

The Discipleship Project-Summer 2017

Series 3: The Masquerade of Sin

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Series Big Idea: Because Satan masquerades the destructive nature of sin, we must be honest with ourselves about the carnage sin brings.

Lesson 3.3: The Folly of Sin

Lesson Big Idea: If sin remains unchecked, it will eventually spiral out of control.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Esther 7:10 (PPT)

The Japanese honeysuckle was first introduced in the United States in the mid to late 1800s as an ornamental plant and for erosion control. Both humans and wildlife are drawn to its fragrant flowers and sweet honey-flavored nectar. Its evergreen foliage creates a safe haven for the birds that rest on its branches and feast on its berries. This honeysuckle is fast growing and hardy, and it thrives in a wide variety of habitats. So why has this seemingly helpful and beautiful vine been listed as an “ecological threat”? And how did it come to be seen as an “invasive, noxious weed”?

Beginning with a small seed, dispersed by the wind or wildlife, the Japanese honeysuckle quickly settles into the soil where it sprouts and sends out “runners” and rhizomes (underground roots). Recent studies posit this root system may actually poison the surrounding ground so other surrounding plant life cannot grow. Furthermore, as the Japanese honeysuckle takes root and grows, it shoves native species out of the way with thick, woody vines. It rapidly overtops other small trees and plants by twining around them and completely covering them.

The fruit of the honeysuckle is deceptive as well; the berries contain too much sugar to provide sufficient nutrition for the birds. Thus, they often perish in cold winter climates. Unfortunately, once this honeysuckle takes root in a woodland area, not only does it wreak havoc on the vegetation and wildlife, it is extremely difficult to remove thanks to the continued dispersion of those tiny seeds.

Much like the honeysuckle, if left alone, things can enter into our hearts that will ultimately result in the destruction of our lives. Nobody wants to live a life that results in destruction; yet many do. What can we do to keep from going down the wrong path? What can we do to keep from living a life of destruction? God’s Word has an answer.

FRAME

Haman is a perfect example of someone who thought his life was evolving as he had planned and never saw the destruction that was coming. The Book of Esther introduces us to this man. Haman had been promoted as a high official under King Ahasuerus, king of Persia. The king had commanded that all of the servants bow and show reverence to

Haman. However, “Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence” (Esther 3:2, KJV). (PPT)

When Haman heard of Mordecai’s refusal, he became infuriated. The Scriptures reveal that **Haman became consumed with selfishness, pride, and hatred toward Mordecai and plotted to have him killed.** But that was not enough. Because one man (Mordecai) would not bow down to him, the situation evolved into a plot to murder all of the Jews throughout the entire kingdom. Haman became obsessed with exterminating the Jews. He lost control as **“sin” spiraled out of control (PPT) (PDG),** and the evil he intended for Mordecai actually came upon his own life. How many times do we end up being hanged on our own gallows?

The Bible provides many examples to help us understand the consequences of unchecked sin. One such example is found in the life of **Ahithophel.** (See II Samuel 17:23.) (PPT) According to Psalms, Ahithophel was not an enemy who hated David. Rather, David described him as an equal, a “familiar friend.” (See Psalm 41:9.) (PPT) He referred to him as his guide, his acquaintance. They had even worshiped together in the sanctuary. (See Psalm 55:12–14.) (PPT) Yet this same “friend” betrayed David.

In the past, Ahithophel had counseled both David and Absalom. He was considered a wise and trusted advisor. But then we come to a time when Absalom (David’s son) rebelled and conspired to overtake his father’s kingdom. Ahithophel sided with Absalom, and **he advised Absalom to allow him to choose twelve thousand men to pursue David and kill him.**

- **How could a trusted advisor, a friend, reach the place where he was willing to betray and conspire to murder a friend?**

To understand the root of Ahithophel’s betrayal one must understand that Ahithophel was Bathsheba’s grandfather. He no doubt resented what David had done to his granddaughter. And although the Scriptures do not explicably state this, it appears that feelings of hurt and offense entered his heart. He gave them space, so, consequently, they became a root of bitterness. **When bitterness springs up and is left unattended, sin spirals out of control.**

Fortunately for David, Absalom also asked advice from Hushai. After hearing Hushai, Absalom and all of the other counselors decided that Hushai’s advice made more sense, so they disregarded Ahithophel. When Ahithophel realized his counsel was not followed, and he no longer held a place of esteem and honor, he lost all hope. Ahithophel, wise advisor and trusted friend of King David, went out and hung himself.

