



# The Public Cost of Private Sin

Joshua #7 • February 15, 2026

## Opening

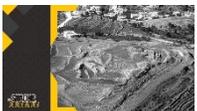


This past summer we did a series on AI, talking about how Artificial Intelligence is just the latest technology to raise big questions – spiritual questions – about who we are and how we live and how we respond to life.

- These questions challenged us to choose **patience** in our life.
- These questions challenged us to look for **truth** in our world.
- These questions challenged us to act with **integrity** in our behaviors.
- These questions challenged us to evaluate our own **personhood** in comparison to a computer's accomplishments.

Those lessons we learned still apply, and I encourage you to continue to use the lens of Christ to help you evaluate how you use this or any technology!

But this morning, we're going back to AI...just not in the same way. AI plays a key role in our current series covering the book of Joshua. As we arrive at chapters 7-8, the real-life Joshua is going to learn some difficult truths when he encounters AI... "Ai" as in the spelling of a city, not "A.I." the technology!



While previous weeks in this series have helped us follow Joshua's example as he lived out God's command to "*be strong and courageous*," this is the week when things go wrong. After divine guidance, miraculous victories, and reminders to remember, today we find the nation of Israel undercut by *one person's* decision.

Nothing stays great forever in this world. Sin has the terrible habit of turning celebrations into weeping and laughter into tears. The powers of sin (its effects and its aftermath) are never more than a moment away. Bad things related to our own sin or the sin of others happen in an almost predictable fashion. Almost daily!

So, we aren't surprised when Joshua's string of impressive victories is **tripped up by sin**.

But, neither are we surprised when **God does something to forcefully remedy** that sin and its insidious effects.



Today, as we go into the city of Ai (Ay-uh), we are going to see the **public cost of private sin**. And if you take anything away from today's sermon, let it be this warning:

**Sin is never private.**

## Private Sin Becomes Public



### Example of Sin "Leaking Out"

Sin is never "private" because it simply doesn't stay that way.

*In the news (for what seems like forever) there have been stories about a certain man. His name is not a name most of us should know. He worked as a money manager based in New York, far away from small-town Kansas. His clients were high-profile, and he moved in social circles that involved the rich and powerful...and even royalty. Why would we know a guy like that?*

*But we all know his name now. Jeffrey Epstein. Why? Because he was accused of abuse and trafficking. He provided underage girls and young women to his powerful friends, particularly on an island in the Caribbean. His was a terrible story we couldn't stop watching.*

*While he was eventually arrested, his name and deeds would spread in notoriety. And even after dying in prison (by hanging), awaiting trial, his legacy continues today as the files of evidence against him are being made public.*

*The "private" acts of billionaires and well-known figures who joined Epstein are now on display for everyone to see.*

What happened in this criminal case is a **very visible example** of private sin becoming public. Word gets out, like water leaking through a pinhole in a pipe!

### Achan's Secret Sin

In Joshua 7:1, we find out that the battle of Jericho had an unexpected, secret sin that was about to be made public.





*“But Israel violated the instructions about the things set apart for the Lord. A man named Achan had stolen some of these dedicated things, so the Lord was very angry with the Israelites. Achan was the son of Carmi, a descendant of Zimri son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah.”* (Joshua 7:1, NLT)

If you remember back to our story last week about the capture of the city of Jericho, God’s miraculous victory (supported by marching and trumpets) gave the city in to the hands of the Israelites. As the first city they conquered in the Promised Land, Jericho was special. Not only was the victory **impressive** due to the city’s strength...not only was the victory **shocking** due to the miraculous action of collapsing the city’s defensive wall...but the **victory of Jericho was sacred**. The defeated Jericho was **“devoted to God for destruction.”** God laid claim on the city and everything in it. As a picture of God’s worth and sovereignty, the Israelites had been told:



*“Do not take any of the things set apart for destruction, or you yourselves will be completely destroyed, and you will bring trouble on the camp of Israel. Everything made from silver, gold, bronze, or iron is sacred to the Lord and must be brought into his treasury.”* (Joshua 6:18–19, NLT)

Guess what?! Achan took stuff anyway.

