

The fateful condition of sin

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[0 : 0 0] Well, there are many conditions in life that end up being fatal if they're left untreated. Maybe you've had a child or a family member who has had a serious illness who needed to be treated if they weren't going to die.

My nephew was one, in fact. He was born with a condition called TGA, a congenital heart defect, where the major arteries of the heart were swapped around at birth, and he had to have open heart surgery within weeks of being born.

And if he hadn't, he may well have died. And we're thankful that everything went well, and today he's a healthy, bouncy little boy. But we never forget, as his family, that he had a very serious condition that would have been fatal if it was left untreated.

Well, as we come to read Joshua 7 this morning, we're reminded of another condition that's equally fatal if it's left untreated, but it's a condition that we all have.

And it's a condition that's actually much more serious than any medical condition, because it's not just fatal for our lives on earth, but it's fatal for our eternity. It's a condition called sin.

[1 : 1 2] And we're reminded of just how serious it is in this story of Israel's attempt to conquer the city of Ai. Israel, we're in the middle of the conquest of Canaan. You'll know if you've been with us in Joshua, the land that God had promised for his redeemed people to live in.

And they had just miraculously, we saw last week, they had just taken the city of Jericho, this great walled fortress. And now they're planning to capture another city, Ai. Except this time, things didn't go nearly as well.

They thought that this would be a piece of cake after Jericho. They thought, you know, we don't have to even send all our army. We can just send a few guys. We can just take it. God will be with us. But then they got there, and they got a nasty surprise.

They were soundly whipped by the Aites, with a number of Israelites being killed in the process. The first fatalities of this war that they're fighting.

And they were hugely surprised. They didn't expect that. And the reason we discover for this defeat wasn't because of overconfidence. I mean, after all, they had every reason to be confident, seeing what God had already done for them in Jericho.

[2 : 1 9] The reason for their defeat was because of the sin that was in their community that was left untreated. And that's what this story is about. This story is actually a case study for us this morning of sin and the seriousness of sin.

And what it can lead to, not just for Israel, but what it can lead to in our lives if it's not dealt with, if it's not treated. And so there are three main lessons that we can learn about sin this morning.

And the first is that sin is serious. Now Joshua and the elders of Israel were really taken aback by their defeat. It's the last thing they expected.

So they pleaded. The first thing they did is they came to God in prayer and they pleaded. And they asked him, you know, why have you done this? Why has this happened? And so he told them. And it turns out that someone had taken some of the devoted items from Jericho that God had commanded to be set aside.

And they investigate and discover this was done by a man named Achan, who he then admits to having taken a cloak, 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold.

[3 : 28] Now, in a civilized society, the response to that kind of crime is maybe a rap on the knuckles. I mean, he's a first offender. He's shown remorse. Let's let him off with a warning.

That's what you'd expect, wouldn't you? And so it's shocking when we discover what punishment he gets. God commands Achan to be killed. And he is stoned to death and burned.

Now, I don't know about you, but that seems a little heavy-handed, doesn't it? The punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. I mean, yes, it was bad. He was naughty.

He shouldn't have done that. But come on, to stone and burn him to end his life? That's what we think. We tend to sort of be shocked when we read something like this, this violent response to this crime.

But the reason we're shocked, the reason we think that, the reason we think it's overkill is because we actually fail to understand what the crime really was. This man's crime was not just taking a few things.

[4 : 32] That's what we've got to understand here this morning. This man's crime was actually a deep, deliberate rebellion against what God wanted. You see, the devoted things from Jericho were items that God explicitly wanted to set apart for his holy use.

In the previous chapter we read, after they took Jericho, Joshua 6.18, God says, He's very clear. When God says this, he doesn't mess around.

He's very clear. Keep away from the devoted things so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking them. Otherwise, you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.

You know, he's making an effort to warn these people what is going to happen if they took any of the devoted things. All the silver and gold and all the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury. So, God has made it quite clear what his will is, what he wants.

And Achan knew that. And he didn't care. Why? Well, because Achan wanted what Achan wanted. Rather than what God wanted.

[5 : 37] Achan served Achan before he served God. And that was his real sin, you see. Not just taking a few items, but his rebellion against the rule of God in his life.

Because he disregarded what God wanted. And he put what he wanted first. And that's the real problem here. But the Bible teaches that's the real problem not just in Achan's heart, but in your heart and in my heart as well.

Not so much the particular sins we might commit, but the reason we commit them. Simply because we make what we want more important than what God wants. And that is always the motivation for sin.

