

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

True Reconciliation (Genesis 33:1-17)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on June 1, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ So far, in our series on the life of Jacob, we've seen him leave a trail of broken relationships. His propensity to lie and cheat and manipulate others has resulted in numerous burned bridges. He has strained relationships with his father Isaac, with his uncle Laban, with his cousins in Paddan-aram, and most of all with his twin brother Esau.
 - **When we last encountered Esau in the narrative, back at the end of chapter 27, he was boiling hot in anger.** His fury was dead-set against Jacob. Who had just stolen Esau's blessing and had previously secured Esau's birthright by means of manipulation. The text says that Esau hated Jacob and planned on killing him (27:41). Jacob had basically burned that bridge with his brother to a crisp. And smothered all the embers. Scattered all the ashes. It's *that* bad. **The picture we're given is of an irreconcilable relationship.** Utterly broken and unrepairable.
- ❖ This is what led Jacob to flee from his home. To leave his parents in Canaan and to find refuge with distant relatives – with his uncle Laban. Now, in our passage, twenty years have passed. Jacob is now married to Leah and Rachel. They have a large family. They're in possession of an even larger flock. They've outgrown and overstayed their welcome in Laban's house. **So, back in chapter 31, we saw Jacob pack up everything and flee Paddan-aram to return to Canaan.** To return to the Promised Land.
 - Now back in the previous chapter, we're told that Jacob sent on ahead, droves of animals from his flock, as a present for his brother. Hoping to appease his wrath. In chapter 32:6, we learn that Esau is coming to meet Jacob. But he's not coming alone. He's accompanied by four hundred men. Jacob does *not* like the sound of that. Why would my brother need to travel with that many men? He must be coming to wipe me out. To kill me and take all my possessions. The text says that Jacob was "*greatly afraid and distressed*." He divided all his goods into two camps. Thinking that if Esau attacks one camp, hopefully the other will have time to escape.
- ❖ That's how stressful and perilous this whole situation is, leading into our chapter, in Genesis 33. It begins in v1 saying, "*And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him.*" Esau and company are almost here. And their intentions are still unclear. The way Genesis 33 begins makes you think a merciless slaughter is about to occur. But surprisingly, it doesn't turn out like that. **Genesis 33 ends with an olive branch extended.** The hatchet buried. Bygones left as bygones. Estranged brothers are reconciled. We see tears, hugs, and kisses. It's nothing short of a miracle.
 - How did that happen? **How was such a broken relationship mended?** How was it healed? And, of course, on a personal level, the bigger question is: **How can I experience the same in my life – in my relationships?** Some of you have been carrying, for years, a grudge against someone you were once close to. Or perhaps someone out there resents you, and despite your efforts, the relationship is still strained. Some of you are dealing with ongoing conflict – with someone at home or someone in the workplace. There's no trust, no peace, no reconciliation.

- ❖ I hope this morning's text brings you hope. To believe things can change. To even want things to change. To know that true reconciliation is a real possibility. Now to help you get there, I want to draw three observations from our text: (1) the source of true reconciliation, (2) the cost of true reconciliation, and (3) the impact of true reconciliation.

The Source of True Reconciliation

- ❖ Let's start by considering the source of true reconciliation. Don't just jump to that moment when Jacob and Esau reconcile. It's tempting to just analyze that and come up with some steps to achieve the same outcome. But that would overlook the essential preconditions that have to occur first. We have to consider what took place *before* our passage. We have to go back into chapter 32 to see the source of true reconciliation.
- ❖ The fact is that something monumental, something life-transforming, took place for Jacob between the beginning of chapter 32 and the beginning of chapter 33. And if you were with us last week, you know what that is. In Genesis 32:22-32, Jacob has a face-to-face encounter with God. He wrestles with the LORD all night long. **It ends with him receiving the blessing of conversion.** He's made into a new creation and given a new name. Jacob – now named Israel – walks away from this divine encounter with a limp. He's humbled and broken. He ends up naming that place Peniel, which means "*the face of God*." He saw the face of God and did not die. Instead, by grace, he was delivered and is now a changed man.
- ❖ This experience made all the difference. **Jacob wasn't ready to reconcile with his brother until he first reconciles with God.** Back in Genesis 32:20, we're told that Jacob was hoping to "*appease [his brother] with the present that goes before me*." In my Bible, the footnote tells me the Hebrew literally says to, "*appease his face with the present...and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me*." Another footnote says that the Hebrew word for "*accept me*" literally means "*to lift up my face*."
 - Think about it. Reconciliation with Esau is framed entirely in the language of appeasing his face, seeing his face, resulting in him lifting up my face. **And based on how the narrative unfolds, the whole point is that, before Jacob is ready to see Esau's face, he needs to be confronted by God's.** He needs to reconcile with God before he's ready to truly reconcile with anyone else.
- ❖ Think about how this encounter with the LORD changed Jacob into a new man. Someone ready to reconcile. **Before his conversion (pre-Peniel), we're told, in chapter 32:11, that Jacob feared "the face of Esau."** We already saw how he sent on ahead over 550 animals in five droves hoping to appease his brother's wrath. And when he heard Esau was coming with four hundred men, he nervously split everything into two camps hoping to mitigate any loss. And notice how it says in chapter 32:21, that he stayed behind. He put his wife and kids in front and took up the rearguard. **Pre-Peniel, Jacob prioritized his own self-preservation.** He was *not* a man ready to reconcile with anyone.

