

THE ACCOUNTABILITY DARE

Joshua 7:1-15

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the question “What are you accountable for?” We might name such things as personal health, pay my bills, upkeep and maintenance of our home, carry out my job duties, my reputation, and a number of other things. We probably think of such things in this list as individual responsibilities with individual accountability. Most people are OK with this idea of individuals having responsibility and accountability for what they do or don’t do.

In the news of the day, we are likely to hear such terms as “profiling” or “stereotyping” in which we tend to paint everyone in the group with the same brush based on how some of that same group might behave. We are constantly being reminded that we should not do that, but the reality is that is what happens many times. Does your behavior (either positive or negative) impact the reputation of others with whom you are associated? Of course, it does.

I still recall the fairly common practice of the elementary school teachers punishing the entire class for the misdeeds of a few. There are situations where our benefits as well as our liabilities are dependent to some extent on the group behavior. In the New Testament writings about the church there is some emphasis on members being part of the Body of Christ and each taking care of his or her responsibility so that the mission of the church can be accomplished. I don’t recall hearing a lot of emphasis on the accountability aspect of unfaithfulness or a failure to do our part other than the mission does not get accomplished. Apparently, “failure in accomplishing the mission” is not a very big deal to many people, because there doesn’t seem to be any tie-in to personal accountability from neglect of personal responsibility.

The real question that we should be concerned about is “how does God view such unfaithfulness?” There is an example of how such unfaithfulness caused problems in the history of Israel as they were invading the land of Canaan.

Understand Sin is Serious – 7:1-5

¹ But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the things under the ban, therefore the anger of the LORD burned against the sons of Israel. ² Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and said to them, “Go up and spy out the land.” So the men went up and spied out Ai. ³ They returned to Joshua and said to him, “Do not let all the people go up; *only* about two or three thousand men need go up to Ai; do not make all the people toil up there, for they are few.” ⁴ So about three thousand men from the people went up there, but they fled from the men of Ai. ⁵ The men of Ai struck down about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them down on the descent, so the hearts of the people melted and became as water. Joshua 7:1-5 (NASB95)

Notice that the indictment of unfaithfulness from God was against all of Israel and not just against Achan. God had given them instructions regarding what should be done with the material possessions that found in Jericho once the city was conquered. In Joshua 6:17-19 the entire city with the exception of Rahab and her family and the silver and gold and vessels of brass and iron were to be completely destroyed as being accursed. These were the things that were “under the ban” as indicated in verse one of Chapter seven in the New American Standard. The origin of this way of dealing with the spoils of war can be traced back to the early part of Moses’ message in Deuteronomy 7:25-26

The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the LORD thy God. Neither shalt thou bring an abomination into thine house, lest thou be a cursed thing like it: but thou shalt utterly detest it, and thou shalt utterly abhor it; for it is a cursed thing.

It is obvious from this admonition that the reason for the “ban” was to guard against any tendency to worship the false gods of the Canaanites. As it turned out, Achan had kept for himself a garment that was made in Shinar (where the tower of Babel had been), silver coins and a wedge of gold. These were likely taken from a temple in Jericho and were thought to be associated with one of their idols in the temple. Such things were classified as abominations unto God and that resulted in His anger which influenced how He interacted with the entire nation.

If one person secretly participating in an abomination can influence the prosperity of an entire group or nation, then we would have to conclude that any group or nation that openly accepts and even protects abominations in their midst (in their house) would be setting themselves up for certain failure? We can probably think of things that we (as a nation) have embraced that the word of God clearly identifies as abominations and we wonder how we will escape the anger of a just and holy God unless we recognize such sins for what they are and repent and deal with such practices.

We have a lot of sayings that we might quote that don’t have a lot of truth in them. One such saying that applies to this situation is “What you don’t know can’t hurt you.” Joshua and all of Israel discovered that the opposite of this adage is the real truth. The nation thought they were “on a roll” after the great victory against Jericho. As a result of thinking that everything was going their way, they proceeded to prepare for battle against the next town. They assumed that this was what they should do and they followed the same pattern (sending out spies to assess the situation) that had been used with Jericho. This seems like a reasonable thing to do. The problem with this approach was that they had not consulted with God to determine what, when and how they were to proceed. They knew the general mission was to conquer and possess the land, but they did **not** know the specifics of what they should do and when and how it should be done.

