

“Partial Obedience is Disobedience”

Genesis 33:1-20

February 26th, 2017

An exasperated mother sent her naughty son to his room to discipline him for his disobedience. The boy stormed up the stairs to his room and defiantly hid under his bed. When the boy’s father got home from work, he went up to check on his wayward son.

He entered the room, but didn’t see his son anywhere. He paced around the room for a moment, then stooped to look under the bed. When he looked under the bed, he saw a couple of eyes looking back out at him.

Then he heard his son’s voice, “Hi Dad! Is Mom trying to get you, too?”

Friends, *can we talk? May I be frank with you?* One thing that we have in common with each other is this - we have difficulty grasping the extent of our depravity and sin. We think we’re not that bad off, really, especially when we compare ourselves to other people (and we can always find someone who doesn’t have it together as much as we do!) We don’t like to think about the concept of sin – it’s not a happy thought, and it’s not a pleasant discussion! For sure, we are more eager to excuse or rationalize our faults than others may be. We, to a person, tend to have a better (*higher?*) picture of ourselves than we do of others.

Our fallenness is pervasive – it has polluted every aspect of our existence – our minds, our bodies, our wills, our emotions, our instincts – every part of us is thoroughly stained by sin. The Bible says that we are conceived in iniquity (**Psalm 51:5**); we are born dead spiritually (“in our trespasses and sin” – **Ephesians 2:1**); and we are at war with God. (**Romans 8:7-8**) Not a good picture at all – unless God saves us from ourselves, we remain against Him.

All of this to say that when it comes to measuring ourselves by the precepts and principles of God’s Word, we still may not see the depth and breadth to our fallenness. We may be deceived (by self or others, or both) into thinking we’re more obedient than we actually are. Surely, Jacob would be a case in point.

The text we studied last Sunday (**Genesis 32:22-32**) instructed us that Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the Lord all night. In so doing, God wrestled the independence out of Jacob, turning him into a man of God, even giving him a new name. That demonstrates the new nature God gave to Jacob. As we come to **Genesis 33:1-20** this morning, we see that even though Jacob was justified before God (saved from sin), he was still a work in progress (being sanctified). He was able to do things that pleased God, and he sometimes did things that didn’t. Such is the state Christians find themselves in this side of glory. Though we are bound for glory, we can fall off the path that takes there.

Genesis 33:1-20:

“Now Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and there, Esau was coming, and with him were four hundred men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maidservants. ² And he put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children behind, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³ Then he crossed over before them and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.
⁵ And he lifted his eyes and saw the women and children, and said, “Who *are* these with you?” So he said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” ⁶ Then the maidservants came near, they and their children, and bowed down. ⁷ And Leah also came near with her children, and they bowed down. Afterward Joseph and Rachel came near, and they bowed down.

⁸ Then Esau said, “What *do* you *mean* by all this company which I met?”

And he said, “*These are* to find favor in the sight of my lord.”

⁹ But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.”

¹⁰ And Jacob said, “No, please, if I have now found favor in your sight, then receive my present from my hand, inasmuch as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me. ¹¹ Please, take my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.” So he urged him, and he took *it*.

¹² Then Esau said, “Let us take our journey; let us go, and I will go before you.”

¹³ But Jacob said to him, “My lord knows that the children *are* weak, and the flocks and herds which are nursing *are* with me. And if the men should drive them hard one day, all the flock will die. ¹⁴ Please let my lord go on ahead before his servant. I will lead on slowly at a pace which the livestock that go before me, and the children, are able to endure, until I come to my lord in Seir.”

¹⁵ And Esau said, “Now let me leave with you *some* of the people who *are* with me.”

But he said, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.” ¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷ And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house, and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

¹⁸ Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which *is* in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram; and he pitched his tent before the city. ¹⁹ And he bought the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, from the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for one hundred pieces of money. ²⁰ Then he erected an altar there and called it El Elohe Israel.”

Two experiences mentioned in this passage reveal Jacob still struggled against his sin nature, even though he was a redeemed man.

