

Sin and Grace

Genesis 31:1-21

There is a grand and glorious conclusion to the fifth chapter of Romans. It is a chapter which so clearly defines how sin and condemnation came into the world through Adam, and how righteousness and justification came into the world through Christ. At the end of that great theological explanation, there are these words,

Rom. 5:20 “But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.”

That’s what we have here in Genesis 31. That’s actually what we have seen throughout the whole book of Genesis. “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.” In our text this morning sin is all over the place, especially the sin of covetousness. But God’s grace does much more abound! We’ll begin with the sin, and with an appropriate warning.

I. BEWARE THE SIN OF COVETOUSNESS.

Let me first define covetousness. There is a Greek word for covetousness used in the NT which simply combines the two words, “having” and “more.” So the simplest definition of covetousness is the desire to have more. More anything. But especially more mammon. More material things. More money. More clothes. More toys. A more expensive car. A bigger house.

If you want to know what our society wants more of, if you want to immediately identify what it is that we covet, watch commercials or online ads. Those commercials will be appealing to your incredible desire for more, your insatiable selfishness. They are a direct appeal to your covetousness, and they sell. That’s why advertisers spend millions and millions of dollars.

The Bible warns us about covetousness often. The ninth commandment, of course.

Exod. 20:17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

The Hebrew word for “covet” means desiring. Desiring for yourself that which belongs to someone else. Such desire leads to all sorts of evil, even unto death, as we read in,

James 1:14 “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”

We are warned about covetousness in other places even more specifically. Regarding the desire to have more money, a desire often provoked by the money which someone else has, we read in,

1Tim. 6:6 “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

So covetousness can be defined as the opposite of contentment. And it certainly betrays a weak faith. Ultimately, it is a contradiction of faith, for in Jesus’ own words,

Matt. 6:24 “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one

and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Jesus also said,

Luke 12:15 “And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”

And the direct warning of,

1John 2:15 “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.”

Beware of the sin of covetousness. You can’t miss that exhortation in those verses!

But we do. Because we don’t see it in ourselves. Maybe we see it in others, but not in ourselves. We can see greed in others sometimes, much more quickly than we can see it in ourselves. But studying this chapter in Genesis will help us to see it, because we can see what it produces. First and foremost,

A. Covetousness produces envy.

Now, what is envy? It is your discontentment and resentment provoked by covetousness, provoked by the situation of someone else. Envy almost always comes from covetousness. They are so closely related, for the discontentment of envy comes from “wanting more.” And envy is so destructive.

Look at the example of Laban’s sons.

v.1

Jacob had prospered greatly, more so than Laban. And since

the sons had too much of their father’s heart in them, they couldn’t stand to see Jacob grow wealthy. Their resentment and bitterness is obvious by the way in which they overstate the case, “Jacob has taken EVERYTHING our father owned.”

Well, not exactly everything. Laban wasn’t in the poor house. Actually, he was probably still much better off than he was 20 years earlier, when Jacob began working for him. But at this point, he wasn’t as prosperous as Jacob. That resentment is called envy. Selfish envy. What a horrible thing envy is.

The sin of envy is a barrier to the gospel, it’s a barrier to any form of advancement in life. I know a little about that, having done very well when I was in school. I often faced ridicule for doing well! For getting good grades! It is a very common experience. That ridicule is the very reason why many people fail to work up to their own potential. Because of such envy, everyone, in effect, works down to the level of the lowest common denominator.

The incentive to succeed, the incentive to excel, is absolutely destroyed. In parts of our culture, that also applies to getting good jobs. In some communities, if you got a stable, well-paying job, you might risk becoming an outcast. So everyone stays in temporary, low-paying jobs or on welfare. Everyone works down to the level of the lowest common denominator.

We call it dunning down. We lower our standards to the level of those below, where everyone stays. Too often, we feel like we have to apologize for success, or for some specific achievement or blessing? Too often, the more successful person made to feel guilty for hurting the self-esteem of the less successful person? Because of envy!

