

JUST A LITTLE MORE
1 Kings 21
see H. Stephen Shoemaker, “Elijah the Prophet,” *GodStories*

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We come to our third in a three-part sermon series about the prophet Elijah.

It’s nice when you can own multiple residences – one for the summer and one for the winter, one to vacation at the beach and one for mountain getaways, one by the lake and one in the Big Apple. I can’t be sure how many residences Ahab, king of Israel, owned. But one of his multiple residences is the scene for the third story of Elijah. Yet in this particular story, Elijah becomes a supporting character, and Ahab moves to the forefront.

Samaria has some pretty high elevations, and it does get chilly in the winter. So, Ahab and his Baal-worshiping woman, Jezebel, were spending just such a cold winter at their seasonal retreat in Jezreel. Ahab peered out from his palace and saw the plot of land adjacent to his and began to imagine just how wonderful it would be to be able to plant a garden right beside his palace. Rows of corn, squash, okra, pole beans – and even a watermelon patch.

Now remember, this is the king who has absolutely everything. But all he can do is focus his attention on the fact that he has a burning, all-consuming desire for the plot of ground next to his. Nothing else brought him joy in life any more – none of his riches, none of his relationships, not even his royalty. All he could do was focus on what he did not have, which was the little piece of land next to his.

No “For Sale” sign in the front yard. Didn’t matter. He approached Naboth man-to-man (or should I say king-to-subject). “Boy, Naboth, have I got a deal for you.” Beware of those words. If anyone ever says, “Boy, have I got a deal for you,” I’ve finally learned that what they really mean is, “Boy, have I got a deal for me.”

“Naboth, I need a vegetable garden, and I need it here close to the palace. I’m just going to buy your piece of land here next to my royal residence. Take your pick, my friend. I’ll either give you money, or I’ll give you another vineyard, rather than this one, to stand in its place.”

Instead of calculating his capital gains cost versus evading taxation by a land to land trade, Naboth immediately said, “Can’t do that. Heaven forbid. Scriptures won’t allow me to do that.”

Moses had said it. To sell the land of his fathers would be to break the law of God.

“Oh my king, I am so sorry, but the family farm is not for sale.”

Ahab had one of the biggest pity parties in all of Palestinian history. He was sullen and vexed, says verse 4, because of no-deal Naboth. He began to get depressed and pouted and sulked around the house. He even refused to be refreshed or strengthened by food. Ahab was coveting his neighbor's plot of land. Ahab couldn't eat, couldn't sleep.

But the reality is there is no such thing as material covetousness. All coveting, all wanting what others have is spiritual. The material things – the plot of land, the new car, the bigger house, the better job – are really merely symbols. We desire it. We lust after it. We become fixated on the object, whatever it is, simply because it will content our spirit – yes, even if it's just for a moment.

Maurice Silverman has said, “If envy were an illness, the world would be a hospital.”

Of course, it's one of the Ten Commandments, though it's one we don't take as seriously as the others. Don't kill. Don't steal. Don't commit adultery. All those seem fine. But rarely do we mention covetousness. Perhaps we think in our mind that God needed ten – He came up with nine good ones and simply began to speak about covetousness just to fill in the tenth gap.

Exodus 20:17 states it this way: Don't covet your neighbor's house – there you go, Ahab. Don't covet your neighbor's spouse (Rick Springfield's “Jessie's Girl”: “*Jessie is a friend, Yeah, I know he's been a good friend of mine. But lately something's changed; it ain't hard to define. Jessie's got himself a girl and I want to make her mine.*”). Don't covet your neighbor's servant. Don't covet your neighbor's stuff – that is his ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The Bible is a history of people who covet, a people whose lives are destroyed by wanting what someone else has. Cain coveted Abel's approval before God. Jacob coveted Esau's birthright and blessing. David coveted Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. Thinking about those examples, we see how quickly coveting becomes linked to other, more visible, sins like adultery and murder. Cain killed Abel. Esau wanted to kill Jacob. David had Uriah killed. And in this story, Ahab will have Naboth killed.

Coveting, in and of itself, is serious sin. For God it was one of the Big Ten.

