

In Spite of Myself

1. Warm up: On Sunday Jeff told how he once tried to make his Grandma's famous yeast rolls for a family gathering and ended up serving the rolls with perfectly formed cat paw prints embedded in them. Tell us about one of your cooking catastrophes.

2. We all fail, sometimes in little things like cooking, but other times in major ways. Today we're talking about major failures, i.e., moral failure and character flaws as exemplified in the life of Jacob. Jacob's name means "he who grasps" and "he who supplants." In prior weeks, we've seen that Jacob came from a broken family where parents played favorites. We also saw how Jacob took advantage of his elder brother Esau in a moment of weakness, acquiring his birthright for a bowl of soup, and how years later he tricked his father into giving him the deathbed blessing intended for Esau. Let's re-read a portion of that story, Genesis 27:18-29, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. In what we just read, what impressions do you get of Jacob? How would you describe him?
 - b. Would you want Jacob to be your brother or your small group leader at church? Why or why not?
 - c. If you had to pick one word to describe how you feel about Jacob, what would you choose – and why?

3. The major storyline of the Old Testament is about fall and redemption. God created us humans intending that we live in, and faithfully tend to, an earthly paradise. But as soon as creation was completed, we said, "Thanks, God. We'll take it from here. We don't need you anymore." Soon paradise was lost. But God didn't give up on us. God hatched a Redemption Plan. God's dreamed of raising up a great nation that would model goodness, share God's truth with all humanity, and eventually birth a Messiah to complete the redemption process. But first that nation had to be born.
 - a. Suppose you were God (heaven help us) and you were selecting someone through whom to birth this new nation that would be a light to the world and create the potential for global spiritual redemption. Of all the people you personally have known (or have read about), who is someone you might choose to be the father or mother of that great nation? Explain why you'd choose that person.
 - b. It's stunning that of all the people on the planet God could have chosen to birth a great spiritual nation, God chose someone as flawed as Jacob. In future weeks, we'll see that eventually Jacob gets renamed Israel, fathers twelve sons, and the offspring of those sons ultimately become the twelve tribes of Israel. Actually, it's not unusual for God to use people with great moral failings. Moses murdered someone, King David committed adultery, Esther hid her Jewish heritage for a time, Gideon cowered in fear, Mary once doubted her Son's calling, Peter denied knowing Jesus, and the list goes on and on. What should we draw from all this?

- c. Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Put that verse in your own words. What do you hear it saying?
 - d. Ephesians 2:4 says, “But God, who is rich in mercy . . . , loved us even when we were dead in trespasses [and] made us alive together with Christ.” What do you think that verse means?
 - e. Years later as an older man, Jacob looked back on his life, with all its twists and turns, and said to God, “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.” Genesis 32:10. Do you ever feel that way? What makes you feel that way?
4. When wondering why God seems to always choose flawed people to do great things, Jeff said, “Maybe because that’s the only kind of people there are.” He went on to point out that even Mother Teresa often secretly doubted God and her faith. Even St. Francis of Assisi had a mean streak, once forcing a monk to place a coin in a dung heap with his lips. It seems like we all have our demons, even so-called saints.
- a. When you hear about the flaws of great spiritual leaders like Mother Teresa and St. Francis, how does that make you feel?
 - b. Who is someone whose life has overlapped with yours whom you regard as a great spiritual hero? Why are they such a hero to you? As best you can tell, did that person have any major flaws? If so, why do you still regard them as a hero?
 - c. Jeff regards Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the greatest spiritual hero of our generation. Jeff told about how disappointed he was to read that Dr. King might have succumbed to adultery. But after thinking about it, Jeff concluded, “If heroes have to struggle with great flaws like the rest of us, yet push forward anyway and allow God to use them in spite of their flaws, that makes them even greater still. Dr. King isn’t great because he was perfect. He’s great because he did incredible things in spite of his imperfections.” Your thoughts? Assume for the sake of argument that Dr. King was guilty of adultery. How should that affect how we think about him?
 - d. What’s the difference between a flawed hero and a truly bad person?
 - e. To the extent you’re comfortable sharing, what would you say is one of your inner demons, character flaws, or significant weaknesses?
 - f. Do you ever find yourself doubting whether God can use you to do great things? What tends to trigger those doubts?
 - g. Jeff said, “Failure is not a reason to get discouraged and give up. Life’s gritty. Life’s messy. Life’s complex and far from perfect, and so are we. Despite it all, God still can use you and me to do great things. God’s grace is greater than our failures.” Do you genuinely believe God can use you to do great things? What’s something beautiful God has used you to do in spite of yourself?

Genesis 27:18-29

[As we pick up the story, Jacob's mother has urged him to go to Isaac (his blind, dying father) and impersonate his older brother Esau, in hopes of tricking his father into mistakenly granting him Esau's blessing.]

18 So Jacob went in to his father, and said, "My father;" and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" ¹⁹Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." ²⁰But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success."

²¹Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." ²²So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." ²³He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. ²⁴He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" Jacob answered, "I am."

²⁵Then Isaac said, "Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. ²⁶Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." ²⁷So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said, "Ah, the smell of my son

is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed.

²⁸ May God give you of the dew of heaven,
and of the fatness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and wine.

²⁹ Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you,
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"