

The Importance of Obedience

Joshua 7

Introduction:

- Today we are turning to a moment in biblical history that has implications for the unique challenges of our day, both for the qualities we look for in our leaders and, more importantly, the qualities we must possess if we are to be good neighbors in times of uncertainty.
- Context: two major acts of God have taken place—the parting of the Jordan river and the fall of the walls of Jericho.
- Today we are in Joshua chapter 7 which is really a continuation of the Jericho story. So, it will be helpful to back up and summarize chapter 6. Israel’s army marched around Jericho once a day for the last six days, then on the seventh day they marched around it seven times, blew the trumpets, shouted, and God caused the walls of the city to collapse. That the famous part! But the part that sets up the next scene (chapter 7) is that Israel was commanded to devote everything in Jericho to destruction except the silver, gold and vessels of bronze and iron that were to go into God’s treasury. And they were explicitly commanded to keep away from all those things, or else they would be destroyed like Jericho. So it’s a sign of trouble that chapter 7 opens with these words: *“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.”*

Outline:

- I. When Israel disobeyed God’s command, things unraveled quickly (1-9). (wait for point c to state)**
 - a. Achan took for himself things that should have been given to God.**
 - i. Achan did precisely what the Israelites were commanded not to do after the defeat of Jericho. These were God’s instructions: *keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction.*
 - ii. “Devoted things”: “The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the LORD, often by totally destroying them.” It could also be by “consecrating something or someone as a permanent and definitive offering for the sanctuary” as in the case of the silver and gold.
 1. With Jericho, God commanded that the city and everything in it be devoted to the Lord for destruction, except the silver, gold and

vessels of bronze or iron. Those were to go into the “treasury of the Lord.” But Achan took some of it for himself.

- iii. As a result, God was angry with the people of Israel.
 1. Notice how the actions of one person affected everyone. On the surface this may not seem fair, and we don’t have time to camp out here, but it seems fitting to at least note the basic truth that our actions do not affect just us. They impact everyone around us. There was a strong sense of community identity in the Bible that many of us have a hard time understanding, but even in an individualistic culture our actions have consequences far beyond our own lives. Achan sinned, and God was angry with Israel.
 2. We’ll see more about God’s anger in a bit, but at this point it’s the backdrop to what happens next. Not knowing what Achan did, the story continues with Joshua pursuing the next city of Canaan.

b. Joshua relied on his own strategy for battle and his army was defeated.

- i. Every event until this began with “the LORD said to Joshua,” then he obeyed, and God gave him success.
- ii. In this case, Joshua sent spies to Ai who came back with an overconfident assessment and Joshua acted on it. As a result, the Israelites were defeated and all the people became fearful.
- iii. This is a direct reversal from the way things had been. After they crossed the Jordan river on dry land, all the Canaanites were fearful (5:1). The same language is used in both cases, the hearts of the people melted. The fear that first gripped the Canaanites now gripped the Israelites because they had disobeyed and God’s anger was now turned on them.

c. Joshua questioned God’s purpose and plan for leading Israel into Canaan.

- i. This scene highlights another reversal of fortunes. After the Jordan River crossing, we read that “the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him” (4:14), and after the fall of Jericho we’re told “his fame was in all the land” (6:27). But now we find him with his face in the dirt, and it appears he’s forgotten all of God’s promises about giving the land to Israel and wishes they never would have crossed the Jordan in the first place. Like the rest of the people, Joshua’s fighting spirit had melted away in a flash.

d. *So we see that when Israel disobeyed God’s command, things unraveled quickly.*

- i. There’s a lesson in here for us, isn’t there? When we fail to do what is right, things can unravel for us and the people around us in ways we never dreamed. That’s sobering.

Transition: At this point in the story, we know about Achan's sin and God's anger, but Joshua apparently has no idea what's going on. The way God reveals the situation to Joshua is remarkable.

II. God demonstrated respect for himself and for Israel by speaking the truth in love (10-15). (wait for point c to state)

a. God spoke the hard truth to Joshua (10-12).

