

"Reaping What You Sow"
Sermon Series on *A Faithful God for a Fallen People*
(Gen. 29:1-30)
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Introduction

For some reason we have a tendency to think we can be deceptive with people and get away with it. For example, back in 2010, a reality show premiered on television called *Meet the Parents*. The show presented three guys who spent a weekend with a young woman and her parents in their home, each hoping that he would be the one chosen by the parents to enjoy a vacation in Hawaii with their daughter. The last test to which the contestants were subjected was a lie detector. Without fail, each of the men was stressed even by the thought of such a test. And without fail each man lied in order to protect his chances of winning, even though he was hooked up to a machine that caught him in his deception!

Or take another example from just this past week. U.S. Olympic swimmer Ryan Lochte thought he could get away with fabricating a story about being robbed at gunpoint in Rio de Janeiro during the Olympics. But the truth has come out that the swimmer was lying when he said that he and his teammates were robbed and someone pointed a gun at his head. It turns out one of his teammates vandalized a door to a bathroom at a gas station, and the security guard and the owner told them they needed to pay for the damage. Ryan has tarnished his reputation badly, and he's also probably lost millions of dollars in endorsements all because of his deception.

For some reason we think we can be deceptive with people and get away with it. We think we can lie or shade the truth, and it won't find us out. But the truth always has a way of coming out, and sooner or later, as the old saying goes, we reap what we sow. It's a truth in agriculture, and it's also a truth in life. Jacob learned this lesson himself, and we read about it in Genesis 29.

I. The Courtship

Some people fall in love the first time they meet. It's love at first sight. For example, Wilfred Grenfell was a medical missionary to Labrador, which is north of Newfoundland in Canada, in the early part of the 20th century. And he was a fast worker when it came to falling in love. He was on board a ship returning to England in 1908 when he spotted a charming young lady on deck. He was forty-three years old at the time, so it wasn't as though he had never seen a beautiful

woman before. But this woman had such an appeal to him that he proposed to her shortly after they met. Naturally, she resisted saying, "But you don't even know my name."

He responded, "It doesn't matter; I know what your name is going to be!"¹

They were married the next year.

This was a case of love at first sight. On some very rare occasions people fall in love the first time they lay eyes on each other. We read of another such instance in Genesis 29.

Rachel came to a well with her flock of sheep, and Jacob was instantly a hero by rolling the stone away from the mouth of the well to impress her. A short time later he was negotiating her hand in marriage, as was the custom in the ancient Near East. But the story takes on characteristics of complexity and struggle as Laban put his oldest daughter Leah into Jacob's bed on his wedding night, and this began a lifetime of conflict and competition in Jacob's love life. We'll talk about that more next week.

Jacob's love for Rachel was strong. He wanted to marry her so much so that he was willing to work for seven years in order to earn her hand in marriage. Verse 20 of our passage says that the seven years were like only a few days to Jacob because of his love for Rachel. Love has a way of motivating a person. It provides extra energy and joy. And even after the deception by his uncle Laban, Jacob worked another seven years to fulfill Laban's demand - a total of fourteen years! Now, that's real love!

It's amazing what a person will do when they're in love. When Lorie and I were in seminary in Boston, I remember a time when I talked my friend Allan Poole into going with me to pick up some sandwiches from our favorite spot, Nick's Roast Beef, and we took them to Lorie's apartment in the town of Manchester by the Sea. That might not seem like a very valiant task which was driven by love to you, but it was beginning to snow pretty hard, and a big storm was in the forecast.

Allan and I made it to Lorie's apartment and back to the seminary, but barely. The Blizzard of '78 set in with what New Englanders call a Nor'easter storm, and twenty-eight inches of snow fell in twenty-four hours. Boston and the whole state of Massachusetts were shut down for five days after that night. I even had to put Allan in the trunk of my car in order to gain enough traction just to get up the hill at the seminary. Love prompts us to do some pretty crazy things, doesn't it?!

Jacob enthusiastically went to work for Laban as he looked forward to his wedding day with Rachel. When the seven years were up, he went to his uncle and said, "*Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to lie with her*" (*Gen. 29:21*). I think it's interesting to note this passage affirms that Jacob and Rachel had not arranged a secret love affair along the way during the seven years,

and they were not sexually active before they got married. For seven years they remained chaste and had not slept together! True love waits. And it doesn't pressure or seek the joys of the marriage bed before the wedding day. That's something every young person and every young couple needs to hear these days.

II. The Switch

Laban agreed to fulfill his end of the bargain, and our passage says that he "*brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast*" (Gen. 29:22). It was a big wedding banquet. But then Jacob experienced the surprise of his life! After the celebration, when it came time for Jacob and his bride to be alone, Laban substituted Leah for Rachel.

Some have wondered how this could have happened. How could Jacob not have known he was sleeping with Leah rather than Rachel? In the ancient Near East, it was the custom for women to be veiled, especially at their weddings, in much the same way we see women veiled in Muslim countries today. In addition, it was dark after the day of celebration out in the desert, and Leah may have been wearing Rachel's clothes and even Rachel's perfume. Perhaps Leah and Rachel resembled each other in the way they spoke as sisters sometimes do. In the darkness of the desert, and after a day of partying, Jacob slipped into the tent after the wedding feast, made love to Leah and fell asleep in her arms.

But the next morning when he awoke, there was Leah! Can you imagine his surprise? Jacob confronted Laban and he asked, "*What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?*" (Gen. 29:25). Laban replied that it was not the custom in that part of the world to give the younger daughter in marriage until the older one had been married.

