

Welcome everyone! I'm so glad you have joined us for worship at The Creek today. If you have your bible, will you turn with me to Joshua 7? As you are turning there, I want to tell you about a difficult conversation I had with a friend a few weeks ago. I hadn't connected with this guy in a quite a while, and as we were catching up on life, he told me that a few months prior he started having some pain in his back. He tried stretching, tried strength training, tried rest, but no matter what he did, he didn't get better. So finally he went to a doctor, who referred him to a physical therapist, but no matter what he did, he couldn't get relief. The pain started getting worse and worse. Mobility was limited, quality of life was down. Finally he had an MRI. It wasn't a torn muscle or ruptured disk. It was cancer. As soon as the cancer was discovered, they went into emergency mode. A full-scale examination of his body to see how far it had spread, then surgery to extract everything they could, followed by several rounds of chemo and radiation, doing whatever they could to target the cancer and kill it. It's been an intense battle, and this person told me, "I've got to do whatever I can to kill this cancer, because if I don't kill this cancer, this cancer will kill *me*."

My friend's story runs strangely parallel to the story we are going to read as we continue in our study through Joshua. For review, God led his people across the Jordan river at flood stage, and then, as Gary did such a great job teaching us last week, miraculously brought down the walls of Jericho, a major military stronghold. Because God had done these great feats on their behalf, they had every reason in the world to believe that God was with them and was going to continue leading them in victory. At this pace, they must have figured the entire promised land should be theirs in a matter of weeks! But then, just like my friend ended up weak and compromised because of a cancer he didn't know he had, a cancer emerged within the Israelites and began to cause great damage.

Let's start reading from Joshua 7, starting in verse 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. When they returned to Joshua, they said, 'Not all the army will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary the whole army, for only a few people live there.'"

Now remember, God had just fought for his people at Jericho, a major military stronghold. And the Israelites didn't even have to pick up their swords, they blew trumpets and God took care of the rest. So, the assumption is that when it comes to Ai - a comparatively small town with a comparatively small army - the victory processional will continue. God would continue to bless them, and they would continue to take new ground without any hesitation or challenge. Ai was of such little concern that they didn't even send the whole army, just a few thousand men - not even 1% of their forces. With God on their side, it was certain victory! It was going to be a walk in the park, they could win this battle in their sleep.

We pick up reading in 7:4: "So about three thousand went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, 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 in fear and became like water.”

So the exact *opposite* of their expectations came true. The Israelites were expecting victory, and they were served defeat. They went running for their lives, and 36 men fell on the battlefield that day. The entire community was shocked, and their disposition shifted immediately. They went from being strong, courageous and triumphant, to melting in fear, their hearts turned into puddles of water.

And do you know what their immediate assumption was? This is God’s fault! God did this to us! How could he allow something bad like this to happen? Listen to what happens in the next verse: “Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, ‘Alas, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?’” Tearing their clothes! Putting dust on their heads, laying face first on the ground, crying out, “God! Why did you do this to us?! Why did you bring us here!?”

Joshua assumed, of course, that he was in the right, that he had the moral high ground. He is pointing his finger at God. But listen to God’s reply, I love how direct and simple it is. “The Lord said to Joshua, ‘Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.’” How about that as a response? They’ve been lying face down on the ground with dust on their heads and torn clothes all day long, weeping, mourning, and blaming God. And when God speaks, he doesn’t come and coddle them. He doesn’t say, “I’m so sorry you are hurting right now. You have every right to be upset. You are angry, and that emotion is valid, you are justified in your anger. Go ahead and vent some more! Tell me how unfair this is.”

No! He just says, “Stand up! Get up off the ground. Quit crying. Quit being delusional, and thinking about this so myopically. I didn’t cause this. *You did!* You understood the commands I gave regarding Jericho. Remember, you didn’t fight that battle, I did! I fought on your behalf, and I said that everything in Jericho belonged to me. And someone from your people took what belonged to me. They’ve stolen. They’ve lied. They kept it for themselves. And until you deal with that sin, that sin will destroy you. Until you deal with that sin, I won’t be with you anymore, and if I’m not with you anymore, you will be susceptible to every threat that comes your way. Even the small town of Ai will send you running for your lives and melt your hearts with fear.

