

Message: Fit to Serve**Are We Fit to Serve God?**

“In ancient times, a King had a boulder placed on a roadway. Then he hid himself and watched to see if anyone would remove the huge rock. Some of the king's wealthiest merchants and members of court came by and simply walked around it. Many loudly blamed the king for not keeping the roads clear, but none did anything about getting the stone out of the way.

Then, a peasant came along carrying a load of vegetables. When he reached the boulder, the peasant laid down his burden and tried to move the stone to the side of the road. After much pushing and straining, he finally succeeded. After the peasant picked up his load of vegetables, he noticed a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the king indicating that the gold was for the person who removed the boulder from the roadway.

The peasant learned what many of us never understand. Every obstacle presents an opportunity to improve our condition.”¹

This fable uses an illustration to make a point. But it places the morale into a specific, feudal context. And, by doing so, it influences the message of the story. For the fable, the change is this, “Obstacles present an opportunity to improve our condition that the poor are more likely to act on that those who are wealthy and foolish.” Did you hear that version of the fable? Or did you hear the version focusing on the moral behavior of a good person? Which do you think is a more accurate reading of the fable?

The context, or background, of a narrative is important, as this brief illustration shows. Without understanding the people, culture and customs of the time, it can be hard to see the real point the author is making. Today’s passage from Genesis 29:15-28 is just such a narrative.

On the face of it, this story sounds a lot like an older man taking advantage of a younger man, who is in love with his youngest daughter.

¹ <http://gatewaytojesus.com/encouragingwritingspage1.html>

And, in truth, that’s what it is. Laban deceives Jacob into working for him for fourteen years for Rachel’s hand in marriage. But there’s more to the story than that. Jacob is also a deceiver. This is a case of the con man being conned. There are layers of deceit in this narrative, but when you peel them back, just like peeling the layers of an onion, what you find is Jacob reaping what he has sown.

Let’s look at the first layer of deceit. Laban deceived Jacob by giving Leah, his eldest daughter, in marriage. Jacob goes in to her, meaning they consummated the marriage, and the covenant is bound – the marriage cannot be annulled. The same is true for marriages today – once the marriage is consummated, it cannot be annulled without special circumstances. Jacob confronts Laban about it. Jacob’s feelings echo those of Esau when he found out that his younger brother had deceived their father Isaac into giving Jacob Esau’s birthright seven years earlier.

Jacob deceived his brother, creating a hateful rivalry, rather than a relationship based on brotherly love. Laban did the same, exploiting Jacob’s situation, rather than showing true love for his daughters and explaining the terms to Jacob. Laban has some good points and he could have said, “I will give you Rachel at the end of seven years, if Leah is married.” He did not, instead offering an excuse, “*that’s not the way we do things in this country*” (NRSV). That’s legalism if I’ve ever heard it. Laban acted according to his nature, setting Leah, Rachel and Jacob on a course that later led to conflict and further deception. God worked through it and Jacob learned a valuable lesson about the harm deception does, as well as the meaning of commitment and hard work to get what you want in life.

What happens when we act wickedly against other people? When we are unjust towards others, they are harmed. We are planting seeds of sin in the lives of others that grow and bear bitter fruit – revenge, payback, whatever it is called. We reap what we sow, even when the seeds are planted in our own life. And what we sow harms us, those affected and their children and children’s children. We see that in Jacob’s life and the life of his sons when they sell Joseph, their brother, into slavery and are later repaid. Our sins aren’t just kept in the family, though, but also spill over into the lives of those around us.

A second layer of deceit involves Leah. In v17, the NRSV describes Leah as having “*lovely eyes.*” The NKJV translates the phrase as “*delicate eyes,*” while the NIV offers “*weak eyes*” while others offer “*tender eyes.*” Perhaps she had poor eyesight, which is why she was unmarried. Laban was wealthy – we know because he gives each of his daughters a servant as a wedding present. He must have been concerned about her. Instead of being upfront with Jacob, Laban involves Leah in the deception. And she is a willing partner.

