

## **The Game of Greed**

I Kings 21:1-10

June 24, 2007

Now, this is my opinion. Feel free to agree or disagree. I really believe that network television programming is at an all time low for creativity. We are in an era when it is so expensive to produce programming that network executives are looking for shows that are cheap to make, yet have the potential to bring in large audiences.

Again, this is just me – and I know that there are millions of people who disagree – but I find shows like “Wife Swap,” “The Great Race,” “Survivor,” Super Nanny,” Dr. Phil,” “The Simple Life,” “The Bachelor” and all sorts of shows like that – to be mind-numbingly stupid.

But it is obvious that they have captured the attention of many people because they continue to multiply. That wouldn’t happen if they weren’t making money, so I’m probably the one who is out of touch.

There is another show that I find to be just as idiotic (again, that’s my opinion that is probably not shared by many others.) It is called “Deal or No Deal.” Many of you have probably seen it. It involves 26 models, each holding a case with a dollar amount all the way to one million dollars. The contestant gets to choose a case which becomes his or her prize. One by one, the other cases are taken off and the contestant is able to see which dollar amounts are no longer in play. The goal is to end up with the million dollar case, or at least as much money as you can get. Every once in a while, the “banker” will call down to the stage and offer a sum of money for the contestant’s case. The contestant can take that money or continue playing. They can leave with a huge amount of money or next to nothing. It just depends on how the winds of fortune blow.

Game shows like this are about as old as television itself. When I was a kid I remember “The \$64,000 Question.” Then there was “Let’s Make a Deal,” the \$10,000 Pyramid,” The Price is Right,” “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” and so many others.

At the heart of all of these shows is the chance to win a whole lot of stuff or a whole lot of money. We’ve all seen contestants pass up on a lot of money on the outside chance that they could win more. It all plays into our greed, doesn’t it. The way it works is that, regardless of how much you have; there is always the possibility of having more.

On July 16, 2002, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan went before the Senate Banking Committee to tell them that our national illness was infectious greed. We all remember Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Anderson, and all the others who allowed unbridled greed to sweep through corporate boardrooms and executive suites.

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Tickle, who is also a widely-read writer on prayer and spirituality, delivered the lecture on greed which was subsequently published in book-form titled simply “Greed.” In it she says that it is ironic that our money has printed on it, “In God We Trust” when we spend more time counting our assets than we do trusting God.

But certainly, greed and all of its accompanying issues is nothing new to us. It did not begin in the heady days of the dot com frenzy of the 1990’s. It has been around for a long time.

With that, we are taken back to the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of I Kings and the story of King Ahab and his neighbor Naboth. We have talked about King Ahab before. He was the one who married Jezebel, a foreign woman who worshiped foreign gods and goddesses. Without question, she was the stronger personality of the couple. She was the one who called the shots. She was the one who was large-and-in-charge. She said “jump” and the king asked “how high?”

Let’s remember what went on here. King Ahab was having a bad day. He and his army had just fought a decisive battle with the King of Aram a nation to the northeast of Israel. Israel won the battle and in an act of generosity, the King of Aram was allowed to go back home to Damascus with the assurance of safe passage.

We have trouble, in our day and age, of understanding the assumptions behind holy war. That God would command war and total victory over an enemy along with that enemy’s complete destruction, is something that doesn’t really compute with us. However, in his generosity, King Ahab of Israel was disobedient to God because he had not destroyed the entire invading army, by letting the opposing king go free.

So Ahab had been told by a prophet that God had commanded that it would be Ahab’s life for the life of the foreign king. King Ahab would pay the punishment that was due the foreign king.

So Ahab was having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day...and then he arrived home and the day got worse. This is the point at which the lesson for today picks up. Next door to the King’s palace was a vineyard owned by a fellow named Naboth. The King wanted the vineyard. It would be a good place for him to make into a garden where he could relax. So he went over to his neighbor’s house and offered him a fair market price, or if that wasn’t enough, another vineyard. But Naboth refused to sell. He told the king that this was his family inheritance and no amount of money would entice him to sell it.

The King threw a temper tantrum. He went home, climbed into bed, and refused to eat. The text doesn’t say this but maybe he also threatened to hold his breath until he turned blue.

Jezebel, his wife, was always the strong partner in that marriage. She saw Ahab sulking around and told him to buck up. This was no way for a king to be acting, she said. She told him to get out of bed and have lunch and leave the matter to her.

So they threw a dinner party to which Naboth was invited. At the dinner, she had paid some informants to accuse Naboth of blasphemy or intentional defamation of the name of God. Now the penalty for blasphemy is stoning. So they took him outside the dinner party and he was soon lying dead under a hail of stones and rocks. With Naboth dead, there was nothing to prevent the king from taking what he wanted. He got his vineyard, but it was drenched in the blood of Naboth.

