

The God Who is Just

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[0 : 0 0] So we're going to look back now at the passage we read from the Bible from Joshua chapter 7, if you've got one of these church Bibles, that's on page 182. So if you're visiting with us this evening, we've recently started a series in our evening services, what we've called Taking God at His Word. And we're going through the book of Joshua, and we're looking at what it teaches us about who God is as the promise making God. So we've looked at the God who is faithful, the God who is merciful, the God who is with us, and so on and so forth. This evening we come to chapter 7 in Joshua and the story of Achan, and we're going to think about the God who is just.

And I think it's important for us in the world that we live in today to recognize and understand the justice of God, because we live in a world that is in many ways full of injustice and evil and suffering and wrong. And for many people today, I think the idea of someone getting away with a crime, with an injustice, it feels inherently wrong to us as human beings. Maybe you've seen on the news recently, there was a car crash that killed a 19-year-old boy, and the woman who was involved in the car crash who was a police suspect went back to the US under diplomatic immunity. And there's been a huge outcry about this because of this perceived injustice, that the media is in a frenzy. There's the sense that this isn't right, someone should answer for this. There's anger and confusion from the family at the injustice of the situation.

In another less extreme example, maybe some of you are familiar with VAR, with video assistant refereeing, which has really been introduced in football. And really, it's been introduced to help ensure that referees get the right decision, because many of you, if you're a fan of football or sport, will be familiar with the sense of injustice, a penalty being awarded against your team when it wasn't a penalty, or a player being called for offside when they were actually onside.

Or maybe you prefer rugby to football, and you can cast your mind back to the Last World Cup, and Scotland are playing Australia, and this penalty is awarded against us. And it stops us from getting to the final. And in hindsight, it wasn't a penalty. Anyway, the idea of injustice and perceived injustice, I think, is one we're very familiar with. And the point is, even if you're not a sports fan, I think you can relate to the idea of something being wrong and unjust and unfair.

And the Bible reminds us that in the world in which we live, after the brokenness of the fall, and after sin and evil come into the world, lots of things happen that aren't fair. But the God of the Bible is revealed as a God who is absolutely just, a God who will one day right every wrong, and wipe away every tear from our eyes. But we recognize as we come to this part of Joshua, sometimes it is hard to come to terms with God's justice. Sometimes for us as flawed and fallen human beings, we struggle to grapple with the truth of God's justice. And we recognize this evening that this is a particularly difficult and challenging passage, but we know at the start, as we begin, that every word is inspired, every word is here for a reason, and we trust that God is speaking to us this evening through this part of Joshua. But like last week where Derek took us through the story of Jericho and the idea of God as a savior through judgment, we're going to have to do some work to grapple with the truth of Scripture in the Old Testament. So we have two points this evening as we think about the justice of God in the story of Achan. First of all, we're going to think about the seriousness of sin. We're going to think about the fact that God takes sin very seriously, and we ought to as well. And then secondly, how that points us to the extravagance of grace. So we're going to think about sin, and then we're going to think about grace. So first of all this evening, the first point, to understand God's justice, we have to come to terms with the seriousness of sin. And we see that in this story in several ways. First of all, Achan's sin is serious because it is a direct personal rebellion against God. I think sometimes we have quite a trivial view of sin. Sometimes we underplay the gravity of what sin actually is. We think sin is just breaking a rule. We think it's just overstepping a boundary. I think particularly as Christians, in light of the gospel and in light of what Jesus has done

for us, and all that we have, the forgiveness and hope and new life, we sometimes minimize the impact sin can have and its seriousness.

[4 : 46] And at first glance, when we come to something like Joshua 7, and we look at what Achan did and what happened to him, we might think that it's a bit, what he does is a bit trivial. We're told in verse 1, Achan, son of Karmie, son of Zabdi, son of Zera, so on and so forth, took some of the devoted things. And later on in the chapter, it expands on that, and it tells us he takes a cloak from Shinar, which is Babylon. It's a symbol of status and power. And he takes some silver and some gold, some money. But it's the context of the previous chapter, really, that helps us see why this is such a serious situation. And if you didn't hear Derek's sermon last Sunday, I'd recommend you listen to it if you can. But in chapter 6, we have God's people at Jericho, and God gives his people the victory over Jericho. But God tells us people there that everything in Jericho is devoted to him, either in salvation or in judgment. And so because the victory at Jericho is God's, nothing in the city is to be taken by the people. And so what Achan's doing here in chapter 7 is he's directly rebelling against something God has explicitly told him. He is actually stealing from God. And in fact, he is identifying himself with those who have rejected God and those who stand under God's judgment. And right away, I think there's echoes we can see here with the