And his crime was discovered through the use of AI (...the city).

Verses 2-5 of chapter seven tell the story.



*“Joshua sent some of his men from Jericho to spy out the town of Ai, east of Bethel, near Beth-aven. When they returned, they told Joshua, “There’s no need for all of us to go up there; it won’t take more than two or three thousand men to attack Ai. Since there are so few of them, don’t make all our people struggle to go up there.” So approximately 3,000 warriors were sent, but they were soundly defeated. The men of Ai chased the Israelites from the town gate as far as the quarries, and they killed about thirty-six who were retreating down the slope. The Israelites were paralyzed with fear at this turn of events, and their courage melted away.”* (Joshua 7:2–5, NLT)

The juggernaut of Israelite conquest was halted...by a massive underdog! After defeating the biggest obstacle at Jericho, this next battle should have been a piece of cake. They approached this tiny town in the mountains

casually. They thought they could claim this gateway to the hill country easily. But when they fought around... they found out!



At the battle of Ai, the Israelites were defeated. In the aftermath of this unexpected failure, Joshua and his people went to God grieving. They used all the outward cultural displays of mourning.

- Tearing clothes
- Laying on the ground in humility
- Putting dust on their heads

They prayed to God and ask why He (!?) would allow this defeat. Not only would it impact the Israelites' reputation and safety, they said, but also the surrounding nations would lose respect for the Israelites' God!

God, though, was about to **make a private sin public**.



*“But the Lord said to Joshua, “Get up! Why are you lying on your face like this? Israel has sinned and broken my covenant! They have stolen some of the things that I commanded must be set apart for me. And they have not only stolen them but have lied about it and hidden the things among their own belongings. That is why the Israelites are running from their enemies in defeat. For now Israel itself has been set apart for destruction. I will not remain with you any longer unless you destroy the things among you that were set apart for destruction.”*  
(Joshua 7:10–12, NLT)

## Sin Makes Itself Known

Whether your sin gets called out by the Lord Himself or not, private sin eventually becomes public.



Sin leaks out through...

- **Words.** People like to share what they know, whether it is in the form of gossip about a secret they know...or in the form of confession by a soul troubled because of its mistakes. Those words about ill-gotten gain become whispers... and rumors... and then reputation... and common knowledge.
- **Behavior.** When you start to do things you shouldn't, people see the results...whether in the physical toll (e.g. bloodshot eyes, shaky hands) taken by addiction to a substance, or the weight of guilt (e.g.

slumped shoulders and shifty eyes) over mismanaged money. The way you act makes it obvious.

- **Evidence.** Sinful acts done in private still leave behind traces. Whether it is an article of clothing left behind in a hurry, or an email that didn't get deleted, or a candy wrapper left on the table, physical items can shine a light on the things you thought were hidden.

Secrets can stay private for a while. But eventually – over the course of hours, weeks, or even years – the public finds out. The sin leaks out to family, friends, church members, community members, and more.



*“The time is coming when everything that is covered up will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all. Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the housetops for all to hear!” (Luke 12:2–3, NLT)*

If you don't want people to know your sin, eliminate it before you start, because eventually sin makes itself known.

***Sin is never private...it doesn't stay secret for long.***



## Private Sin Affects the Public

Sin is also never “private” because it affects more people than you realize.

Go back to verse 1.



*“But Israel violated the instructions about the things set apart for the Lord. A man named Achan had stolen some of these dedicated things, so the Lord was very angry with the Israelites...” (Joshua 7:1, NLT)*

Look at that closely.

- **Who sinned?** One man.
- **Who was guilty? Who was God angry with?** The whole nation.



*Back in school, I used to be so frustrated with this concept. I still remember one occasion in second grade when a certain kid kept causing problems in class. One kid! Looking back, I'm sure I would have more compassion because his home life was probably tough and other factors made school difficult for him. But at the time, I was annoyed. He broke rules; I was the rule-follower. He was*

*inappropriate; I did the right things. Yet when 2:00 pm rolled around, the teacher informed the class that the entire class would have to skip recess because of Harry's behavior!*

*What?! The whole class?! Yes, the whole class.*

*His individual, "private" sins just became very public!*

We face similar challenges:

- Maybe it is an entire flight delayed by the actions of one rowdy passenger...
- Maybe it is a traffic jam caused by the choices of an intoxicated driver...
- Maybe it is a nation facing sanctions because of the policies of a dictator...