Because we know what God wants. And if we haven't read it recently in his word, he's given us a conscience. And we still don't do that because we want what we want more. And that's the reason Eve committed the first sin in the Garden of Eden.

And why we're in this mess in the first place. Because she put her wants and her desires and her curiosity over what God wanted. And what God clearly said he wanted. So it's this rebellion of the human heart against our creator's rule which causes us to sin.

[6 : 50] And it deserves the highest penalty. And that's what's clear in this story this morning. This rebellion against God that we're all prone to deserves the highest, highest punishment.

Because think about it. If we rebel against the rule of God in our lives and we ignore his will in our lives, there's really no reason for us to remain in his universe. There's no reason for God to keep us around if we constantly are just not going to listen to him and constantly just going to ignore him and what he wants for us.

Why should we inhabit his world if we ignore his will in favor of our own? And so I hope you see this morning that makes sense. The only right penalty for this treason against our creator is death.

Nothing less. And that's why Achan died. And that's why all humans eventually die ever since Adam and Eve. Because the Bible says there is no one who does good.

That's what the Bible says. There is no one who does good. In other words, no one who actually lives the way God wants us to. Not even one. All have turned away and have together become worthless.

[8 : 00] That's talking about you and me. And so this morning we're reminded of just what sin is. And we've got to take it seriously. Sin is not just doing naughty things. Sin is rebellion against God's rule in our life.

And it is a deadly serious matter. Sin is not least of all. Because we're all guilty of it. And we all do it every day. We chase after our own wants instead of God's.

Sin is not just a sin. Secondly, though. That's the first thing. We just learn the seriousness of sin. Secondly, we learn here not only how serious it is, but what effects it has.

We learn of sin's far-reaching effects. Notice in the story that Achan wasn't the only person who suffered for Achan's sin. Did you see that? In fact, listen to how the story is introduced right at the beginning of the chapter.

The Israelites were unfaithful. That's interesting. It was just one man. And yet, we're told the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things. Because Achan, son of Kami, the son of Zimri, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them.

[9 : 02] So the Lord's anger burned against Israel. That's interesting, isn't it? There's a corporate responsibility for Achan's sin. They all take the rap for it.

The whole of Israel carried the responsibility, and they suffered for it as well. Thirty-six men died because of one man's sin. Now, I admit, this concept is difficult for us to grasp in the individualistic kind of society we live in.

The fact that, you know, the many suffer for the sins of the one. We don't like to think that we're affected by people around us in the way they choose to live. We like to think that we're all independent of each other, and yet that's not the case.

The truth is, in any community, the actions of our neighbors affect us more than we'd like to think. I mean, for example, a person who decides to drink, get drunk, and then drive, may well smash into your car and kill you, even though you've had no say in the matter.

Their actions affect you or your family in a tremendous way, and there's nothing you can do about it. Another example we've seen in South Africa many times, in our townships, the actions of one person being irresponsible with the gas stove in their shack, and the shack burns down and sets aflame hundreds of others, and many people lose their lives because of one man's action.

[10 : 19] You see, whether we like it or not, and it's in life, it's in every area of life, we exist as members of bigger units of communities. We can't be independent of the actions of the person next to us.

Our actions will always affect the other members of the communities or families or companies that we belong to, and their actions will affect us. But this is no more so than in the community of God's people, the church, which Israel is a foreshadow of.

Because in a church like this, St. Mark's, we are much more interdependent on each other's obedience to God than we might think. Whether you obey God or not affects me, and whether I obey God or not affects you.

You see, Achan's disobedience affected all of Israel. And if you are part of a church, your sin will affect the whole church, whether you like it or not.

Because, you see, ongoing sin in the life of a Christian is like a cancer that spreads to surrounding cells. That's how cancer works. It starts small, with one cell, and you think, okay, well, that's just one cell.

[11 : 32] It's nothing. I mean, one cancer cell. So what? I've got millions of other cells. But that spreads. That's the problem about cancer. It spreads, and you can't stop it. Sin is the same. Unless it's dealt with, eventually your sin becomes acceptable to the person next to you.

And then they become comfortable with it, because you are. And the standard of our church drops more and more. And before we know it, we look at our church, and it's no different to the world around us. We lose our saltiness, as Jesus says.

And that's why there's something called church discipline that is necessary in a church, in every church. The calling out of church members in sin to stop.

