

Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob

Outrageous Things (Genesis 33:18-34:31)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on June 8, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ This morning's text is a dark chapter. The events recounted are upsetting. It begins with a horrific act of sexual violence against a young woman, and ends with a more horrific massacre of all the able-bodied men in a city. It's disturbing to read. And surprising.
 - Considering how the narrative had been unfolding. **So far, in this series on the life of Jacob, we've seen a steady trajectory of growth.** It started with deceit and manipulation in his house. It continued with more of the same in his uncle Laban's home. But with his experience of seeing the face of God (in chapter 32); of being transformed into a new creation (new man); and after reconciling with his brother Esau – things are moving in the right direction. It's a positive trajectory.
- ❖ **But it all comes to a crashing halt in Genesis 34. This chapter feels like a rude interruption to an otherwise positive story.** Just look at the next chapter. There's a header in my Bible that says Genesis 35 is about God blessing and renaming Jacob. How encouraging! It makes you wonder why the narrator didn't just skip over this shameful episode in Jacob's story to keep the positive trajectory moving straight into chapter 35.
 - The fact that he didn't tells me that chapter 34 was intentionally included for good reason. **First, it's included because the goal of Scripture is *not* to paint simply an optimistic picture of the life of faith – but a realistic one.** The fact that the Bible is not sanitized of dark, shameful episodes like these – that speaks to the veracity of these events. These aren't mythical, made-up stories. Because no one – if they were simply making up stories about one of the patriarchs of the faith – would include a chapter like chapter 34. Unless it really happened that way.
- ❖ So that's one reason why Genesis 34 was written. **Second, it's there because it's a needed reminder that the life of faith is a life-long journey.** Not a quick sprint. And this journey is filled not just with mountaintop experiences, climbing higher and higher. No, in this journey you'll be led, from time to time, through dark valleys; under the shadow of those mountains; where dangers lurk; where sin and shame lie. **These rude interruptions to our otherwise positive journeys of faith are to be expected and to be prepared for.** Which is why we need biblical stories that don't hold back but, instead, give us a realistic picture.
 - It's going to be uncomfortable to study this chapter. But it's going to be good for us and for our walks with the Lord. **This passage exposes and explores the depths of human sinfulness.** By examining the actions of Jacob, of Shechem, and of Jacob's sons, we gain valuable lessons on (1) the consequence of spiritual passivity, (2) the devastation of disordered desires, and (3) the brutality of unbridled zealotry.

The Consequence of Spiritual Passivity

- ❖ The first lesson to learn involves the consequence of our spiritual passivity. **It's a lesson learned by observing Jacob and his lack of appropriate action when confronted with right and wrong.** Let's be clear, Jacob is a changed man now. But he's far from a perfect man. He still struggles with his fleshly tendencies. And what's highlighted in Genesis 34 is Jacob's sinful propensity towards a spiritual passivity.

