

Tricks and Truth
Genesis 29:16–30
Sunday, July 19, 2026

Let us pray: Lord, your Word is *good* and *true*. Help us to *hear* your Word and to *live it out*, so that we might be good and true, in Jesus' name. Amen.

When we left off last week, Jacob had run away from home with his brother Esau wanting to kill him for stealing his birthright and their father's blessing. Jacob runs out into the wilderness until he can't run anymore, and he stops to sleep. While he sleeps, he has a dream in which he sees a ladder reaching from heaven to earth, with angels going up and down, and God speaks to him, promising to be with him and to give him the land that he is on. Jacob wakes up and says, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

So often, when we are talking about Jacob's story, we skip from *that* part to the part that we are going to talk about *next* week, when Jacob wrestles with God. We often skip the part that we are going to talk about today, when Jacob gets married and has children. Many people are not as familiar with *this* part of the story. But it's actually a *really great* part of the story. It's *long*, spanning chapters 29, 30, and 31, so we couldn't read *all* of it here. I chose to read the part that best captures the gist of this section, Jacob meeting and marrying his wives. So let me give you a quick summary of what happens in these chapters.

Before Jacob left home, his father Isaac told him to go to a place called Paddan-aram, around 700 miles north, in what we know today as Turkey. That's where Jacob's uncle Laban lives, and Isaac tells him to go there to find a wife for himself. So that's where Jacob goes. When he gets there, he meets Laban's daughter Rachel, and he absolutely falls in love. He tells Laban that he wants to marry her, and Laban says, "It is better that I should give her to *you* than to some *other* man," which sounds like a ringing endorsement from your future father-in-law. But Laban agrees, on the condition that Jacob works for him

for seven years. Jacob does, and the time flies by because he is so in love with Rachel. At the end of seven years, they have a big wedding feast, and Jacob goes off to his tent with his new wife. But when he wakes up in the morning, he discovers that Laban has pulled a fast one on him, secretly bringing his *other* daughter Leah into Jacob's tent instead of Rachel. When Jacob discovers this and calls Laban out on it, Laban says, "This isn't done in our country, marrying the *younger* daughter before the *older* daughter. But if you work for me for seven *more* years, I'll let you marry Rachel, too." And Jacob does, because he loves Rachel so much...*more* than he loves Leah.

When God saw that Leah was unloved, it says that God opened her womb and gave her children by Jacob. But Rachel couldn't have children. He has four sons with Leah, which makes Rachel very jealous. So Rachel says, "Take my maid Bilhah and have children with her, so that at least I can have children through her." Jacob does, and he has two sons with Bilhah. This makes *Leah* jealous, and she says, "Take *my* maid Zilpah and have children with *her*!" So he does, and they have two sons. Then he has two *more* sons with Leah. And finally, after many years, Jacob has a son with Rachel, and that son is named Joseph. Joseph is going to be very important later. Eventually he will have another son with Rachel, Benjamin, but that's not for a while.

After 14 years and 11 children, Joseph is ready to leave. He wants to go back home to Isaac. He goes to Laban and says, "I have served you faithfully for 14 years, and I have made you very prosperous, but I have a big family now, and I need to take care of them." So he and Laban make a deal. Laban has a lot of sheep and goats. Jacob says, "Let me have all of the sheep and goats that have speckles and spots. You can keep all the others." Laban agrees, but then he goes out and takes all of the speckled and spotted sheep and hides them, sending them off with his sons, so that Jacob has nothing. And Laban is like, "I guess I don't *have* any speckled sheep and goats!" Jacob decides, "Well, if I can't *take* them, I'll *make*

them,” and he starts breeding sheep and goats that have spots and speckles. This takes about six years, but Jacob finally has a big flock that makes him very wealthy.