That sin is like cancer. Most of us have healthy bodies that are fully functioning and capable, but if cancer begins to grow, even though it’s not visible on the outside for everyone to see, it will begin to cause untold damage - so it has to be removed swiftly, no matter the cost, for the rest of the body to live. That’s the case with the Israelites. And it is so relevant for our lives today! This passage helps us realize that whenever sin is present, God’s people are likely to encounter two

very challenging realities: (1) God's presence will be limited in our lives, and because of that, (2) we will be susceptible to attack. In the past, when we have talked about God's presence, we've said there is God's omnipresence, which means he is everywhere all the time. There is God's indwelling presence, which means he lives inside of those who have placed their faith in Jesus and been baptized, and then there is God's manifest presence, which is the overwhelming sense that God is with you, around you, and for you. That sense that every word you speak, he's a part of the conversation, every step you take, he's right beside you. You know he's near and you feel his love! God's manifest presence is such a profound gift. But when we walk in sin, instead of walking in step with God, we walk in the opposite direction.

Sin limits God's manifest presence in our lives, and because of that, sin leaves us susceptible to attacks. Just like the Israelites were defeated by the nothing town of Ai because of their sin, if we have sin in our lives, we, too, will be weak, vulnerable, and exposed. If there is sin in our lives, instead of us *taking* new ground, we'll *surrender* ground. Relationships will deteriorate; joy, peace, and contentment that otherwise would be ours will leak out of our lives like water in a bucket with a hole in it.

And we might find ourselves crying out to God, saying, "God, how could you let this happen? Why did you do this to me? This isn't fair!" And God responds by saying, "Stop crying! Get up. Quit thinking from a delusional, myopic point of view. I didn't cause this, you did. You have sin in your life you haven't dealt with. It's *your* sin that's working against you, not me." It's that selfishness, that pride, that stubbornness, that unforgiveness, that greed, that lie, that pornography, that affair - it's eating away at you like a cancer, robbing you of your health, stealing your vitality, and instead of being positioned for God to do great things in you and through you, that sin has you hobbled, injured, and sitting on the sidelines. Whether it's the experience of the Israelites like we see in this passage, or the experiences we've had in our own lives, sin has *very* real consequences.

Now, if you've been at The Creek for any length of time, you know that our desire and commitment is to faithfully preach through God's Word. Often, as we preach from God's word, we get to focus a lot of love and grace, on joy and peace. But when we come to a passage like this, it's important that we slow down, take our time, and understand the reality of sin, honestly deal with any sin that might be present in our lives, and then commit by God's grace, from this point forward, to repent of that sin and follow Christ in righteousness. Like the Israelites, we must be willing to go to great lengths to remove sin in our lives.

Back in our text, God helped Joshua to identify the sin in Israel's midst. Even though there were over 1.5 million people among them, and it would have been otherwise impossible to discover who had committed the sin, like using a modern-day MRI machine, God led the community through an examination process that clearly identified a man named Achan. And once Achan was singled out, Joshua said to him in verse 19: "My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me. Achan replied, 'It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.'"

As soon as Achan is confronted, he confessed to the sin. And it's very telling - in describing what he did he used three verbs. He said: (1) I saw, (2) I coveted, (3) I took. I saw, I coveted, I took. Think about that. As soon as the Israelites entered the promised land, a land filled with great abundance and with the presence of God, someone saw something they weren't supposed to have, coveted it, and then took it.

Does that remind you of anything? If you are thinking about this from a Biblical perspective, it will likely take you all the way back to Genesis 3, to the Garden of Eden, to Eve being tempted to commit the very first sin. Think with me: just like the Israelites, Eve was brought by God to a place of promise, a land with great abundance, filled with his presence. There was just one thing she wasn't supposed to have. But she saw it, she wanted it, and she reached out and took it. The parallels are strong. If we are paying attention, they are almost unmistakable. And I believe it's the Bible's way of connecting the two stories, so that when we read these stories we pause, we take note, we dive deeper and we really press in to understand the truth about the nature of sin and the truth about the nature of the human heart.

