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Series: *Joshua: A Call to Faith*

Title: *How Much is Your Sin Going to Cost Me?*

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Scripture: Joshua 6:17a; 18-19; 7:1-12

Last fall the entire DC area celebrated our Nat's winning the World's Series. Things were looking good for DC sports fans and not so good for the team that lost, the Houston Astros.

Then about a month after the series, things looked even WORSE for the Houston franchise because on November 12 the media broke the story that the Astros had been cheating---not in the 2019 series---but in prior seasons. The story said that during Mike Fiers' tenure as pitcher from 2015 to 2017, the Astros had secretly stolen signs from visiting teams---such that the Astros batter was able to know what kind of pitch was headed his way. This tactic was used when the Astro's won the World Series against the Dodgers.

The setup was surprisingly simple. A camera in the Astros' home stadium zoomed in on the catcher doing his "sign between the legs deal." This was sent to a monitor situated in a recessed area where an Astros player was sitting not too far from home plate. That player decoded the catcher's signals, then banged on a large trash can in a certain way to inform the hitter what the next pitch would be. Like, two hits for a fast ball, three for a curve ball, etc. I'm wondering why no one asked about the trash can that was always being beaten on in strange ways when the Astros were up to bat!

Now baseball teams have always cheated. Many say it's part of the game---but this time everyone agreed a line had been crossed. The Astros had gone too far, and the MLB levied heavy punishments on the team. Two team officials, the general manager Jeff Luhnow and the manager A. J. Hinch, were first suspended by MLB and then fired by the team. The MLB also fined the Astros organization \$5 million, the highest fine possible, and made them forfeit their 2020 and 2021 first round draft picks.

Here's the moral. The actions of a few can have negative consequences for thousands. I mean the entire Astros organization has been tainted. Many think they should return their 2017 World Series trophy. And in a way, Major League Baseball itself has been tainted as well. I mean, many have come to think it is so full of cheating that it's not much more of a true "sport" than "professional" wrestling.

I bring this up because our text for this morning provides a tragic illustration of this principle. To review; Last week we studied about how Joshua began the invasion of what would become Israel as God led the Hebrews to miraculously conquer the fortified city of Jericho. Remember?

There was silent marching for six days, and on the seventh day after seven silent laps the rams' horns blew and the people shouted and the thick, high, double-walls of Jericho tumbled down like so many dominos. However, BEFORE the walls fell, God gave them very clear instructions as to what the Hebrews were to do with any treasure they found as they explored the conquered city. Take your Bibles now and let's read exactly what God said. Look at chapter 6, verses 17-19. And if able, I would ask you to stand in respect for God's Word as it's read.

Joshua 6:17a – "The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD.

18 – ...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.

19 – All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into His treasury."

Now flip over to chapter 7 and let's see how the Israelites did when it came to obeying these instructions, and what happened as a result.

7:1 – The Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, 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.

2 – 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.

3 – When they returned to Joshua, they said, "Not all the people will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary all the people, for only a few men are there."

4 – So about three thousand men went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai,

5 – 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 and became like water.

Let's back up so we can understand exactly what happened. As we read in chapter 6, before the fall of Jericho God had given the Hebrew people very clear commands. Other than Rahab and her family, everything living in Jericho was to be put to death; all the livestock and all the people.

Now if that sounds cruel, remember, the people living in Canaan were a completely pagan people. They had turned their backs on our Creator and given themselves to false gods. They practiced temple prostitution and child sacrifice and all manner of evil. Plus God had given them a long time to turn from that behavior---400 years! Way back in Genesis 15:16 God had told Abraham that Canaan would be the land where his descendants would eventually live. He said, **"After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, [but not until then] for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction."**

Did you catch that?

God didn't let Abraham or his offspring invade and destroy the residents of Canaan until God knew no other Canaanites would decide to follow Him. Only when everyone in this culture had turned from Him would they deserve destruction. Here's something else to note; the coming of the Hebrews four hundred years later was no secret. I mean, the people of Israel did not take the people of Jericho by surprise. The Jerichoites knew they were coming. They knew about the battles they had already won. They knew they had camped on the other side of the Jordan. They heard about the parting of that river at flood stage. I mean, stories about the God of Israel and his chosen people had been circulating throughout the city for a long time—but only Rahab responded by turning to the God of Israel. At any time during those seven days of marching, anyone in Jericho could have said what she said in Joshua 2: **"For the Lord your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below."** But no one else uttered these words. No one else made an effort to repent and turn to God.

