

August 26, 2012

Jacob

Lessons from an Imperfect Life

Genesis 49:29-33

Opening Words:

It has become my tradition to look at a single Old Testament character during the summer months. I do this for two reasons. First, we believe in the witness of both the Old and New Testaments. There are divine truths in both. Second, I hope to teach you the stories of the Old Testament. We live in Biblically illiterate times. If you have been with me through the years you may remember the stories of Abraham, Elijah, Esther, Joseph, Moses, Nehemiah and Ruth. Next year I am considering David. This year we looked at the Jacob.

We have come to the end of Jacob's story. He is considered to be one of the greats of the Old Testament. Hebrews 11:21 says, *"By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.* We began our journey with Jacob on June 3. We have looked at many stories within his life. Let me remind you of them one last time.

It has been said Jacob's life can be divided into four sections. The first section deals with his family, birth and youth. Jacob's grandfather was Abraham and his father was Isaac. His mother was Rebecca. He had a red hairy fraternal twin brother, Esau. Jacob tricked him out of the birthright and the blessing. Those events caused a family rift. The first section ends with Jacob running away. The second section deals with Jacob's time away. He runs away from his brother's murderous threats and goes into business with his Uncle Laban. Professionally, he prospered. Personally, his life becomes very complex. It is at this time in his life he marries his cousins, Leah and Rachel. (That fact is hard for us to put our minds around.) The third section deals with Jacob's return home. Twenty years away will change people. Esau changed. He learned the power of forgiveness. He welcomes Jacob back and builds relationship with his extended family. The stage is set for a happy ending, when a personal tragedy strikes Jacob. Rachel, the love of his life, suddenly dies in childbirth. That child, Benjamin, became the final of his twelve sons. Each brother will become a future tribe of Israel. In the fourth and final section Jacob takes a back seat to Joseph's story. The well built handsome young man led his family into Egypt to escape the drought. Does any of this sound familiar?

This is my eleventh and final message in my summer sermon series on Jacob. The end has come. Today, we discover Jacob dies. He is buried in the family cave. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Genesis 49:29-33. Let me call this message *Lessons from an Imperfect Life*.

Genesis 49:29-33

29 Then he gave them these instructions: "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite. 31 There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. 32 The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites." 33 When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

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One of the most famous and popular presidents in American history was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Many consider him the third greatest president, behind Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. He sat in the Oval Office between 1933 and 1945. His combination of optimism and activism revived the national spirit. He made the dark days of the Great Depression a little brighter and introduced America as a world leader during the Second World War. He was a great leader yet he was a man with imperfections. He spent his life hiding his imperfections. Today, these imperfections are common knowledge. First, Roosevelt had a long term affair with a woman named Lucy Mercer. She was with him when he died in 1945. Second, Roosevelt was a cripple. In 1921 he was diagnosed with polio and suffered from permanent paralysis from the waist down. He hid his imperfections from the public for years. He was afraid his imperfections would limit his career. This is my question for you today. What imperfections are you hiding? Is anyone here today perfect? If you will admit you have at least one imperfection say, **"Amen!"**

The world's opinions about imperfections did not end die with FDR. The world is filled with imperfect people yet the word demands perfection. That is one of the reasons they print the legal notices in the paper. We want to publicly embarrass the imperfect. Has anyone here ever found your name in the paper because you had to declare bankruptcy? Has anyone here ever found your name in the paper because your marriage ended? Has anyone here ever found your name in the paper because you got caught shoplifting at the Savings Store? The worst part of that whole ugly chapter in your life was the day the newspaper came out. Your personal business became public news. Everyone suddenly knew your secret, your imperfection. It sounds absurd. Our imperfect world will not tolerate imperfections. So let me ask you this question. How perfect are you? Is anyone here a model of perfection? The answer is NO! You have imperfections. The person sitting next to you have imperfections. Everyone in this room and everyone you will see today have imperfections. The person speaking to you has imperfections. Jacob had imperfections.

That is why this sermon series resonated with so many people. Jacob was a man with imperfections and we are people with imperfections. How many imperfections can you remember from his life? He struggled with his relationship with his brother. He tricked him. He struggled with his relationship with his father. He exploited him. He struggled with his relationship with his uncle. Laban got the best of him. He struggled with his

relationship with his wife. He married and had children with a woman he really didn't love. He struggled facing the greatest problems in his life. He ran away from them. He struggled with his unruly sons. They sold their own brother into slavery. He struggled when the love of his life died and he struggled with his own mortality. Is anyone here in a big hurry to die? Can anyone here relate to our imperfect hero? Can anyone here relate to any of those issues? Jacob is just like us, imperfect! However, this is the good news for today.

God is not looking for perfection; God is looking for the availability. The only really great thing Jacob did in the story was show up! All you have to do to serve God is show up. The great theologian, Woody Allen once said, *"99% of success is just showing up."* Are you eliminating yourself from Christian service because you aren't perfect? Or are you showing up for Christian service with your imperfections? How far as you willing to trust God with your imperfections?