Garden of Eden. There's a sense in which what Achan does here in Joshua 7 mirrors the very first sin of humanity, the very first time we get it wrong before God in Genesis C. You might have the verses on the screen. They are adamant he'd directly rebel against God and his explicit instruction. And if you look at the language in both chapters, actually, you can see the parallel.

Genesis chapter 3 in verse 6 says, when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took an aid. Achan, when he confesses what he's done, uses the same kind of language to describe his action. He says, when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold, I coveted them. It's the same words, desired them and took them. And I think in many ways, this breaks down sin for us in some way. Sin can begin very subtly. We see, we desire, we take.

We take. Adam and Eve's sin destroyed the perfect relationship between human beings and God in the garden. But so often our sin reflects that same pattern. We see something, we see someone, our heart fixates on it and we begin to desire it more than we desire God. And then eventually, we're led to act. I think it was John Calvin, French theologian and reformer, who said that our human minds can be so much like an idle factory. We're constantly fixating on things to worship in God's place. And we see that in the rest of the Bible. It's full of examples of the allure and the attraction that money and power and sex and status can have over us as human beings.

And that there are so many things in life that we can end up worshiping in God's place. And so we recognize the seriousness of sin. First of all here in the Achan is directly rebelled against the God who is so good and so loving and so faithful to his people. Secondly, sin is a rejection of what God has promised. The promises of God are a theme we've been looking at time and again in Joshua. God is a God who makes promises to us as his people. He promises to give us a place to live. He promises us family, a people to live to be part of a family. And he promises a special relationship with himself to enjoy and the blessings that that entails. And the point Joshua makes time and again is how we respond to those promises is extremely important. We have a kind of contrast drawn for us in the opening chapters. We have two different pictures of two different responses to God's promises. On one hand you have Rahab. We looked at her a few weeks ago.

[8 : 38] Rahab is this amazing example of the grace that God shows to the outsider. And the fact that her story is included right at the beginning I think is really significant because she's a Canaanite.

She is someone who is outside of the people of God. Someone who's part of this culture that has rejected God. But she recognizes who God is and she trusts in his promises and so she's included in God's people. And then we come to a chapter like this by contrast where we have Achan. Achan is an insider. He's someone who is born into the people of God. He has the right family background. He has lots of knowledge about God and what God has done. He is someone who has experienced God's power firsthand. He has seen God's promises unfolding and yet he turns his back on God and rejects and rebels against him. One commentator on this passage said that a really important point of Joshua is that outsiders are only a confession away from being included. So Rahab should give all outsiders hope. Achan in contrast should make insiders cautious and attentive to keeping our faith in the promises of God. When we come to Jesus' message in the New Testament we see

clearly how he came for the outsiders. He came for those who are marginalized. He came to call not the righteous but sinners to himself. He came to seek and to save the lost. So we see the seriousness of sin in that it's direct rebellion against God. It's a rejection of what God has promised. But here's the third thing and I think this is a key point in the Achan story. His sin is serious because it brings God's anger. And you see this if you look at the beginning and the end of the story. Verse one I think we might have on the screen. It says there, people who favored Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things for Achan, the son of Karmie and so on, took some of the devoted things. The anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel. And we're told at the end of the story as well in verse 26, after Achan is punished, how God's anger is turned aside. So the idea of God's anger here is a really important theme in this passage and right away we have to recognize that it is a difficult concept for us to grasp. It's hard for us to come to terms with the idea of a God who is loving and merciful and gracious and a God who gets angry at sin. And that's partly I think because in our modern minds we equate anger with the kind of human idea with an erratic rage or loss of control.

But the biblical reality of God's anger is a measured just fair response to sin, to what is wrong, to what's fundamentally not good. And we have maybe a small window into that when we think about the instinctive response we all feel to injustice. We can relate maybe at some level to the idea of a righteous anger when we hear of things happening that are horrific and wrong.