Not thinking that you can sin and just hide it and keep it to yourself. It affects the people around you. And that's why the Bible instructs us to call out members in the church who are caught in a sin, and to help them, and to help them to stop.

Not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the body, for the sake of the church. Both Paul and Jesus teach this concept, that if a church member sins and they don't repent of it, that church member is to be put out of the church.

[12 : 45] Okay, they're not to be stoned. We're not Israelites, by the way, before you get any ideas. But they are still to be treated as someone out of community of God's people.

Jesus says to be treated like a pagan, an outsider, someone who doesn't follow God because they don't. Because they've put their wants ahead of God's. It's rebellion. And so we are to exercise church discipline as a church in the unfortunate event that that is the case.

We don't want that to be the case, but we've got to be ready for when it is. Not only to protect the community, but to warn people that their ongoing sin is serious and that it is life-threatening. Now, let me just pause there.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that people in church never sin. Okay? Okay? I mean, I know you better than that, and you know me better than that. And it's not to say that there's no means of grace and forgiveness in a church, which there always is.

That is the amazing thing about the gospel. And, I mean, the songs we sang this morning about God's grace on us and all he's done for us. And how we can still come to him despite our sin.

[13 : 57] And there's always grace. And there's always means of forgiveness in the gospel. Because we do sin. The problem is, when we sin and it doesn't bother us, and we don't take those means of grace, and we don't seek that forgiveness, and we don't repent, and we don't see how serious our sin is, that is the problem.

Because that indicates just an ongoing rebellion against God, which is unfit for the member of God's church. And that's why a person can't be a member of God's church and continue in this attitude of rebellion.

And so we still need to take sin seriously. You see, even though there is forgiveness, we still need to realize that sin has far-reaching effects. It affects the people around you.

It's got far-reaching effects not only for our churches, but for our families as well. Your sin affects your family. More than you know.

I wonder if you noticed that Achan's whole family was killed with him. Did you notice that in the passage? It seems extremely brutal, doesn't it? And in fact, God commands in his law, in Deuteronomy, that children should not be punished for the sins of their fathers.

[15 : 13] And so, why were the children punished in this case? Well, most likely because they were complicit in the crime in some way. They must have been old enough to know what he did and to help him cover it up.

To choose to keep quiet about it. I mean, he couldn't have hid all the stuff in his tent without his family noticing. And helping him to cover it up. And so, essentially, through this one man's action, through this one man's decision, he has dragged his whole family into rebellion against God.

Now, we say, we look at Achan and we say, that's despicable. How could he do that? How could he get his whole family involved in the sin? Knowing what was going to happen. And yet, you know what? Parents are doing that every day.

Dragging their children into their own rebellion against God. Because children will always follow the example of their parents. They can't do anything else. Children, before they're at the age of accountability, they're programmed to just follow in the footsteps of their parents.

And if their parents are caught up in sin, and if their parents care little for what God wants in their lives and in their home, they teach their children to do the same. And they drag their children into their own rebellion.

[16 : 18] And so, parents, take this warning from Achan. Your unrepentant sins, your neglect of God, your erratic church attendance, will inevitably rub off on your children and could lead to their ultimate destruction in eternity.

Do you want that on your conscience? You know, if you want to destroy yourself and your rebellion and sin, go ahead, but don't drag your children down with you. Come to church for the sake of your kids, if nothing else, even when you don't feel like it.

Read the Bible at home for the sake of your children, if nothing else, even if you don't care about it. Jesus says, if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

That is the words of Jesus. Let's take it seriously, parents. Because our own sins are much more far-reaching than we'd like to think. And then thirdly, because sin is serious, because it is far-reaching, we also see in this story, sin must be dealt with.

Sin has to be dealt with. When Joshua prayed to God after their defeat, notice God's response in verse 10. It's almost comical. Joshua is down on his face, right, praying that God doesn't remove his presence from them.

[17 : 38] And you know what God says? Get up. What are you doing down on your face? If you want me to remain with you, don't just pray. Go sort it out.

You don't sort out sin by lying on your face, Joshua. You need to do something about it. You need to root out the sin. You need to root it out of your community.

And you need to remove it. And that's what God would say to us this morning as well. Let me ask you. Do you ever feel like God's presence is withdrawn from your life?

He doesn't seem to be there. You pray and nothing happens. And you pray and you're down on your face. And nothing happens. You know what God wants to say to you? Get up. Root out the sin.