See him now – old Ahab pouting, refusing to eat, refusing to have a good time. Can't enjoy anything he has because of what he doesn't have. Material things – greed is ruling his life. Ahab, the moping monarch, the listless leader.

There was a study conducted where a child was placed in a room full of the grandest toys imaginable. The child was allowed to play in the room for quite some time, then he was finally removed for a while and a second child was introduced into the room, allowing the second child to play with the toys. Then, while the second child was still playing, the first child was reintroduced into the room. They discovered that no matter what toy the first child was playing with when they left the room – no matter what toy had caught their attention the most – it didn't matter. When the first child returned to the room, after the first few moments the only toy he was interested in – you guessed it – was the toy in the other child's hands.

It's true. We gauge a great deal of our wants and likes on our perception of how other people like those things. Advertisers discovered this magic long ago and go to great pains to use models and celebrities that we might either recognize or, in some way, be attracted to so that we will want what they have. Do we really need Troy Aikman to tell us to buy Acme Brick or do the ladies need to douse themselves with Halle Berry perfume? The sad thing is that whether we are two years old (like the toddlers taking the toys) or whether we're 90 years old, we continually fall for the same ploy of covetousness.

In fact, the best things in life aren't things at all.

Enter Jezebel. "Why is my little prince pouting? You haven't even touched your taters. Why are you apathetic, Ahab?"

"Because I spoke to Naboth, the Jazreelite, and said, 'Give me your vineyard, and I'll pay you a fair price.' I even offered to give him another vineyard. But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'"

Ahab was going to pout, but no-deal Naboth was going to honor the law, God's law.

"Now let me get this straight," said Jezebel. "Nobody Naboth is telling you, the king of Israel, that he's not going to do the deal. Are you a man or a mouse?" she asked. Remember, she was from the Phoenician city-states. She had been trained in the absolute traditions of her Phoenician people. You don't say "no" to a king. "You go on and eat your bread. You find joy in your heart, Ahab." (As if things ever can give us joy.) "I'll make sure you get that vegetable garden you want."

She wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal. She explained a scheme. Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the head of the people. Find two worthless men, two false witnesses, who will testify against him saying, "Naboth, you cursed God and the king." Then, we'll take him out and stone him to death.

Indeed, that's the way it took place. They had a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the people. Two paid-for witnesses began to testify, saying that Naboth had cursed God and the king. Indeed, he was taken from the city and stoned.

"Naboth is dead," they send word to Jezebel. When Jezebel heard that Naboth was dead, she said to Ahab, "Arise, go get what you wanted. Go get the vineyard of Naboth. Because nobody tells my pouting prince no."

So Ahab goes to survey the land for which he'd been willing to kill. "Mine, all mine" – the joy of fulfilled covetousness.

We are a coveting, a greedy people. A person whose God is gold and whose creed is greed really doesn't have room for God. Their heart is so shallow they try to fill it with all of the things of the world.

Jesus was teaching, and a man came up to him and said, “Lord, make my brother share his inheritance with me.” Jesus said, “Who made me a lawyer or an arbiter between the two of you. You’d better be careful, because all kinds of covetousness can overcome your life. Life is not the abundance of possessions.” King Solomon predicted the problem when he said, “A heart at peace gives life to the body. But envy rots the bones.”

Somebody always has more than we have – more success, more wealth, more time, more friends. How do we protect ourselves from this destruction, from this envious heart that literally leads us to rot in our souls? How do we get over the grabbing greed that affects all of our society?

I. First of all, we have to acknowledge our problem.

Every one of us wants more – just a little bit more. Like Ahab, grabbing for the ground of his neighbor, we all want and need just a little bit more. We have to acknowledge our problem.