But that response is amplified for God because God is so holy and so perfect and so just. And for him to be consistently just, God can never ignore sin. God can never sweep sin under the rug. God can never pretend to look the other way. One of the most incredible things about the gospel is that on the cross Jesus is turning aside the anger of God. He is taking God's response to sin upon himself. Isaiah 53 makes this point we have on the screen as well. Verse 4 speaks about Jesus taking up our pain and our suffering. Yet we consider it unpunished by God, stricken by him, afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquity. The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed. You see the cross is at the same time the most powerful demonstration of God's love and his justice. We have to hold the two together. We can't properly understand God's love if we don't understand his just response to sin.

[12:40] Sometimes we talk about God as a loving God and it can be very in a very superficial way. But when we unpack what that love looks like we see that he is a God who is willing to die in the place of sinners and bring them back to himself. We'll come back to that later on. But the reality of God's anger is the third reason we need to take sin incredibly seriously because God takes it incredibly seriously. The fourth way that we see the seriousness of sin in Joshua 7 is the way that it affects other people. His sin, Achan's sin, has an impact on the people around him.

And again, that's maybe something that's hard for our 21st century minds to come to terms with because we're so individualistic. Maybe we think of sin as something that's just between me and God.

But in God's dealings with human beings there's often a strong link between an individual on one hand and the group, the community on the other. And if we look at the passage we see the way that reflected in the language. Achan is one guy who did something wrong but it says that Israel was unfaithful. It says that Israel has sinned. It says that God's anger burned against Israel.

Achan's individual action led to the death of 36 people. It left families to mourn and to grieve. And we know that the world in which we live today which has so much pain and suffering and death all stem from human sin and from evil. And actually the sin of one individual can have a huge impact even in small and subtle ways in our world. The hateful ideology of one man in World War II led to the death and suffering of millions. Or more recently we've seen how the financial greed of an elite few can lead to the huge implications for those who are poor and exploited. Or how the individual actions of an abuser can send shock waves through an entire family. The point is that sin has an impact on other people. Sin is rarely an individual matter. Imagine a ship that sinks in a storm and everyone on board manages to get onto a lifeboat. But suddenly one person grabs a saw and begins to saw a hole under their seat at the bottom of the boat. And when people try to stop him and he says, what has it got to do with you? I'm only sawing under my own seat. And you see the absurdity of that statement. Our actions have implications for goods or for ill for other people. And the same is true here in the Old Testament with Achan's sin. He is like the guy with a saw sawing under his own seat. But Paul actually makes the same point in the New Testament when he uses the metaphor of

the body to describe us as the church. God's people, the church family is like a unit. And if the foot stumbles, the body stumbles. Here at St. Columbus we've been doing a series on discipleship in our morning services. And we're thinking about helping each other to grow and to develop our Christian lives together as we follow Jesus. And a big part of that is taking sin seriously together. I think Derek made the point this morning that we don't live our Christian lives in isolation. We're not going our own way as Christians. And part of that is we're called to confess sin to one another. Do we have biblical friendships where we do that? Where we talk about sin? Where we struggle to battle together with one another against sin in our lives?

It's a biblical idea. Proverbs says, better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. So we're called to battle with sin together because sin has implications for everyone. But Achan's sin also affected others in that he took Canaan inside the camp. So the nation of Canaan where God's people are going into, we've already talked about God's judgment against Canaan and all the difficulties that that implies. But this is a society that is burning its own children in sacrifice. It's a society that's from when all kinds of twisted sex acts and corruption and hate and all kinds of other things. And we have to recognize as we think about this, and as we grapple with these themes, that this part of the Bible is a unique moment in redemptive history. And so the severity of this kind of sin, the severity of this kind of story is a unique situation. And we see that played out in the consequences of Achan's sin. As we read in verse 24, it says, Joshua and all Israel took Achan and all the stuff he stole, all his sons and daughters, all his oxen and donkeys and sheep, and they stoned them and they burned them. And to us, this probably seems a really difficult thing to get our head around. How do we hold together a God who is loving and gracious and parts the Old Testament like this? Well, I think something really important Derek said last week is we must let Scripture interpret Scripture. We must let what is clear in God's word shed light on what's not clear. We have to come to pastors like this recognizing that there's going to be parts of the Bible that are hard. But at the same time, we have to come with grace and humility and humble ourselves before God in faith and dependence on him. We have to let God be God and trust that he is just and will always do what is right in a world full of injustice. And we see the way the sin has consequences and implications, not just for ourselves, but for others. So the story of Achan demonstrates to us clearly the seriousness of sin and the seriousness of which [18:16] God takes sin. And God would not be a just God if he didn't punish sin. As we say that and as we think about that, we come to the second point. And I want to think about the extravagance of grace.

