

“Sly vs. Sly”
Genesis 30:25-43
January 22nd, 2017

The two National Football League teams that will play in this year’s Super Bowl will be decided in games later today. I thought it appropriate to begin with a football illustration.

Adrian Rodgers once told the story of Mike Kollin, a former linebacker with the Miami Dolphins. Mike’s former coach, Shug Jordan, asked him if he would do some recruiting. Mike said, “Sure, coach. What are you looking for?”

“Well, Mike, you know there’s that guy, you knock him down, and he just stays down?” Mike said, “We don’t want *him*, do we coach?”

“No, that’s right, we don’t want him.” Then there’s that guy, you knock him down and he gets up; you knock him down, and he stays down.” Mike answered, “We don’t want him, either, right coach?”

“That’s right. But Mike, there’s the guy, you knock him down, and he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up.” Mike said, “That’s the guy we want, right coach?”

“No, we don’t want him, either. I want *you* to find that guy who’s knocking everybody down. That’s the guy we want!

As a teenager, I was introduced to the humor of *Mad Magazine*. *Perhaps you’re familiar with it – and that may explain something about me, doesn’t it?*

One of my favorite parts of *Mad Magazine* was the comic strip, *Spy vs. Spy*. *Spy vs. Spy* was a parody of the political ideologies of the Cold War in the 1960’s, 70’s and 80’s. It featured two agents involved in espionage, one dressed in white, and the other in black. They were otherwise identical, and known for their long, birdlike beaks. The spies were constantly in conflict with each other, using a variety of booby-traps to inflict harm on the other.

As I wrestled with the text before us today in the Bible’s first book, Genesis, I was intrigued by the back and forth relationship between Laban and his nephew Jacob. Both men were prone to deceiving others, and they each get the upper hand on the other for a time. Because they seem intent on bettering themselves at the expense of the other, I’ve entitled this message, *Sly vs. Sly*.

Last week, as we worked through the closing verses of **Genesis 29** and the first 34 of chapter 30, we learned of God’s blessing Jacob – with 12 children (11 sons and one daughter!) All the while, Jacob was working for Laban, herding sheep; serving out a sentence he agreed to for the hand of Laban’s daughter Rachel in marriage. Today, we see Jacob’s time with Laban isn’t yet over. During that time, God again blesses Jacob – this time with possessions and wealth.

Genesis 30:25-43:

²⁵ And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country. ²⁶ Give *me* my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know my service which I have done for you.”

²⁷ And Laban said to him, “Please *stay*, if I have found favor in your eyes, *for* I have learned by experience that the LORD has blessed me for your sake.” ²⁸ Then he said, “Name me your wages, and I will give *it*.”

²⁹ So *Jacob* said to him, “You know how I have served you and how your livestock has been with me. ³⁰ For what you had before I *came* was little, and it has increased to a great amount; the LORD has blessed you since my coming. And now, when shall I also provide for my own house?”

³¹ So he said, “What shall I give you?”

And Jacob said, “You shall not give me anything. If you will do this thing for me, I will again feed and keep your flocks: ³² Let me pass through all your flock today, removing from there all the speckled and spotted sheep, and all the brown ones among the lambs, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and *these* shall be my wages. ³³ So my righteousness will answer for me in time to come, when the subject of my wages comes before you: every one that *is* not speckled and spotted among the goats, and brown among the lambs, will be considered stolen, if *it is* with me.”

³⁴ And Laban said, “Oh, that it were according to your word!” ³⁵ So he removed that day the male goats that were speckled and spotted, all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had *some* white in it, and all the brown ones among the lambs, and gave *them* into the hand of his sons.

