An Unsealed Secret

Temptation. Just the mention of the word conjures up a myriad of thoughts and feelings. For some it may be a mile-high, six-layer, extra-moist, chocolate cake just waiting to be devoured. For another, the exhilarating thrill of watching the speedometer hit the 100-mph mark as their heart races with an adrenalin rush, all the while knowing at any moment they are dangerously close to getting caught.

What makes a temptation so desirable is the contemplation of the pleasure to be gained, if only a seemingly simple compromise can be made. But what is often a temptation for one person can easily turn into a tragedy for another. The person who is tempted usually doesn't take the time to reason from cause to effect—how indulging in this pleasure can bring lifelong consequences to themselves and others.

There was a man who apparently yielded just once to a seemingly benign attraction. He was a soldier serving his army in a time of war. The battle they just fought was ultimately successful. All the army needed to do was march in and secure their position. And, like many who had gone before, this soldier held to the unstated rule of conflict—to the victor goes the spoils.

As the triumphant army maneuvered its way through the city, no one dreamed that what appeared to be such an overwhelming victory would turn into such a tragic loss. To the very soldiers who were to soon proclaim a magnificent conquest, the cost of one simple mistake would spell disaster and serious defeat.

The exact spot of the incident is unknown, and no one is certain how the contraband was exposed. Perhaps it was simply lying in plain sight and easily discovered. But regardless of the circumstance, one soldier saw it and it was certainly a sight to behold—a glorious, magnificent, radiant wedge of gold. The mere worth of this precious metal alone would make anyone stop and take notice. We don't know why he did it; all we know for certain is that Achan took for himself that which was sacred and designated to the temple treasury. Joshua, their commander, had strictly admonished them to "keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction" and "make the camp of Israel liable to destruction." (Joshua 6:18)

So why did he do the very thing that had been explicitly forbidden? One could make the argument that he succumbed to a moment's temptation, and we might be inclined to reason that is the whole truth. But, for the sake of being impartial, let's look at this from a different perspective. Is it possible that Achan stole a beautiful garment, 200 silver shekels and a wedge of gold because his character was already bent toward dishonesty and selfish gain, rather than being overtaken in a moment of weakness?
We see this rationale used often when a minister falls from grace. The fallen minister's perspective of the situation goes something like this. "I was trying to help restore a broken and wounded soul when, unexpectedly, passions were aroused and, succumbing to the heat of the moment, I fell from grace." It sounds feasible, at least to someone who has never experienced abuse from a spiritual leader. But was he truly caught up in the moment, or was his true character revealed the moment his inappropriate actions led to his moral failure?

Achan was not allowed to use the temptation of the moment defense and neither are those who have been called to stand before the people in Christ's stead. Character is not excused by a moment of weakness, it is revealed. When a minister has a moral fall, his true self is ultimately made manifest. Not only by his immoral behavior, but also in the way he shows repentance.

In his defense, the minister states his moral failure came after he took his eyes off Jesus. He wants the world to view him as a repentant leader and, regardless of his moral failure, one who deserves another chance to redeem himself and, ultimately, be restored to a ministerial podium—even though he knew better. A closer look at the facts surrounding the "incident" seems to proclaim otherwise. While his temptation to immorality may have been extremely intense and almost overpowering he, like Achan, was instructed to know better, and still stands before God without excuse.

In Achan's case, he, along with the entire army, was warned that if they took any of the spoils from the battle it would "make the camp of Israel liable to destruction." That warning alone should have been enough to put all temptation out of his mind. Apparently it worked for every other soldier in the Israelite army, except for Achan. They all knew the high cost of taking what was forbidden and were loyal to the command, except for him. Why? What took place during the next few days reveals the truth.

Soon after the incident, the army of Israel went to battle again. This time their enemy was an even easier conquest, a small city that only required 3,000 men to easily defeat it, but they were badly beaten and 36 men lost their lives.

All of Israel is devastated. Joshua tears his garments, prostrates himself before God, and weeps in the dust. What do you think was whirling around in Achan's mind at this moment? He knew the execution of the command from God was being fulfilled. He knew the destruction falling upon Israel was because of his sin. He knew that each of the men who perished, and whose families were mourning their loss, was a direct result of his actions, and yet he kept silent. Amazingly he did nothing, all the while knowing it was because of his sin that this heartache and devastation was taking place. How truly sorry do you think he was? Somehow he must have believed that if he kept silent he would get away with it.

The following day, all of Israel is called to stand before Joshua as he, the leader of God's army, slowly passed before each group waiting for the Lord to identify the guilty party. I suspect Achan must have started to get very nervous. But still he says nothing. Once his tribe is finally selected, the eye of God pierces deeper and uncovers Achan's clan and then, finally, his own family is identified. But not one word admitting his guilt escapes his lips. The entire family is brought to stand before Joshua and each man passes before him. Not until there is no further possibility to escape the truth, and he is finally identified as the guilty one, does Achan confess.

Sadly, nothing about his forced confession appears to be truly remorseful. No heart-wrenching cry of despair for the lives that were lost, or sorrow for how much pain his actions have caused others. Nothing. Not one sorrowful word escapes his lips. Why?
He's not truly sorry. And, until forced to confess, he is still hoping to get away with his crime.

The real tragedy of Achan's sin is sadly seen in the high cost his crime dealt to others. His sons, daughters, entire family and all their possessions are utterly destroyed. Each one of their lives goes down to eternal ruin with him. And why? All for the sake of indulging in a sinful pleasure and for selfish gain.

Some may wonder why his family should perish when they had nothing to do with his sin. They didn't steal anything. They were innocent bystanders in this whole sordid ordeal. This doesn't seem fair. Perhaps, and maybe we will never know all the details, but it is very possible that Achan did have support. I imagine it would have been extremely difficult to dig a hole, bury all those items under the floor of the family tent, and go completely unnoticed. Even with all the excitement of victory in the air, this would not have been an easy task to accomplish unobserved. And, if they knew what he had done, they too chose to keep silent.

Sin costs. It not only destroys the life of the self-seeking one who indulges in it, but also those who aid in the process of covering and protecting the fallen. Ultimately, the consequences of Achan's sin also fell upon each of his supporters who, for whatever reason, apparently chose to aid and abet his criminal behavior.

There is no adequate defense available to one who willfully chooses to destroy the life of another. Like the fallen minister, Achan's true lack of concern for others is clearly revealed in the extreme selfishness of his actions. While knowing the ultimate cost to others by his ill-gotten gain, he is still willing to take the risk. His unwillingness to repent has been repeated countless times by many who have followed in his immoral footsteps down through the ages of time. An unrepentant heart always lives as a law unto itself and it can justify practically anything, irrespective of who is hurt, or how much devastation is left by the wake of its reckless and uncontrolled desires.

Within Achan's temptation and failure is found a valuable lesson for us today. It would be well for ministers and church leaders to remember that people's lives are sacred property. Especially those who are God's sheep and have covenanted to walk with Christ-committing their lives into His care. Like Israel of old, ministers who serve in the army of God, are similarly admonished to "keep away from the devoted things," those precious souls each pastor has pledged to watch over and guard with their own life, remembering that, if they fail to do so, and abuse their sacred responsibility, the consequences of their own actions make themselves, their supporters and those whom they betray "liable to destruction."

Today, we would do well to heed the warning message revealed within the sad ending of this ancient story. And to the severely tempted one I am commissioned to say, "take heart you have Heaven's assurance that God is still able to 'keep you from temptation and deliver you from evil.'" (Matthew 6:13)

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