

Sermon #1,184: Joshua 7:20-26

2-7-16, Quinquagesima/Catech. Oral Exam I, Bethany-Princeton MN
(Hymns: 33, 510.1.2, 437, 488.1.9.10, 236)

9th & 10th COMMANDMENTS: "ARE YOU HAPPY?"

Prayer: O Lord, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless unless they rest in You. All our desire is known unto You, therefore perfect what You have begun. We seek Your face; turn Your face toward us and show us Your glory. Then shall our longing be satisfied, and our peace shall be perfect. Amen. (*Quoted from St. Augustine, Confessions 1.1; and in The Lord Will Answer, p. 301*)

The Text, Joshua 7:20-26. ²⁰ And Achan answered Joshua and said, "Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: ²¹ When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. And there they are, hidden in the earth in the midst of my tent, with the silver under it." ²² So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver under it. ²³ And they took them from the midst of the tent, brought them to Joshua and to all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the LORD. ²⁴ Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the garment, the wedge of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and all that he had, and they brought them to the Valley of Achor. ²⁵ And Joshua said, "Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day." So all Israel stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. ²⁶ Then they raised over him a great heap of stones, still there to this day. So the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the Valley of Achor to this day.

Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Are you happy?" This question can be a source of such mischief!

The prevailing religion in America today is the one that says: “I believe that there is a God, and He wants everyone to be nice, and that He wants me to be happy.” This is the prevailing religion in America today. Belief in a non-specific God who doesn’t condemn anything except intolerance. The last part of that – “God just wants me to be happy” – is something you hear a lot. But curiously, you don’t find it in the Bible.

When do you hear this “God just wants me to be happy”? Usually when someone is trying to justify what they’re doing, or what they want to do, and it isn’t in accord with the Ten Commandments. For example: *“I’m just not happy in my marriage, and doesn’t God want me to be happy?”* – spoken as justification for a divorce or taking up with someone else. Or: *“I just don’t feel fulfilled in my job, and wouldn’t God want me to be happy?”* – spoken as justification for quitting, and leaving the family without a steady income. Or: *“We’re so in love, and can’t afford to marry yet, but wouldn’t God want us to be happy?”* – spoken as justification for sexual sin. Or: *“I don’t really have money for that right now but I can’t live without it, and doesn’t God want me to be happy?”* – spoken as justification for taking shortcuts financially or using dishonest means to get it.

So it is really a revelation to find that there is a commandment that asks: “Are you happy?” In fact, there are two. But notice where they come: at the end, numbers 9 and 10. This is a sign of how God wants you to deal with this question, “Are you happy?”

Usually when people think in terms of “God just wants me to be happy,” they are using that statement to overrule a commandment. But the way God has set it up, the first eight commandments overrule these desires and cravings. In other words, you can’t get it at the expense of other people or how God has set up, or ordered, your life and duties.

That’s what the Ten Commandments really are: God’s ordering of your life. He orders your relationships with people, with the government, with those you love, even with enemies. He orders your use of time, food, drink, technology, entertainment, the health industry, money, language. He makes you not the boss of someone else but the servant of everyone, out of fear and love for God. You are accountable and answerable, you are not a free agent or a Lone Ranger. What you do affects others. You do not get to just serve yourself or see to your own welfare.

This is the context in which you deal with the question, “Am I happy?” And the parallel questions: “I want this, so what do I do with this desire?” Which is a question we don’t usually take time to ask, since the old Adam is in charge saying: “You want it, go get it. You deserve it.”

This is what coveting is. Jesus said, ***“Beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Lk 12:15).*** It is an old word, not really an everyday word. But in the Bible story, it is part of Achan’s vocabulary, a word he already knew!

This took place right after the fall of Jericho, shortly after the Israelites entered the Promised Land under Joshua. Achan may have been a little one crossing the Red Sea, or he may have been born during the 40 years in the wilderness. At any rate, it’s only 40 years since the commandments were given on Mt. Sinai. Achan’s parents had done what Moses instructed in Deuteronomy 6, to ***“teach these [commandments] to your children.”*** Achan knew the word covet; he says to Joshua: ***“When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them.”***

All that is in Achan’s head is that he wants them. That’s how it is with coveting. It only says, “I want this,” and runs roughshod over all the other commandments. Our problem today is that very few people recognize it to be a sin. Coveting is the home-base viewpoint of our culture. It’s all about possessing, about acquiring, accumulating and consuming.

Achan is better than we are. He calls it a sin, whereas we are always trying to justify it. At the outset he says: ***“Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel”*** – the only true God, the Triune God – and then he admits his coveting and stealing. It is a little shocking that after he confesses his sins, he and all his family are stoned to death. God did forgive him. But there is punishment, to show that God looks on this sin with ***“fierce anger,”*** as it says. Why did Achan’s wife and children pay for his sin as well? God punishes the sins of the father to subsequent generations. God didn’t want anyone to wink at this sin, as we do.

These last two commandments are really the key to understanding all the commandments. They are about your desires, what’s on the inside. Your happiness can’t be at the expense of others. When you are

guilty of focusing on your wants so that you justify sin in order to get what you want, or if you are sick with wanting and feel that you can't be happy if you don't get what you want, then you turn your happiness into a god. In Jesus' parable of the sower which we heard last Sunday, He said ***"the desire for other things"*** can choke out someone's faith in God. It is a sign of dissatisfaction with God. If you have discontentment, if you are full of complaining or pessimism about life, you lack the right love of God as a child of the heavenly Father who trusts He'll give all you need.

Well, what do you do with this? Does it mean you can't want anything, you can't shop? No, that's not the point. The 9th and 10th Commandments are not there for you to trust in your ability to be happy-no-matter-what. The point is to drive home how you are unable to obey the Law yourself. Maybe you can control your actions, or if you really work hard, your words; but your wants? How do you get that under control?

It's all about the purpose of the commandments. They tell you what to do and what not to do. They show where you fall short. But they can't help you do better. The 9th and 10th commandments don't give you any help in being content or happy. For that you need Jesus. These commandments drive you in repentance to Jesus, who perfectly trusted His Father's care, and was perfectly happy, but He did it to count for you when you aren't that way. That's how you are forgiven.

What it says following the grim punishment of Achan and his family – ***"so the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger"*** – is true in your case. For you it's because of the grim punishment of the Son of God on the cross. It did not please God to punish His Son. But it did please Him to do so for your sake, out of love for you. Achan is a strange preview of Christ in a way. He and his family were punished for his own sin, and in so doing turned the Lord's fierce anger away from all Israel. Jesus was punished, but not for His own sin, instead for all your sinful desires, wishes and thoughts as well as in words and deeds – and in so doing Jesus turned the Lord's fierce anger away from the human race. He made peace between God and every person, by His innocent death.

The most important thing to the Lord is not that you are perfect in your wants and desires. The most important thing to Him is that you are drawn to His cross and you become one with Him. Having the mind of

Christ is not something you learn by your efforts. Having the mind of Christ is something you receive, He gives it to you in His Word and Sacraments. It is the gift of faith, which includes love for Him, desire for Him and what He gives you, what is only found in Him, by grace.

That is what these youth have been learning in catechism class about the Law and the Gospel, the commandments and the creed. These commandments show how much you need a Savior, and to want Him more than anything. This cannot become your desire by force. It only happens as you experience His forgiving love. He has made you for Himself, and your heart will only be restless unless you rest in Him. There is where true happiness is found! You find it by His finding you. Amen!