Now it has been 20 years since Jacob first came to Laban, and he is *really* ready to go home. So he packs up his wives and kids, and they just split. Don’t even say goodbye to Laban. They just get out of there. But *before* they leave, Rachel steals her father’s household gods, these little statues of gods that were a *big deal*. Basically, whoever had the gods was the leader of the family and had claim to all of the family’s property. So Rachel has just taken that *away* from her father Laban. She has basically robbed him blind.

Laban finds out that his family and his gods are missing, and he goes after them. When he catches up with them, he accuses Jacob of theft. Now, Jacob didn’t know anything about Rachel stealing the household gods. So he says, “Look through all of our stuff, and if you find them, you can kill whoever stole them.” Well, Rachel has hidden them in the saddle bag of the camel that she is riding. And when Laban comes to search the saddle bag, Rachel says, “I really can’t get up, because ‘the way of women’ is upon me.”

So Laban does not find his household gods, and Jacob chastises him for falsely accusing him (even though it *wasn’t* false, but Laban can’t *prove* it). So Jacob and Laban agree to make a covenant. They set up a stone pillar, and Laban says, “If you promise to take care of my daughters and grandchildren, I will not pass beyond this pillar to come to you, and you will not pass beyond this pillar and come back to me.” Basically, “Take care of them, and I don’t ever want to see you again.” So Laban says goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren, and they head their separate ways.

Now, here's what I want you to see about all of this. All up until now, Jacob has been the trickster. Tricking his brother Esau out of his birthright. Tricking their father Isaac into blessing *him* instead of Esau. Jacob lies, cheats, and steals to get what he wants. But then he meets Laban, and the tables are turned. Laban tricks Jacob, lying, cheating, and stealing from *him*. The trickster gets tricked, over and over again, for 20 years. His *wives* even get in on the action, lying, cheating, and stealing to get what *they* want. These are some *really healthy* family dynamics, and they are going to continue on in Jacob's children, as we will see in a couple of weeks.

So why are we spending time on this story today? What does *this story* have to teach us about how to live faithfully to God? Well, very simply, I think it stresses to us the importance of *honesty* and *truth*. Jacob's story shows us something that Jesus talks about over and over again in the gospels – you *get* what you *give*. If you want to lie, cheat, and steal, then you will be lied to, cheated, and stolen from. What you put out into the world will come back to you. The way you treat *others* is the way that others will treat *you*. Following Jesus Christ and living faithfully to God is about living in ways that reflect honesty and truth to others.

We live in a culture that plays fast and loose with the truth. A culture of *spin* that takes a shred of the truth and distorts it in a way that serves *my* side and *my* agenda. And there no longer seem to be any *consequences* for not telling the truth. As long as you're not doing it in a courtroom, where you are under oath, then what does it matter? What can they really *do* to you? It's not necessarily *illegal* to *lie*.

But there *are* consequences to lying and not telling the truth or spinning the truth. The consequences are that we don't *trust* each other anymore. We are *afraid* of each other, based on the *lies* that are being told to us *about* each other. We don't know what is *true* anymore and what to *believe*. And all around the

world, people are being *killed* because of *lies*. Lies that people in positions of power *tell* us, and we *believe*, and we *repeat*.

It reminds me of the story of Jesus and Pontius Pilate, after Jesus has been arrested, and Pilate is questioning him, trying to figure out what to do with him. Jesus says to him, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world: to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” And Pilate responds, “What is truth?” The implication there is that truth is whatever Pilate *says* it is. *He* is the person in charge, and *he* decides what is true. But let’s *look* at that question, because I think it can help us to understand what it *means* to live in ways that are honest and true. *What is truth?*

When the Old Testament talks about *truth*, it uses the Hebrew word *emeth*, a word that means, “firm, faithful, sure, reliable, and stable.” It comes from a Hebrew word that pertains to *pillars* and the *supporters of doors* (like a door frame). So *truth* in Hebrew is something that is firm, reliable, solid, sturdy; it holds things up like a pillar or door frame.

When the New Testament talks about *truth*, it uses the Greek word *aletheia*, which at its root means, “not hidden.” *Truth* is that which is obvious, evident, or not hidden. It is there for everyone to see.