MP 1 – Jacob’s Dishonesty with Esau;

MP 2 – Jacob’s Choice of Residency.

The first several verses of today’s passage give details of the long-anticipated reunion between twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. Jacob was fearful that such a reunion would not go well. When he sent messengers to let Esau know of his desire to reconcile, those messengers returned to Jacob with news that Esau was coming with an entourage of 400 men. Jacob was sure he’d lose at least half of his family and possessions to what he thought was an angry brother bent on evening the score.

The opening verses in today’s passage picture a Jacob who favored one wife and one child over the others. He kept back Rachel and Joseph in the hopes that Esau would take any or all of the rest. This will come back to haunt him in later chapters of Genesis.

What a contrast between the genuflecting Jacob in verses 1-3 and the exuberant Esau in verse 4. Instead of harming Jacob, Esau threw himself on his twin brother whom he hadn’t seen in 20 years. “...Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” Esau was beautiful here. He made no mention of the past. His hug, kisses, and tears said it all. Only the day before, Jacob had prayed “Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me *and* the mother with the children.” (**Genesis**

32:11) And here was the direct answer to his prayer. God had changed Esau's heart, at least as it regards his brother, Jacob.

The resulting conversation between the brothers consisted of Esau being introduced to Jacob's large family – Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, Bilhah, and their 11 sons and 1 daughter. The reunion also included Jacob's insisting that Esau accept Jacob's gift. Esau had plenty of possessions and servants; he didn't need what Jacob wanted him to have. Yet, Jacob pushed Esau to accept his gift. When he did accept it, Jacob felt vindicated for his wretched treatment of Esau in gaining the birthright and blessing from him.

Interestingly, however, there is no accepting of his own sin by Jacob, nor is there any confession of his sins against Esau. Jacob deceived Esau to obtain his birthright and blessing from their father Isaac. By his gracious behaviors to Jacob, we can conclude that Esau had forgiven Jacob. Yet, even so, Jacob doesn't acknowledge his part in the conflict.

How like so many people in our own day. There is too often no true biblical reconciliation among professing believers. This is true even of those who have clearly defied God's Word and the church's gracious attempts to curb sinful patterns in the membership. People in conflict with each other live their lives avoiding each other as much as possible, and eventually, with the passage of time, there exists some kind of uneasy détente. Memories fade; sins are swept under the carpet, but not properly dealt with. They often raise their influence later in life. It ought not to be this way among those who have been forgiven much by a gracious God!

One example of Jacob's haunting by his sin takes place in verse 12 when Esau suggests he and Jacob travel together back to Esau's home in Seir. Jacob's response reveals the struggle of his sinful nature and new nature. Listen to verses 13 & 14 in a paraphrase, "...My master can see that the children are frail. And the flocks and herds are nursing, making for slow going. If I push them too hard, even for a day, I'd lose them all. So, master, you go on ahead of your servant, while I take it easy at the pace of my flocks and children. I'll catch up with you in Seir." (*The Message*)

Jacob had no intention of going with Esau, despite what his words said. He presents excuses for why he cannot travel with his brother. *Have you ever done that, friend?* I am ashamed to admit that I have on multiple occasions, and the most recent time wasn't all that long ago. When we are asked to do something that we really don't want to do (even if it's a ministry opportunity), we come up with fictional appointments that preclude our participation (Oh, we have another commitment then; I have to soak the corns on my feet; or I don't go out at night – or a myriad of other possibilities).

"Jacob said that he was going to follow Esau to Seir. But as soon as Esau was out of his sight, he set out in the other direction to Succoth. He tells Esau that he is going to follow him when he actually had no intention of doing so. No doubt he was wise to set up camp separately from Esau, just as Abraham was wise to live apart from Lot. But Esau must have wondered about the character of his "favored" brother, who talked freely of spiritual things but behaved like the heathen." (Boice, 825)

Speaking truth is the biblical opposite to deception. If Jacob didn't want to go to Seir, he should have said so. Obedience to God's Word is the hallmark of the Christian. Jesus says as

much in **John 14:15** – “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” It is possible! God expects radical obedience from His children.