- i. He called Joshua to his feet.
- ii. He detailed the severity of Israel's sin.
- iii. He explained why they had been defeated in battle.
- iv. He defined the requirement for a continued relationship with him.

b. God told Joshua how to make things right (13-15).

- i. The people must prepare themselves for a demonstration of God's judgment.
 1. This is the same language used in preparation for crossing the Jordan River. He said, "consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you" (3:5). Dealing with Israel's sin is obviously very different from parting the river for them to pass through, but the identical language suggests it's equally significant, and the people must be prepared.
 2. Incidentally, to consecrate something is to set it apart as sacred. For Israel, this meant they were to declare themselves set apart for God and his purposes—to reaffirm that they are a holy people.
- ii. The devoted things would be exposed from tribe to clan to family to individual. The one caught with them would be devoted to destruction, just as God said they would. Then and only then would God's presence be with them so that they could stand against their enemies.

c. What we see here is that God demonstrated respect for himself and for Israel by speaking the truth in love. The truth about their sin. Love in a way to make things right.

d. This scene shows us something remarkable about God. He is a self-respecting being.

- i. In verse 12 he said to Joshua? "I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction."
 1. What a self-respecting statement! God could not have been more clear in his instructions to stay away from the possessions of

Jericho. In the face of their direct disobedience (outrageous!), he could not be more clear in defining the new terms of their relationship.

- ii. His anger is not unwarranted or uncontrolled. It is justified, measured and explained.
- iii. He doesn't lose his cool or seek to harm Israel in return for their offense.
- iv. Instead, he dignifies Joshua and the Israelites by explaining their offense and giving them a clear pathway of restoration.
 - 1. It was not an easy path. Quite the opposite, this is one of the harshest punishments in the Bible. Incidentally, the book of Joshua as a whole has more killing and destruction than perhaps any other part of the Bible, but it is not the rash cruelty of a bloodthirsty deity. It is the morally appropriate judgment of a self-respecting God.
 - 2. It's worth repeating: God demonstrated respect for himself and for Israel by speaking the truth in love

e. On self-respect.

- i. I'm not an expert on self-respect, but it's easy enough to find some good reading online on this topic. In an article coming out of Stanford University, I found a couple categories that are helpful for us to see just how important a quality this is.
- ii. Individual self-respect.
 - 1. "It is part of everyday wisdom that respect and self-respect are deeply connected, that it is difficult if not impossible both to respect others if we don't respect ourselves and to respect ourselves if others don't respect us."
 - 2. How is it with you today? With me?
 - a. In a complex and confusing time, it's hard to know when to assert ourselves and when to back down. When we feel we've been trampled on, we lose self-respect. But when we do the trampling, we fail to treat others with respect.
 - i. With children, especially teenagers.
 - ii. With coworkers
 - iii. Some of us are in relationships where we're getting trampled, and we need the self-respect to say, "no more." "I will not be with you anymore unless ..."
 - iv. Some of us are doing the trampling, trying to build up our own self-respect by disrespecting others.
- iii. Institutional self-respect.

1. “It is increasingly part of political wisdom both that unjust social institutions can devastatingly damage self-respect and that robust and resilient self-respect can be a potent force in struggles against injustice.”
 - a. As we continue to wrestle with issues of racial injustice, public health, and political mistrust, it is not hard to see that self-respect and a willingness to respect others has been lost in many conversations. This godly quality has suffered harm in much of the common discourse of our day.
 - b. But it is encouraging that by cultivating this virtue, you and I can be that potent force in our cultures struggles against injustice.

f. Two takeaways:

- i. God’s self-respect is part of what makes him worthy of worship. If he didn’t keep his word and respect his own commands, then why should we? But he does, and so must we.
- ii. It is out of respect for us that God offers a path to become like him both as individuals and as a society. We CAN learn godly self-respect both individually and institutionally. In fact, that’s precisely what we find as our story progresses in Joshua 7.