The next target was a town named Ai. The first time this place was mentioned was in Genesis 12:8 in connection with Abraham when he first came to the area. He pitched his tent between Ai and Bethel. The name Ai literally means a “heap of ruins.” It is possible that it became known as “heap of ruins” after the city was eventually conquered. Sometimes the names of places in the historical accounts reflect the name they eventually had. For example, Bethel was originally called Luz but became known as Bethel after Jacob had his dream encounter with the angels ascending and descending on a ladder between earth and heaven. His comment following the dream was “Surely this is the house of God” which is the literal meaning of the word Bethel.

The report from the spies was one of a lot of confidence in their ability to take the city. As it turned out, they were very much overconfident. They underestimated the strength of the people of Ai and overestimated their own ability. As a result, the forces that went up to attack the city were soundly defeated and they ran for their lives. The fast retreat limited their losses to 36 deaths. Something else died in that defeat and it was their courage.

In our previous study of what is needed for strength and courage a key requirement was the presence of the Lord and it was only when things went terribly against them did they realize that they did not have the benefit of God being with them. Since we know that God does not move, then the conclusion would have to be that the nation had moved away from God.

Realize We Need to Turn to God – 7:6-9

⁶ Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, *both* he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. ⁷ Joshua said, “Alas, O Lord GOD, why did You ever bring

this people over the Jordan, *only* to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? If only we had been willing to dwell beyond the Jordan! ⁸ “O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned *their* back before their enemies?” ⁹ “For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and they will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will You do for Your great name?” Joshua 7:6-9 (NASB95)

Joshua could have rationalized the setback by thinking “you win some and you lose some.” Sometimes we think that all of life is just a set of random happenings and it is all just a matter of “luck” or chance. This is why people will try to repeat something that turned out to be a failure the first or even the tenth time because they think their luck will change. If Joshua believed in coincidences, then he would have immediately regrouped and tried the attack again.

We can see from his actions that Joshua realized that something significant had changed and whatever it was affected the way God was interacting with the nation. He and the elders of Israel called a meeting with the Supreme Commander. In other words, they turned to God to find answers to what had caused the humiliating defeat at Ai. Sometimes when things go terribly wrong we don’t even know where to start in asking questions. The first question from Joshua was related to whether God had some hidden agenda to destroy them by having the nation cross over Jordan. The next thing was to start second guessing and regretting the actions they had already taken. He was essentially saying that it might have been better to not have been so ambitious to attack the area to the west of the Jordan River. The third step was to admit that they did not have a clue as to why all this was happening to them. The fourth thing was concern for the consequences of what had happened. Specifically, this defeat would embolden the enemies to fight harder. The fifth step was to appeal to God to protect His reputation.

I guess that many of us have gone through this same process in wondering whether we are really in touch with what God is doing in our lives. The pagan gods were thought to be capricious even to the point of wanting to inflict harm on those who worshiped them. This may have been background for the first question Joshua raised. It is a breakthrough when we come to the point of realizing without any doubt that God’s desire for us is for our good. The idea of Jehovah being a loving Father in His interactions with His children was a particular emphasis of the revelation of God’s character in the teachings of Jesus.

Generally, regretting having taken some action in the past is usually a waste of time. What’s done is done and the only purpose of reviewing it would be to determine what we might learn from it. Sometimes we beat ourselves up by thinking that life would be so much better if we had just not done this or that. Our energies would be better spent in seeking God’s direction as to what we should do now that we are in our present situation.

Admitting that we are clueless as to what is happening is a good starting point. This is like starting with a clean slate that is not cluttered with preconceived ideas that come from assumptions and presumptions. If we will admit that we don’t really know what is going on, then we might go on from there to learn or verify the facts of the situation. The truth of the matter is always a good starting place.

Should we be concerned with the possible consequence of what has happened to us in our present circumstances? The answer to this is one of those “yes and no” situations. We would say “yes” in realization that the choices we make today will impact what happens tomorrow or even ten years from now. The lessons from the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy are really about how making the right choices to obey and follow God’s ways will produce blessing and success and making the wrong choices to be rebellious will produce failure. We might say “no” to the question with regard to the fact that IF we are following God’s way, then the details of what happens to us are really inconsequential if we are in the center of God’s will.

Finally, it is ever helpful to try to put pressure on God to try to influence Him to help us

because if we fail, then it might reflect poorly on His reputation? Moses made that argument when God was ready to destroy most of the Israelites and start over with Moses and now we find Joshua saying something similar. I think that our primary concern is this matter is that we should behave in such a way that we do not ever cause people to think poorly of God because of what we, His children, might do.