- ❖ **We're not used to speaking of sin in passive terms.** We usually think of sin as something you actively do. You *commit* sins. We call them sins of *commission*. **But don't forget about sins of omission.** In our corporate Confession of Sin, we often speak of confessing that we sinned against God by what we have done, and *by what we have left undone*. It's those good and righteous things we've left undone – when they're in our power to do them – those are sins of omission. And they're the result of an underlying spiritual passivity.
- ❖ This is evident in Jacob's life. Look back with me at the end of chapter 33 in v18. "*And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city.*" So after he's reconciled with Esau, on his way home from Paddan-aram, he first goes to Succoth (33:17), which is east of the Jordan river. Then, in v18, he crosses the Jordan and arrives at a city called Shechem.
 - Now the name of the city is anachronistic. Meaning that Shechem was the city's name by the time Genesis was written, but it obviously didn't go by that name in those days. Because it was most likely named after the Shechem in our story. Whom we're introduced to in v19. "*And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent.*"
 - So, in those days, the tribal leader was named Hamor and one of his sons (his most honored of sons) was named Shechem. We're told that Jacob bought a plot of land from them and built an altar on it to worship the LORD.
- ❖ **Now the last three verses of chapter 33 seem pretty innocuous.** But if we take a more careful look, we realize that the narrator was setting us up for chapter 34. He was leaving clues – foreboding, ominous clues. Like when he throws in the phrase, "*which is in the land of Canaan,*" that's supposed to alert us to the general wickedness of that region. Or when it says that Jacob "*camped before the city,*" that's meant to foreshadow coming trouble.
 - **When was the last time, in Genesis, when someone chose to settle in close proximity to a city?** The astute reader would recall **Genesis 13:12**, which tells us that Lot, "*settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom.*" Lot's failure to distance himself from that city resulted in equally horrific consequences for him and his family. **So Jacob's foolish decision to camp "*before the city*" of Shechem signals to the reader that trouble is brewing.**
- ❖ **Now a careful reader will also recognize that Shechem was not supposed to be Jacob's destination. He was supposed to settle in Bethel.** Which happens later in chapter 35. But that should've happened in the first place. He should've gone straight to Bethel.
 - If you recall, back in Genesis 28:20, Jacob made a vow to the LORD. While he was on the run from his brother, one night he received a vision of the LORD in a dream. He named that place Bethel, which means house of God. **And he made a vow – that if the LORD would be with him and keep him and bring him back from all his sojourning – then the LORD would be his God and he would build an altar there.** A vow he finally fulfills in the next chapter, in Genesis 35:7, there in Bethel.

- ❖ **That's how chapter 33 should've ended – in Bethel.** With Jacob building an altar and fulfilling his vow. But, instead he spends who-knows-how-many years idly living in the shadow of this Canaanite city just asking for trouble. Look at an ancient map, and you realize that Shechem was twenty miles north of Bethel. Had he traveled just twenty miles further, he would've settled in the right place. He was so close. He was almost there.
 - **But *almost* fulfilling your vow is not the same as fulfilling it. In fact, almost fulfilling means you didn't fulfill the vow.** That's like saying, "*I almost obeyed God.*" That's not going to cut it. That's just another way of saying, "*I didn't obey.*" That's the definition of a sin of omission.
 - **Partial obedience is always disobedience.** If it was in your power to obey the Lord, and you only obeyed partially – you didn't obey. If God calls you to break that bad habit or to repent of that sin, don't imagine he'll be pleased if you just partially disengage. **"At least I tried" is not the standard. The Lord expects your full, wholehearted obedience to his Word.**
- ❖ **For us to be content with anything less is a symptom of spiritual passivity.** And that passivity is evident in Jacob. Look at his reaction when he hears about the assault. He should be up in arms. But we read in v5, "*Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah. But his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came.*"
 - **He stayed silent. And the silence was deafening.** Especially viewed in stark contrast to the reaction of his sons when they hear the news. V7 says they were "*indignant and very angry.*" So different from Jacob. **There's no emotional reaction on his part.** And it's not like he's incapable of showing deep emotions. We read later on, in chapter 37:34, when he hears about the "death" of his beloved Joseph – "*Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days.*"
 - Where was the sackcloth and mourning for Dinah? **How could he remain so passive when his own daughter is brutally assaulted?** It's inexplicable and unjustifiable. And it leads to devastating consequences.
- ❖ Jacob's spiritual passivity led to a decision to settle his family in the shadow of a Canaanite city. Which led to this outrageous crime committed against his daughter. And his passivity towards that horrific thing led to even more horrific things taking place – the deception and slaughter of all the men of Shechem by his own sons.
 - **Being passive in the face of moral wrongdoing is like being on a river, in a rowboat, and passively laying the oars on your lap.** Don't imagine that you'll just stay still and the currents will pass around you. No, they'll drag you in the direction they're going if you don't actively push back.
- ❖ **We're so focused on *not* committing certain sins that we fail to see the danger of a passivity towards doing the right thing.** Sins of omission are *not* to be treated lightly. Spiritual passivity – leaving undone what we ought to have done – has detrimental effects, not just on us but on those around us. The consequences are damaging. Let's press in – to not just avoid doing the wrong thing – but to actively do the right thing when opportunity arises.

