

Have you ever been in a situation where you did something that you were pretty sure you shouldn't but you did it to accomplish something that you felt just had to be done? Maybe you didn't even realize it was something you shouldn't have done. You know, like the so-called "white lie"? Changing or withholding the truth just to spare someone's feelings for a bit? Hey, maybe it was something a lot bigger than that. But as we're going to see today, that kind of action is just never justified, it's never right in God's eyes. To intentionally sin for "the greater good" is never something he wants, it shows a lack of trust in God to carry out his will. And the first commandment "You shall have no other Gods" clearly spells out for us in the meaning that we should "fear, love and *trust* in God above *all things*." We'll explore this all more as we go on here, but let's take a look at the example Jacob set for us here.

Jacob had left his home away from home of many years. In the time he had gotten a family and had his wealth increase to a substantial amount from the nothing he had when he left. But now came the moment of truth. He was returning home. And that meant seeing his brother again. The brother who had pretty much wanted to kill him the last time he was there. Would time have healed this wound? Would his brother have cooled down with age? He had taken a few precautions, divided up his entourage into three camps so as not to present a single target. He had sent messengers ahead with gifts to butter up his brother. But now came the waiting to see how it would turn out. Tomorrow was the big day. And in that evening, we come across one of the most enigmatic accounts in all of scripture: <read text: Gen 32:22-30>.

Jacob sends the rest of his group across the Jabbok River, while he himself remains entirely alone. But he is interrupted from what would've probably been a fitful night lost in strong emotion. Without warning or even any kind of explanation in the account, Jacob is suddenly wrestling with another man until daybreak. And somehow, in a way we can only guess at, this other man is described as unable to overpower Jacob. We know from the end of this account that this is God himself, so how can that be the case? The mysteries are starting to stack up, I wasn't kidding when I said this text was hard to understand. But you know what? The details aren't really all that important. I can say that because if they were, they would've been written down for us. What matters is what we do know about what happens here, even if that's difficult to get a handle on as well.

Jacob and the man continue their struggle and when it becomes apparent that the man cannot simply overpower Jacob, he tries a new tactic. He wrenches Jacob's hip socket to try to put him in enough pain to give up. Did strike the hip hard enough to dislocate it or did he just touch it and divinely damage it? The words in the original language could mean either. But either way it happens, the tactic does not work. Jacob continues to hold on. The man asks to be let go because the sun is coming up. But Jacob will not release the man until he is blessed by him. Had Jacob now guessed the identity of his attacker? It would seem so, but it would also seem like he wasn't sure since he asks the man his name later. Again, mysteries we're not entirely sure about.

The main point is when Jacob refuses to let the man go, the man asks Jacob *his* name. And then the man gives Jacob a new name. His original name, Jacob, meant heel-grabber, an idiom at the time for one who deceives. And though he was given that name from birth, Jacob earned the name during his life. But now Jacob is called Israel: he who wrestles with God. Because, the man says, you have struggled with God and with man and have overcome. At first this may not seem like a huge step up from his previous name, but let's consider Jacob's life to this point compared with what happened during this evening we're looking at.

Like I said, Jacob had earned his name as heel-grabber. Before he was even born there was a promise that the two brothers would have issues but that the younger would rule over the older. This was a promise of God, one that would not be broken no matter what. But Jacob did not seem capable of simply trusting God that it would happen and felt that he needed to help it along during his life. He withheld food from his famished brother just to get the birthright from him. He disguised himself to his aging father and received the blessing from his father. Was God's promise accomplished? Yes. But through means that God did not approve of. And so Jacob got an extra dose of grief to go with his accomplishments. His brother Esau was so upset over what had happened that he planned to kill Jacob as soon as their father was in the ground. And so Jacob had to leave home and flee to his uncle Laban. His uncle who turned the tables on Jacob a few times and gave him some deception of his own to deal with, and furnished him with a little more grief.

