

YOU SHALL NOT COVET ANYTHING THAT BELONGS TO YOUR NEIGHBOR

SERIES: ELIJAH: GOD'S INSTRUMENT OF GRACE

by Ron Ritchie

Today we will be reminded of the truth our Lord once taught through his prophet Jeremiah (17:9-10):

"The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?
I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give to each man according to his ways,
According to the results of his deeds."

This spiritual reality could not be more clearly illustrated than in the lives of King Ahab and his Queen Jezebel as we open up to 1 Kings 21:1-29 where we find Ahab coveting his neighbor's vineyard.

Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard

1 Kings 21:1-16

Now it came about after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard which was in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. And Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is close beside my house, and I will give you a better vineyard than it in its place; if you like, I will give you the price of it in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." So Ahab came into his house sullen [downcast or withdrawn] and vexed because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and ate no food.

But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "How is it that your spirit is so sullen that you are not eating food?" So he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite, and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it pleases you, I will give you a vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" And Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you now reign over Israel? Arise, eat bread, and let your heart be joyful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and sent letters to the elders and to the nobles who were living with Naboth in his city. Now she wrote in the letters, saying, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the people; and seat two worthless men before him, and let them testify against him, saying, 'You cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death."

So the men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them, just as it was written in the letters which she had sent them. They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the people. Then two worthless men came in and sat before him; and the worthless men testified against him, even against Naboth, before the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city and

stoned him to death with stones. Then they sent word to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned, and is dead." And it came about when Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, that Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." And it came about when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Now, in Chapter 20 (which we didn't have time to cover) Ben-hadad king of Syria came down and attacked Israel, surrounded the northern capital of Samaria, and had Ahab and Jezebel trapped like birds in a cage. In the midst of the tension the Lord sent an unnamed prophet to tell Ahab that God would destroy the Syrian army and the nation would know he was God. In time that prophecy came true with the death of some 127,000 Syrian soldiers. The only man left alive was King Ben-hadad, to whom Ahab extended mercy instead of the sword, violating God's ban on sparing anyone. Ahab called this wicked king "my brother," but God would use him as an instrument to take Ahab's own life in another Syrian war some three years later. So God spoke to King Ahab through one of his prophets and said, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people.'" (1 Kings 20:42.) And Ahab went home "sullen and vexed." He was depressed.

That brings us to chapter 21, where we read that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab (his summer residence). With the words of the prophet of God in Ahab's heart informing him of his impending death, rather than falling down before God in sackcloth and ashes, he left the capital of Samaria in this depression and went north to his summer palace in Jezreel. He was annoyed and pressured in his relationship with the Lord. He was concerned about what he should do with his life. There was no joy in his victory over the Syrians.

All wrapped up in himself, Ahab went out to walk along the wall of the palace, where he noticed the vineyard of Naboth. He began looking at and then coveting (longing for with envy) this vineyard, and he began to plan a way to buy it from Naboth so that he could turn it into a vegetable garden. Ahab was quite aware of the tenth commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant [employees] or his ox [tractor] or his donkey [car] or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:17.) But he made his plans anyway, only to discover that the vineyard was not for sale because Naboth said, "The LORD forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." He refused to sell the land to the king based on the law of Moses which stated, "...No inheritance of the sons of Israel shall be transferred from tribe to tribe, for the sons of Israel shall each hold to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers." (Numbers 36:7; see also Leviticus 25:23-28.) Naboth was bound by the command of God and not by a personal issue.

When David Roper, now pastor of Cole Community Church in Boise, Idaho, was here at PBC, he wrote:

In contrast to all the other nations of this time, the Israelites were...commanded to maintain their inheritance, the portion of land that they inherited from their fathers. When the nation of Israel conquered the land of Canaan, the land was first divided among the tribes and further subdivided by clans and families, so that every man in Israel had a plot of ground that he could call his own...Now, that wasn't true anywhere else in the ancient Near East...the kings owned the land and the common people worked the land...But in Israel, everyone had a piece of land, and the law established very stringent regulations that were designed to maintain the right to hold that land...This kept property from being accumulated by the rich and the powerful..Now, Ahab was aware of this law, and he knew it was wrong to ask for Naboth's paternal inheritance. (*Jezebel*, Discovery Paper 3375.)