So for *us* to live in ways that are truthful means that *we* are reliable, stable, and sturdy. That we are not wavering. That what we say holds up under scrutiny. This is not just about “not telling lies.” It is about meaning what we say, and saying what we mean. That we do not have anything to hide.

So much of the *spin* that we hear every day in the news is about *technicalities*. It’s about taking a *piece* of the truth and *reframing* it, so that the *piece* becomes the only thing that you see. Spin hides the *overall* truth in favor of this one little *piece* of the truth. It often isn’t an outright lie. It is telling the truth in a

Carefully chosen way, so that people see things the way you want them to see it. What you are saying might be *technically* true on the surface, but when you start to dig into it, it begins to waver and unravel. Something can be *technically true*, without being *honest*.

Being honest means that we are not afraid of the truth. We don't have to *hide* it or *spin* it. We can speak the truth, even when it does not benefit us. Paul says to the Ephesians, "Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another." He is saying that we can't just say or do whatever we want, as if our words and actions do not affect anyone beyond ourselves. *Spin* is a *trick* that comes from a place of *self-interest*. Telling a lie or a half-truth, while *helping* yourself, might *hurt* someone else. And speaking the truth, even if it hurts you, might *help* someone else. We are members of one another. We are *bound* and *connected* to each other...and to God.

As followers of Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, we should not *tell* lies. We should not *repeat* lies. We should not *support* lies. The same goes for *spin* and *half-truths*. Because if people cannot trust what we say about personal matters or politics or whatever, they are not going to trust what we say about *Jesus*. So when we, as Christians, lie or support lies, we are not just undermining *our own* credibility. We are undermining the credibility of *other Christians*, and we are undermining the credibility of *Jesus Christ*. As Christians, we should constantly be *discerning* and *speaking* the truth.

Now, that *doesn't* mean that you just walk up to someone after worship and say, "Hey, that outfit looks *really bad* on you. I'm just speaking the truth!" First of all, that's *not* the truth, it's your *opinion*, and we need to be able to differentiate between the two. And second, Paul says that we are to speak the truth *in love*. Love, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, is patient and kind. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in

wrongdoing, but it rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

We are to speak the truth in ways that show patience and kindness; in ways that seek the wellbeing of the other. Not in ways that are envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Not in ways that are irritable or resentful. Not in ways that celebrate what someone has done wrong and throws it back in their face. We are called to speak the truth in ways that bear with others, believe in others; in ways that are hopeful.

There is a saying that, before you say something, your words should pass through three gates: Is it *true*? Is it *necessary*? Is it *kind*? Is this thing that I'm about to say *true*? Do I know that it is *factually correct*? If not, I shouldn't say it. Is it *necessary*? Do I really *need* to say it? If it's not, then don't. And is it *kind*? Does what I am about to say show *kindness* to this other person? If *not*, then try to find a way to say it that *does*. Is it *true*? Is it *necessary*? Is it *kind*?

I know that this is a very basic sermon. If someone asks you, "What did your pastor preach about today," you would say, "Don't tell lies." That seems very simple and obvious, like it goes without saying. But if we think it goes without saying, then we don't *say it*. And if it *was* that simple, then everybody would do it, and we wouldn't have the problems with the truth that we have in the world today. Sometimes the simplest things can be very hard to do, and the most basic things are the ones that we need to be reminded about the most.

Jacob's story has been built on tricks and lies, and it has caused him nothing but pain and problems. But he is about to have an encounter with the truth, and it is going to change the course of the rest of his life. *We* have encountered the truth in Jesus Christ. And it should change the course of the rest of *our* lives. It should change how we *speak* and *act* and how we *treat other people*. It should change what we are

willing to *tolerate*, as far as lies and spin and half-truths. Just because it might benefit you or your side does not mean that it is *right*. The truth has nothing to hide and nothing to fear. And while it may not always be *easy*, it is always *right*, and it will set us free. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.