Envy is such a terrible, terrible thing. It is a sin, a sin prompted by the heart-condition called covetousness. Wanting more. And because you want more, you try to keep others from getting more first.

There are inevitable consequences to envy. Jacob found out what they were, dealing with Laban and his sons.
v.2

That's a nice way of saying that Laban was furious with him! Likewise, as he explained rather gently to his two wives, Laban's daughters,
v.4-5

Jacob figured out that Laban was not friendly to him! I guess after 20 years of dealing with all Laban's wickedness, that wasn't too hard to figure out! Put very simply,

B. Covetousness produces anger and conflict.

Jacob is the object of Laban's anger, and he is in deep trouble. He didn't ask for the conflict, and in fact, he had done everything in his power to avoid it. But because of covetousness, Laban was angry!

And because he was angry, there was conflict. Conflict so severe, that Jacob was compelled to leave. So it is with covetousness. It produces anger. And conflict.

That conflict was obviously originating with Laban, for we see Laban acting totally inappropriately with Jacob. Again, not just that he tricked Jacob into marrying Leah and not Rachel, after an oppressive seven years of free labor. And not just that he compelled Jacob to work as a slave another seven years for Rachel. But that Laban violated the working agreement that they

made in the previous chapter frequently, repeatedly.
v.6-7

Again, the fruit of covetousness.

C. Covetousness produces cheating and deception.

Ten times is likely a round number, meaning "just as often as he could." We might say, "a dozen." Or even, "time after time." Time after time, Laban violated that agreement. He attempted to cheat Jacob out of any profit. And, of course, when Jacob's profits continue to increase, Laban just tried over and over to put an end to it.

One would wonder why Jacob would put up with such evil, apparently free to go anytime during those last six years of labor.

But he stayed. And endured. And as we'll see later, continued to be blessed. But no thanks to Laban. Look at what he did, as an example of how he changed Jacob's wages.

v.8-9

Though those verses demonstrate how God took care of Jacob, notice how they describe Laban's treachery. If Laban saw that the cattle were producing striped cattle, he would tell Jacob he decided that only the speckled would be his wages. Then, when the cattle would produce speckled offspring, he would change it again to the streaked ones. But by the original agreement, all the striped, speckled and streaked cattle were to be Jacob's wages.

Laban is trying to cheat him out of what was rightfully his! Such despicable cheating! Such wicked deception. All produced by covetousness. Indeed, the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil!

Then, we have Rachel and Leah, Jacob's wives.

v.14-16

D. Covetousness produces selfish pragmatism.

Now, here I need to say first that Rachel and Leah responded well to Jacob's request. He asked them to leave their home, their father's home where they had lived all their lives. He asked them to go to a place which was, for them, a foreign country.

They correctly understood that the request actually came from God.

v.13

So they agreed to go. Without complaint or any hesitation indicated. That was praiseworthy. But this text does give us an insight into their reasoning, which I believe can best be described as selfish pragmatism. Pragmatism means doing what works. It means making decisions based upon what is expedient or beneficial, not necessarily based upon what is right or wrong according to set principles or convictions. What matters is practical consequences, and not predetermined values.

In the most extreme sense, a pragmatist has no values at all, except to do whatever is beneficial at the moment. And the measure of what is beneficial, is usually selfish.

Let me give you an example. Without addressing the specific political issues, it's fair to say that many people in our country vote as pragmatists. That is, they don't vote for or against the President with a deep-rooted sense of core values, but rather with a sense of "what's in it for me." Especially economically. If things are going well economically, then the current President is reelected. If things are not going well economically, then the current President is not reelected.

That pattern crosses party lines. If people are better off, they stay with whoever is in office. And if they are worse off, they vote out whoever is in office, whether it's Carter or Bush. We make a lot of decisions that way. It's called selfish pragmatism. Or in more down to earth terms, "What's in it for me?"