So the king of Israel became even more depressed and annoyed, so much so that he went to bed, turned his face to the wall, and refused to eat. But Jezebel came into the bedroom and intervened. At first she could not believe what she saw---the king of Israel in a pity party all by himself on his bed, facing the wall and refusing to eat his supper. She asked him what the problem was, and he told her that he wanted to plant a vegetable

garden next to the palace on land belonging to Naboth and was willing to pay for it or give him another vineyard in exchange for it, but the jerk wouldn't sell it or trade it. (Notice that what he told her was a half-truth; he didn't mention the part about the inheritance.) Jezebel inquired sarcastically, "Are you not the one who exercises kingship over Israel? Get a grip on yourself! Get out of bed, take a shower, get something to eat, and I will get that stupid plot of land for you so you can plant your vegetables."

Then Jezebel began to devise a plan of deceit. Keep in mind that her family value system was built on the foundation of Baal theology. Baal was a god who coveted others' goods and then went about trying to obtain them by any means possible. So Jezebel wrote letters in the name of Ahab to the elders and nobles of the city of Jezreel in which she incited them to violate the ninth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). She wrote:

To the Elders and Nobles of Jezreel:

Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the people; and seat two worthless men before him, and let them testify against him, saying, "You cursed God and the king." Then take him out and stone him to death.

Signed, King Ahab

The elders and nobles received the letters and quickly obeyed, which showed their moral and spiritual corruption in that city and the fear Ahab and Jezebel had put in their hearts. The fast was proclaimed and the two witnesses (see Deuteronomy 17:6-7), literally "sons of Belial" or sons of worthlessness, testified that Naboth had cursed God and King Ahab. The charge: Naboth blasphemed God because he swore a formal oath before King Ahab and God promising to sell him the land, and then he defaulted on his promise. This innocent man and his sons (see 2 Kings 9:26) were then taken out to a field and stoned to death (see Exodus 22:28; Leviticus 24:16), eliminating any legal heirs. Thus Ahab could take possession of the land based on the legal codes of the ancient Near East. Word of the death of Naboth and his sons was quickly carried to Jezebel, and she rejoiced and told King Ahab that he now had his land for his vegetable garden. So the king went out and walked around on his new piece of land.

"There are six things which the LORD hates,
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that run rapidly to evil,
A false witness who utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brothers."
(Proverbs 6:16-19.)

Ahab and Jezebel hit five out of seven! So God is now going to act. When we live our lives totally on a horizontal plane, so to speak, we don't think of God at all. We concentrate on keeping all our ducks lined up and all our bases covered, and we keep our motives out of sight so no one really knows what's going on. It never occurs to us that we are accountable to God. So we never think God is going to move in and change the whole situation. But look at what happens next to Ahab and Jezebel:

The judgment of God

1 Kings 21:17-26

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth where he has

gone down to take possession of it. And you shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "Have you murdered, and also taken possession?"' And you shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs shall lick up your blood, even yours."' And Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" And he answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the LORD. Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, both bond and free in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, because of the provocation with which you have provoked Me to anger, and because you have made Israel sin. And of Jezebel also has the LORD spoken, saying, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the district of Jezreel.' The one belonging to Ahab, who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat, and the one who dies in the field the birds of heaven shall eat."

Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him. And he acted very abominably [in the most vile manner] in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the sons of Israel.

Proverbs 15:3 says:

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place,
Watching the evil and the good."

The prophet of the Lord was with Elisha somewhere when the Lord, who had seen all the injustice done to Naboth and his family by the wicked hands of Ahab and Jezebel, told him to go meet with the king and deliver the following message from the living God of Israel:

To King Ahab:

Thus says the LORD, "Have you murdered, and also taken possession?" In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs shall lick up your blood, even yours."

The living God of Israel

Elijah found King Ahab where God had told him he would be, and Ahab immediately tried to put the prophet on the defensive just as he had before. (The first time was when Elijah was sent by the Lord to meet with the king and tell him about the contest on Mount Carmel, and Ahab's first words were, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?") In his spiritual blindness and out of his unrepentant heart he could still say to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" Elijah was an enemy of the king because whenever he showed up the heavens opened, the light of truth shone, and he spoke the word of God. And Ahab hated the truth.

Jesus would later teach his disciples this spiritual principle: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you...." (John 15:18-20.) The world hated Jesus and called him their enemy because he came to tell them the truth of God and how far they had fallen short of the glory of God. In every generation, if they hate the Lord they will hate his spokespersons. If we are going to be the light of the world we live in so that God can shine through us, then we have to understand that with that comes the hatred of the world. We must not be surprised, and we must keep telling the truth as Elijah did, walking even into the presence of a king to tell him the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And Elijah answered Ahab, "I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the

LORD. You have sold yourself to the company store, you have become a slave of evil. Your wicked wife Jezebel convinced the elders and nobles that it was right to falsely accuse Naboth of cursing God and you, and they were convinced it was right to take him out and stone him just so you could have a vegetable garden. Well, according to the law of God and not the law of the Baals or of the Near East, you are both murders. And there are consequences for both of you. In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs shall lick up your blood, even yours."