Get rid of it. Don't just lie on your face and expect things to change. If you're not going to root out the problem in your life, root it out. You know, Jean and I spent a large part of last weekend, let me share with you, weeding our garden.

[18 : 39] I'm sure many of you can relate to the challenge that is weeding a garden. Because we've come to realize that no matter how much we tend our garden and want to make it look pretty, unless we uproot the weeds, unless we find those weeds and uproot them, they will take over.

And no matter what effort we make in making our garden look nice, they'll just spoil it. And we also discovered that you can't just cut the tops off the weeds.

You know that would be easy. You just mow over them. Fine. You just cut the tops off. But you know what? If their root remains, then they're back next week and there's a dozen others with them because they've spread all their seeds around.

You know, one innocent looking weed can lead to the growth of dozens more. But you know, that's how sin works, doesn't it? If we let sin continue to grow in our lives unchecked, if we just cut the tops off and we just hide it and we just kind of change our behavior a bit, but we don't get to the root, our sins will eventually take over and they will spread and they will take over your life.

But that's not all we learn about sin here and how it's dealt with. Because we go on to see that rooting out sin is actually not enough. Just identifying it and just rooting it out is not enough.

[19 : 59] It would be great if Achan could have just admitted and given the stuff back and everybody could have been, you know, hunky-dory with that fine Achan. But no, that's not what happened. The sobering truth is that rebellion against God needed to be punished.

And that reminds us that God's universe is a just universe. We don't, you know, we often look at our newspapers and we see crime being unpunished and we tend to think that people can get away with sinning against God, but they can't.

One day God will judge everybody because He is a just God and we live in a just universe. And no sin against God will ultimately go unpunished.

Achan's sin needed to be punished if God's people were going to continue enjoying God's blessings. Achan needed to take that punishment for God's people to be set free from God's wrath.

And right there, I wonder if you see Jesus. I wonder if you see how this story points to Jesus. Because you know what? Every story in the Bible points to Jesus.

[21 : 07] And I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't show you how this story this morning points to Jesus. Because think about it. What is this story about? This story is about a man who needed to die in order for God's people to be right with God.

And that's what Jesus came to earth to do for us. He came to be Achan for you and for me. He came to take that punishment which we deserved.

He came to go to that valley. He came to be cut off from His people. He went outside of the city just like Achan went outside of God's people here. And Jesus took Achan's punishment.

Your punishment and my punishment for us. Instead of us. He came to die for the sin that pollutes us so that we can be right with God. So that we can enter that promised land in eternity one day.

And the difference is where Achan died for his own sin Jesus died for yours and mine. And when you realize that that's what Jesus did for you. When you realize that that's what this is all about.

[22 : 09] That's why Jesus came. To take that sin in your place. When you realize that. How could you not want to root out the sin that Jesus died for? How could you not want to get rid of it in your life?

How could you live in a peace treaty with the sin that Jesus came and suffered for? For you. Jesus didn't die so we could stay rebels against God. He came to treat us of our sin.

The great physician came to treat us of the greatest disease when he died on the cross. But we need to take that treatment. You need to take that treatment.

The doctor can offer you treatment but nothing's going to happen if you don't take it. We need to take sin seriously. We need to confess it and we need to get rid of it.

Have you done that? Have you done that or are you still cherishing a hidden rebellion in your heart against God? You are still if you're honest with yourself you are still putting your wants before God's.

[23 : 12] Are you still calling the shots? Are you still keeping parts of your life back for yourself? Well if that's the case know know that if you confess that if you bring that to your rightful creator and ruler God and give that to him he has made a way to forgive those sins no matter how bad they are but do confess them do lay them at the cross don't let them continue to grow and fester come now and repent them repent of your sin and not just for your own sake but for the sake of your church and for the sake of your family don't mess around with sin in fact to close let us do that right now let us repent together of the sins that perhaps God has convicted you of this morning dear God creator of all the earth and provider of all life we confess that we have sinned against you not only in our actions but in the attitude of our hearts we like Achan have followed our own will above yours we have ignored your ways and broken your laws we have committed the worst kind of treason and so we deserve the worst kind of punishment but we also know that Jesus came to take that terrible punishment on our behalf so as a church we repent of our sins we put our trust in our savior and we ask help us to root out habitual sins from this church family help us to identify and turn from the hidden sins in each of our lives help us as parents to lead our children into obedience to you help us as brothers and sisters to keep each other accountable cause us to live lives that please you and magnify the name of our savior Jesus Christ in his name we ask Amen