel had just defeated the city of Jericho and the quest for the Promised Land had begun. God was fulfilling his promises to his people. Unfortunately, the excitement was short lived; the victory was followed by dark disappointment, all because of secret sin. Turn to Joshua chapter 7 in your Bible.

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 (v. 1).

Immediately, in this dramatic irony, we are given information that Joshua and the Israelites do not have yet. While the author calls Israel unfaithful, and God's anger burns against them, we find out that the root of the unfaithfulness is one man—one man out of the multitudes and his name was Achan. After the victory at Jericho, Achan directly disobeyed the orders God had given

them and took some of the riches from the city for himself. God had declared *herem* on the city of Jericho, which means he had ordered its complete destruction and that no Israelite would take for himself any of the plunder found in the city. It was all God's. Herem warfare was God's way of keeping his people holy. I am pretty sure Achan didn't miss the memo about herem, but we find out later in the passage that somehow Achan was tempted past the threshold of obedience.

What did he end up taking? A beautiful Babylonian robe, five pounds of silver and a pound of gold. All three of these things would be pretty easy to conceal. You can fold up a robe, five pounds of silver isn't that big, and a pound bar of gold? I have an old cell phone that would have been bigger and back in high school, I sported it in my pocket! I can imagine Achan wouldn't have thought it was that big of a deal. In comparison to the piles of treasure devoted to God after the victory, what difference could those three tiny pieces actually make? No one would even know. I can imagine him thinking, "My secret is safe with me." It turns out, what Joshua and the Israelites didn't know **did** hurt them.

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 (verses 2-5).

The Israelites suffered a humiliating loss at Ai. Not only did they lose 36 men, but they fled the battle. What was especially concerning was this battle had made strategic and even spiritual sense! Now, most scholars think that Ai was about 15 miles away from where the Israelites were camped at Gilgal. To get there required an uphill march through a ravine which ended on the top of a ridge. Taking Ai would have made strategic sense because it would have created for Israel a foothold in Canaan. So Joshua sent spies to scout out what is going on in the area. The report when they get back is so good, it's like they say, "Joshua, this is going to be easy. We don't need the whole army, let them rest! Just send some of us and we'll take it, no problem."

Some people try to argue that the reason Israel was defeated at Ai was because they were confident in their abilities, and not in God. Perhaps. Things may have been different if Joshua had waited to hear from the Lord directly, but I don't think that's the

point here. I actually think it made spiritual sense to Joshua for the progression to continue into Canaan. It is clear from the beginning the reason Israel is defeated is because of Achan's sin—the secret sin no one but Achan knew about. What Joshua and the Israelites didn't know did hurt them; the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water. The only other times that phrase is used in scripture is to describe Canaanite fear of God and his people. Here, the hearts of God's own were reduced to terror in the wake of this loss.

It's easy for us to overlook what Joshua and the Israelites may have been experiencing because we know what is really going on. But for just a minute, put yourself in Joshua's place. They had crossed the Jordan; there was no going back, they had started a conquest that had no doubt made a stir, bought them some enemies, and as much as the Israelites were the vessel of God's redemptive plan, they were weak when measured against the tribes and people of Canaan. God had brought his people this far and had given them one sure victory but now it looked like he had deserted them. What we don't know can hurt us.

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).

Joshua and the elders, in their despair and confusion, throw themselves down before the ark; they were confused and distressed. Joshua's initial plea to God is, "O Sovereign Lord, Why?" How many of us find ourselves so often in this same place? I can hear myself in Joshua's despair and disappointment. Joshua's cry is not disappointment in himself or in Israel, but he is disappointed in God. "Why Lord would you promise us this land then leave us to fend for ourselves? Why did you start to deliver us for your sake and then deliver us into the hands of our enemies instead?" Joshua's lament is real and deep and laced with broken expectation.

I wonder if those laments are familiar to any of you. Ever been excited or passionate about something, and it seems certain you know where God is leading you? Your mind jumps to what's next and you get full of anticipation of what God is going to do and how he is going to do it? Then, God closes a door. Suddenly your dream gets shut out. Maybe an anticipated marriage ends in a breakup instead. Maybe an anticipated promotion ends up in the loss of a job instead. Maybe the shut door is a broken reputation or maybe something being done to you that is entirely out of your control. Maybe it's something as simply devastating as a child getting sick or someone you care about leaving unexpectedly. Anyone ever asked "O Sovereign Lord... Why?" I have been in Joshua's place. Joshua did not anticipate failure as a part of the

Israelite conquest. God had promised the land. And the battle had made logistical and even spiritual sense! What went wrong?

Joshua pleaded with God and then did something similar to what Moses had done generations before: essentially he warns God that if Israel gets wiped out, his benevolent, all-powerful name would be at stake in a way that will hinder the belief of all the surrounding nations. That's a bold statement. And while Joshua was concerned about the surrounding nations remembering God's name and benevolence, remembering God's holiness had to start with Israel. Yes, God promised the land. Yes, God promised deliverance and an enduring name for Israel, but dwarfing all of those promises was God's real promise—his presence. And that demanded holiness. These were God's chosen people. His own. God's chief concern here wasn't moving the Israelites into the land. If it had been, the Israelites may have won that battle at Ai while Achan's treasures lay buried in his tent. God could have dealt with Achan later. But no, God's chief concern was focusing the eyes of Israel on himself so they would know his name. They would know his holiness. They would know his presence is far more valuable than any conquest and victory ever could be. How would other nations come to know the holiness of God if his own people had forgotten it?