God announced five prophecies against the king and queen of Israel: (1) "I will bring evil upon you, and will utterly sweep you away." (2) "I will cut off from Ahab every male, both bond and free in Israel." (3) "I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam...and like the house of Baasha... [these two houses in the northern tribes of Israel were cut off because of their gross idolatry] because of the provocation with which you have provoked Me to anger, and because you have made Israel sin." (4) "And of Jezebel...The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the district of Jezreel." (5) "The one belonging to Ahab, who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat, and the one who dies in the field the birds of heaven shall eat."

Then God summarized the life and times of Ahab and Jezebel: "Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife incited him. And he acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the sons of Israel."

This was a very terrible day in the history of the northern kingdom. There couldn't have been more sin in the sight of God, and he couldn't prophesy more evil against the house of Ahab. Many innocent people would have to suffer because of the selfishness of one man who wanted to have a vegetable garden. It hadn't looked like such a big deal to Ahab to covet Naboth's vineyard. But God was watching all the evil Ahab was doing, and Ahab finally tip the scales by murdering an innocent man.

But now something strange will happen. Over and over again I have tried to share how God loves his people in Israel and the church, and how as a father he will do many things to discipline us---not for our destruction but to bring us as sons into fellowship with him. We are about to read about an amazing moment, and I want you to think this through in light of our own country and the western nations, in light of all the evil that surrounds you. Think through with God what is going on in these next three verses, because if you understand it, it is going to set you free to have a heart like God. Look at God's heart of mercy after he has prophesied against Ahab and his family:

The mercy of God

1 Kings 21:27-29

And it came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son's days."

Finally King Ahab came to his spiritual senses and realized that he had been confronted with the one and only living God, who was not only a God of justice but a God of compassion and mercy. In spite of Jezebel and her Baals, he fell before the living God of Israel in sackcloth and ashes, fasted in humility, and went about despondently, literally "in a soft [meek] spirit" (slowly, like one in deep trouble before God). Then God saw the heart of Ahab, and I can just imagine how excited God was. "Elijah!" he said. "Look what has happened! Ahab has humbled himself before me! Now I am going to withhold the evil I have prophesied for Ahab until the days of his sons [who worshiped the Baals]." Amazingly, Ahab asked God to forgive him---and God did. Based on this passage I believe we will see Ahab in heaven. And if we should ask him how in the world he got there, he will tell us, "The same way you did, by the mercy of God!"

Here we see another spiritual principle: "God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the

knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Dr. Vernon McGee once told a story on his *Through the Bible* broadcast about the final days of former President John F. Kennedy. The world now knows how morally corrupt he and his family had been, but what most of the world does not know is that the weekend before he kept that deadly engagement in Dallas, Texas he called Billy Graham to the White House to speak with him about spiritual things. Dr. McGee had heard that they had a three-hour meeting together. A few years later he met Grady Wilson, a member of the Graham team, at a dinner, and he asked him if it was true that Kennedy and Graham had met for three hours just before Kennedy's death in Dallas. Wilson answered, "No that is not true. The meeting lasted eight hours!" Who knows the heart? Only the Lord. And he is not wishing that any should perish.

But then there are the consequences of sin, which are very severe. Judgment does take place against all who are enemies of God. and because God had told Ahab that he was no longer to be the king and that he was going to have to pay for his sin, his physical life---not his eternal life--- would be taken. God hates idolatry in his people. He promises that if we don't deal with it, then he will. We tend not to believe him, and then we are stunned when he brings judgment.

The sword of the Lord in the hand of Jehu

Some three years later Jehoshaphat king of Judea visited Ahab, and Ahab asked if he would join him in battle against Ben-hadad the King of Syria once again over some land on the east of the Jordan called Ramoth-gilead. After hearing from some false prophets that they would be victorious, they called in a true prophet of God named Micaiah who told them they would be destroyed. But in spite of the word of the true prophet, they went into battle against Syria. And in spite of the fact that Ahab disguised himself, "a certain man [of the Syrian army] drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor." (1 Kings 22:34-36.) King Ahab bled to death in his chariot and was taken home to be buried in Samaria. "And they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood (now the harlots bathed themselves there), according to the word of the LORD which He spoke...Ahaziah the son of Ahab became king over Israel....And he did evil in the sight of the LORD and walked in the way of his father and in the way of his mother [Jezebel]...[and] caused Israel to sin. So he served Baal and worshiped him and provoked the LORD God of Israel to anger according to all that his father had done." (1 Kings 22:38, 51-53.)