³⁶ Then he put three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban’s flocks. ³⁷ Now Jacob took for himself rods of green poplar and of the almond and chestnut trees, peeled white strips in them, and exposed the white which *was* in the rods. ³⁸ And the rods which he had peeled, he set before the flocks in the gutters, in the watering troughs where the flocks came to drink, so that they should conceive when they came to drink. ³⁹ So the flocks conceived before the rods, and the flocks brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted. ⁴⁰ Then Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the streaked and all the brown in the flock of Laban; but he put his own flocks by themselves and did not put them with Laban’s flock.

⁴¹ And it came to pass, whenever the stronger livestock conceived, that Jacob placed the rods before the eyes of the livestock in the gutters, that they might conceive among the rods. ⁴² But when the flocks were feeble, he did not put *them* in; so the feebler were Laban’s and the stronger Jacob’s. ⁴³ Thus the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.”

We know Jacob deceived his brother Esau twice (bargaining for Esau’s birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup and later stealing Isaac’s blessing from Esau). Jacob carried out his mother’s cold and calculating deception of Isaac. In each case, Jacob knowingly cheated members of his family. Laban, as we’ve seen more recently, is an opportunist, constantly on the lookout for benefitting from others, using them for his gain. Like many in our society today, Jacob and Laban were takers and not givers. Unfortunately, that phenomenon also works itself out within the confines of God’s Church.

Yet, in today’s passage, we see God prospering Jacob in at least three ways, and they serve as our three main thoughts (borrowing this outline from the late James Montgomery Boice):

MP 1 – Others before Self;

MP 2 – Work before Leisure;

MP 3 – Faith before Worry.

Jacob’s motive does not seem to be selfish; in fact, it appears that he is **placing others before himself**. Look again with me at verses 25 & 26 – “And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country. Give *me* my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know

my service which I have done for you.” It seems clear that all Jacob wanted from Laban was what he rightly served him for – Rachel as his wife, and his 12 children.

By his words at the close of verse 26, Jacob and Laban both know that Jacob worked hard for Laban, and increased his riches substantially. In the realm of economics and finances, to place others before self is not to advance one’s own wealth at the expense of others. To place self before others when it comes to making money is selfish and greedy. They are a terrible combination that is quite destructive.

A central, foundational truth of the Christian faith is sacrificing self for the benefit of others. The more we place others’ needs before our own, the closer we get to the heart of Christianity – Jesus Christ gave Himself for the eternal benefit of the elect of God the Father. He came to earth and lived a perfect life – a life without sin – not for His own welfare, but for God’s chosen ones. Friend, if you are a believer in Christ, Jesus has given you the greatest gift you could ever have – far better than a new game system, another vehicle, a pay raise, or a new home. God gave Himself for you – and you are only able to sacrifice for the benefit of others to the extent you’ve been sacrificed for.

The New Testament’s instruction to us is this from **Philippians 2:3 & 4**: “*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*”

Let us live for others, and not first and foremost for ourselves. To love like God loves us is to be “other-oriented,” not self-focused. *How did this look in your life last week? What will you do to make the week ahead more in tune with what Scripture expects of us?*

Having explored the first principle that the life of the Christian is to be one of serving **others before self**, we see a second principle present – the life of the Christian is to be marked by **work before leisure**. Jacob worked hard for his employer. And, this, even though he may have felt justified in repaying the deception of his uncle Laban in squeezing another 7 years of work out of him. We see no evidence in this passage of the attitude of so many people in our day that their work is beneath them. *Are you a person who thinks God owes you something? Are you unhappy with your job – do you think it’s beneath you?*

<p>I’ve had some pretty distasteful jobs in my lifetime – and even so, I was ultimately grateful for the opportunity to earn money for myself. I’ve cleaned out calf pens (stinky work!); cleaned light fixtures in a tire factory (wretched work!). I’ve never been a smoker; but in Air Force basic training, one way we were humbled by our drill instructor was picking up off the ground cigarette butts smokers had left behind – the very same people who got to break ranks and sit in the shade puffing away, while the rest stood at ease in formation under the blazing south Texas heat in July & August.</p>

God designed us to work; to be productive and creative. And work we must unless we are physically or mentally unable (and not merely *saying* we aren’t able). Laziness and idleness are sinful; the Bible teaches, “...If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.” (**2 Thessalonians 3:10**) And, Church, it is our responsibility to meet the needs of our own families – it is not the government’s responsibility to care for us. Writing to his protégé Timothy in **I Timothy 5:8**, the Apostle Paul commands, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his

household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” If we have the means and the resources available to help a fellow church member, or even fellow Christian, and we don’t help them, we invite God’s displeasure!