The same is absolutely true for us and the disappointments we face, be it dead dreams or shattered hopes. I am not saying all of our hardships happen because of some secret sin we're not aware of, but I do know the reason for our suffering is sometimes hidden. And I do know that God uses suffering to arrest our attention, just like he arrested Joshua's, and to remind us he cares more about our relationship **with** him than what we can do **for** him. His presence in our lives is far more valuable than any plan we could put our hope in. Sure, God has a plan for your life. But that plan will never be enough without his presence. In this case, Joshua did find out the reason for the Israelite suffering. Listen to how God responds:

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 (verses 10-12).

God literally tells Joshua to stand up and get his face off of the ground. How's that for a response to lament? In response, God puts all of Israel into the same category and says, "**They** have taken, **they** have lied, **they** turn their backs and run in face of their enemies, **they** have been made liable to destruction." Here's where every hair on the back of an American neck goes up. Whoah God! Simmer down. They? Achan stole some of the devoted things. Why would Israel have to suffer the defeat because of the disobedience of one man? It took me analyzing my rationale to realize how faulty my thinking actually is. When we in the West think of things being fair, we tend to focus on

individual culpability. Our nation was birthed on principles of individual rights and when what we think is fair is questioned, we are quick to throw up our arms and claim injustice. But God is the author of justice. He cares more about each of us than we do for ourselves, and as much as he cares for us as individuals, he has also created us far more dependent on each other than we care to realize. It's true Achan stole the devoted things, but his secret sin polluted all of Israel and the consequences were just.

Secret sin is never safe. It's not safe for us, and it's not safe for those around us. We have a very bad habit of separating ourselves from each other and assuming what each of us does means nothing to anyone else. Do you realize our actions have the power to lift up the body of Christ or bring it down? When I was living in Santa Barbara, I volunteered at a food bank and one afternoon I was stacking cans next to another woman from the community. She found out I was a Christian and started telling me all the ways her church experience had harmed her. My internal reaction as she told me all of those awful things was to balk at them and to claim, "Well, if you just came to my church, things would be different! That's not the way real Christians act!" But in that moment, God gave me an alternative response that was much better. I apologized. I apologized that we hadn't represented Jesus well in the way we loved her. I am telling you, I shocked her and suddenly, I was having a conversation with her about her whole life story. Did I do the things she claimed were done to her? No, but at the same time, yes. As much as our pride makes us wish we could separate ourselves from each other, especially as we learn about people who sin or think in ways we certainly never would, we have to realize something: As followers of Jesus, we rise and fall together. No, it may not always seem fair, but it is in fact, just.

Thankfully, God's intention was not to destroy all of Israel. In correcting Israel's confusion, God's intention was to purify all of Israel. He told Joshua to have the Israelites make themselves presentable and he would whittle through the tribes and the clans and the families until he rooted out the bad seed that was causing all of this confusion. And that's exactly what happened. This must have been the worst morning ever! It reminds me of my third grade teacher who made everyone in the class stand at their desk each morning after homework was collected. One by one she read the names of every paper she had in her hands and once your name was read, you got to sit down. There were definitely times I was left standing at the end (I am pretty sure this contributed to my perpetual anxiety about schoolwork for the rest of my life!), but even when I knew I had turned everything in, I still stood there in absolute terror waiting for my name to be called. That's probably how all of the Israelites felt. And finally, Achan was the last man standing. His secret sin was never safe, it wasn't secret anymore either.

Achan confesses to Joshua only once it is absolutely clear he is without a doubt the one who did it and not a moment before.

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." So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath (verses 19-22).

I saw. I coveted. I took. I have a 7-month-old niece who I am absolutely infatuated with. She is adorable. Her name is Naya... I love her. Naya loves my glasses and every time she sees them, she ends up ripping them off of my face and they fly to the floor. Sometimes she even giggles when it happens. The same is true for my earrings and anything else that's shiny. And because she is a baby, I couldn't care less that she sees, she wants and she takes. But most of us, if we're honest with ourselves, maintain that same pattern of thought long past seven months in certain areas of our lives. The difference between what Naya does and what we do, or what Achan did, is we know there's something wrong with what we're doing. There's nothing wrong with Naya's heart when she sees and wants and takes, but with Achan's heart, and with ours, there is. Achan stealing the devoted things was the result of a faulty heart posture.