- ❖ **Had he approached Esau at this point in time, Jacob probably would've tried to appease his brother – like he did with Laban.** He would've tried to squash their beef. To put their conflict to rest. But he would've been treating his brother like an enemy to pacify, an opponent to placate, a competitor to manage. **He probably would've agreed to another nonaggression pact – like he did with Laban.**
 - And, sure, that would've helped manage the conflict. That would've mitigated or eliminated the fighting altogether. But that's not reconciliation. **A lack of fighting is not the same thing as a lack of conflict.** Just picture the DMZ between North and South Korea. There hasn't been any fighting there for decades. But neither has there been any peace. There's been no reconciliation.
- ❖ **True reconciliation is *not* defined by the mere absence of fighting. It's defined by the real presence of grace and acceptance.** Gracious acceptance. Before he could enjoy true reconciliation with Esau, that's what Jacob needed first. He needed a life-transforming experience of grace. **Where the One Person who rightfully holds a righteous anger against you for your sins – instead of hurling a closed fist of justice at you – extends to you an open hand of gracious acceptance.**
 - That's what Jacob experienced at Peniel. **He expected to see, on God's face, an angry frown. Instead, he saw a gracious smile.** That does something to you. No one experiences such grace and leaves unchanged. **When your Enemy has opportunity to do you harm but accepts you instead, that will shatter your former categories of who and what is an enemy.** How can you treat anyone as an enemy anymore? How can you merely settle for an absence of fighting? **You won't rest until there is true peace and reconciliation with those you've hurt or with those who have hurt you.** That's what happens when you experience God's grace.
- ❖ **Friends, this is what we mean when we say that the source of true reconciliation with others is rooted in our reconciliation with God.** Romans 5 tells us that, while we were enemies with God, we were reconciled to him by the death of his Son. We'd scarcely risk our lives to die for another person, even a good person. But God showed his love and gracious acceptance of us in that while we were still sinners – still enemies – Christ died for us.
 - **Without experiential knowledge of this kind of love, the best you can hope for is a negotiated settlement with your enemies.** You might be able to mitigate the fighting and manage the situation. But they'll be no real resolution. No true reconciliation. Only by an experience of life-transforming grace will you become a new creation. Only then will you be ready to reconcile with others. **Because they'll no longer be your enemies to placate but your neighbors to love as yourself.**
- ❖ Look at Jacob. Post-Peniel, he's a different man. Notice how he moves from the rearguard to the vanguard. Genesis 33:3 says "*he himself went on before*" his family. *He* takes the lead. *He* bears the risk. **And notice how proud Jacob has become humble Jacob.** Pre-Peniel, he was always vying to be first. Constantly competing with Esau. But now, post-Peniel, he's bowing himself to the ground as he approaches his brother. Now he's ready to reconcile.

- ❖ What about you? Are you ready to reconcile with those who have hurt you? With those you have hurt? **Until you address your conflict with God – until you’ve been reconciled through putting your trust in Christ and his gospel – until then, you’ll be a long way from experiencing true reconciliation with others.** You’ll still be missing the source. Make sure to go to God first. Get right with him. And then you’re ready to get right with others.