We thought about the seriousness of sin. But I think in this passage, we do in some implicit way see the extravagance of God's grace. And you might think as you look at Joshua 7, and maybe if you're reading this in your own devotion, you think, how on earth do I understand this? How do I apply this to my life today? But here's the thing, we see God's ongoing grace towards his people and to this world every day in the fact that this is not his normal response to sin. In this unique moment of redemptive history, we have a glimpse into what sin deserves.

And yet it's not the normal way God responds. We also have a glimpse here, I think, of the cross. We have this idea that God's anger is turned aside after punishing sin. We sang earlier that if God marked our sins against us, not one of us could stand. But we also sang that with him, there is forgiveness. This is what Paul says in Romans chapter 5 and verse 7. He says, very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him? In other words, it's only when we really grasp the seriousness of human sin that we can truly appreciate the profound and amazing love of God. The death of Jesus on the cross is the most costly act of love we can imagine. But it only really makes sense when you appreciate the extent of human need for a Savior. It only makes sense when we see Jesus as a substitute, as one who is in our place. Part of the essence of the gospel message is that Jesus died in my place, in your place. I wonder if you were asked this week why Jesus died on the cross, what would you say? Because if we reduce God down to some kind of palatable, soft deity who only exists to love and only exists to affirm, and in doing so we never really talk about sin and the serious effects and consequences of sin, then we actually make the gospel message meaningless. The cross actually becomes a failure, and the death of Jesus becomes pointless. There are several different views about what Jesus was actually doing on the cross. Some people say he was a moral influence. In

other words, that Jesus died to show us how to live, to live lives of self-sacrifice and denial and kindness. And there's elements of truth in that. Other people focus on the victory of God on the cross. That's where evil is defeated and Satan is subdued. But the really important point of the cross that we have to return to time and again is that Jesus is there in our place.

It's that Jesus is actually taking our punishment. And the question for us this evening as Christians in a 21st century Western culture is how do we present the cross to our world? Do we dumb down the justice of God and try and make it palatable? Or do we, as Paul says, present it in Ephesians 2 as we were by nature deserving of wrath? But God, because of his great love for us, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. In other words, those of us who are so much like Achan in so many ways, who actually deserve the outcome we read in this passage, by nature rebels and deserving God's response to sin.

[22 : 08] Instead, are showered with grace and mercy and given life in place of death. So to grasp the gospel, we have to hold both of these truths together. We have to take sin seriously. But we also have to come to the grace of Jesus Christ and to fix our eyes on him and what he has done for us on the cross.

Tim Keller, author of lots of helpful books, Pastor in New York City, he put it like this, and with this will close. He said, the gospel shows you that you are more sinful and flawed in yourself than you'd ever dare believe, yet at the very same time you are more loved and more accepted in Jesus than you could ever dare hope. We pray that God would enable us to trust in him and to rest in that amazing truth this evening. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you so much for your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank you for the hope we have through him of life. We thank you Lord, that we come to you as those who are broken in so many ways as sinners, as those who are flawed.

But Lord God, we thank you that you take us as we are and you forgive us and you call us your children. Father, thank you for the grace you give us to grapple with hard truths. Father, help us in humility and in wisdom to recognize that you are a God who is so just. You are a God who cannot tolerate sin or evil, and that one day Lord God, you will return to this world and you will right every wrong.

And Lord God, we thank you for the amazing hope we have in Jesus. Father, we pray that you'd help us this week in our lives, in our workplaces, in our universities, in our family lives, to live out our hope in a way that others can see, to be people who demonstrate our love for Jesus and our love for others in practical ways. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.