Here's something else; Joshua said that no one could re-found the city of Jericho unless they were willing to sacrifice the life of his firstborn son. And many years later a pagan king did that with no qualms.

If it helps, think of it this way. The people of Jericho were already destroyed---they were "unsavable" because they had rejected God---they were already dead---dead in their sins. And in His Omniscience, God knew nothing would change that. He knew there were no more "Rahab's" out there.

Now as I said, in addition to killing every LIVING thing, every VALUABLE thing was to be put in the treasury of the Lord. Then the city itself was to be burned. So, simple instructions that were easy to understand. The

Hebrews were to destroy the city, everyone in it and were not to keep anything for themselves. God's clear-cut rule was that in this battle the bounty belonged to Him.

Now, normally, the spoils of war were considered a soldier's pay, their reward for victory. But not this time, because as I told you last week, the soldiers didn't win this battle. God did! And as a way of making sure they understood this fact, God had them give all the valuables to Him. He also told them that if this law was broken, the entire nation would suffer.

The Hebrews understood this clear instruction from the Lord. Everyone listened to God's command and obeyed. Everyone that is but one man, a man named Achan from the tribe of Judah. Look at verse 21 of chapter 7 where, after he is forced to do so, he confessed his crime. Achan said, ***"When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them."***

Please understand, until Achan confessed, no one but God (and Achan's family) knew that he had done this. Somehow amid the celebration after the fall of Jericho Achan was able to get his hoarded wealth to his tent unseen.

Then, while the smoke was still rising from Jericho, Joshua (who, like everyone else, was ignorant of Achan's sin) began to make plans for the next site of conquest. Following his usual custom he sent spies to scope it out, a little city called Ai, which was an outpost east of Bethel, located up in the hill country about 15 miles from Jericho. The spies came back and assured Joshua that only a few thousand warriors were needed to take care of this puny little opponent.

Now it was quite a hike up to Ai, a 3,800-foot climb along a trail that traversed deep ravines and steep inclines, so basically the spies were saying, *"It's a hard climb, Joshua. The people deserve a break after all this marching around Jericho, besides there's only a few men up there. A couple thousand of us can take them easily."* I would probably have said the same thing. I mean, even the name "Ai" means "ruin," so it must have not been a very impressive place. It was nothing compared to Jericho. Joshua didn't want to throw everything he had into every battle, so to keep most of his troops fresh and to protect the camp he took the spies' advice.

Well, shockingly, those 3,000 Hebrews were absolutely defeated. They ran back down the trail in terror, leaving 36 dead soldiers behind them. And please understand, this is the only defeat of the invading Hebrew forces recorded in Joshua and the only report of Jews actually being slain in combat.

What happened? I mean, the huge fortified city of Jericho was easily defeated. How were the Jews beaten by a much smaller city?

(A) First, there was too much SELF-CONFIDENCE.

The people, Joshua included, had almost immediately forgotten that it was not the Jewish troops, but God Who had delivered Jericho to them. Pride seems to have consumed them the moment the walls fell, as if Jericho's astounding defeat was their accomplishment. They learned the hard way that as Proverbs 16:18 says, ***"Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall."***

We would do well to remember this principle. Any good thing we do is thanks to God. As James 1:17 says, ***"Every good and perfect gift-comes not from us---not because of our efforts---but rather is from above, coming down from the Father."*** Colossians 1:27 puts it this way, ***"It is not us but Christ IN us that is the hope of glory."*** And as Philippians 4:13 says, ***"We can do all things---but only through Him Who strengthens***

us.” We must always remember, it is not self-confidence that will turn the world upside down but rather GOD-confidence.

(B) A second reason for their defeat was there was too little PRAYER.

I mean, Joshua should have consulted the Lord when it came to planning the battle at Ai. Instead he acted solely on the recommendations of his scouts. He and his officers were making the foolish mistake of walking by sight, not by faith. Had Joshua been wise enough, humble enough, to call a prayer meeting, God would have informed him of Achan’s sin, and he could have dealt with it. Because he didn’t do this Israel suffered a humiliating defeat.

