

“Greed, Guilt and Grace”  
 Sermon for 22 March 2020  
 Texts: Genesis 31:1-37

Jacob is a sinner and his choice sin is greed. In being greedy, Jacob has transgressed God’s Law—committed acts of sin. He is guilty. Guilt is the **judicial sentence** passed on his sin by God who judges all things aright. Therefore Jacob is under divine judgment and is subject to divine wrath. Things are not alright between Jacob and His Creator—and this is the legal/moral condition of all sinners. Unless Jacob’s greed is atoned for, and mortified, he will remain under condemnation and desperately in need of divine grace. That is the universal predicament of all sinners. Punishment follows sentencing. The wages of sin are death; spiritual death is what follows the sentence of guilt for the transgression of sin.

What we need to pay attention to, friends, is the *judicial sentence* of guilt. It relates to our standing before God, the legal jeopardy we have put ourselves in by disobedience, by rebellion, by spiritual treason. Guilt is not a subjective reality; it is not primarily about uncomfortable and self-condemning feelings like shame, disappointment and regret. We are nowhere told that Jacob regretted his thievery of the birthright, or the blessing of the first-born—his conspiracy with his mother to dupe, deceive his father in the course of stealing what he coveted. Greed was not only his choice sin, it was one from which we see no repentance. That does not mean 1. he wasn’t guilty of greed and 2. it doesn’t mean that God neglected to hold him accountable. Indeed, Jacob’s struggles with Laban might helpfully be viewed as retributive afflictions —chastisements aimed at the formation of his character and the nullification of his sin. They are expressions of divine love and grace. They reflect the pattern of God’s just dealings with sinners before the deliverance of Christ which we, as Christians, enjoy. Our advantage is great, but God was as effectual before Christ as He is forever.

So God in dealing with Jacob’s greed is dealing with his sin. **Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but God delivers them out of them all.** (Psalm 34:19)! When God slays the sin, guilt is removed and sentencing is irrelevant. We can postulate that greed is formed in “the insecurity of the second-born,” or, more generally, “in the fear of missing out.” But rationalizations are not explanations, or excuses. The tenth commandment declares, **Thou shalt not covet . . . anything, or anyone.** Lusting after anything, or anyone is sinful. Greed aligns with that lust. Greed may attach to people, places, positions, and things. Jacob lusted for the advantages of birth order which Esau came by naturally—matters of position, place and possessions—and his covetousness led to deception, conniving, and theft. All acts of a sinful nature are reprehensible before God. By committing those acts, Jacob became guilty and was sentenced to painful consequences in real time, in real life. What scripture says is underneath these overt sins is spiritual rebellion, self-serving mutiny and treason. They are the diseases of which sins appear as symptoms.

Here are some of the temporal consequences of Jacob’s greed:

- alienation from his family: father, mother, brother.
- destruction of the family structure.
- flight for his life, a twenty-year exile in a strange land.
  - this brings fear, poverty and loneliness into his life.
  - this renders him vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse.

We shall show how these effects are medicinal to Jacob. But first we note that God, having chosen Jacob, loves him by:

- inaugurating a relationship with Jacob—**I am with you, I am your God.**
- directing him straight to Haran, to Laban, and to his two wives.
- blessing him with eleven sons (initially) as future, tribal heads of the nation Israel.
- blessing his work with wealth and increase—compensating for all he gave up in fleeing his home and the wealth of his father Isaac (Esau got all that!).
- bringing him home safely again (with bread, raiment and protection—divine interventions).
- affirms his membership in God's family. Guaranteeing his inheritance, as well as giving purpose to his existence.

Life is about more than position, power and wealth . . . more than flocks and flocks of sheep! God delivered Jacob from greed by extinguishing it through affliction. Thus, mortifying sin, God absolves Jacob's guilt and mitigates, or cancels his sentence. God replaces greed with contentment, insecurity with safety. God calls him out, brings him home **as a company**. He establishes him as Israel (the "one who wrestles with God and prevails"). *This change of name reflects a new, purged, transformed or redeemed character.*