The Cost of True Reconciliation

- ❖ That’s how it worked for Jacob. After seeing the face of God and experiencing divine acceptance, now he’s ready to see Esau’s face and receive his brother’s acceptance. It’s a beautiful moment. But I want to be careful not to romanticize it. **Let’s acknowledge how hard it is to achieve true reconciliation with others.** There’s a cost associated with it. It’s not cheap grace. This leads to our second observation – the cost of true reconciliation.
- ❖ But, before we dig into that, let’s jump back into the narrative. Look at v4. For the first time reader, until you get to v4, it’s unsure how this reunion between these estranged brothers will unfold. But the tension is released the moment you read, *“But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”*
 - Jacob clearly was not expecting that. He expected the worst and planned accordingly. **His actions suggest he was prepping for Esau to come in hot seeking revenge.** He had carefully planned out this encounter. He approached Esau bowing seven times. He instructed his family to follow his lead and to come, in three successive groups, everyone respectfully bowing to Esau. It was all well-planned but all unnecessary.
 - **Esau didn’t need to be placated.** He came running up to his brother with a big hug and a wet kiss. And they wept on each other’s shoulders. It’s a beautiful picture of true reconciliation.
- ❖ **Clearly, over those twenty years, Jacob was not the only one who changed. Something happened to Esau.** Compared to his younger self, he shows far more restraint. He’s not blindly driven by his impulses like before. We’re not given any details, so let’s be careful not to assume too much. We don’t know if Esau had his own Peniel experience. We don’t know if he had reconciled with God. The text doesn’t say, so we can only speculate.
 - **But what is clear is that Jacob wasn’t expecting this response from his brother.** Even as, if you recall, he had been praying for this outcome. Back in chapter 32:11, he prays for deliverance from the hand of Esau. And, to Jacob’s pleasant surprise, God came through. **It just goes to show how we tend to underestimate God’s ability to answer our prayers.** And underestimate his ability to change others, especially those we’re in conflict with.
- ❖ Now if we keep reading in v8, Esau asks his brother why he sent those five droves of animals. Jacob is honest to admit that it was in hope of finding favor in Esau’s sight. Now Esau initially refuses the gift. Look at v9, *“But Esau said, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’”*

- ❖ That initial rejection is important within the narrative. It reveals that the forgiveness Esau extends to his brother is genuine and not motivated by greed or selfish gain. He's not after more flocks. But Jacob insists that he take the gift. **Because, without saying it directly, the gift was Jacob's way of making restitution.** To make amends for what he had stolen decades earlier. Listen to v10, "*Jacob said, 'No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand.'*" Now notice how "*accept my present*" suddenly changes, in v11, to "*please accept my blessing*."
- ❖ That word change is deliberate. It's the same word for "*blessing*" used back in chapter 27, referring to what Jacob had stolen from Esau. **So what we see him doing here, in our passage, is him making restitution.** He's restoring what was taken earlier. That's a biblical concept. Restitution – this act of giving back what was stolen (or paying money to cover the loss) – it's understood as a fruit of genuine repentance and a sign of true reconciliation.
 - It can't be something demanded by the offended party. Otherwise, that's just purchasing forgiveness. **Restitution must be a free-willing act, by the offender, that flows out of a repentant heart committed to righting wrongs and restoring relationships.** It has to be initiated by the wrongdoer. And treated – not like a transaction – but as a step towards reconciliation.
- ❖ Now apologizing (admitting fault) is also important for reconciliation. It's also a fruit of repentance. And, for some people, to say sorry is a difficult thing. To swallow their pride is a big cost. **But, for some of us, it's easy to say sorry, and sometimes we use it as a tactic to simply stop the fighting.** To quickly be done with the conflict. For those who have this tendency, apologizing doesn't cost much. It can actually be a form of cheap grace.
 - That's why the concept of restitution is vital. **It reminds us that true reconciliation is never cheaply attained. It always costs something.** Perhaps no money or goods are exchanged. But restitution means making every effort to make things right. **If you hurt someone, if you're in the wrong, then what can you do to make it right?**
 - At minimum, the cost will involve swallowing your pride, listening to the person you hurt, holding back the urge to justify your actions, and being open to make any changes so that you don't keep hurting them. **And again, it's important that you don't treat it transactionally – but relationally.** It's about healing past wounds, rebuilding trust, and achieving true reconciliation.
- ❖ Now so far, we've talked about the cost as it pertains to the offender, the wrongdoer. **But there's also a cost of reconciliation that the offended party must be willing to bear.** Think about Esau. After Jacob urged him, he *did* accept the gift. And the fact that he doesn't offer a similar gift in exchange means that he recognized it as a gift of restitution. And by accepting it, he communicates that the matter is settled and the relationship is restored.
 - But based on a cold calculation, those 550 animals Jacob offers pale in comparison to the immeasurable value of the Abrahamic blessing he stole. They're infinitesimal compared to all the blessings that Jacob has coming his way. **So in order to forgive his brother, Esau had to absorb a great cost. A great debt that he's owed.**