You know that sin affects more than just you. Hidden sin can have wide-ranging consequences!

Achan's story is no different.

## Israel's Collective Sin



The communal aspect of Achan's private sin might seem unusual to us, but Eastern cultures like the ones in Scripture tend to be more "collective" than "individualistic."

You might have noticed it in the New Testament when people became Christians. Their conversion wasn't just a person; it was a "household" (ex: Acts 16:31). Their mindset could be described similar to this quote:

*"...there was never a single individual we could call "him"... He has a village behind him. A family. And more. There are also his dead parents and ancestors. That village, that family, those parents and ancestors are bound to him tightly, as though they were living beings. That is why he is not an isolated human being. He is an aggregate who must shoulder the burden of village, family, parents, [and] ancestors...."<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Richards, E. R., & O'Brien, B. J. (2012). [Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible](#) (p. 95). InterVarsity Press.

And a similar mindset exists in the people of Israel. Individuals belonged to something bigger. A family, a clan, a tribe, a people! In that world, a person's sin was larger than that person. Here, God was holding the *whole nation* accountable for Achan's decision. It was a "we, not I" moment.



*“Get up! Command the people to purify themselves in preparation for tomorrow. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Hidden among you, O Israel, are things set apart for the Lord. You will never defeat your enemies until you remove these things from among you.”*  
(Joshua 7:13, NLT)

***Sin is never private...when it spreads to others.***

## Sin Affects Others

Church, you need to remember that your sin is bigger than you imagine. It affects all of us.



Take a “harmless” example...from a kids’ cartoon:

[richard watterson pizza trick](#)

The double sins of **gluttony** and **petty theft** are “private” sins. The customer and employer never need to know! What impact could this have on anyone else?! Well, as it turns out...plenty!

- **Health** – that quantity of extra pizza can impact Richard’s quality of life with his family and shortens his lifespan. He might not be around to see grandkids.
- **Fear** – what if he gets caught? He always must worry about being discovered and what that will do to his employment.
- **Shame** – (not so present in this particular cartoon, but...) Richard might lose sleep over his dark secret. It might affect his attitude toward the family and others, as he snips at them or gets mad when questioned.
- **Future generations** – what example is he providing for Darwin and Gumball? It’s a bad one! When they see this secret sin acted out with impunity, they might choose to follow in his footsteps and be terrible citizens.

Sin...even private sin... is big!

We can't hide our sin from God...



*“O God, you know how foolish I am; my sins cannot be hidden from you.” (Psalm 69:5, NLT)*

...but we can't hide them from others either, nor can we always shelter others from the consequences.

Back in Scripture, when Achan's sin was dramatically revealed, a public assembly was called, and God narrowed down the suspects...by tribe...by clan...by family...until the spotlight was left on Achan alone. Achan confessed his sin, admitting that he stole from God (much like grabbing cash from the church offering); he confesses to taking and hiding a nice coat along with silver and gold from the items that were explicitly devoted to God.

*“I Saw...I Wanted...I Took”*

His crime was confirmed, and the **communal** guilt was applied to him and also his family and all his possessions. They *all* faced the death penalty for Achan's actions.

It is harsh! The punishment raises other spiritual questions we could address at another time...but I want you to focus on one sad truth today: that **sin is never private**. It spreads to others in its guilt and its effects.

If you don't want others to suffer the effects of your private sin, then keep your family and the church safe by staying accountable and transparent before that sin comes to fruition.

***Your sin is never private...when it spreads to others.***

## Be a Public Unburdened by Private Sin

Once Achan's guilt is taken care of in the community, AI shows how the elimination of sin makes a difference.

Unburdened by sin, the nation can again experience God's favor.