Today, I want to talk about three divine characteristics you need to remember the next time you feel inadequate to serve God. Each one is demonstrated for us in Jacob's story. Each one is alive and well in our world today. Never forget our human imperfections cannot frustrate **God's will**. Never forget our human imperfections cannot frustrate **God's grace**. Never forget our human imperfections cannot frustrate **God's faithfulness**. So if you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"** I am going to move through these points quickly and end with a major illustration.

God's Will

This is divine characteristic number one: God's will. Review the story in your mind. Jacob did everything possible to frustrate God. However, he couldn't do it. It was all part of God's will for Jacob to have twelve sons. Each one of those sons became a tribe in Israel. It was from one of those tribes, Judah, which Jesus came. With all of his imperfections Jacob could not frustrate God's will. Nothing can frustrate God's will. Your imperfections cannot frustrate God's will. No forget that God has the final word. On Tuesday evening I have a worship committee meeting. I hope to meet with this group quarterly but I want to look at the outline for the entire year. Time goes fast and I don't want to waste a single Sunday. One of the things I have been working on in the past month is my preaching schedule for the coming year. There are certain things that are set in stone. I like to talk about the incarnation on Christmas Eve and I like to talk about the resurrection on Easter morning. One of the themes that we visit annually is the passion of Christ during Holy Week. If you only come on Palm Sunday and Easter you miss it. On Monday through Friday of Holy Week, we look at how Satan moved through Jesus' enemies. You know the story. Jesus was arrested, put on trial twice, sentenced to die, wiped, forced to wear a thorny crown and was crucified. Things did not look good for the Master for a while. It looked like Jesus had won. Jesus was dead! Satan thought he had frustrated God's will. He was wrong. Death is not the final answer. The resurrection of Jesus changed everything. It wasn't the end; it was just the beginning. The resurrection is the cornerstone of the church. It was all part of God's plan of salvation for the world. If Satan could not intentionally stop God's will then your imperfections cannot stop God's will. If that makes you feel a little better say, **"Amen!"** First, there is God's will.

God's Grace

This is divine characteristic number two: God's grace. I don't care how many ways you look at the story of Jacob. Outside of being Abraham's grandson, you will never find a reason why he was chosen. He did nothing exceptional. The truth be told, the only exceptional things he did were bad. He simply received the benefits of God's great grace. We have all benefited from God's great grace.

Do you remember this story? In June of 2011 Celia Oyler gave her kidney away to a virtual stranger. The lucky recipient was 49 year old John Young. Celia had never met John but they had seen each other at Teachers College Columbia University. She is a professor and he is a doctoral student. She heard his story from others and wondered if she was a match. She was and she did. It is a story of true grace. He did nothing but received the gift of life. Would you consider giving one of your kidneys to a stranger? Jesus gave his life so we could live. Never underestimate the power of God's grace! Your imperfections cannot frustrate God's grace. If that makes you feel a little better say, "**Amen!**" First, there is God's will. Second, there is God's grace.

God's Faithfulness

This is divine characteristic number three: God's faithfulness. For twenty years, Jacob lives away from Canaan. Jacob had runaway from his family but God didn't run away from him. God was far more faithful to Jacob then Jacob was to him. God is more faithful to us then we are to him! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" First, there is God's will. Second, there is God's grace. Third, there is God's faithfulness. Let me end with two stories.

Several years ago, I had a problem with my refrigerator. It was still under warranty so I went to the store where I purchased it. The store said I was covered but it was a manufacturer's warranty. They gave me a toll free number to call. I took that number home and a day later I called it. The phone rang and you know what happened. I got a recording. The recording said I had two options. I could leave my name and number and they would return my call as soon as possible. Or I could wait on the line for the next available customer service representative. I left my name and number. I didn't hear anything for about a week so I called again. This time I had decided to wait. Do you know how long I waited? I waited for about three and a half hours. I was more then a little annoyed. The foreign sounding voice at the other end of the line did her best to help me. In time, my problem was solved. I still own that refrigerator. It runs fine today but I will never buy that brand of refrigerator again. I am not dissatisfied with the quality of the product. I am dissatisfied with their customer service, their availability. Maybe God knows something we don't know. Availability is more important then perfection.

I have told you this in the past. The only Sunday school teacher I ever had was a woman by the name of Rose Parker. She had a surplus of imperfections. She had a mistaken marriage in her past. She only stood about five feet tall and she could have lost a few pounds. The red in her hair came from a bottle. She was not a trained as a teacher. She had no Biblical or theological training. She would tell us some off cover jokes. The only thing going for Rose Parker was her availability. Every year the

education committee of that church would look for a Sunday school teacher for my class. There were no girls in my class, only unruly boys. She answered the same way each year. "If you can't find anyone else then I will do it." Don't ever say those words. They stopped looking with those words. She started with us in kindergarten and graduated with us from high school. Rose Parker went to glory years ago and I can honestly say she changed my life. It is kind of funny. All these years later I don't remember her imperfections. However, I do remember her love and her availability. It is true. Availability is more important than perfection. If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"**

Is there a perfect person in the house? NO! Jacob had his imperfections and so do you. There has only been one perfect life. His name was Jesus and they crucified him. God is not interested in perfection; God is interested in availability. How available are you making yourself to God's service? It has been said, *The Lord doesn't ask about your ability, only your availability; and, if you prove your dependability, the Lord will increase your capability.* "And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**