

10th July 2022 – No Stealing

Joshua 7 : 1 – 26 Achan

Exodus 20 : 15, “You shall not steal” - quite a straightforward commandment, right, or is it? Martin Luther sees this as God’s desire to protect private property rights. It is Luther’s view that this commandment doesn’t only prohibit the taking of another’s property, but also covers all unjust, fraudulent dealings whether in the marketplace, workplace or any other place where transactions are conducted.

If we consider our Old Testament reading, we need to look at one of my favourite childhood Bible stories in which God delivers the city of Jericho into the hands of the Israelites, as recorded in Joshua 6. God gave Joshua specific instructions before the battle, that the men of war were to march in silence around the city once each day for six days. The priests were to walk with them, blowing rams’ horns and carrying the ark of the covenant as a sign of God’s presence among them. We all know the story... On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times. At the appropriate signal, the priests were to blow their trumpets, and the people were to give a mighty shout and the walls of the city spectacularly came down. They went on to destroy everything in the city, with the exception of Rahab and her family.

As the first city to fall in the conquest of Canaan, the whole of Jericho was devoted to the Lord (Joshua 6:17). The people of Israel were to take no spoils of war; Joshua gave a clear command that “all the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury” (v19). In this way, Jericho was a “tithe” to the Lord who gave them the victory. God’s people were to honour Him with the firstfruits of the conquest.

Shortly after their success at Jericho, the Israelites moved on to attack the city of Ai. The spies Joshua sent to Ai thought the city would be easy to overtake—much easier than Jericho— so they suggested that Joshua send only two or three thousand men. Much to their shock, the Israelites were chased out of Ai, and thirty-six of them were killed. Joshua tore his clothes as a sign of mourning, not only the deaths of thirty-six men, but he and the elders of Israel mourn the loss of the blessing and guidance of God. He tells God, “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?”. God responds by telling Joshua that Israel had sinned! Isn’t it staggering to think that the whole nation, not just one man was found guilty of the theft of things that were devoted to God!

Paul says something similar to the Church in 1 Corinthians 5:6; he says, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" A small amount of sin accepted and tolerated among believers can infect the whole group. In this sense, the acceptance and toleration of the sin is worse than the sin itself, so it needs to be dealt with strictly.

The people were to consecrate themselves, and then the following morning the perpetrator would be identified by lot (see Proverbs 16:33).

When morning came, each tribe presented itself. The tribe of Judah was chosen by lot, then the clan of the Zerahites, then the family of Zimri, then Achan. "Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and honour him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me'" (Joshua 7:19), Achan confessed his sin, admitting that in Jericho he saw a robe, two hundred shekels of silver, and a fifty-shekel bar of gold that he "coveted," took, and hid in a hole he had dug within his tent. Messengers from Joshua confirmed the plunder was found in Achan's tent, and they brought it before the assembly. The Israelites then stoned Achan, his children, and his livestock and burned the bodies; they also burned Achan's tent, the plunder he had taken, and "all that he had" in the Valley of Achor (i.e., the "Valley of Trouble"), (Joshua 7: 25-26). The pile of stones was left there as a reminder of Achan's sin and the high cost of not obeying the Lord.

Achan's sin was grave. He took what was God's. His sin was a clear and wilful violation of a direct order, with consequences for his household and the entire camp of Israel. Achan was given time to repent on his own; he could have come forward at any time, yet chose to wait through the casting of lots. Rather than admit his guilt and perhaps call on the mercy of God, he attempted to hide. "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28: 13). Measured against the lives of thirty-six men and the welfare of the entire nation, what Achan gained was insignificant.

Once the sin had been purged from the camp and Achan had been punished, God gave Joshua victory over Ai, making it the second Canaanite city taken by Israel in its conquest of the Promised Land, Jericho being the first. (Joshua 8)

Israel was under a covenant with God that promised blessing on their obedience, and it also promised curses upon their disobedience. So Israel could not fight in God's power and presence unless they walked in obedience to God.

Let's be clear, we are not under that kind of covenant! Our position with God is made by the work of Jesus on our behalf, not our works. That's grace. Yet if we want God's power and presence in our own battles, we must walk in fellowship with Him, sin and rebellion will always hinder this fellowship.

Luke 19 : 1 – 10 Zacchaeus

In Our New Testament reading, we're still in Jericho! We are introduced by Luke to a man named Zacchaeus whom he describes as "a chief tax collector" who lived and worked in Jericho. Zacchaeus is an important character because he is a great example of a sinful man who is changed by Jesus Christ's compassion over sinners. In the time of Jesus, Judea was part of the Roman province of Syria. Roman taxes totalled one percent of a man's income. Whilst it doesn't seem like much, there were other taxes: customs taxes, import and export taxes, toll bridges, crop taxes, sales tax, property taxes, and a whole host of other special taxes so it all added up.

Technically, rich Romans who didn't live in Syria collected the taxes and 'ran' the tax service. These Romans hired local men to do the collecting for them but didn't pay them a penny; instead, these local tax collectors made their living by extortion. The very system Zacchaeus worked under encouraged corruption. He cheated his fellow citizens, taking advantage of their powerlessness. It's no wonder tax collectors were very unpopular, in fact they were hated. Zacchaeus was like a district manager and had people like Matthew (regular tax collectors) working under him; he must have been efficient, organized, and aggressive in his work. Jericho was a plum job, since it was a commercial centre, positioned on a major trade route between Jerusalem and territories east of the Jordan; it was also a centre of the profitable balsam production (balsam was used in oils and perfumes). It's no wonder he was rich.

Zacchaeus' eagerness to see Jesus when He was passing through on his way to Jerusalem suggested that his interest went deeper than mere curiosity. He was a genuine seeker of truth. But, being small in stature meant he couldn't see over people's heads and as he was so unpopular, few made room for him. He was clearly a resourceful man, not chief tax collector for nothing; he hatched a plan to run ahead of Jesus as fast as his little legs can carry him, climbed up a sycamore tree along the route and was in a good position to see the Teacher of Nazareth as he passed by.

Only Jesus doesn't pass by; he stops under the very tree and calls Zacchaeus down. He tells him, "I must stay at your house..." Jesus is essentially commanding Zacchaeus, not asking him; he sees His visit to Zacchaeus as part of His divine mission. Zacchaeus descends from the tree immediately and joyfully receives Jesus.

Can you imagine what Zacchaeus felt like on the day he met Jesus? What was he feeling that morning when he heard that Jesus was coming? What was he feeling as he was trying to see Jesus but couldn't? Imagine how he felt when Jesus called him by name. By the end of the day, we know from the text that he was a changed man!

Zacchaeus seems to have an immediate change of heart – even before Jesus sits down at his table. He proceeds to confirm in a really striking way what Jesus' visit had done for him by

announcing the gift of half his goods to the poor and a fourfold restitution to any he had defrauded. Where voluntary restitution was made, the Law required no more than the original amount plus one fifth, but Zacchaeus was willing to pay even more than that amount. Considering the way he had made his money, the list of people he had defrauded was no doubt a rather lengthy one.

Jesus chooses to go to Zacchaeus' house and eat with him. In fact, it was Jesus' idea, not Zacchaeus'. Jesus already knew Zacchaeus needed to invite Him to stay, not just in his home, but in his heart. Jesus' reply makes it clear that Zacchaeus has been saved, together with his household; after all, Jesus came to the world to seek and to save the lost. Zacchaeus is a clear example that those who seek Jesus, in reality, are sought, and saved by Him. No one is beyond His help.

Amen.

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