The Devastation of Disordered Desires

- ❖ Now let's turn our attention to the despicable sin committed by Shechem against Dinah. This leads to our second lesson. I want us to observe the devastation that results from disordered desires. **Not only should we examine Shechem's actions, but to the extent it's revealed in the text, we should examine his motivations – his desires.** So turn back to the text in v1.
 - We're introduced to Dinah – Jacob's daughter that he had with Leah. We were told in chapter 30 that Leah bore six sons. Two of them being Simeon and Levi, who play a prominent role later in the story. And Dinah came last. She was the little sister. Commentators suggest that she was born not long after Joseph (cf. 30:21). And if he's seventeen when the events of chapter 37 begin, then Dinah was probably fifteen or sixteen in this chapter. Which is young, but in those days, in that culture, she would've been of age to be married.
- ❖ Now we're told that, one day, Dinah went out unattended, to the city, to see "*the women of the land.*" That, again, just speaks to Jacob's passivity in allowing his young daughter to go out unchaperoned into a dangerous setting.
 - And in v2, Shechem the son of Hamor, the prince of the land, "*saw her; he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her.*" **Those four verbs – saw, seized, lay with, humiliated – they paint a violent picture of sexual assault, of rape.** What's interesting is how the Hebrew for *saw* and *seized* are the same words in the same sequence in Genesis 6:2. When the sons of God *saw* and *took* the daughters of man to be their wives, implied by force. And, what's more, they're the same words in the same sequence as when Eve *saw* and *took* the fruit in Genesis 3:6.
- ❖ The implication is clear. When Shechem saw Dinah, he looked upon her with fleshly desire. And though she was as forbidden as the fruit was in the Garden, he took her by force and laid with her. He was driven, in that moment, by his lustful, sinful passions.
 - Which is why the next verse is so jarring. **Because, standing alone, v3 sounds romantic.** "*And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her.*" That phrase, "*his soul was drawn to [her],*" is translated in the KJV as "*his soul clave unto Dinah.*" His soul was cleaved to her.
 - **You hear, in the KJV, an echo of Genesis 2:24.** That well-known verse that describes and defines marriage. Where a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. **So Shechem's heart for Dinah is described using the language of marriage.** It says he loved the young woman. He spoke tenderly to her. Literally, it says, "*he spoke to the heart of the young woman.*"
- ❖ But that's out of order. **In Genesis 2, the soul-cleaving between a man and a woman – that holding fast and becoming one flesh – occurs in the context of marriage and takes place before the physical consummation.** Before laying with one another in the marriage bed.
 - **But here in Genesis 34, the soul-cleaving occurs outside the context of marriage and is placed in the story after the sexual act.** And that alone would implicate this as an illicit act of sex.

- ❖ **Any sexual act that occurs *before* marriage – before God cleaves two souls into one flesh – if it occurs outside the context of marriage, it’s sinful in God’s eyes.** And you only compound your guilt if you force yourself on another. Like when Shechem sexually assaulted Dinah. It was already bad having occurred before marriage. And he made it that much worse.
- ❖ Now I’m not surprised if Shechem would push back and argue, “Okay, my actions were wrong, but my heart was in the right place. I do love her. My soul feels cleaved to her. I want to make this right. I want to marry her.” But my point is that there is no excuse. There is no rationalization. **Feeling love for the person doesn’t justify our behavior.**
 - In fact, I would push back and tell Shechem, “Your behavior reveals to me that you don’t know what love is. You speak of love and marriage, but it’s clearly not your heart language.” **Shechem’s heart is driven by disordered desires.** That loving attraction (that soul-attachment) you’d expect between a husband and wife – which is good, beautiful, and true – has been distorted and deformed into a self-serving, fleshly infatuation. Sin has disordered what would’ve been, in another context, good desires.
- ❖ **And it led Shechem to commit what v7 describes as an “outrageous thing.”** Look at v7, *“he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing must not be done.”* That word appears thirteen times in the OT. And in eight of those cases, the reference point is some instance of sexual misconduct. Most refer to assault (2 Sam 13:12). But one describes premarital sex (Deut 22:21) and another adultery (Jer 29:23).
 - And by calling the behavior outrageous – some translations say a disgraceful thing – the point is that the behavior in question doesn’t just break a law or harm a victim. **Such an outrageous thing threatens the family unit or the general public by tearing at the moral fabric of the community.** Such a thing must not be done among us. To tolerate such behavior – to rationalize it away – would be to devastate the moral foundation of a whole community. That’s what makes it outrageous.
- ❖ Friends, this is all relevant to us. **God forbid, but if any of you are ever the victim of sexual assault,** be clear that no matter what your partner says to you – no matter if they say they love you; that their soul is drawn (attached) to you, that they want to marry you – they don’t know what they’re talking about. They don’t know love. Love is not what’s motivating their heart. They’re being driven by disordered desires, and they have gravely sinned against you. It’s an outrageous thing that must not be done. **So you should report them to the authorities. You should *not* be silent.** And if you know of anyone who is a victim of sexual assault, don’t adopt the passive response of Jacob. Speak up on their behalf, especially for those who can’t speak for themselves.
- ❖ **But there’s also a word here for those who are engaging in sexual activities *before* marriage – outside the context of the one-flesh union between a husband and wife.** Yes, your situation is different from what Shechem did to Dinah. In your case, it’s consensual. In your case, both of you probably feel love for each other. You feel like your souls are already cleaved to each other. It’s like you’re already married.