At the root of sin - not just the sin of Eve and not just the sin of Achan - at the root of *every* sin, the sin in our lives today, is the belief that we know better than God. Even though God has said you shouldn't do that, we think we should. Which means behind every sin is *pride*. And not just pride in thinking that we know better than God, but also a lack of faith and trust in the *goodness* of God. When we sin, it reveals we don't believe God has our best interest at heart. We don't believe his commands are ultimately for our good. We don't believe he actually knows how we should live. So sin stems from pride - thinking we know better than God, and unbelief - not trusting the goodness of God. So when there is sin in our lives, we shouldn't scold ourselves and say, "I can't believe I did that!" We should instead do deep, introspective work and ask the Holy Spirit to show us where pride or unbelief is evident in our lives that gave rise to that sin in the first place.

Achan is not alone in this. We've all been there. And the Bible not only reveals the truth about the nature of sin, it also reveals the truth about the *consequence* of sin - which is enough to cause some serious fear and trepidation. Think about it: Eve's sin brought death into the world. And Achan's sin brought about death, too. Not only the death of the 36 fellow Israelites in his community who died needlessly in the battle against Ai, but it also resulted in his own death, and the death of his entire family. Achan took things from Jericho that were devoted to destruction, and the end result was that Achan and his entire household and everything he owned became devoted to destruction, as well. The Israelites literally stoned them to death and then buried them and everything they owned, and then burned what was left. Sound pretty extreme? Of course it does! But think with me - just like my friend with cancer who said, "If I don't kill this cancer, this cancer is going to kill me," the Israelites had to remove the cancer, they had to remove the sin from their community, otherwise the sin would eventually kill all of them.

This sermon is entitled "The Awful Effects of Sin." And when you read this story, it's unavoidable: sin causes damage, destruction, even death. This story helps us put sin in its proper perspective. No one ever commits a sin and ends up better because of it. Sin promises fulfillment

but leaves us destitute. Sin tells us our lives will be enriched. They end up destroyed. That's why one pastor I know says, "You don't commit sin, sin commits you."

Let me highlight four areas from this story where sin causes damage, destruction, and death: Sin brings damage, destruction, and even death to your future, your family, your community, and the reputation of your God. Let me say that again, and then we'll walk through each one of them: *Sin brings damage, destruction and even death to your future, your family, your community, and the reputation of your God.*

Let's begin by talking about your future. Just like sin cost Achan his future, sin can cost us our future, too. Maybe you are tempted to lie at work to get ahead, instead of opening more doors - a decision that could cost you your job. Maybe you allow bitterness and anger to fester in your heart toward a family member or friend. Does that make your life or your future better? Of course not! That toxicity taints your other relationships and costs you healthy friendships. When you gossip about a friend, people no longer trust you with personal information. When you spend money impulsively and unwisely, instead of having financial freedom in the future, able to do what you want and be a blessing to God and others, you end up with minimal resources. Sin always presents itself as a great idea, it promises to offer you your best life now! But no matter how sin advertises itself, sin is not the path to life, it is the path to death. Sin will not take you forward, it will only take you backward. Sin will not enhance your future, it will diminish your future, every single time.

But it's not just your future sin will damage, it's your family. Achan's entire family had to suffer the consequences of his sin. They themselves were not morally responsible for his decision, but as family members, they were still affected by it. Sometimes, when the consequences of sin rain down, like a bomb, the explosion radius is wider than we thought it was going to be. Sin fools us into thinking, "This is just a personal decision. This won't affect anyone else, only me. I would never do something to hurt those I love." Nothing could be further from the truth. Sin not only wreaks havoc on your life, it wreaks havoc on the lives of those you love. If you don't believe me, go and ask a wife whose husband has a pornography addiction and see if his sin was just a personal issue that didn't hurt anyone else. Ask a child whose mother left the house for another relationship and see if her sin was just a personal issue that didn't hurt anyone else. Ask the parents of a child who is rebelling and see if that child's sin is just a personal issue. Sin causes *so* much pain and heartache in the lives of those we love the most.

And it's not just our family who's affected, it's our community. Remember, Achan's sin caused 36 men to lose their lives. 36 women became widows because of his sin. Dozens of children became orphans because of his sin. Sin didn't just affect Achan and his family, it affected the entire community. The same is true in our lives. Sin affects the people we have relationships with in significant ways. As Christians, we should have a goal to be a blessing to every person we are connected with. We are to love them and seek their good. If you are a Christ follower, if the Holy Spirit is living inside of you, every person you interact with should be enriched and blessed because of you. And when we are really following after Christ and loving others the way God calls us to, that happens! But when we are living in sin, instead of enriching others, we become a drain on them.