Second Kings 1 tells us that although Ahab's first son Ahaziah became king after his father's death, within the year he would be found lying on his death bed after accidentally falling through his second-floor lattice in the palace at Samaria. He cried out to the god Baal-zebub, the god of the dung heap, to save him; but Elijah told him he would die. He died childless.

Ahab's second son Joram (or Jehoram) came to the throne, but 2 Kings 9:21-27 says that God moved the prophet Elisha to anoint Captain Jehu king of Israel and to use him as the sword of the Lord against the house of Ahab (see 1 Kings 19:16). And Jehu eventually killed Joram in the vineyard of Naboth. Jehu then ordered one of his officers, "Take him up and cast him into the property of the field of Naboth the Jezreelite, for I remember when you and I were riding together after Ahab his father, that the LORD laid this oracle against him: 'Surely I have seen yesterday the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons,' says the LORD, 'and I will repay you in this property,' says the LORD. Now then, take and cast him into the property, according to the word of the LORD."

The Lord had one count against Jezebel: Servant of Baal, enemy of the living God of Israel. "The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the district of Jezreel," he had said. That prophecy would be fulfilled exactly under the orders of Captain Jehu. He rode into Jezreel, and when Jezebel heard of it, she decided to try to entice him. "...She painted her eyes and adorned her head, and looked out the window." But then because she was so angry about Jehu's involvement with the death of her son Joram and about this fulfillment of the prophecy of Elijah, and because she was caught up in the web of who was on whose side, she could not control her tongue. When she saw him enter the gate she called out to him, "Is it well, Zimri, your master's murderer?" (2 Kings 9:31.) At that point Jehu called out to two eunuch servants who were standing by her and ordered them to throw her out the second-floor window. When she landed on the ground some of her blood splashed on his horse, so Jehu used his horse and chariot to trample her to death. Then he went in to eat, and after his meal he said, "See now

to this cursed woman and bury her, for she is a king's daughter." They went to bury her, but they found only her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands. His servants told Jehu what they had found and he responded, "This is the word of the LORD, which He spoke by His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying 'In the property of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung on the face of the field in the property of Jezreel, so they cannot say, "This is Jezebel.'"" (2 Kings 9:34, 36-37.)

This woman had corrupted not only King Ahab and her two sons, but also her daughter Athaliah, who in turn corrupted her husband Jehoram and her son Ahaziah, both of whom became kings of Judah. After Athaliah's husband died and her son Ahaziah was killed by the hand of Jehu (see 2 Kings 9:27), she established herself as the queen of Judah for six years. She instituted Baal worship in the land and killed all of David's dynasty except for the son of Ahaziah, Joash (Jehoash), who as a little boy was hidden from her by a priest of Jehovah. Had he been killed by Athaliah, the Davidic line would have been cut off, and there would have been no Messiah out of the house of David. When Joash was declared king of Judah at the age of seven by the high priest Jehoiada, Athaliah was killed by the palace guards (see 2 Kings 11).

Second Kings 10 tells us that Jehu had the teachers of the seventy sons of Ahab who lived in Samaria cut off their heads off, put them in baskets, and bring them to the gates of the city of Jezreel.

Jehu then killed all the staff who remained in the house of Ahab, and the great men, his acquaintances, and his priests, until he left him without a survivor.

Then Jehu met forty-two relatives of the late king of Judah, Ahaziah, on their way to Samaria, and he killed them all.

Second Kings 10:18-28 tells us that Jehu then ordered all who worshiped Baal to come to Samaria and enter the temple of Baal for a great sacrifice. They came to a man, and he killed them all and burned the temple and all their symbols, thus eradicating Baal worship from Israel.

The story of Ahab and Jezebel in these chapters demonstrates the consequences of the seemingly inconsequential sin of coveting what belongs to another. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This is referring to the one and only living God of Israel whose name is *Yahweh*. This is the God who "loves justice" (Psalm 99:4). This God called out a "holy people" whom he named Israel, and now in the age of the Spirit he is calling out a "holy people" whom he has named the church, the body of Christ. This God takes the Ten Commandments off of the stone tablets and places them in the hearts of his followers. He enables his followers by the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit to choose not to participate in idolatry; adultery; dishonoring their parents; murder; adultery; stealing; bearing false witness; or coveting their neighbor's wife, land, servants or anything that belongs to their neighbor.

We don't have to scheme to get the things we need. God calls us to come to him and he will provide all our needs. "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.)

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