

! Kings 21:1-21
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South Plains

The Limits of Growth

Strangely enough, I find that I have some sympathy with King Ahab, the villain in the Old Testament story for today. When we lived in Tennessee, I wanted a vegetable garden next to my house, the same thing Ahab wanted. Out of 12 years in that house, we had a decent garden for only three of those years, and it was way down at the other end of the street. So, I have some sympathy with Ahab's desire to grow vegetables in the field next to his house. The issue for both of us was the same: how far are we willing to go to get what we want? What limits the growth of our gardens?

The difference between me and Ahab is that he was King of Samaria. I was king of a fraction of an acre too shady for a garden. He had the money to get exactly what he wanted; or so he thought. He approached his neighbor, a man named Naboth, and proposed a deal. Naboth would give up his vineyard in exchange for either another piece of land that he could use or for a fair price. Despite the fairness of the offer, Naboth said decisively, no: "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."

It's not hard to imagine why Naboth refused the king: Sentimental attachment to his ancestral home place. The time and trouble of re-planting a vineyard. A

promise he had made to the Lord never to leave his land. Most intriguing to me is a commandment from the Lord found back in Leviticus 25:23: "Your land must not be sold on a permanent basis, because you do not own it; it belongs to God, and you are like foreigners who are allowed to make use of it (25:23)." Naboth knew he was only the manager of God's property.

King Ahab gets a lot of attention in the Old Testament because he was one of the worst Kings of Israel, spineless and unprincipled and under the baleful influence of his pagan wife Jezebel. We get an idea of Ahab's character by his reaction to failure. After his rejection by Naboth, he pouts. He's so depressed that he takes to his bed and refuses to eat. However, he is married to a fixer. Jezebel finds out about Naboth's refusal to sell out, and she promises her husband to fix things up so Ahab can have his vegetable garden.

We know about fixers. Every recent President has had someone to do the work behind the scenes. In the business world that person used to be called an executive secretary. Today we might call him or her an administrative assistant. By whatever name, the fixer makes things happen. Jezebel was an unscrupulous fixer, determined to get Ahab that piece of property. She hatched a scheme where the nobles in Naboth's town would proclaim a day of fasting. Everybody would gather together and things would be arranged to seat Naboth in a prominent place. At the right time, Jezebel plotted to have two scoundrels stand up and accuse old Naboth of

cursing God and the king. In those days, that was an offence punishable by death. And, indeed, that was the outcome for poor Naboth. He was taken outside the town and stoned to death by the good citizens who were his neighbors. It was a bloody and shameful way to die.

With Naboth dead, King Ahab expanded his holdings and planted his vegetable garden. The beauty of Jezebel's plan was that the king never lifted a finger against Naboth. Two scoundrels denounced him and the community put him to death. Deniability was complete. Ahab could honestly say, "I didn't have anything to do with Naboth's stoning. I didn't even know about it until somebody told me."

Of course, the Lord knew the truth. And thus the prophet of the Lord knew the truth. Elijah was sent to Naboth's vineyard where he found Ahab and confronted him. It's easy to put all the blame on Jezebel, just as we blame Eve for the original sin. The foreign Jezebel probably assumed that royalty had unlimited power. That's still true in some societies today. But not in Israel. Israel was chosen by the Lord, created by divine plan, and therefore lived under a covenant with the Lord governed by the Lord's commandments.

It's not only kings who forget their limits. Governments tend to overreach and control more of our lives than they should. Businesses tend to take advantage of every opportunity to expand their market and profit. I suspect that most of us function, at least

some of the time, according to the principle that if I can do it, I should do it, especially if it's to my advantage. If oil is under the sea and we can drill for it, we should. If someone will buy cheap shoes, then we should sell them. If someone else will buy outrageously expensive shoes, then we should sell them too. That was Jezebel's attitude. If she could get Naboth's vineyard, she should get Naboth's vineyard. And, that was the attitude taken by the petulant Ahab: accept the benefits available regardless of the price exacted upon others.

What's interesting about Ahab is that he managed to keep his hands so clean and his conscience so clear. He does not seem to know or care about knowing how his benefits appeared. He was willfully ignorant or naïve. This is where the story comes a little too close for comfort to my life. I enjoy so many pleasures with little or no awareness of their cost.

For example, I love a really good cup of coffee once or twice a month. I'm almost a coffee snob because ordinary coffee gives me a stomach ache. But, gourmet, mountain coffee beans grown under the shade of banana trees and selected so that the damaged, stunted and diseased beans have all been discarded, that makes a good cup of coffee. I love the TV image of that Latin American peasant named Juan, smiling under a colorful sombrero and leading his donkey to market with two bags of the finest Columbian coffee beans.

The reality, however, is quite different. I know that much because a few years ago I had the opportunity to go to Nicaragua and pick mountain, shade grown, coffee beans. An overseer showed me how to pull the stubborn beans from the bush. My hands got scratched and sore. After 30 minutes he came back to get me; and I was very glad to stop that work. However, he led me to the sorting room where I sat with several women and children on a concrete floor picking out the bad beans. Top quality beans were washed and bagged for the beneficio at the bottom of the mountain. There, workers emptied them out to dry on flat, open slabs the size of a football field. Several times a day those workers used wooden rakes to turn the beans over in the sunshine. Only when they are dried does mechanization take over for roasting and shipping.

I do not complain about the high price of good coffee any more. It comes to me after much hard, manual labor. And, I am very glad that South Plains participates in the sale of Equal Exchange Coffee where the people doing the labor receive a larger share of the profits, a fair trade for their hard work. I am no longer so naïve about the true cost of coffee.

The pleasure of a cup of coffee is a small example of the benefits we enjoy from other people's work. Sometimes it's not just the hard work that gives us products. It's the risks a barefooted steelworker takes in India where manhole covers are cast for American cities,

or the slave labor in illegal sweatshops sewing clothes for us.

My point is certainly not to blunt the pleasure of ordinary life by making us feel guilty about being middle class consumers. But, we can become better informed consumers about the products we buy. We can decide what we're going to buy. We have the incredible blessing of a government that can respond to moral concerns, an economy that can afford to share the wealth with those at the bottom of the food chain, and a country with a long tradition of protecting both workers and the environment. It's possible to turn around the adage that says, "If we can, we should." It's possible to say, "Because we can be fair and honest, we should be fair and honest." When we fail, we have the blessing of confession and the redemption of forgiveness in Christ.

Ahab was a greedy man in addition to being a crybaby. He wanted what was not his. He did not need that vegetable garden. He could have bought or leased another garden. But, the sin is not in wanting more. The sin is giving that desire the upper hand, first by pouting and then by taking what Jezebel made available.

Jezebel is more than the personification of cruelty and lust for power. At the root of her character is a disregard for God. God is the limit on her expansion of power, the check on her acquisitiveness, the boundary beyond which she is not to go.

We all have limits or boundaries set by God. When we live within those boundaries, our lives are healthy and good. The Ten Commandments are one set of limits. Jesus sums up the boundaries with two commandments:

Love the Lord your God with heart, mind and strength.

Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

The king and queen trampled those limits with impunity.

The consequences are severe because their sins were so flagrant. They were so willfully ignorant that they were cruel. Elijah predicts and the prediction comes to pass: "Thus says the Lord: in the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood." Ahab's desire for more and more vegetables knew no limit. It was a reasonable desire taken to silly lengths. In the end it killed him.