Arabian horses go through rigorous training in the deserts of the Middle East. The trainers require absolute obedience from the horses, and test them to see if they are completely trained. The final test is almost beyond the endurance of any living thing.

The trainers force the horses to do without water for many days. Then they turn them loose and of course they start running toward the water, but just as they get to the edge, ready to plunge in and drink, the trainer blows his whistle. The horses who have been completely trained and who have learned perfect obedience, stop. They turn around and come pacing back to the trainer. They stand there quivering, wanting water, but they wait in perfect obedience. When the trainer is sure that he has their obedience he gives them a signal to go back to drink.

Now this may be severe but when you are on the trackless desert of Arabia and your life is entrusted to a horse, you had better have a trained, obedient horse. We must accept God's training and obey Him.

The other issue dogging Jacob in this passage is where he settled down after his reunion with Esau. Verse 17 reveals, “And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house, and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.” God had previously told Jacob to come back to Bethel. That was **Genesis 31:13** “I *am* the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar *and* where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family.”

Succoth was a backward step, spiritually as well as geographically. Stopping there and setting up a homestead suggests Jacob was still a man who did things his own way. But, that’s not all. Verse 18 tells us that Jacob next went to Shechem and set up his tent there. Shechem was about a day’s journey short of Bethel. Stopping to put down roots in Shechem was disobedience, and Jacob’s pious act of erecting an altar (verse 20) and claiming his new name of Israel could not disguise the fact. It was partial obedience, and partial obedience is complete disobedience!

A little boy liked to pull paper bags out of a kitchen cupboard that his mother was saving. He would spread the bags around the kitchen floor and use them as a playing surface for his toy cars. This was permitted on the condition that he collect up the bags and put them back in the cupboard when he was done with them.

One day, his mother found the bags strewn about all over the kitchen floor, and her son was in the living room playing the piano with his father. When she told her son to pick up the bags, there was a brief moment of silence. Then his small voice, “But I want to sing, ‘Jesus Loves Me.’”

His father pointed out to their son that it’s no good singing God’s praises while you’re being disobedient.

I John 2:4 teaches us, “He who says, ‘I know Him (Jesus Christ the righteous),’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

In chapter 32, we learned that Jacob received a new name from the Angel of the Lord. *Wouldn't you think that new name would be used exclusively from that time forward?* You might. Interestingly, throughout the remainder of the Book of Genesis, his new name Israel is used only 1/3rd of the time he is referenced. 'Jacob' is used twice to every one instance of 'Israel.'

In Genesis 33 as we've seen today, Jacob is trying to be both Jacob and Israel. Apparently, there was still a lot of the "old man" in the "new" patriarch. To be both is impossible, though. For either the new nature within will draw us away from lesser loyalties and make us God's man or woman, or else lesser loyalties will draw us away from God and reveal that we were not true children of God in the first place. Jacob came dangerously close to living out the second possibility as the next chapter indicates.

Chapter 34, which we'll study next time, shows the cost of Jacob's disobedience, paid in rape, treachery and massacre.

A principle of God's Word to take with us this from **I Samuel 15:22** – "Has the LORD *as great* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *and* to heed than the fat of rams."

Hosea put it this way in his Old Testament prophecy – "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (**Hosea 6:6**) Synonyms of mercy here are 'faithfulness,' 'loyalty,' or 'obedience.'

Let us endeavor for the week ahead, and from this time forward, that we will men and women of full obedience to God, and not merely part of the time. There's no such thing as a part-time Christian. It's an all or nothing proposition. To be partially obedient, is to be fully disobedient.

The cost of obedience is nothing compared with the cost of disobedience. Puritan pastor Richard Baxter has written:

"Lord, it belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live;
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this Thy grace must give.

If life be long I will be glad,
That I may long obey;
If short--yet why should I be sad
To soar to endless day?

Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than he went through before;
He that to God's Kingdom comes,
Must enter by this door."