

SHIFT Sermon Series: WEEK FOUR
By Rev. Malcolm Smith

“WHY HAVE YOU DECEIVED ME?”

After Jacob finishes working seven years for Rachel, Laban organizes a big party to celebrate. But, the next morning, Jacob realizes that Laban has given him Leah instead of Rachel. Imagine how furious you would be if you were Jacob. “Why did you trick me? This was not the deal!”

This week is about times when we experience similar frustration about things not working out the way we wanted them to in our spiritual lives. We may not always be conscious of it but sometimes we make deals with God, “OK, I’ll try my best to be the peaceful, kind person you want me to be and then You’ll make things work out for me.” And then we feel tricked when that deal falls through. We do better for a while with managing our anger but then there’s the perfect storm of a stressful week of work and our children being bratty and disrespectful and we find ourselves so angry that we want to punch something. We wake up and find out that we got Leah instead and we still don’t have Rachel.

“I’ve been working on handling my anger in a better way for seven years and I’ve gotten nowhere! This wasn’t the deal!” We feel frustrated with the Lord, frustrated with our situation in life, and frustrated with ourselves. This is not how we wanted things to work out and yet, unfortunately often, this is how they do work out.

WHERE IS GOD IN ALL OF THIS?

On the surface level this story can seem pretty distasteful and depressing—a man with two wives who are willing to do anything to have his children, including giving their servants to him to sleep with and bartering for the right to sleep with him. What a change from the beautiful story of falling in love that came just before. It’s easy to think “It would have been a lot better example for children if Jacob had just married Rachel and there wasn’t any of this mess with Leah and the handmaids.”

We might wonder why God didn’t intervene and keep Jacob from being tricked by Laban. But the confusing thing is that when God does play a role in the story it seems like He’s on Leah’s side. “When Jehovah saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.” (Genesis 29:31). Whether or not Jacob and Rachel like it, Leah is part of God’s plan in the story and, whether or not we like it, Leah is part of God’s plan for our lives.

At one point in the story Rachel says to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die!” and Jacob angrily responds, “Am I in the place of God?” (Genesis 30:1-2). When we’re upset about things not going according to our plans we can very easily slip into putting ourselves in the place of God—thinking “This is not what’s supposed to be happening! If God knew what He was doing, He would change these things....”

And yet, God does know what He's doing. He knows that Rachel won't be able to have children unless Leah has children first. (Rachel is finally able to have Joseph because of what Reuben finds in the field.) In a similar way, the Lord knows that we won't be able to make any progress towards our ideals, no matter how good they are, without some less elevated goals to work for along the way.

“IT MUST NOT BE DONE SO IN OUR COUNTRY, TO GIVE THE YOUNGER BEFORE THE FIRSTBORN.”

When Jacob asks Laban why he's deceived him Laban tells him “It must not be done so in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.” This sounds like just a poor excuse for Laban to get twice as much work out of Jacob and it seems like this whole problem could have been avoided if Laban had followed through with the original deal. The reality it represents, however, is unavoidable: even though we want our ideals now something else has to come first.

The problem is that, when we start out, we love the *ideal* of Rachel but we don't love the *reality* of Rachel. We love the ideal of being a humble person but we don't love the reality of stopping trying to impress people. We may think that it's true that it's better to be humble but we'd prefer it to be true that it's good to be full of ourselves. And so we're given the firstborn (Leah) first before the younger (Rachel).

Take the area of physical health as an example: Rachel is the ideal of having healthy body and mind so that we can serve other people. At first it's unlikely that this ideal is going to get us to eat any more healthily or make us any more likely to get off the couch to go exercise. We might even say, “I know that I shouldn't be eating this...” or, “I know I should exercise more...” as we stay on the couch, eating a bag of chips.

[W]ith a person who feels an affection for internal truth [Rachel], that is, has a desire to know the more internal secrets of the Lord's kingdom, those secrets are not in the beginning joined to him even though he knows them and sometimes even though he acknowledges and seemingly believes them. For worldly and bodily affections are still present, and these cause him to take them in and seemingly believe them. But insofar as those affections are present those truths cannot be joined to him. (Secrets of Heaven 3834)

Some Leah ideas, on the other hand, might actually make a difference—you'll be better looking if you eat more healthily, you'll feel better and have more energy if you exercise regularly, find someone to be your exercise partner. Jacob doesn't just marry Leah first. She also has children first. Leah is practical, everyday ideas that produce visible results.