*“Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid or discouraged. Take all your fighting men and attack Ai, for I have given you the king of Ai, his people, his town, and his land. You will destroy them as you destroyed Jericho and its king. But this time you may keep the plunder*



*and the livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the town.”*  
(Joshua 8:1–2, NLT)



When I study chapter 8, I often focus on the last line (“set an ambush”) and consider the military tactics Joshua will use against the city of Ai. Chapter 8 shares his clever approach – a fake attack to draw out the defenders, then an ambush from hidden troops that take the city and trap the enemy forces! The details are all in chapter 8 for you to read...and if we were in class, you’d definitely be getting a map!

But the most interesting part this morning is verse 1. *“Do not be afraid or discouraged.”*

Despite Achan’s private sin and its public impact, God is still ready to move forward and offer blessings to Israel. He is full of grace!

You need to remember that God moves past sin better than anyone else!



*“Where is another God like you, who pardons the guilt of the remnant, overlooking the sins of his special people? You will not stay angry with your people forever, because you delight in showing unfailing love. Once again you will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean! You will show us your faithfulness and unfailing love as you promised to our ancestors Abraham and Jacob long ago.”* (Micah 7:18–20, NLT)

He doesn’t overlook sin because it is trivial. Far from it! Sin is abhorrent to God! He hates it with a passion you will never fully comprehend.

But His mercy is even greater!

The private sin of one person brought guilt and damaged all of us. But God’s mercy finds a public solution:



*“For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God’s wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam’s one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ’s one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.”* (Romans 5:17–19, NLT)

Jesus died on the cross, taking the communal penalties of our sins, so that you and I can be unburdened by them! We can have victory and celebration in Jesus' triumph over sin!

We don't have to be defined by what happens in private. We can be defined by what Jesus did in public!

## Conclusion

### So, remember: Sin is never private.

- It always makes itself known.
- It always has an impact on others.

As Christians, we need to be honest about those sins.

Are we burdened by private sins?  
Are we stuck in a pattern of rebellion?  
Are we locked in addiction?  
Are we angry? Or scared? Or worried?  
Or focused on ourselves?

Those sins need to go so they don't damage the church.

- We must **confess** our sins to God and turn away from them (1 John 1:9)
- We must **act** – make a change in direction or habit, not just feel bad about it (John 8:11)
- Maybe the biggest step I want you to take is this: **ask for help** before it gets to that point! **Share** your troubles and **pray** for one another. Guilt comes *after* the action, not before. Achan wasn't guilty until "I Saw...I Wanted...**I Took**." So, admit your weaknesses and find strength and encouragement through others in the church. (James 5:16)

Church, let's stop paying the public cost for our private sins. The price has already been paid by Jesus! Instead, let's stop hiding our sins, get them out in the open, repent, and wait for God to forgive!

They are never private. But even if God's anger at your private sin lasts for a while, His love and mercy through Jesus will last longer!





## Prayer

### Invitation

If you need help...if you want prayer... Can I ask our elders and deacons in the room to raise a hand? During our song, they will be open to praying with you and for you. Or if you feel more comfortable with someone else in the room, don't be afraid to bear each other's burdens.

Take advantage of this time as we sing together.

# Sermon Notes

## Private Sin Becomes Public

(Joshua 7:1-5; Joshua 6:18-19; Joshua 7:10-12; Luke 12:2-3)

## Private Sin Affects the Public

(Joshua 7:1; 7:13; Psalm 69:5)

## Be a Public Unburdened by Private Sin

(Joshua 8:1-2; Micah 7:18-20; Romans 5:17-19)

# Sermon Discussion Questions

- What are some sins you don't mind confessing to others? What types of sins do people usually hide? Why the difference?
- Read Joshua 7:1 and Psalm 69:5. Is any sin truly hidden? How does that knowledge impact your decisions?
- How did Joshua's defeat lead to the discovery of Achan's sin? (7:1-12)
- How does your private sin make itself known? Consider words, attitudes and other ways it might leak out.
- Read Luke 12:2-3. Why is it important for our sins to be brought into the open?
- How was Achan identified as the guilty person? What do you suppose God wanted Achan and the Israelites to consider during the lengthy process of identifying the guilty party?
- How might your private sin spread to others? Consider consequences and influences.
- Read James 5:16. How can the church be used by God to encourage people who need a fresh start after their private sins are exposed?