III. Israel learned to respect God and themselves by purging the devoted things from their midst (16-26).

a. Joshua followed God’s instructions for exposing the devoted things (16-18).

- i. One of the signals that this is as significant event is that we’re told Joshua rose early in the morning. That may not seem like a big deal except that the writer of this account made a point to say the same thing the morning Joshua led the people across the Jordan river. It’s as if the writer is saying, “this is a big day.”

b. Achan honored God by confessing his sin (19-21).

- i. There’s another lesson tucked in here for us in Joshua’s words to Achan. Did you catch it? It brings glory and praise to God when we tell the truth. That’s one of the key issues in this story. In taking the devoted things for himself, Achan not only stole from God, but he lied about it by keeping it secret. It sounds so basic, but it’s worth saying—hidden secrets do not show respect for God or for ourselves, but the truth brings him glory and does us good.

- ii. Also, there is a very interesting parallel in Achan's confession. He saw, he coveted, and he took the things that were forbidden. Does that sound familiar? In the Garden of Eden, there was a fruit tree that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from. But when Eve looked at the tree, she saw that it was good food, it was something she desired/coveted, and so she took some for herself and Adam.
 - 1. The same sin that brought the fall of humanity was about to bring destruction on Achan and his family.

c. All Israel devoted to destruction Achan, his family and possessions (22-26).

- i. Achan is a counterpoint to Rahab. She was a Canaanite who served God by protecting the Israelite spies and as a result was saved from destruction and included among God's people. Achan was an Israelite who disobeyed God and as a result was destroyed in the same manner as the inhabitants of Jericho. Their actions in relationship to God determined their fate, not their bloodline.
- ii. If you're like me, you might bristle at the idea that Achan's action was so outrageous that it deserved this kind of response from God. He took a robe and little bit of money. Others have done far worse and not been punished like this. David committed adultery and murder, and he was allowed to remain king!
 - 1. This is a legitimate question, and there a few things to say quickly about it.
 - a. First, it's not about the robe and money any more than Adam & Eve's sin was about the fruit. It was about disrespecting God so severely as to directly disobey him, seeking wealth and status over his presence.
 - b. Second, the entire conquest of Canaan is a unique situation in the history of Israel, or in human history for that matter. We're told in Leviticus that the Canaanites of this era were a particularly vile and debased people. They were characterized by incest, adultery, child sacrifice, and a host of other things. Archaeologists have even found evidence of these practices in the ruins of Canaan. In Genesis 15:16, God even foretold this judgment when he told Abraham that in 400 years his people would occupy this land after the sin of the Amorites (Canaanites) was complete. In short, God had been keeping records for hundreds of years, and now their day of judgment had arrived. And it was complete annihilation for anyone associated with their sin.
- iii. One more lesson for us. Even though God's judgment isn't always this severe in the moment, we are absolutely meant to see how seriously he takes obedience. Israel was told to stay away from the devoted things, and

because Achan disobeyed it cost him his life. When Joshua and all Israel were told to purge the devoted things from their midst, they obeyed and God turned away from his anger.

- iv. Finally, they memorialized this event by building a stone monument “which remains to this day,” just like they did after crossing the Jordan. Yet another signal that we should pay attention to the significance of this remarkable day in history. This was the day they learned to respect God and themselves by purging the devoted things from their midst.
- v. What do we take away?
 1. The importance of truth telling
 2. The importance of obedience.
 3. Both are central to giving God the respect & honor that he is due.
 4. Both are central to respecting ourselves and others.
 5. God takes both incredibly seriously because of his own self-respect and because of the love & respect he graciously gives to us.

Conclusion:

- More than learning from the example of God himself in this story, which I hope we all will do, we should all marvel at the character and love of God in the gift of his son, Jesus, who dignified us so much as to give his own life as a sacrifice. Unlike Achan, he had done no wrong. We have. And yet he paid the price for us so that we can live in the eternal presence of our self-respecting God.