Then Laban tried to smooth things over, and he offered Rachel's hand in marriage as well in exchange for another seven years of service. Finish out the honeymoon with Leah, he said, and Jacob could marry Rachel as well. Jacob agreed to this arrangement. And a week later he and Rachel were married, and he began seven more years of service to his deceitful uncle.

Have you ever had someone pull a switch on you? You thought you were getting one thing, but they gave you another. You believed you had an agreement, but they changed the terms on you at the last minute. If this has ever happened to you, then you can imagine the expression on Jacob's face when the next morning he woke up, and there was Leah! However, God used even this to teach Jacob a valuable lesson, and that leads us to the final point I want you to consider this morning.

III. The Lesson

What happened to Jacob was a painful experience, and the embarrassment and disappointment must have been incredible. Imagine his frustration when he asked Laban, “Why have you deceived me?” That question says it all, doesn’t it? But notice the correlations in this story with what Jacob and his mother did to his father Isaac and his brother Esau in the passage we studied two weeks ago. The lesson God taught Jacob through this whole experience is the principle that says what goes around comes around, or, as Scripture says elsewhere, you reap what you sow.

Life is filled with irony, isn’t it? It’s like this picture of a truck that got stuck trying to go under a bridge, and the truck was too tall. On the side of the truck these words are painted, “On the road to success. There are no shortcuts.”

Or this picture of a guy who is standing precariously on the handrails of some stairs trying to hang a sign that says, “Think safety first!” Now that’s ironic!

There are three ironic aspects of the story we have read this morning. The *first irony* is that in being given Leah first and then Rachel, Jacob was forced to learn that the right of the firstborn should be respected. That was something he wasn’t willing to do in the case of his own brother Esau. Laban appealed to the same tradition of the firstborn coming first in all things related to the family in order to defend his actions. It was the very same tradition Jacob and Rebekah had subverted seven years before.

The *second irony* is that even though Jacob was the child of promise and God told his parents that the younger boy would be served by the older one, Jacob had to learn what service was really all about. He had to work hard for Laban for a total of fourteen years before he completed his time of service. Being a person of promise and privilege doesn’t exempt you from learning the lessons of humble service so you can appreciate the blessings God is giving you.

The *final and greatest irony* was that Jacob was deceived by Rachel's father, just as Jacob had deceived his own dad. In Laban Jacob had met his match. Here the deceiver was himself deceived, and he reaped what he had sown. You’ll remember that Jacob pretended to be Esau, and Isaac was deceived. Leah pretended to be Rachel, and Jacob was deceived. What goes around comes around. I wonder when the irony of it all set in on Jacob. God was teaching him a lesson he would never forget.

How can you and I break the cycle of reaping the bad things we have sown? What is the key to living a new way? I believe that the way you begin to break the cycle of negativity is by sowing seeds of goodness and grace. That’s the only way to overcome the negative consequences of our poor choices. The laws of agriculture and the laws of spiritual accountability don’t change. We’re the ones

who must change if we want to see different results. And when you do, you'll be amazed at the fruit that can be produced in your life.

When my friend Craig Barnes was growing up, his father, who was a pastor, brought home a twelve-year-old boy named Roger one day. Roger's parents had both been killed by a drug overdose. As the family's pastor, Craig's father did all he could to help. When it was clear to Craig's parents that there was no one else who cared about Roger, they decided to raise him as if he were one of their own sons.

Craig says his parents did a wonderful thing in making Roger a part of their family, but it created a lot of work for everyone, and it wasn't easy. You can imagine that growing up in the home of heroin addicts was a different experience than what Roger discovered in the home of Craig's pietistic parents. Many times they would say to him, "No, no, Roger, that's not how we act here. You don't have to fight or scream or hurt others to get what you want. We expect you to act differently here."

With his biological parents constantly stoned, Roger spent the first twelve years of his life hurt, frightened, and self-absorbed, and he used to worry if there would be enough food for him. But now, in his new home he had to learn about sharing, manners, and family chores. Gradually, over a period of time, Roger began to change in amazing ways. Eventually, he graduated from college, and he joined the army.

A couple of years later, a telegram came to the house relating the tragic news that Roger had been killed in an act of heroism in the Vietnam War. It was a terrible day for the whole family. Craig remembers his mother's tears most of all. She wept not only because of the grief of loss, but also because she was so proud of Roger. He had given his life in order to save others. Now, where in the world could Roger have learned how to do that unless it was from the sacrificial love of Craig's parents?²

What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow. It's true on the farm. It's also true in life. And this truth cuts in both positive as well as negative ways.

Conclusion.

As we close, let me ask you – how are you reaping what you've sown in the past, and what negative consequences of your sin are you having to deal with right now? What lessons is God teaching you, like Jacob, and what are you going to learn from it all?

Second, how might you sow seeds of grace and truth this next week which will reap a harvest of goodness down the road? In what ways can you sow seeds of blessing to others, just like my friend Craig's family did?

In his book *Traveling Light*, pastor and author Eugene Peterson writes: "Every word of encouragement, every prayer of intercession, every act of helping is seed which will mature to eternal life. And every word of criticism, every avoidance of compassion, every indulgence of greed is a seed that will mature to evil corruption. There is no possibility of deception in life. The uses and misuses of freedom, private ventures done in secret through either modesty or shame, have public results."³

Jacob would agree with what Eugene wrote in his book. The patriarch learned you really do reap what you sow – in positive and negative ways. Let's think about these matters, and live in the light of this truth in the coming week. Amen.

¹Taken from a sermon by Glenn Pease titled, "The Celebration of Love". Unpublished.

²Adapted from an article Craig Barnes wrote in *Leadership Journal* titled, "It's Not About You," Winter 2001, pp. 34-39.

³Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, p. unknown.