I had a very close friend who lived in a secret sin for about 10 years of his life. It was so severe that when it came to the surface, we had to commit him to an out of state, live-in-rehab facility for 7 months. The choices he was making caused so much heartache and pain. I went to visit him in rehab several times, and I'll never forget what he said to me on one of those visits. He said, "Dan, for all those years, my sin and selfishness made me a taker in every relationship. I was a leech to other people, living off their vitality and health, exploiting their kindness and generosity. When I get out of here, I want to be so healthy, so much like Jesus, that instead of being a taker in every relationship, I can be a giver, I can be a contributor, I want to help other people." That was 6 years ago. By God's grace, it's happened! This man is married, has a child on the way, started his own business, he employs three other people, and he leads his staff in bible study and prayer every single week. He's a valuable part of his church, he meets in a men's accountability group, he disciples a group of middle school boys, he uses his income to support his church, give to missionaries, and bless friends in need. As soon as he renounced the sin in his life and committed himself to walking in God's ways, and he went from being a *taker* from his community to a *giver* to his community. It's incredible the transformation that can happen when the cancerous effects of sin are removed.

And it's true not just on a relational level, but on a church level. I remember at my old church, I had only been on staff for less than a year, and there was a few month period of time over which several staff members had to be fired for moral reasons. I was brand new at the church and was shocked that so many issues came to the surface all at once. I talked to the senior minister and he said, "I think God is purifying our leadership team, and getting us to the place where he can use us to the full extent possible." For the seven years those immorality issues were present, the church was basically stagnant numerically, with next to no growth. In the seven years following their removal, the church doubled in size, from 7,000 to 14,000. Now I am sure there were a lot of factors in play that caused the growth, but from that senior pastor's perspective, one of the most significant factors was the removal of sin in the church. When the leaders were walking in greater purity, the manifestation of God's grace multiplied exponentially.

The Bible tells us, very clearly, that sin affects our future, our family, our community (be that one on one relationships, a group of friends, or our church), and last, sin affects the reputation of God. When Joshua was talking to God about the defeat against Ai, he said in verse 9: "What then will you do for your own great name?" God's glory, God's honor, God's reputation was tarnished throughout the entire region in the aftermath of Achan's sin. Think of how true that is today. What happens to God's reputation in the world when catholic priests are exposed for abusing hundreds of children over the course of decades, and the higher up leaders in the church cover it up? What happens to God's reputation when a senior pastor is unfaithful to his wife? All those years, saying one thing, while in reality, in private, doing something else? Or we could move to the personal level. I was reading on a blog a while back about why people leave the church, and one person said, "Two of the ladies I work with are mean-spirited and gossip all the time. They're horrible to be around. They're also in bible study together every week. I just couldn't take the hypocrisy any longer."

As Christians, we represent Christ, it's in our very names, *Christians!* We represent Christ. Everything we do is to honor his name. People are to see us and say, "Wow, if that's what followers of Jesus are like, I want to get to know who Jesus is." It says in 1 Peter 2:12 "Live such

good lives among the pagans that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits.” A life of good deeds enhances God’s reputation and causes people to turn to him. But the opposite is also true. In the eyes of a watching world, sin in our lives diminishes God’s reputation and causes people to turn away from him.

Sin damages our future, our family, our community, and the reputation of God. Sin brings destruction. I hope you hear my heart on this, I’m not trying to come down hard on anyone. I’m not trying to turn up the guilt in anyone’s life. My only goal is to teach God’s word as faithfully as I can, with as much love and grace as possible, and also with as much urgency as possible. The effects of sin are awful. Sin brings destruction. Sin ruins lives. I’ve sat with too many people, too many couples, too many families, I’ve seen too much pain and heartache not to tell you the truth. Do you remember what Jesus himself said about the severity of sin? In the Sermon on the Mount, he said if your right eye causes you to sin, what are you supposed to do with it? Put a cover over it for a few minutes? No! Gouge it and throw it away. If your right hand causes you to sin, what are you supposed to do with it? Put it in your pocket for a while? No, cut it off and throw it away! It’s better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Now obviously Jesus is using hyperbole, but that’s how intense, that’s how seriously he tells us to take sin in our lives and how strongly he compels us to pursue righteousness.