- ❖ That's the point. Forgiveness is never free. It's never cheap. It always costs you something. **Forgiveness means refusing to make the offender pay for what he or she did to you.** It's where you absorb the cost. You take it upon yourself instead of taking it out on those who hurt you. And even if they do try to make restitution, it very likely won't be equivalent to the loss you have to bear. Just like in Esau's case. **So if you're going to truly reconcile with them, then you have to be willing to bear a great cost. To absorb a great debt.**
 - I know it's easier said than done. I know, for some of you, the hurt is deep. The pain is great. Absorbing *that* is asking a lot. But that's why we've been stressing the importance of reconciling with God first. Because he knows the cost. He knows all about absorbing debt. Because that's what he did on the cross.
 - **The cross of Christ is the ultimate demonstration that forgiveness is costly.** That's where God absorbed the cost of our sins. He did that for you, so that you can become a new creation in Christ who would do the same for others. Forgiving one another as God in Christ Jesus forgave you (Eph 4:32).

The Impact of True Reconciliation

- ❖ True reconciliation comes with a cost. Let's be clear on that. But despite the cost, the pursuit of reconciliation is worth it. Because it has an impact far greater than you think. It definitely impacts the relationship with those you hurt or those who hurt you. **But there's a more far-reaching, missional impact to be made whenever true reconciliation is achieved.** This leads to our third and final observation – the impact of true reconciliation.
- ❖ Look back at v10. Let me read it again, *“Jacob said, “No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.”* That's a profound statement. Jacob is making that connection. **His reconciliation with his brother is connected to his reconciliation with God in the previous chapter.** That just reinforces our point that one reconciliation is the very source of the other.
 - But notice the particular point being made in that statement. *“For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God.”* Jacob is pleasantly surprised that the one whom he thought would hold wrath against him was instead extending acceptance. It reminded him of Peniel. It reminded him of the face of God.
 - And that's the point. **We get a glimpse of God's face in the face of those who graciously accept us.** Especially when we did the harm. When we know we deserve nothing but their wrath. To see acceptance on your face – to see forgiveness in your eyes – is like seeing the face of God.
- ❖ We already talked about how the gospel is the source for achieving reconciliation. **Well, my point here is that our reconciliation is a public stage for displaying the gospel.** One of the most powerful testimonies to the truth and beauty of the gospel of grace is a fully restored relationship between two people who were estranged by years of bitterness and resentment. **That kind of reconciliation preaches the gospel more powerfully than I can in this pulpit.** It's the gospel of gracious acceptance lived out for all the world to see.

- ❖ Think about the impact their reconciliation had on all of Jacob's family members. And all those four hundred men with Esau. They were also given the chance to see the gracious face of God in the face of Esau – as he embraced and kissed his brother. Think about how that impacted them as they returned home. To their own fractured relationships with a sibling, a spouse, a child, a colleague. Imagine all the relationships healed. All the lives changed.
 - **Like a pebble tossed into a still lake, who knows what kind of far-reaching, gospel impact will ripple and radiate from just one public act of true reconciliation?** Who knows what kind of impact you might have on others?
- ❖ Parents, think about the impact on your children. **If marital conflicts and reconciliation serve as a stage for displaying the gospel, then your children have front row seats.** But, sadly, our kids usually only see the conflict part – the fighting and bickering. Even if mom and dad do reconcile, it takes place later, behind closed doors. Our kids don't see it.
 - **If they don't see the signs of our reconciliation – our tears, our kisses, our embrace – if they don't see the look on our faces as we graciously accept our spouse – then they miss the chance to see the face of God.** So let's make every effort, as parents, to make our reconciliation as public as our fighting. For our children to see. To see a faint glimpse of the face of God.
- ❖ And this applies to more than just parents. All of us deal with relational conflict. **We all have people in our lives that we've hurt and people that have hurt us.** It might even be with people here this morning or in your small group. If we adopt a healthy practice of dealing with our relational conflicts, we could make a significant gospel impact as a community.
 - **Imagine what newcomers or seekers will think if they enter into a space where no one is pretending like we're perfect people in a perfect community.** Where we don't hide our relational struggles. Where our forgiveness and reconciliation is as open and public as our bickering and fighting.
- ❖ **Church, when we treat our reconciliation as a stage for displaying the gospel of grace, we do more than heal our personal relationships. We glorify God and his gospel.** We take this message we proclaim every Sunday and we embody it. We en flesh it. **We incarnate the gospel with the brokenness and the beauty of our human lives and relationships.** So that the whole world can see that our faith is more than just words. More than just sermons and sound doctrine.
 - **At the heart of our faith is a message of reconciliation that has the power to heal difficult marriages, to repair broken families, to reunite estranged siblings, and to restore fractured friendships.** The world doesn't need a church that simply holds to good theology. It needs a church that lives it out – that puts on display how the gospel impacts real relationships. Let's be that church for the world!