Look at the reason which Rachel and Leah gave for agreeing to leave with Jacob. It was their own well-being! After all, their would be no reason to stay with Laban, since they had no inheritance left.

v.14

They realized that their own father treated them as foreigners, not as daughters, that he had sold them into marriage, and then used up all the money himself, instead of using it for them and for their benefit.

v.15

Therefore, they conclude,

v.16

"The money is ours. Let's go." So they left, with all their things.

v.17-18

Now, by itself, this is a bit of a harsh evaluation, but that is the reasoning that we're given. It's basically selfish. They agree to what God commands because their best material interests are not being served by the present arrangements.

My point is that covetousness produces such selfishness. Covetousness destroys the principles, convictions, and values of a man, and causes him to think only of himself and his own benefit. We certainly live in such a society today!

One more danger of covetousness.

E. Covetousness produces idolatry.

Look what happened right before they left.

v.19

What are the household gods? Literally, in Hebrew, it is the word teraphim. The teraphim were idols, statues of some sort to which the people bowed down and worshiped. Clearly, Laban had not freed himself entirely from the pagan worship which surrounded him!

But why did Rachel steal them? Several suggestions are offered by the commentators. They are all somewhat related, and aren't necessarily contradictory. The teraphim were used by the pagans to promote household prosperity. In other words, there was a superstitious or magical idea that these idols would bring good luck and good fortune. Rachel wants that for herself, and likely also wants to deprive Laban of whatever benefit they might bring him.

Another suggestion is that possession of the teraphim was the proof of a family relationship and the legal grounds for actually obtaining the family inheritance. That would be of obvious value to Rachel, who no doubt felt that she couldn't trust her father.

Further, the teraphim are also described in Scripture as being used for divination, or fortune telling. Predicting the future, supposedly revealing God's will. And such attempts to obtain a revelation from God are false.

Zech. 10:1 "Ask the LORD for rain In the time of the latter rain. The LORD will make flashing clouds; He will give them showers of rain, Grass in the field for everyone. 2 For the idols speak delusion; The diviners envision lies, And tell false dreams;

They comfort in vain. Therefore the people wend their way like sheep; They are in trouble because there is no shepherd."

The teraphim were therefore a form of idolatry, seeking from idols revelation that can only come from God. But people wanting to get rich or stay rich, like Rachel perhaps, would turn to such idolatry because of their covetousness.

People today will turn to astrology to guide their investments in the stock market and other places. People still seek revelation from idols in an attempt to bring about their own peace and prosperity. Covetousness produces idolatry. And in fact, the Apostle Paul defines covetousness as idolatry.

Col. 3:5 "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

But again, my main point. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." So enough about covetousness.

II. BEHOLD THE GRACE OF GOD.

This chapter isn't simply about a righteous man fleeing from a selfish father-in-law. What is God doing in this passage? He is building the nation of Israel, the nation of his people. Jacob is the father of that nation, the father of the twelve tribes. Jacob's name will soon be changed to Israel. But Jacob is living in Egypt. He's been there for 20 years. For the nation to be established, Jacob and his twelve sons have to live in the land which God had promised them. They had to return to the land of Canaan.

And so they did.

v.17-18

God is accomplishing his purposes. God is carrying out his

predetermined will. God is causing all things to work together for the creation of the nation of Israel.

And in doing so, we learn a great deal about how the Lord provides for his people. What the Lord does for Jacob, he does for us, too. Specifically the Lord is protecting and providing for his people, which means that he leads them away from danger. He directs their paths. What we see with Jacob is that,

A. The Lord guides his people out of danger.

They escaped from the wickedness and oppression of Laban.

v.13

v.3

And most clearly,

v.20-21

Now, the question comes, was that a proper thing to do or was it a wrong thing to do? My commentaries differ, which does seem to indicate that the text itself doesn't give us a definitive answer. Jacob's actions are not evaluated, just described.