We might wonder, then, whether we actually need Rachel. But, in the story, Jacob never would have married Leah if he hadn't fallen in love with Rachel and been working for her. And Leah has weak eyes—she's short-sighted, she doesn't see the whole picture. Just like health fads come and go, Leah ideas are not always something you can always

rely on. And, though Leah ideas can help us eat more healthily and can get us to exercise more, they're never going to get beyond the external, somewhat self-oriented reasons for doing it. We need Rachel to remind us that the point of being healthy is to be able to help other people and serve the Lord.

Each of Jacob's sons represents a key part of the process of spiritual growth. The first four—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah—represent the four main stages of spiritual growth and so provide a useful way of summarizing the process that we're looking at in more detail as we work our way through the Jacob story.

'Reuben' meant truth as this exists on the first step in regeneration or rebirth - truth which is no more than knowledge, and so merely a knowledge of truth. 'Simeon' meant truth as this exists on the second step in regeneration or rebirth - truth present in the will, and so a will desiring truth. 'Levi' meant truth as it exists on the third step in regeneration or rebirth - truth for which one feels an affection, and so an affection for truth, which is the same as charity. But 'Judah' meant good which exists on the fourth step in regeneration or rebirth - good which is the celestial form of love. When a person who has been regenerated or born anew has come this far the Lord manifests Himself to him, for he has by now risen up from the lowest step, as if by a stairway, to the one where the Lord is." (Secrets of Heaven 3882)

WORKING WITH THE PROCESS

When we understand that the plan that the Lord has for our spiritual growth involves more than just the ideal of Rachel we can be better prepared to respond to the ups and downs that we're inevitably going to experience. When we fall short of our ideal of being a peaceful and anger-free person, rather than beating ourselves up about it, we can know that it's just the reality of where we are right now and we can work on finding some lower goals to work towards in the meanwhile. Maybe we just say to ourselves, "If I can get through a week without letting my anger burst out at

my coworkers or family, then I can buy myself a muffin at the end of the week."

The point is to find ways to keep working towards our ideals, even though we can't achieve them yet. And as we do that, good things will happen. Though it was a difficult time, by the end of it, Jacob had eleven children and Rachel had finally had one herself.

Sometimes a focus on being perfect can get in the way of doing what we need to do today. Take for example the internal truth that all good comes from the Lord and that no good exists which springs from a person's autonomy. This truth can be known when regeneration begins, but it cannot as yet be acknowledged in action as well as in faith since the acknowledgement of it in faith and action involves a discernment in the mind that that truth is indeed a truth and a desire in the heart for it to be a truth; and this is the situation whenever good is put into action. That acknowledgement also involves the discernment that good springing from the proprium inevitably entails self-regard, thus

Real-life examples:

- I was going to get a degree but then kids came along.
- I was going to finally get the house that I wanted but then I had to look after my aging, ailing parent.
- Even on just a given day, I was going to make such a dynamic presentation but then I was up looking after my sick kid all night.
- I want to be a lawyer to bring justice. Dang! Law school is hard.
- I loved the honeymoon state and then the reality that marriage isn't easy hit.
- I want to be useful and serve people. But people are annoying and don't do just what you want them to or aren't grateful or keep asking for more when you've given all you can.

get disappointed. But if we stop then, then we'll never learn how to paint that well. Let's close by reading the passage from *Secrets of Heaven* 3843.

putting self before others, and as a consequence contempt for others and above all thoughts of merit for the good that one does. These faults are present in external truth before internal truth has been joined to it, and the two cannot be joined together until self-regard starts to wane and a regard for the neighbor begins to be felt. (*Secrets of Heaven* 3906:2)

Question: can you tell that there are things you believe to be true but don't really want to be true?

THE POWER OF HABITS

It takes time to learn how to paint a picture. It takes time to learn how to live our ideals. We might see an amazing painting and be inspired to try painting. When we try to do it ourselves we may