- **What are some things Ahithophel could have done to uproot the seed of bitterness?**

We do not want to overlook the role of **Absalom** in this story. As mentioned before, Absalom was David’s *own* son. What would bring a son to the place where **he would conspire to have his father murdered and then try to usurp his throne?** Eventually, David “lost” Absalom by his death at the hand of Joab and his servants, but David had really “lost” Absalom long before this.

When we examine the life of Absalom, we not only see a personable and handsome young man who loved the pomp of royal life, we also see early signs of his rebellion against authority. And we see a fractured relationship with his father. Absalom had issues David never addressed.

When Absalom learned of the rape of his sister, Tamar, by their half-brother, Amnon, he was understandably irate. According to the law, Amnon should have married Tamar, yet Absalom told Tamar to keep quiet and let him handle the situation. But instead of handling the situation by confronting Amnon and demanding marriage, Absalom waited two years. And over the course of those two years, he allowed anger and vengeance to fester in his heart! Finally, Absalom murdered his half-brother. Instead of insisting Amnon abide by the laws and marry Tamar, Absalom thwarted justice and had him murdered!

Consequently, Absalom was exiled to Gerar, and although he was allowed to return to Israel, we never read of his remorse or repentance. We only see anger and self-righteousness. And, once again, we read where Absalom felt he was above the law. After being repeatedly ignored by David, he demanded to see the king's face and stated, "And if there is iniquity in me, let him put me to death" (II Samuel 14:32, NASB). (PPT) How could Absalom speak this way? Did he really believe he was without guilt? Did he not think himself worthy of the death penalty? He, once again, revealed his disregard for God's Law. He wanted the death penalty for Amnon, though the law did not require it. Yet he thought the death penalty harsh and inappropriate for himself, though he was a murderer under the Law. This was a man who manifested absolutely no repentance.

The unrepented sins of hatred, vengeance, and pride took root, spiraled out of control, and birthed rebellion. (PPT) (PDG) Absalom plotted for four years, winning over the hearts of the people while running David down with hypocrisy, lies, and deceit. How deep the roots of resentment must have been!

In the end, we catch up with Absalom running away from David's army on his mule. His hair became caught in a tree, and he was left hanging. While he hung from the tree, Joab took advantage of Absalom's dilemma. Ironically, against the king's command, Joab meted out his own form of justice (sound familiar?). He killed Absalom for setting his fields on fire and for appointing Amasa over the army. (See II Samuel 16–18.)

- **What should Absalom's attitude have been when he was ignored by his father?**

Another biblical example of the folly of sin is recorded in the account of **the fall of Judas**. Not a lot is known about Judas beyond his discipleship, betrayal, and death. But we know Jesus handpicked Judas. He was one of the twelve. He learned from Jesus and left all to follow Him. He witnessed the miracles alongside Peter, James, and John. He was offered the same opportunities and experiences as the other eleven, and he was trusted with the job of treasurer.

However, John 12:6 gives us a brief glimpse of Judas' thievery and lack of character by stating he, "had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it" (NKJV). Did

his love of money—a root of greed—lead him to be willing to betray Jesus for a paltry thirty pieces of silver?

Sin took Judas farther than he ever intended to go. (PPT) (PDG) This man who walked with Jesus, whom Jesus called “friend,” betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Soon after his betrayal, we read that Judas was filled with great remorse. Unlike Absalom who refused to see his wrongdoing, Judas repented and tried to return the silver, but he was too late. His emotions spinning like the coins tossed on the Temple floor, **Judas went out and hanged himself.**

- **What do you believe was at the root of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus Christ?**
- **Why do you think Jesus picked Judas?**
- **Why did Jesus encourage Judas to do what he did?**
- **Why did Jesus call Judas “friend” knowing full well what he was getting ready to do?**

And so it is with the honeysuckle. The vine is so green. The nectar is so sweet. The flowers are so beautiful. The berries are so delicious. The gardener never intended for the Japanese honeysuckle to choke out the vegetation. He never realized it was poisoning the soil. Who would imagine the luscious fruit was all for show? And so the honeysuckle remained unchecked. The tiny seeds continued to be spread across the soil, and the roots tenaciously persisted in their hidden agenda. The vine rapidly spiraled out of control. The end result was death and devastation.