I believe one reason God recorded this incident in His Word was to help us learn that we need to regularly ask God to show us our sin. We need daily “sin check-ups.” You see, we can’t walk by sight either, because our sight is impaired. Our immoral society distorts our perspective on things. We so easily become conformed to our corrupt culture. We look at life through sin-tainted eyes so regularly, that every day and especially before every “battle” of life, prior to every major decision, we need to pray with the Psalmist: ***“Search me, O God, and know my heart...see if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”*** (Psalm 139:23-24)

So, self-confidence—pride, was a factor in their defeat. And a lack of prayer was as well. But neither of these were the reason God cited. When the beaten and panicked soldiers come back down the mountain and reported to Joshua, he tore his robes and fell on his face before the Ark of God and finally got around to praying. He basically asked God, *“Why? Why has this happened?”*

God told Joshua to get up off the ground and then He said the reason for their defeat was the fact that His ban had been broken. Someone had disobeyed God’s clear command. In verse 12 He says, ***“That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies.”*** In other words, God says, *“The men of Ai defeated you because there is sin in the camp.”*

At this point we can see a vivid example of the fact that sin disrupts our fellowship with God. As I said a couple weeks back, we can’t sin against God and still enjoy communion with Him. Remember 1st John 1:5? Let’s say it together: ***“God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...”***

Achan’s sinful stash interrupted this fellowship. J. Sidlow Baxter puts it this way, *“The electric wire of fellowship between God and Israel had been cut and the current of power therefore ceased to flow.”*

Let me ask you. Have you separated yourself from God due to some sinful stash of your own? Has some hidden sin taken the joy out of your salvation and made you weak and powerless? Remember. A Holy God cannot and will not tolerate sin. God designed the human heart to beat in unison with His. When it does, we experience a deep and satisfying peace and He empowers us to make a real difference in this world. We live truly victorious lives--abundant lives! But when our hearts don’t beat in unison with God’s, when we ignore His loving laws, we cut ourselves off from fellowship with Him. Well, God told Joshua to have the people come forth the next morning, first, tribe by tribe, and then clan by clan, and then family by family, and then individual by individual, until the guilty person was discovered. They used lots to ferret out the person who had broken God’s ban.

It was probably done like this. Each of the names of the 12 tribes was written on a piece of pottery. All the pieces were put in a jar and one was drawn out, thus indicating the guilty tribe. Then this was done with clans,

and then families, and finally individuals until Achan was discovered. With twelve tribes totaling over two million people, this series of lottery drawings must have taken hours! Imagine Achan's racing heart and pulsing blood pressure as, tribe by tribe, family by family, household by household, Joshua's dragnet closed in on him. He knew he had broken the ban. He knew what God had said. But he still remained silent until the very end, putting everyone in the nation of Israel through this ordeal.

Now, God could have just told Joshua who the guilty party was, but He didn't. And I think the reason He didn't was to give Achan time to repent. God was giving him a chance to admit his wrong and show that he realized what he had done to his people. In fact, I think if he had come forth earlier, perhaps the night before when Joshua announced that they would draw lots or the next morning or even at the beginning of the lottery process---I think if Achan came forward THEN, God would have forgiven Him but Achan didn't. Achan was rebellious until the very end. Maybe he thought they'd run out of pottery shards! His stubborn behavior reminds me of something we all learn as children; it is always better to admit your sin to your parents than have them discover it. You still get punished, but not as severely, because you haven't added to your sin by trying to hide it. As someone has put it, *"The pain of exposure is better than the pain of concealment."*

Achan's name literally means *"trouble"* and Joshua played on this in verses 23-25 as, after the pottery shard had fallen to Achan, he confronted him and said, *"Why have you TROUBLED us? Why have you lived up to your name Achan?"* Then they took Achan and his family and his livestock to a place called Achor, which comes from the same root and means, *"a PLACE of trouble"* and Israel executed God's justice. After stoning Achan and his family---who had certainly helped him conceal his sin---they and their possessions were burned in accordance with God's command. Then their graves were marked by memorial stones so that no one would forget.

Does Achan's sentence shock you? Does it seem extreme? Well, remember, there were 36 widows and numerous fatherless children in camp because of this one man's disobedience.