And now, faced with the scary situation of seeing his brother again, Jacob seemed to have learned his lesson. In this nighttime conflict, he clung to God. Rather than take the easy way out and let go, he held on to God and waited for God to bless him. No matter the effort or pain it required enduring, Jacob would not let go of God. This is not to say Jacob

never had problems with this again, but it is indicative of him learning a valuable lesson from all of this. As the next morning came and he approached his brother, confident in the promises God had given him, there was no subterfuge or machination working. And God carried him through it. Everything turned out fine for Jacob and his family, and there was no consequence or penalty to be paid this time. Simply trusting that God would do as he promised produced a far better result for Jacob than he had ever had in his life.

Now, that may be a roundabout way of getting to the final point for us, but I think it's important to see how Jacob got to where he was and the differences each approach really makes. That is really one of the larger purposes of the Old Testament for us, to show us that God remains faithful to his promises throughout human history, so that we can be confident in the promises we have been given, so we can trust them fully and not make the mistakes Jacob made in struggling against God so often in his life.

As I've mentioned, nearly every moment of our lives comes down to this basic decision: will you trust God or not? Half of the battle, I believe, is actually recognizing that the struggle is there. How often do we make decisions without ever considering that this is at the heart of them? We are constantly setting priorities, choosing how to spend our time and how to spend our money and very little does it ever cross our mind whether this might be a decision that shows whether I trust God or trust something or someone else.

For example, how often do we consider our regular offering to God a gauge of our trust for him? I'm not going to speak in amounts or percentages or even suggest that anyone here is being unfaithful. But have you asked yourself, "Does my giving to God reflect a trust in him to always provide for my daily needs?" Or instead are you a little wary of whether God will always be there to provide and instead we hoard away our wealth "just in case"? I'm not saying don't save money. I'm not saying be reckless and foolish with it either way. I'm saying ask yourself, is your giving hindered out of fear of not having enough some day? I'll be honest with you, I bring up this one example because this is probably the one our culture has made it the hardest to fully trust God in. There are many other examples we could talk about. Trusting God to be with us when we witness to others. Trusting God to have a good reason for difficulty in our lives. Trusting that time spent with him in his word is not time wasted.

Like Jacob we need to recognize that struggling against what God intends for us only causes more trouble than it's worth. Rather than trying to fulfill his promises our own way, in ways he would disapprove of and show a lack of trust, instead we need to hold to God no matter how painful or exhausting the struggle gets. We need to see these situations for what they are and to do that we need to be in God's word to know what he has promised us and at the same time there receive the strength needed to trust in him completely. The power of the Holy Spirit is what allows us to trust God at all and it is what strengthens our trust for the future. And above all, it points us back to the central trust in God that we have above all others. That we trust him to forgive our sins through the blood of Christ. The moments that we have chosen poorly and have followed our sinful nature rather than our God are forgiven. And as we look on that trust, that we are trusting God with our souls, with our eternities, it makes you wonder why we ever have trouble trusting him with something as small as our money or time.

We seek to trust God better every day. Not because we will be punished if we don't and not because we'll receive a better eternal reward if we do. But simply because it is who we are. And we know it leads to a better life now. Like Jacob, we can be blessed without baggage if we put our trust in God, if we hold to him in everything. We cling to him and trust in him for the forgiveness of sins and through that we are blessed with an eternal life. This ideal carries through to every corner of our lives. If we hold to him in everything, if we trust in him at all times instead of struggling against him, we're going to be blessed here and now as well. I'm not saying life is going to be heaven on earth, but when we trust our God, things are better than they would be if we didn't.

As God makes us promises that run contrary to our human instinct, it can be difficult to hold our trust in him at all times. It can be difficult to even recognize that trusting in him is at stake sometimes. Stay close to him in the word of God. Know his promises, see how he has never failed to keep them, both in history and in your own life. Let the Holy Spirit fill you with the trust you need to hold on to God in every circumstance, and by holding fast to that trust, you will be blessed in all you do. Amen.