- ❖ But you're not. It's like partial obedience. It's not obedience. **Feeling like you're married is not the same thing as being married.** Until you enter into a covenant before God and witnesses – until you take those marriage vows – you're *not yet* married. Your souls are *not yet* cleaved as one flesh. **So to engage, in advance, in behavior reserved for a husband and wife is to distort and disorder the good desires of marital love and sexual attraction.**
- ❖ **I know it might sound harsh but what you're doing is an outrageous thing that must not be done among God's people.** If you're in this situation, I realize it doesn't feel outrageous. Your relationship feels worlds apart from Shechem and Dinah. And for all the many ways it is different – thank God. But this one similarity should be enough to alarm you.
 - **By engaging in sex *before* marriage, you're indulging disordered desires.** You're behaving as if your souls are cleaved together as one – when in reality they're not. That was considered an outrageous thing by God's people under the Old Covenant. It should be no different for God's people under the New Covenant. Since God's good design for sex and marriage are reinforced by Jesus and the apostles.
 - So my point is to call all of us to pursue a wholehearted obedience to the Lord – particularly when it comes to the right order and expression of the good desires he gives us for marital love and sexual attraction.

The Brutality of Unbridled Zealousness

- ❖ Now if you're not used to having a preacher be this direct about what goes on in the privacy of your own relationship, I get it if it feels a bit overbearing. You might think I'm overreacting. Like the sons of Jacob. **You might think I'm a bit overly zealous for moral purity.** But I hope the point I make next will surprise you.
 - **As we analyze the response, by the sons of Jacob, to this outrageous thing done to their sister, I'm going to argue that the problem was *not* that they were too zealous.** But that they weren't zealous enough. Yes, in a sense, their zeal needs to be bridled (restrained). But just not in the way you might think. So let's consider our third and final observation – the brutality of unbridled zealousness.
- ❖ Let's step back in the narrative in v8. Here Hamor speaks, on behalf of his son Shechem, to not just Jacob but to his sons. Notice how Jacob, due to his passivity, recedes into the background, and his sons handle the real negotiating.
 - Hamor proposes that a marriage pact – not just for this couple – but between all our children. Let's intermarry. Which will result in us, essentially, becoming one people. Which means you can dwell among us and trade with us. And “*get property in it.*” You can purchase more land. That was a particularly tempting offer. **Hamor's proposal seems like a sure and easy way to fulfill the Abrahamic promises.** All those promises of God to give them the land of Canaan. Seems a little too easy.

