

Failure at Ai: A Picture of Discipline

God specified the way in which the children of Israel were to take the city of Jericho. The instructions, which would never be undertaken by a modern military general, were designed to impress upon the people that it was God Himself who would fight for them and decide their battles. Led by Joshua, the people followed the instructions of the Lord, and the walls of Jericho came tumbling down, at which point they delivered Rahab and her house, then destroyed the rest of the city and burned it with fire. Whatever else the feelings of the people were about the victory, Josh. 7:3 displays an over-confidence in attitude, and perhaps a failure to realize God was their strength. Joshua sent men to view the country of Ai, and when they returned verse 3 records their report to Joshua. "And they returned to Joshua, and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour about thither; for they are but few."

When the people went up against Ai, they were not only smitten, they fled before the men of Ai, and thirty-six of them were slain. Verse 5 describes them as terrified, "The hearts of the people melted, and became as water." What was the problem against this small city? Verse 1 tells us exactly what the trouble was; there was sin in the camp! "But the children of Isreal committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing; and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel." One man sinned, but all the people suffered as a result of his sin. They were unable to defeat the city of Ai until they resolved the issue of the sin according to the manner in which God prescribed.

For us, the lesson is that the sin of one can hinder the efforts of all. For that reason, God has instructed the church to discipline the unruly. At first, the unruly are to be warned (1 Thess. 5:14). But what if they fail to heed the warning? The apostle answers the question in his subsequent letter to the Thessalonian church: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (2 Thess. 3:6). If there is sin in the congregation, its efforts will be hindered, because the people of the world will have the tendency to brand the entire church as a lot of hypocrites, and reject even the opportunity to hear the gospel from them.

One observation to make is that sin has eternal consequences for all involved. If the one who sins fails to repent and seek God's forgiveness, he will be lost. The members of the congregation, by their failure to obey God in the matter of discipline will be lost for their disobedience. Any in the world who turn away from hearing the Word of God because of the situation will be lost for their failure to obey the gospel. If the children of Israel had rebelled against God and refused to punish Achan they would have been denied entrance through the gates of Ai. If we fail to practice the discipline that is needed in the church, we will be denied entrance through the gates of the eternal city. The consequences are too great for us to ignore the practice of correcting those who become caught up in sin.

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