I think part of the reason this judgment and others like it seem so extreme to us is because we are accustomed to living in a politically-correct culture---a culture that minimizes sin and its consequences. Charles Swindoll writes,

"If Achan lived today, attorneys would defend him by declaring him temporarily insane, or by finding a technical loophole. Someone would say, 'Joshua failed to read the man his rights!' Or they might have him plead guilty to petty theft and plea bargain a lighter sentence, rather than involve the whole camp in a lengthy, expensive trial. The fact is we live in an age of grace and many twist that concept into a license to sin. Many redefine sin to exclude any act that doesn't hurt someone else. In other words, sin isn't something that defies God. Sin is something that harms others. Yet, nowhere in Scripture can I find anything to suggest that an action has to hurt someone else in order for God to consider it a sin."

And Swindoll is right. God defines sin, not us. He sets the standard, not our culture. All sin is against Him, and with this incident He was teaching His chosen people this vital principle. But that is not all we can learn about sin from this chapter of Jewish history. There are at least three other principles that it can teach us.

(1) First, it shows us that sin is a PROCESS.

Achan didn't just walk into that Jericho home and steal those things. No. If you examine what happened closely you can see that there was a discernable process in his rebellion, a downward spiral to sin.

A. First, Achan was dissatisfied.

As Achan explored his assigned part of Jericho he probably entertained thoughts like this: *"God has not treated us very well in these years of wandering. Sure---He gave us manna and quail to eat and He has kept our*

clothes from wearing out all these decades---but I don't like wearing the same outfit every single day. I'm tired of the same food day after day, week after week, month after month. I'm sick of having no money for the future. The first chance I get I'm going to improve my situation."

And think of this. Achan didn't need any of the things he stole. What was he going to do with the stuff anyway? He couldn't wear the Babylonian outfit in public. If he did, he'd stand out like a sore thumb. People would KNOW he had disobeyed God's ban.

And he didn't need the gold or silver either. God had provided and would continue to do so. In fact, if Achan had waited one more battle he would have had all the gold he could carry, because in that battle God told them they could have all the spoils. I'm reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 6:33 where He said, **"Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, [put God's will first] and all these things will be given to you as well."** But Achan didn't think this way. He wanted the other things first. The will of God could wait. He wasn't satisfied with God's provision and this mindset led him to justify his sin.

Of course, sin is never justifiable. Wrong is never right. As Isaiah 5:20 says, **"Woe to them that call evil good."** So, dissatisfaction gave birth to sin and that's the way it always is. We would do well to remember this and learn as Paul did **"...the secret of being content in every situation..."** (Philippians 4:12) by learning to trust God to provide for our needs.

B. The next step downward for Achan was to covet.

He forgot that even though he was a soldier he had no right to take any of the bounty because as I said, God, not Achan, had conquered Jericho. Achan didn't do any fighting. He just got his 10,000 steps in every day for a week. But he probably justified his actions by thinking, *"My family and I have been deprived of many good things during our years of wilderness living. Here is this beautiful, new, stylish garment-just my size, some silver---and gold. Think of what it could buy! After this long journey I deserve a little finery. This is no big deal. God will never miss this in light of all the treasury that we'll haul back from Jericho. I'm entitled to a few nice things in life."*

So, dissatisfaction led to coveting.

C. And, finally, Achan acted.

Sinful thoughts led to sinful rationalizations, which led to sinful actions. As James 1:13-15 says, **"Each one is tempted when by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin---and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."**

So Achan's deed was not a single act. No, it was a downward spiral to sin, a series of stumbles. He saw, coveted, took, and hid. As Swindoll puts it, *"That's how the human mind works. Carnality can be incredibly inventive when it comes to rationalizing sin. In the heat of the moment, the excitement of hidden sin, the adventure, the forbidden pleasure drives away all reason. We see, we covet, we take, and we hide."*

Think how much happier we would be in life if we could learn to nip sin in the bud by controlling our thoughts and desires. This is what Paul was talking about when he said, **"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."** (2nd Corinthians 10:5) The more we make Jesus Lord of our thought life, the less we will fall captive to sin because sin is a process.

(2) A second lesson we can learn here is that sin is never SECRET.