James says as much in **James 2:15 & 16**, “If a brother or sister (Christian) is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it profit?*” Such cold indifference to the needs of a brother and sister in Christ is the work of the devil. Similarly, for you not to work and provide for your families’ needs is to show yourself not to be a Christian, but rather worse than a pagan. It certainly isn’t the mindset of someone who has been truly saved by Jesus Christ! This kind of ministry, like every other facet of life in a fallen world takes faith in Christ. We are not to violate such commands of Scripture deceiving ourselves into thinking we have good reason to.

Parents, make sure your children and grandchildren have chores to do. Build in them the responsibility of making sure work is completed before there’s time for recreation. Too many young people don’t know how to clean up after themselves, or make their bed, iron and wash their clothes, prepare cooked food, mow grass...they come into adulthood expecting these things to be taken care of by other people. They expect to be served, and haven’t been exposed to the joy of serving others in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ.

So, we’ve explored placing **others before self** and **working before recreating**; a third principle is also present in this passage – **Faith before Worry**. Jacob trusted God for his prosperity. When Laban asks him in verse 28, “Name me your wages, and I will give *it*”, Jacob determined not to ask Laban for anything; instead, to him (Jacob) would belong all sheep and goats that would be born speckled and spotted.

Evidently, the dominant color of sheep was (is) solid white, and the dominant color for goats was (is) dark brown or black – solid colored. Spotted sheep and goats are in the minority. Those spotted and speckled sheep and goats are the ones that Jacob proposed as his wages. You would think this would be something that Laban proposed, since it would very likely benefit him, and not Jacob. But, Jacob is the one proposing what appears to be a very disadvantageous arrangement for himself.

Laban must’ve been falling over himself to agree to this arrangement. His words are in verse 34, “Oh that it were according to your word!” Laban stood to benefit; the odds were stacked against Jacob, and Laban would gain Jacob’s labors another 6 years (20 years total). He may have been born at night, but he wasn’t born *last* night! To make things worse, verses 35-36 report that Laban took out all the spotted and speckled sheep that Jacob was to remove for himself, and gave them to his sons. Then Laban distances himself from Jacob by moving away.

What might Jacob have done this? The only realistic answer is that He trusted God to bless him in spite of things being heavily tilted in Laban’s favor. Success in the Christian life is entirely because God grants it. What we see happening in verses 37-42 with the peeled sticks is not the source of the abundant blessing of God to Jacob, but merely symbolic of it. God blesses the efforts of Jacob in bringing about what verse 43 calls, “exceedingly prosperous.”

MP 1 – Others before Self;
MP 2 – Work before Leisure;
MP 3 – Faith before Worry.

Brothers and sisters, we serve the only true and living God. He is more than able to work great good out of what seems to be incredible hardship and suffering. As we continue to work our way through Genesis, we see God's grace being manifested in unlikely places and ways. Jacob surely didn't deserve anything good from God; and, neither do we. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (**Romans 5:8**)

Two days after the inauguration of our new President, this closing illustration seems fitting.

Three men were riding to work, and the subject of success came up. One said, "Success is being asked to the White House to consult with the President."

The second commented, "No, success is being asked to the White House to consult with the President, and the red phone rings, but the President won't answer it because he is listening to you."

Finally, the third man added, "No, success is when you're at the White House consulting with the President, and the red phone rings, the President picks it up, listens, then says, "It's for you."