Ahab wanted the vineyard. He didn't need it, but he wanted it. There is a huge difference. He was living in his palace in Jezreel, having come down from the higher elevation of the capital city for the winter. Now, it seems clear, at least to me, that a guy who is living in his winter palace really doesn't need a new garden. He wanted it, but didn't really need it. There is a difference. Notice what was going on with Ahab. His greed followed his coveting of something that wasn't his which led to lying and finally to murder.

If you will allow me, I'd like to finish the story. Shortly after Ahab got what he wanted, God spoke to Elijah the prophet. The history of Elijah and Ahab's relationship is one filled with confrontation and long-standing opposition. God told Elijah to head on over to the palace and tell Ahab that he had gone too far.

The Bible never pulls any punches, but tells all of the graphic details of Ahab's coming fate. God said that the dogs would lap up the blood of Ahab on the very spot where Naboth was murdered. And as for Jezebel, dogs would fight over her dead carcass. Furthermore, anyone who was connected to Ahab in even the smallest way would, upon their death, be eaten by crows and stray dogs. That is kind of gross, but that's the message Elijah had for the king.

So the king repented, asked for forgiveness, even slept in burlap pajamas as a sign of how sorry he was. So God relented...for a time anyway. God spared Ahab from all that he had planned for him, but promised that Ahab's sons would bear the punishment for their father's sins.

Ahab was a Hebrew and I'm assuming that he was fairly well-versed in the Law. But he had trouble with the tenth commandment – you know – the one about coveting things that your neighbor has. It is fascinating to watch how the breaking of one commandment leads to the breaking of another and then another.

The problem really doesn't lay so much in one's own private desire to have something you don't have. Real danger lurks, however, when the intensity of that covetousness causes us to act out, to commit acts of violence or injustice against others just so we can obtain their stuff.

Sin quickly escalates. Covetousness leads to lying and murder, both prohibited by the sixth and the ninth commandments. All of this is wrapped in violation of the first and second commandments. Ahab's sin, at its core, is one of idolatry, putting other things before God. He elevated material things to the status of gods.

This is a story about the abuse of power and social injustice. A real estate transaction that didn't happen led to confrontation between a powerful king and one of the king's subjects. The vineyard owner was framed for a crime he didn't commit resulting to a death sentence and the confiscation of his property.

It seems to me that the main issue of avarice or greed is that we forget God. Avarice or greed makes us more concerned with our stuff than with God who provides our stuff. Relationships with things become more important than our relationship with the giver of all things.

This would be an easy place to go off on the greed which is evident in some circles of corporate America. When I was serving in Crown Point, the chair of our Finance Committee was a man who had started with little, failed in business several times, but at that time was widely successful in the paging business. This was at a time before cell phones really took off. He even provided me with a pager for my personal use.

One day, we were talking about business ethics and he said that he had to be unfailingly honest and trustworthy because if he wasn't, he would lose respect and customers. He said that there is no other way to make it in the business world. Unfortunately there are a few multi-national corporations who need lessons in those sorts of business ethics.

King Ahab's case is a classic one of the powerful rich exploiting the less powerful people of the land. There are parallels in our own time. For example, we have state run lotteries which promise great rewards, but are simply a tax on the poor and the mathematically challenged. Credit card companies make credit so easy to obtain, yet charge incredibly high interest rates, resulting in crushing debt for so many and huge profits for banks. Powerful corporations engineer sweetheart no-bid contracts with the government, thereby shutting off competitive bids from other companies. I am not suggesting that all corporations are bad, because I don't believe that. But I do believe that too many of them subscribe to that phrase from Michael Douglas' character in the movie "Wall Street." "Greed is good.

But greed is not good. The game of greed is, in the long run, incredibly dangerous, for both corporations and individuals. In 1993, a woman won \$4.2 million in the Virginia Lottery. She borrowed \$197,746 and agreed to repay the debt with her yearly lottery checks. But then Virginia State law was revised, allowing her to receive her winnings in one lump sum. She decided to do that and received the balance of her winnings in one check.

Last May, she was sued by the finance company who handled her loan for the outstanding balance of \$154,147. She is broke and doesn't have the money to pay.

I think that the story of King Ahab and Naboth invites us all to look at everything around us as being part of God's wonderful provision for us. It moves us toward a faithful view of stewardship that reminds us that we are simply caretakers of God's bounty. We don't really own our stuff. Our possessions are just on loan to us for faithful use.

To close, let me remind you of the sixth chapter of the gospel of Matthew, part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or – worse! – stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Later in the same chapter, he said, "If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds" (Matthew 6:25-26).

There are so many voices out there – and so many opportunities – to play the game of greed. My hope is that we might instead hear the still small voice of God calling us to be content with what we have and trusting in God for all our needs.