Jacob escapes both his bondage to and the destiny (which could be good, or bad) of Laban, an angry, abandoned, mean-spirited old man—whom we see last as impoverished, frustrated and defeated. Laban loses all the family he had gained through Jacob! He is left "outside the promise." He doesn't even have his household gods to comfort him and both Leah and Rachel are gone. ***What we see here is the atoning effects of divinely directed affliction—Jacob*** gains spiritually through what he suffered. And all of this was of grace! Our gains are commensurately greater because we gain from what Christ suffered on our behalf in addition to whatever divine providences afford us. Laban is afflicted and loses, Jacob is afflicted and gains! Can it be that greed was out-greed-ed in Jacob's life through Laban? I have something like that in mind. And it is God's doing. God works this change in Jacob through Laban even though Laban may have been unconscious of the whole business. God, ever gracious, provided, God protected and God brought Jacob safely home . . . out from under servitude to others (and via them, his own greed sin), out from under unjust exploitation, thievery, dishonesty and abuse (!) into the freedom of his own home, own land, own place. It is interesting that hirings and firings operate in just this manner even today! God cares for His own. In Genesis 33:18-20 it is written that Jacob makes it safely to Shechem, purchased land and pitched his tent. **He erected an altar there and called it "El Eloe Israel"** which means "God, the God of Israel."

His journey ends in worship—we are worshippers all. I mean beyond being workers, or producers, we exist for the praise of His name. And on that altar he offered sacrifices—sin offerings, thanksgiving and praise offerings. Yes, he relocates (35:1) after the Dinah incident, and builds another altar there. He is a changed man, one who has come full circle. . . He is a worship initiator, an heir of the promise, a believer.

Let us review. Something happens (sin) to bring about guilt (a sentence) which leads to a legitimate consequence (punishment). There is no guilt when sin is absent and there is no

punishment imposed lacking sin and guilt. All very judicial. In addition, this is how things will unfold inevitably. Guilt is not a free-floating emotional state and, furthermore, how one feels about sin, guilt and consequences are largely irrelevant. Shame, regret, disappointment and remorse may more appropriately be attached to the transgression than to the sentence of guilt. If one is to escape punishment, or alleviate consequences for sin, something else must happen—we call that something “atonement.” Jesus atoned for our sins, acting as one who justifies the scales insuring justice to all.

“He breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the captive free  
His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.”

So whether He cancels sin, or He makes payment for that sin in advance, either way, the dynamic of sin/guilt/punishment is disrupted—as in ended, or broken. And we, as pardoned sinners, get to go free—acquitted of all charges! Fully exonerated by the blood of the Lamb. In Jacob’s day, God did not make atonement through His Son; He would mortify the flesh through affliction, or suffering. In Jacob’s instance, God may have put greed to death by subjecting Jacob to the greed of Laban until “the pips squeaked”—a colorful British phrase meaning: *“To use force or pressure to exploit someone for as much money, information, manpower, etc., as someone has or is able to give.”* (Primarily heard in UK.<sup>1</sup>) Or, by fighting fire with fire, God reduced Jacob’s choice sin to ashes!

When the Spirit of God so works on one’s choice sin, the process, a work of God only, that person is divinely assisted in taking away the strength, vigor and power of indwelling sin. Indwelling sin is depicted as, or compared to “the old man” who retains, as an inner reality, or property of soul, faculties, properties, wisdom, craft, subtly and strength and must be, figuratively speaking, “slain.” All its powers must be removed actively by the Spirit who lives/operates within the believer. The old man must be slain by the cross of Christ—causing us to be **crucified with Christ**. (Rom. 6:6) In order that we may be “reckoned” dead to that sin—yes, even our choice sins. “But the whole work is by degrees to be carried out towards perfection all our days.” This is so that “indwelling sin may have neither power nor life” . . . “to bring forth works or deeds of the flesh . . . (this) is the constant duty of believers.” “The promise unto this duty is life: “You shall live.”

“The vigor, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh.” (J. Owen)

Dr. Owen is addressing these remarks on mortification to Christian believers. This is to say that mortification appears to be common to both testaments—whether new, or old saints in terms of their respective covenants. Therefore as Jacob died to the sin of greed, the attendant sins (of thievery, deceit, lying, dishonoring his parent) withered—like a cursed fig tree(!), they also died back—having nothing to feed upon. No root cause so to speak; its roots severed, the sin needs must wither. The duty to deal with sin is plainly set forth in God’s word. Our dependency on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is clear; but for the grace of God no one,

---

<sup>1</sup> “This expression alludes to a speech made in 1918 by the British politician Sir Eric Geddes on the subject of Germany’s payment of indemnities after World War I: ‘The Germans...are going to pay every penny; they are going to be squeezed as a lemon is squeezed—until the pips squeak’. More recently, in the 1970s, the Labour Chancellor Denis Healey declared his intention to squeeze the rich until the pips squeaked.” <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/until+the+pips+squeak>

not Jacob, or the Apostle Paul would see sin die; or grow spiritually, approach perfection now or in glory later.

God mortifies our sin so we experience spiritual health, spiritual gain'

**Amen.**