- ❖ That's because such an arrangement could only come by means of spiritual compromise. **Intermarrying their children would result in intermixing their gods.** That's why the Law would later forbid intermarriage with the nations surrounding God's people (Deut 7:3). It's why both Abraham and Isaac had made a point earlier to prevent their sons from having a Canaanite wife. **Ethnic purity wasn't the concern. It was about spiritual purity.** About wholehearted devotion to the LORD.
- ❖ Now, in v11, Shechem interjects and offers a great bride-price. He basically says, "Name your price." He's that desperate. And the sons of Jacob recognize that they have the upper hand. **So they concoct this scheme that places Shechem, Hamor, and all the men of the city in the most vulnerable of positions.**
 - They claim that this proposal for them to intermarry will only work if all the men of the city get circumcised. Now there's no indication that circumcision was being treated as a sign of the covenant. Shechem and his compatriots merely saw it as an initiation rite that opened the door for intermarriage. There's no suggestion that they were planning to convert from one religion to another.
- ❖ **And because of Shechem's honored status, he's able to convince all the able-bodied men of the city to get circumcised.** And on the third day after the procedure – when their pain is at the highest and their ability to defend themselves is at the lowest – two of the brothers, Simeon and Levi, *"took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males."* ²⁶*They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away."*
 - **It's not until v26 that you realize that, this whole time, Dinah was a captive in Shechem's house.** Then we read, in v27 and on, that the rest of the sons of Jacob join in plundering the city as retribution for defiling their sister.
 - And the only time Jacob speaks up, in this entire episode, is to confront Simeon and Levi. Complaining about the trouble they brought on him and the risky situation they're in now, surrounded by enemies. **Notice how he views what they did as a tactical error. Not an ethical one.** He just overlooks the moral atrocity committed by his own flesh and blood.
- ❖ And Simeon and Levi are given the last word. *"But they said, 'Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?'"* Which is a fair question. **On one hand, you sort of sympathize with these brothers.** At least *someone* was looking out for Dinah. At least *someone* was willing to fight for her honor. **In one sense, their response seems justified.** Especially when you realize she was held captive in Shechem's house, being used as a bargaining chip.
 - **But while there's something commendable about Simeon and Levi's zeal to defend their sister's honor and to find justice for her – there's no question they went too far in their scheming.** Too far in their slaughtering. Too far in their plundering. Most people would say they were too zealous. Too fanatical. That's how they would explain Simeon and Levi's brutality.

- ❖ But I'd disagree. **I'd say the problem is *not* that they were too zealous – but that they weren't zealous enough. They weren't fanatical enough.** They were only fanatical in particular ways – like in their moral indignation against sexual sin. There were only zealous for certain things – like their sister's honor or the need for justice.
- ❖ **My point is that they don't need to temper their zeal for justice.** Or to be any less concerned for their sister's safety and honor. Those are all biblical concerns. **But they need to be equally zealous to show mercy and compassion.** Had they been zealous to keep *all* of God's commands – zealous to reflect *all* of God's concerns – then they still would've rescued their sister and exacted justice. But I'm sure they wouldn't have massacred all those men.
 - **The solution is *not* to tone down their zeal but to be more comprehensively zealous – to be equally fanatical for all of God's commands and concerns.** The answer is to bridle their zeal for justice with a zealous love for their enemies.
- ❖ So while I can sympathize with Dinah's big brothers, they're not examples to follow. **They're just demonstrations of the larger point of Scripture – that all of us need a better bigger brother in our life.** One who is just as zealous to protect us and to seek justice. But One who is equally zealous in showing mercy and loving his enemies.
 - **That's the Elder Brother that this story is ultimately pointing to.** The Son of God who is equally zealous to keep *all* of his Father's commands. To wholeheartedly do his Father's will. Jesus is not just zealous for righteousness and justice. He's equally zealous for mercy and forgiveness.
 - And because of his cross, he can be equally zealous in both directions without contradiction. **The cross is where he vindicated righteousness and achieved justice while, at the same time, showing sinners like us mercy and securing our forgiveness.** He did it all at the cross!
- ❖ Perhaps God is using this dark chapter in Genesis to shine some light into your heart, into your life. And it's exposed some sin and shame. **Don't shrink from the light. Instead, turn your face to Jesus and receive his mercy.** Receive his forgiveness. And ask God to make you zealous. Not just partially zealous. Not just zealous for some commands and concerns. Ask him to make you zealous like Jesus with a heart that's wholly committed to the Lord.