Francis Xavier was a Catholic priest, after whom Xavier University is named. For 45 years as a Catholic priest he heard men and women come with their confessions of sin. You know how the routine goes in a Catholic church. They go into a little booth and the priest is on the other side of the partition. The sinner comes in and says, “Forgive me Father, for I have sinned.” And the priest says, “When was your last confession?” You tell him and you confess your sins right there. Of course, say Baptist believers, upholding the priesthood of everyone who proclaims the Lordship of Christ Jesus, we take our confessions sometimes to our pastor, and that can be a healthy thing but not a necessary thing, for as Baptists and as believer-priests we take our confessions straight to God through Christ Jesus, His Son. Francis Xavier said an incredible thing about Catholic confession. He said in 45 years of hearing the confessions of young and old, men and women, after 45 years of hearing every sin imaginable confessed — and even some unimaginable — of hearing sins not even in the Bible, he said that in 45 years he never had one person confess to the sin of covetousness. Never.

II. Secondly, we have to check our self-esteem.

Psychology Today surveyed 25,000 people and discovered that envy is rooted in a low self-esteem. We assume that the Joneses have more than us because they are more worthy. So we seek to get more to boost how we feel about ourselves. We buy that newer, more expensive model car in order to impress those around us.

Comparison is the thief of joy.

Check your self-esteem.

III. Third, evaluate your values.

Do your treasures lie in the wrong chest? What do you really want to invest your life in?

Money can buy a bed, but it can’t buy sleep.

It can buy us books, but it can’t buy us knowledge.

It can buy us food, but it can’t buy an appetite.

Money can buy cosmetics, but it can never buy beauty.

It can buy a house, but never a home. It can buy medicine, but it can't buy health.
It can buy amusement, but it can't buy joy.
It can buy a crucifix, but it cannot buy a Savior.
It can buy a pew in the church house, but not a place in the Kingdom of God.

IV. Get perspective.

You've longed and longed and longed for it. And once you get it, once you acquire it – the very thing so desired, the very thing that promised to bring us happiness leaves us empty once again after a momentary thrill.

How long has it been since you've been to a preschool birthday party? Inevitably at the party of a preschool little girl – I've had three preschool girls and watched each of their birthday parties – inevitably someone will give a gift of large, dazzling jewels. There is a crown, as if the little girl is a queen. There are bracelets and necklaces, gaudy with glitter and gold. As parents we grin smugly, thinking it's cute that a child would find so much value in something that is so valueless.

Get perspective. Just so, God looks at us as we take delight in the fleeting treasures of this life.

V. Practice thankfulness.

Don't get so wrapped up in what you don't have that you forget what you do have. Ahab couldn't enjoy the palace, the royal residence, simply because he didn't have Naboth's vineyard. If you want to compare yourself to somebody, compare yourself to somebody who has much less than you do.

Just like he pounced into the text in our first sermon in chapter 17, in this story now enter Elijah the prophet. He comes just at the right time, just when Ahab is gloating over his new garden.

“Go,” said God. “Say to him, ‘Have you murdered and have you taken possession?’ And then you declare – it's grizzly – ‘In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs shall lick up your blood, even yours.’”

“Have you found me, O enemy of mine?”

“I've found you all right,” said Elijah, “because you sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the Lord. The dogs too shall eat Jezebel in this same district of Jezreel.”

With that last confrontation, Elijah closed out his work. As he prophesied, Ahab and Jezebel went finally to their grizzly deaths. Ahab was killed in battle, and when his blood-filled chariot was washed out, the dogs – as the prophet had declared – lapped up his blood (1 Kings 22:38). Jezebel met a similar fate. She was thrown from a window, and when the dogs had finished with her – ooh, it's what it says – all that was left was her skull, the palms of her hands, and her feet (2 Kings 9:35). “The grass withers, the flower fades,” said another prophet, “but the word of God stands forever.”

The story of Elijah ends in surprise. Elijah does not die, as men die, but rather was taken up to heaven amid a whirlwind, a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire. This time God was in the fire.

His end points to a hope of life beyond this one, a resurrection existence. “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.” These two hopes together – that God’s word will stand forever, and that life will find a fulfillment beyond life – are perhaps why Elijah is called “the Prophet,” and why Malachi prophesied that Elijah would appear again, preparing the way for the Messiah. Only one who had seen God in the lightning on Mount Carmel and waited for God in the crushed silence of Mount Horeb could prepare the way for the one who would come partly revealed, partly concealed in human flesh – God’s own Son, who came to show God’s face and by means of a terrible cross opened heaven’s door.