Each person gets to decide what to do with that. Our tendency is to minimize the severity and consequence of our sin. Jesus doesn’t do that. This passage we read today doesn’t do that. Joshua 7 forces us to realize the severity and the consequences of sin. And hopefully it causes us to take a close look at our own lives. Because at some point or another, we’ve all been where Achan was. Every one of us has sinned. Some of our sins have been exposed, other sins are still kept secret, hiding under a rug in our tent. And as this message comes to a close, I want us all to try to put ourselves in Achan’s shoes. Let’s take the worst sin we’ve ever committed, whatever it is. And let’s pretend, like Achan, that it was exposed for all to see. Can you imagine that? Everyone you know is aware of your sin, and they are aware of all the pain you’ve caused your family, your friends, your community, even God. And imagine, like Achan, you are told that the proper punishment for your sin is death. You take a deep breath and brace for the consequences of your sin. But right before the execution order is given, someone speaks up and says, “Wait, wait, wait! Don’t take their life. We all know they’ve sinned. We all know they deserve death. We all know justice has to be paid. I’ll pay the price. I’ll cover the cost of. Let them go free. Forgive them. Take my life instead.”

If you could put yourself in that situation, it would be the most tragic and at the same time the most beautiful moment in your entire life. It would be the greatest display of love ever imaginable. *That is what Jesus has done for you and for me.* 1 Peter 2:24 says, “Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

The effects of sin are awful. Jesus paid the awful price. All we have to do is believe in him, trust him, follow him, allow him to wash us of our sins and make us new. I remember talking to a person at our church a while back who was in the middle of some very sinful choices. We spoke on several occasions, for several hours. I pleaded with this person to walk away from their sin. I said for your sake, for your spouse’s sake, for your kids’ sake, for your friends’ sake, for our

church's sake, for God's sake, walk away from this sin. You could tell they were wrestling with what to do. A few weeks later that same person came up to me during a service here at church and asked me to pray for them. In my Spirit, before I prayed, I asked God what I should pray, and I felt compelled to pray the words 1 John 1:9. So I said, "If you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive you of your sins, and to purify you from all unrighteousness." This person looked up, wiped a tear away from their eye, and not two seconds later, a person who was on stage leading worship who knew nothing about what was going on said, "I just feel like someone needs to hear these words from 1 John 1:9 right now, and said, "If you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive you of your sins, and to purify you from all unrighteousness."

We don't have any walkie talkies at church. We aren't doing trick stuff. God was speaking to that person, as clear as day, inviting them to leave their sin and follow after him. And that is the invitation to everyone today, no matter who you are, no matter where you are, no matter what sin may be in your life right now. If you confess your sins, God is faithful and just, he will forgive you of your sins and purify you from all unrighteousness.

This sermon series is called "Taking New Ground." From the very beginning we've been saying that God wants to take new ground *in* our lives and take new ground *through* our lives. There are promises he has in store for us, great things he wants to accomplish in us, and today, what we see is that if we want to inherit those promises, if we actually want to take new ground, we need more than just courage from chapter 1, we need more than just saving faith from chapter 2, we need more than for God to make a way from chapters 3-4, and for God to fight our battles from chapters 5 and 6. If we want to take new ground, *we have rid ourselves of every expression of sin and commit ourselves to holiness in every area of our lives.* When sin was in the camp, the Israelites were routed by an army 1/20th their size. As soon as they repented and walked away from their sin, they went back and fought the same battle, this time, with no sin encumbering them, with God's blessings resting upon them, and it was a no-contest obliteration - not just a first round knock-out, but a first *punch* knock-out. If we want to take new ground, it's not about coming up with a perfect strategy, it's not about having a flawless long-term game plan, it's not about a perfect balance sheet, it's not about being the smartest, tallest, fastest, or strongest. If we want to take new ground, it's about being truly and fully dedicated to God, set apart for the Lord, and for the Lord alone.

We have the privilege of coming to a time of communion. So if you will take whatever elements you have prepared, I'd ask you to spend some time, allowing God to search your heart, identify any area where there may be sin, and ask him, in his mercy and grace, to lead you away from that sin, to forgive you of that sin, to purify you from all unrighteousness, and lead you by his Holy Spirit into freedom and victory. As you are prepared in your heart. Please, let's together as a church family, receive communion.