When things go wrong, then perhaps the right questions should not be concerns about God's purposes, regretting past choices, worrying about how others will react or trying to manipulate God with question about His reputation. The questions probably should be directed toward ourselves to determine if the cause is simply sin in our lives.

Admit We Must Deal with Sin – 7:10-13

¹⁰ So the LORD said to Joshua, "Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face?" ¹¹ "Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put *them* among their own things. ¹² "Therefore the sons of Israel cannot stand before their enemies; they turn *their* backs before their enemies, for they have become accursed. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy the things under the ban from your midst. ¹³ "Rise up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, for thus the LORD, the God of Israel, has said, "There are things under the ban in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you have removed the things under the ban from your midst.'" Joshua 7:10-13 (NASB95)

Sin is usually the root of all our problems. The specific sin in this case was disregarding God's specific command to destroy all things associated with the way of life of the people of Jericho. The question the Lord addressed to Joshua of "why have you fallen on your face?" may have had a double meaning. The obvious meaning was related to the fact that they had come before God in humility to find answers and a less obvious meaning was that the nation had been humiliated (fallen on their face) in the defeat at Ai.

The remedy to the problem would require more than just humility and prayer. Some corrective action would be needed to remove the presence of the abomination that was causing the entire nation to come under God's displeasure (accursed).

I can still remember the idea I had about our nation when I was quite young that we were the strongest military power in the world and that no one would be able to stand in our way since we had "right" on our side. Then the Korean War came along and we sort of settled for a standoff after a lot of cost of money and lives. Next came Vietnam and we again expended a lot of lives and fortune and we were essentially defeated. Then we got into the mess in the Middle East and that has turned into a no-win situation. These things should raise a significant question of why are we not able to stand before our enemies. One of the significant changes that has occurred during this time period is that we have become more tolerant of sinfulness as a way of life. Things that used to be considered detestable are now celebrated. Criticism and ridicule of God were once thought to be blasphemous but are now applauded by many in our culture.

Worse than not being able stand before their enemies, God told them that he would no longer be with them unless they got rid of the abomination that was in their midst. Joshua was instructed to tell this to the people and have them prepare for discovery and removal of the abomination. This time of preparation was to give the people a chance for self-examination and repentance if they found themselves to be guilty of going against what God had commanded. This reminded me of the instructions Paul gave in his letter to the church at Corinth regarding preparation for the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:28 we see "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup."

The time of preparation would have given an opportunity for confession and repentance. Matthew Henry commented on this as follows:

if Achan had surrendered himself, and penitently owned his guilt, and prevented the scrutiny, who knows but he might have had the benefit of that law which accepted of a trespass-offering, with restitution, from those that had *sinned through ignorance in the holy things of the law?* (Lev. 5:15, 16). But Achan never discovering himself till the lot discovered him evidenced the hardness of his heart, and therefore he found no mercy.

Know Sin's Remedy is Costly – 7:14-15

¹⁴ 'In the morning then you shall come near by your tribes. And it shall be that the tribe which the LORD takes *by lot* shall come near by families, and the family which the LORD takes shall come near by households, and the household which the LORD takes shall come near man by man. ¹⁵ 'It shall be that the one who is taken with the things under the ban shall be burned with fire, he and all that belongs to him, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has committed a disgraceful thing in Israel.' ” Joshua 7:14-15 (NASB95)

The seriousness of sin is seen in the cost of the remedy as well as the consequences that results if the remedy is not applied. Many will read this account and think that the punishment is too harsh. Where is the concern for the 36 men who died in the failed attempt to take Ai? The eventual consequence of tolerating the sin would have been that nation of Israel would not have been able to experience the inheritance God had promised Abraham centuries earlier since they could not occupy the promised land if God was not with them. The longer range implications would have influenced God's plan to bless all nations by sending the Messiah through Abraham's heirs.

There are many examples in the scriptures where we see the judgment of God against sin being carried out in the historical setting. Most of the time the judgment is swift and harsh. Examples are Adam and Eve dying spiritually and being ejected from the Garden of Eden, the destruction of the world by a flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the burning of everything that Achan had, and even in the New Testament we see the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira who lied about what they were giving to support the early church. Such judgments do not fall immediately on everyone who commits similar sins, but God in His mercy has deferred such judgments in order to provide an opportunity to repent and be saved. The examples do, however, serve to demonstrate how costly sin is and how serious God is about having His people be holy and without blame. The lesson for us today is that we cannot expect to escape God's judgment and we cannot expect to enjoy the blessing of His presence if we tolerate that which God has declared to be an abomination in our nation or in our own personal lives.