Laban had Leah ready for the wedding in a dress that covered her face and form – he would have to fool Jacob, as Rachel had a “*lovely figure and was beautiful*” (v17). You may have seen similar wedding customs in Japan or China. Leah went along with it without saying anything to Jacob, even though it was obvious he loved her younger sister Rachel. Jacob had worked seven years for the right to marry. Leah slept with Jacob on her marriage night, without revealing who she was before they had sex, consummating the marriage and sealing the deal.

I’m not trying to make Leah the bad girl here. She was in a difficult position. She was unmarried and apparently had few prospects in a culture that valued women by the number of children they gave birth to and their fitness, particularly male children. Jacob was eligible and they knew each other well after seven years. There’s no indication they didn’t get along until after the deception, then she feels hated in comparison to the love Jacob has for Rachel. Leah is bound to honor and obey her father. There is a strong honor-shame dynamic at work in the community and it could have deadly consequences if ignored or violated. Leah followed protocol and did as she was told. She was not an independent and strong woman of faith. She could have done the right thing and trusted God to work it out. After all, Jesus is descended from her son Judah, not from one of Rachel’s children.

What happens when we see wicked behavior or hear sinful words and we don’t act? When we see or hear things that are unjust towards others, and do not act, we too are guilty of sin. Rather than the sin of commission – the doing of the act, we are guilty of the sin of omission – the lack of taking action. When we intentionally turn away from sinful deeds, we are not doing good, but evil. Paul shows us God’s truth in

Romans 2:13, *“For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”* We are called to be more than those who listen or even meditate on God’s Word. We are called to act and live with moral integrity. This brings glory and honor to God. It is also the healthiest way for us to live, as God promises in Romans 2:7, *“to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.”*

What if we are doing good? We see the moral conflicts when they come up and we are able to avoid the moral obligation to sin. If you are truly a person who has experienced glorifying grace, praise God. However, the facts are more sobering for the vast majority of us.

A 2008 survey by The Barna Group asked adults which, if any, of eight behaviors with moral overtones they had engaged in during the past week. Of those surveyed:

- Twenty-eight percent had used profanity.
- Twenty percent had gambled.
- Nineteen percent had viewed pornography.
- Twelve percent had gossiped.
- Twelve percent had gotten drunk.
- Eleven percent had lied.
- Nine percent had engaged in sexual intercourse with someone to whom they were not married.
- Eight percent had retaliated against someone.

All of these actions harm others, either directly or indirectly. Some of them are self-directed, and these are the most insidious, for harming our bodies, which are the temple of God, is a selfish act. I’m not trying to give you guilt or shame this morning, instead I encourage you to consider yourself as an addict. We are all addicted to sin and we desperately need a recovery group to help us. I encourage you to find a Bible Study or small group. When we gather with others, we are encouraged and helped to follow a path of light, rather than darkness. We can only learn how our lives impact others and how God affects us

through them when we come together. That is the blessing of a community of faith that is based on trust.

God knows our self-centeredness and addresses it clearly. No matter how true our excuses are as we seek to justify our sinful behavior, they do not excuse our conduct. We will not be drawn into sin to accomplish God’s will; that’s not the way God teaches us. However, we will be tempted to follow our own will in all things. That’s the way that the lord of the earth, the father of lies – Satan, operates. God can, and will, work through us, just as he worked through the deceitfulness of Laban, Jacob and Leah to bring us Jesus. But to intentionally sin and lie about it is to place ourselves in a tenuous position. Rather than living as those who are humble and grateful for the costly grace God has given us, when we live deceitfully, we treat God’s grace as cheap. And, consequently, God allows us to live with the consequences, in hopes that we will repent and turn back to him. I encourage you today to join me and go to God in prayer, persistently and patiently, with eyes and ears open, and with trust and honesty in your heart.

I pray the lesson of Jacob, Leah, Rachel and Laban will speak to your heart and mind, showing you the way to live and giving you the courage to do so.

Genesis 29:15-28 (NRSV)

Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV)

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.