Achan's experience shows that there really is no such thing as hidden sin, secret sin. As Numbers 32:23 says, ***"You can be sure that your sin will find you out."***

Have you ever seen one of those movies with the plot where some kids make prank calls to random numbers and when someone answers they say, *"I saw what you did?"* Well, with God this is not a work of fiction. He always sees what we do. As Matthew 6:18 says our Holy God, ***"sees what is done in secret."*** Psalm 139 goes so far as to say that God knows literally everything about us. He knows, ***"when we sit and when we rise. He perceives even our thoughts. He is familiar with all our ways."*** There is nowhere that we can go that He does not see what we do for, ***"even the darkness is not dark to Him."*** Psalm 90:8 says, ***"[Oh God] You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence."*** Psalm 10:13 says, ***"Why does the wicked man say, 'God won't call me into account?'"*** He will. Romans 2:16 says that a day will come when God will, ***"judge men's secrets."***

The clear teaching of Scripture is that there is no such thing as a secret sin. Sooner or later our sins will indeed find us out. As I read a moment ago, the Bible tells us that one day the secret sins of life are going to be brought to light at the final judgment. But you know, it does not always take that long for sin to be exposed. In Achan's case it took only a few days. And I want to remind you again that Achan had plenty of opportunity to repent but he stubbornly, selfishly refused to do so. He continued to hide his sin and in my mind this is why his punishment was capital. Peter Wagner is right on the money when he writes, *When the Bible says, 'Humble yourself.' Go ahead and humble yourself because if God has to humble you, it's too late."*

So we can learn that sin is a process and that no sin is secret. But, as I inferred at the beginning of this message, the main lesson this text can teach us is that:

(3) Sin is never PRIVATE. Individual sin can harm many innocent people.

Ecclesiastes 9:18 says, ***"One sinner destroys much good."*** And that is so true. Sin is never isolated. Private perhaps, but never isolated. Sin, to some degree, always affects others. As a pastor, I have seen more than one example of one person's "private" sin breaking the hearts of his or her family and friends. In fact, think. How many churches and even entire ministries have we seen become powerless and ineffective because of the sins of their leaders? How many kids grow up to be bitter, selfish, greedy, unforgiving, or dishonest because that's the example their parents set for them? How many third world nations go hungry because of the greed and opulence of the dictator that rules them with an iron fist? We are living in an age of hyper-individualism in which we think, *"What I do is my business. What you do is your business. Let's just mind our own business."* But that is impossible to do because our lives are intricately intertwined. We can either bring strength to one another or we can bring weakness. This is why God repeatedly said, ***"Israel has sinned. Israel has done this."*** instead of singling out Achan.

He did it to remind us that we all pay a price when one of us sins. Since we are each part of the body of Christ--then as 1st Corinthians 12:12 says, ***"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it."*** You are not an island, You don't live to yourself. Your life can give other people strength and confidence and courage and the ability to be much more successful in life. Or, your life can weaken them and cause them to fail. You make an impact everywhere you are. You're connected with other people. We are not just individuals. If we make bad decisions individually then we create weakness in those around us. So, when brother sins, we could accurately ask him, *"How much is your sin going to cost me?"*

In fact, we all need to ask ourselves, *"What are the sins, what are the seeds of disobedience in my heart that may grow into actions that embarrass or hurt my kids, my spouse, my church? What thoughts am I entertaining that could sprout into sinful acts that would be dishonorable to the Kingdom of God?"* This is why

Achan's punishment was so severe. This is why Achan ended up in Achor, this valley of trouble---to help Israel learn this lesson so that generations to come would not suffer.

But you know, even though this is a story of judgment, it is also a proclamation of hope. I say this because in a very real sense the Valley of Achor is a foreshadowing of the cross. In taking the punishment for our sin, Jesus was troubled for all mankind. In Jesus, God went down into that dark valley of judgment and died in our place. The good news of the Gospel is that God does not abandon us in our own sin-caused valley of trouble. In fact, He has provided a means by which this dark, hopeless place can become a path toward peace and restoration. God turned the cross of Calvary, a place of unbelievable "trouble," into a place of hope. Way back in Hosea 2:14 God promised, ***"I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope."*** In Isaiah 65:10 He said, ***"The Valley of Achor will become a resting place for My people who seek Me."*** And in sending Jesus that is what He has done. When you confess your sin God forgives us and because He does no defeat is permanent and no mistake is beyond remedy. Even the valley of trouble can become the door to hope. Let's pray.