It's what Tim Keller would call "the sin beneath the sin." Our actions are outpourings of the posture of our hearts and when we make an idol out of anything—from a relationship to money to our bodies to influence to control to appearing the right way to others—that's when even our secret actions start to reflect the fact God isn't really the one with control of our hearts; we are. Achan's fatal heart posture is why he stashed treasures under his tent. It's the same reason we delete our search histories on our phones and computers and we slide books under our beds. It's why we say insulting things about others just to save face. It's why we sometimes don't deposit or report the cash we make at work. That's why we do things while we are alone that we would never do if there was anyone there watching. All of these kinds of actions, the kind that we think no one knows about, actually point to the deeper problem: We have a wrong understanding of how big and good God is! When we know our idols and keep them in the dark, that's when shame grows, confiscates our joy and has the power to ruin our relationships. And while we think, "My secret is safe with me," shame wreaks havoc on our whole hearts just like Achan's decision wreaked havoc on all of Israel.

Achan confessed to seeing and wanting and taking, but confession was not the end of Achan's story, and it should never be the end of ours. As easy as it might have been to assume that because the devoted things were out in the open, it was go-time; Israel was not yet ready to advance on Ai. God loves us way too much to give us victory for him before we surrender to him.

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 24–26).

Again, I tried desperately to figure out a way this would make sense to me. I tried to think, well, Achan caused the death of 36 warriors! There could be 36 families without dads. He deserved to die this way. But why did his family have to die alongside him? Maybe his family helped him steal things which is why they were brought outside too! But there is no hint of that in the text whatsoever. The fact of the matter is, the more we try to make this passage fair, the more we are going to lose the Gospel in it. This story teaches us two beautiful things about our lives as followers of Jesus that can be held in the midst of that chaos.

First, our secret sin needs to be destroyed. John Owen is famous for saying, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Knowing we have problems is a start, but that’s not the end goal—we have to turn from sin. Paul tells us in Ephesians that *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”* We may not be fighting the way the Israelites were fighting, but do not for a second think that we aren’t fighting anymore. If anything our battle is deeper and harder than the battles the Israelites faced. We are fighting for the love we have experienced in Jesus to permeate this world. And you know where that battle starts? With us.

Satan loves to whisper in our ears, “It’s not that big of a deal. No one will ever know. Your secret is safe with me.” But secret sin is never safe. Shame always follows it and there is nothing that can take away from your purpose, your power and your potential like shame. It distances you from people, and it keeps you from running to God. We were not meant to fight battles for Jesus on our own. But the only way to move forward and out of shame is to bring your sin out from under your tent and kill it, even if that means you need to do it over and over and over again.

This could look like being honest with other followers of Jesus about what you are really battling secretly. It could mean dredging back up things that happened in your past that you are still ashamed of, even though you think they have no impact on the way you live your life now. And unlike the rest of the world, we have a power far beyond our own who will enable us to resist temptation. When we ask, we depend and we obey, the Holy Spirit gives us power to resist what seems irresistible. We can replace the lies we have learned with truth about who we were created to be. We can be strong and courageous. We learn God has given us the power to kill those things we saw, we wanted and we took because ultimately experiencing the presence and pleasure of God is far better. Our secret sin needs to be destroyed.

Second, Jesus paid for our secret sin. The real reason this story was so hard for me was because I know I am Achan. I saw. I wanted. I took. I disobey God and I have added to the chaos

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

around me because of the sin in my life. I’m going to go out on a limb here and say we are all Achan. We saw. We wanted. We took. We disobeyed God and as a result, we deserve death. He sent his son to pay the price for us. If anything in this entire world is unfair it’s that Jesus died in our place for our secret and not-so-secret sin. He stood in the place of Achan and fought the battle we couldn’t win on our own. He is the reason we can live without shame because we are loved as whole people, not just in parts. If we stop and realize we are all Achan, then we will also realize we are all in desperate need of the forgiveness and life that only Jesus offers us.

Far later in the story of Israel, the prophet Hosea mentions this Valley of Achor where Achan and his family were destroyed. At a time when Israel was being beckoned back, yet again, after turning to idolatry, the Lord declares, *“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. There she will respond as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.”* What was once a place devoted to destruction and herem is redeemed and turned into a place where God calls his people back to himself. God can take even our deepest sins and wounds and turn them into hope. That’s what he did on the cross. Our secret sin needs to be destroyed but Jesus already paid for it.

I grew up with three sisters. And in a house of four girls, there were many times when one of us would say, “That’s not fair!” My mom had a killer response every time we said something like that. She would say, “Who do you control?” And we would mumble under our breath back to her, “Myself.” While our secret sin has the power to create chaos for many around us and we rise and fall together, do you realize you only have the power to bring your secret out into the light? You can’t deal with your significant others’ secrets, you can’t deal with your kid’s secrets; you can’t deal with the secrets of the person at church that somehow you keep thinking, “Oh my gosh, I wish so-and-so was listening to this right now.” No. You only have the power to deal with the things you are hiding under your tent.

Let me be clear here. God already knows what is hiding there. He already knows the condition of your heart, where you have chosen other things, wishes and plans above him. He knows the sin beneath the sin and what parts of your life are the hardest to surrender to him. He even knows what you don’t think you are ready to surrender yet! And knowing all of that, he offers each of us the promise of perfect love and sweet freedom as a trade. God loves us way too much to give us victory for him before we surrender to him. As we learn to confess individually “I saw-I wanted-I took,” then together we can do more in our fight for Jesus because like the Israelites, our ultimate victory is already guaranteed.

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