But it says Jacob deceived Laban. Some, therefore, say that he was wrong to leave. They say he should have stayed and only left if he did it openly, going to Laban personally and announcing his intentions. They believe that was the only honorable thing to do. Jacob should put aside any fear of the consequences, and outwardly and boldly do what God had called him to do. Leaving secretly, deceptively, is seen as Jacob relying upon his own devices instead of relying upon God.

On the other extreme, Calvin finds fault with Jacob for not leaving soon enough, accusing him of remaining behind with Laban all those years out of fear and lack of trust. The

admonition, from this interpretation, is also to act boldly and confidently, but doesn't fault Jacob for leaving secretly, just for leaving so late.

My view would be somewhere in the middle, though I find no fault with Jacob leaving secretly. He had no duty bound obligation or oath to Laban. He was not a slave, but a free man, and was free to leave. He was his own man, with his own family, and was not obligated to get Laban's permission to act.

He made his decision, and he left. I believe he was wise to leave secretly, for Laban's wickedness was certainly obvious, and a man is not obligated to put himself in greater danger. Leaving secretly involved no lying, and no harm to Laban. It involved no breach of contract. So it was perfectly lawful.

But the point is that the Lord guides his people out of danger. Secondly, as a demonstration of the grace of God,

B. The Lord establishes justice for his people.

Again, I believe Jacob can be seen as a general example for God's people. The Lord loves justice, that is, each one getting what they deserve, which is both good for those who do good and bad for those who do bad.

In Jacob's case, justice meant getting proper wages! The Lord certainly saw to it that Jacob was properly paid, despite Laban's repeated attempts to cheat him.

Jacob understood those attempts to cheat him, and he realized how fully God had blessed him! As he explained to his wives,

v.7

Specifically, as we've already seen,
v.8

And the correct evaluation of all that is in,
v.9

God did it. God took away the livestock of Laban and gave it to Jacob. God established justice. Then Jacob tells us about his dream.

v.10-12

It's possible that the meaning of this dream is that while Jacob sees the solid color livestock mating, God enables him to see them as streaked, speckled, or spotted, referring to their recessive genes for abnormal color which would become dominant in the offspring. At the very least, this dream is a revelation to make Jacob aware of the fact that even this matter of breeding was being regulated entirely by God's providence, and that Jacob could put full confidence in God to guard his best interests. That's justice.

God would see to it! And it would be a personal justice. God would personally take care of Jacob. Because of his grace,

C. The Lord promises his personal presence.
v.3

What a precious promise, repeated over and over again to the patriarchs. It is the most important promise that we could ever receive. It is a promise for us today. It is the promise of the covenant. "I will be with you."

Jacob understood that promise, and treasured it.
v.5

What a wonderful thing to be able to say. "I've had this particular trouble, but God has been with me." You ought to practice saying that to people. Such a strong faith.

And then, from God's own mouth.
v.13

Remember Jacob's vow at Bethel.

Gen. 28:20 "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. 22 And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

God is answering that vow, saying to Jacob, "I am with you. I will watch over you. I will give you food to eat and clothes to wear. I am the Lord." God is saying to Jacob, "I am with you."

So make this very contemporary. Consider your own life, and whatever difficulty you might have to endure? Whatever the trouble? Or whatever sin you are struggling with? Whatever uncertainty? Whatever challenge stands before you? Whatever it might be, as you read Genesis 31, behold the grace of God. God will be with you.

Israel needed that frequent encouragement, just as we do. So let end with the encouragement Israel received just before they would finally enter the promised land, just before Moses would die. It is words of encouragement that speak directly to your situation, no matter what you're experiencing.

Deut. 31:1 :Then Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. 2 And he said to them: "I am one hundred and twenty years old today. I can no longer go out and come in. Also the

LORD has said to me, You shall not cross over this Jordan.’ 3 The LORD your God Himself crosses over before you; He will destroy these nations from before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua himself crosses over before you, just as the LORD has said. 4 And the LORD will do to them as He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites and their land, when He destroyed them. 5 The LORD will give them over to you, that you may do to them according to every commandment which I have commanded you. 6 Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.”