Similarly, it is ludicrous to believe Haman started out with the intent to be hanged, alongside his ten sons, on the gallows he had built for someone else. Ahithophel and Judas never intended to fall so low as to betray their friends and, ultimately, take their own lives. Absalom surely never expected to get his hair caught in a tree and suffer a humiliating death at the hands of Joab.

These four men, whose deaths were associated with hanging, had heart issues. Their sins remained unchecked. If they had taken care of their hearts, if they had eliminated the seeds and removed the roots, their end-of-life stories may have been different.

- **What does it mean to guard your heart?**

The recommended “best management practice” to control noxious weeds such as the Japanese honeysuckle is constant monitoring and pulling out the plants when they are young, before they go to seed and before the roots begin to send out their poison. So it is with our hearts. Proverbs 4:23 reminds us to keep, or guard, our hearts with all diligence.

It is not the responsibility of our family, our friends, our neighbors, or even our pastor to check our hearts. The responsibility falls on each of us individually. Only we can know when we have been hurt, when we have become angry, or when someone has let us

down. Only we can know when there is a wound that needs to be taken care of.

Much like those tiny honeysuckle seeds, sin has a way of trying to creep in and take root. Often sin takes over gradually and is undetected. **As Christians we need to check our hearts often!** We must raise our shields and keep our hearts pure. We cannot afford to let hurts and small sins take root and grow. How do we check our hearts? First we must pray for God to reveal to us the roots of bitterness, wrath, selfishness, lust, idolatry, or any other weedy root that is trying to grow in us.

Check your thoughts. (PPT) (PDG) Ask yourself, “Am I replaying the same recording over and over?” “Am I rehashing the scenario?” Bitterness flourishes in justification. “Am I justifying my anger like Absalom?”

Check your speech. (PPT) (PDG) Ask, “Is my mouth out of control?” “Am I critical, slanderous, rude, or negative?”

Check your associations. Ask, “Are my friends a positive influence?” Bitterness tends to be like the honeysuckle. It is a noxious weed that can affect the surrounding soil. Similarly, bad attitudes do spread and corrupt. (See I Corinthians 15:33.) (PPT)

One way to guard our hearts is to protect our minds and our thoughts. The spirit of the world bombards us every day. Protect what comes in! Why not capture your thoughts early in the day? Put up a shield against the fiery darts of the wicked by praying, meditating on Scripture, and hiding God’s Word in your heart. (See Psalm 119.)

The Scriptures also encourage us to look straight ahead and fix our gaze directly on our Savior (Proverbs 4:25), not allowing sin to creep into our vision, hearing, and hearts. Weed out the bad and cultivate the good.

FINISH

There once was a man who walked from New York City to San Francisco. When asked what his biggest hurdle was, he surprisingly replied that the toughest part of the trip was not traversing the steep slopes of the mountains, nor was it crossing hot, barren stretches of desert. He said, “The thing that came the closest to defeating me was the sand in my shoes.” Just as a few grains of sand became his greatest hindrance, the so-called “small sins” in our lives can bring utter destruction.

We tend to underestimate the smaller things in life. Even Solomon warned of the “little foxes.” (See Song of Solomon 2:15.) If we ignore the seemingly insignificant things, the “small things,” they will someday grow up and become “big things,” and then they will present to us a great problem.

What was wrong with Haman wanting Mordecai to show some respect? What was wrong with Ahithophel feeling hurt over the wrongs inflicted upon his family by King David? What was wrong with Absalom feeling anger toward Amnon for violating their sister? Or consider Judas—what was wrong with wanting a little bit of money? It all came down to heart issues—issues that could have and should have been taken care of when they were small—issues that ultimately led to death and destruction.

No matter how beautiful the temptation appears, no matter how justified you may feel in your hurt, it is only a cloak for the reality that sin always ends in pain, heartbreak, and judgment. Sin, when it completes its work, results in death:

“Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:15).

- **What are some ways in which we might experience death, even though we may go on living?**

The good news, or I should say best news, however, is someone else died by hanging. But it wasn't because of His heart issues. It was because of ours. Jesus endured the cross for you and me. He endured the cross so we could get our hearts right.