

“How Can I Change My Life?”

Genesis 32:22-32; Ephesians 4:22-24



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There is a question that I often hear as a pastor. And that question is “How can I change my life?” My hunch is that most of here today have asked that question at some point in our lives. What about you? Is there something you would like to change about yourself? An attitude? A habit? Some kind of weakness in your life? Sometimes we try desperately to change, and we might make a little progress for awhile, but nothing seems to last. I think that is because we focus on the externals rather than the internals. We look at behavior and God looks at attitude. We look at the actions. God looks at the inside. For lasting change we’ve got to have a change on the inside and that requires God’s help.

This morning we are going to look at the story of Jacob—a story that shows us four steps that God uses to bring change into our lives. Jacob’s wrestling match with God, described in this story was a turning point in Jacob’s life.

Jacob’s character defect was that he was a manipulator, a swindler. His name literally means “cheater.” He was always using people. But this experience transformed his life and he was never the same again. So how does God change us?

Step one: God starts with a crisis. Jacob finds himself all alone, and a man, who we later discover is God, wrestles with him until daybreak. Now I know that the point of wrestling is to pin a guy down until he cries “Uncle! I give up!” Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever struggled with something until you were in despair, till you realized that you were in a no-win situation? Notice that it says Jacob struggled until day break—what a long fight, an all night struggle. Have you ever had one of those nights?

So what are you wrestling with this week? What is the problem in your life that you’re struggling with that is making you sick and tired? Maybe you are feeling sick and tired of being sick and tired. What is the crisis in your life? Maybe it is an internal struggle and you feel like you are being torn apart. Maybe it’s a struggle in a relationship. Now hold on to your picture of this crisis and ask yourself, “Where is God in this?” God is there, you know. God is right there, waiting in the wings, ready to use that crisis to get your attention. Are you in a crisis this morning? Congratulations! God is getting ready to change you. God wants to work in your life.

It is sort of like the mother eagle. She disturbs the nest until it becomes so uncomfortable that the little eagle has to jump out and learn to fly. How many times has God had to use a crisis to motivate you to change? The crisis comes and you finally give up. The lesson here is this. We never change until the pain becomes greater than the fear of change. Yes, God loves us just the way we are. But God also loves us too much to let us stay that way. If it takes a crisis—you can count on it. God will use it for our good.

Step 2 is COMMITMENT. In vs. 26 we hear, “Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” Jacob’s attitude is persistence. He’s determined. He will not quit. He’s basically saying to God, “I’m sticking with this struggle until I benefit from it! I want something good to come out of this. I’ve made an effort. I’ve put a lot of energy into this. I’ve

made an investment of time in this struggle and I’m not going to give up.”

Often we want to change and God wants to change us, but it just takes time. We didn’t get in the mess we are in overnight. It took years of choices and ingrained patterns and habits. In our microwave society we want instant change—now! But God doesn’t usually solve our problems immediately. No, we learn that sometimes God waits to resolve a problem in our lives because God wants to see if we really mean business. Are we really serious about change or is this just some passing whim?

Many people miss God’s best for them because they give up too soon. The answer is right around the corner, but some people lack the commitment to stick it out. So when it looks hopeless and discouraging, and nothing is changed, they just walk away from it all. God is saying to each of us, “Hang in there! There is hope! You will be able to change, but don’t give up.” This is certainly an encouraging message. If God could change Jacob, God can change us. Be committed to getting God’s best.

The third step is confession. Vs. 27 says, “The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob,’ he answered.” Why did God ask Jacob’s name? Because God wanted him to admit who he was. In Bible times, the name you were given was a description of your character. It was a label. Remember the name Jacob meant “cheater.” When Jacob said, “My name is Jacob, it was a confession, an act of self revelation. It was a reminder of all the people he had hurt, all the heartbreak he had caused, all the problems that had been the result of his hang ups and personality. He was admitting what he was.

Question: If today you were named for your greatest character weakness, what would your name be? Temper? “My name is Temper, I can’t keep a lid on it.” Lust? Unreliable? Gossip? Worrier? Resentful? What would be your tag?

The lesson is that I will never be able to change my weaknesses until I admit them. To whom? First to yourself. Then to God. Then to at least one other significant person in your life. That’s difficult. But the fact is, God won’t work on my problem until I admit that I have one. When you come to God and admit you have a problem, God is not going to be shocked or surprised. God already knows all about it. God

just wants you to know it. Step three is to come face to face, not just with God, but with yourself. What is my name? What am I really like? Until I admit I have a problem, God can't help me.

My prayer today is that St. Andrew's Church can be a place where people can truly drop their masks, admit their problems, stop making excuses, blaming others, passing the buck and rationalizing. It's humbling to admit a weakness. But you can't change until you admit it. I find that the people who are the most honest, open and transparent about their weaknesses are the healthiest people I know. They are also the people who are changing the most in life because they've got it out in the open so they can deal with it. We need to be the kind of place where people can come here, admit they're blowing it in some area, and nobody's shocked, because we are all struggling and we all need help—God's help.

Step four is cooperation. We've got to cooperate with what God wants to do in our lives. Listen to these next verses, "Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed. And there he blessed him, so Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved.'" The moment Jacob began admitting what he was and began to cooperate with God, he began to change. He called the place Peniel which means "the face of God." Jacob came face to face with God, and all of us have to do that some day. We can't run from God forever, so why not face God now.

Sometimes we have to come face to face with ourselves first. When we do, God says, "OK, now I can get down to business in your life! We can start working on those character defects, those faults that we both want changed. Relax and cooperate with me and I'll make those changes that we both want."

Now the amazing thing about this story is that God blessed Jacob, and God wants to bless us also. And God blessed Jacob by giving him a new name, a new identity. God said, "Your name is no longer going to be Jacob; it's going to be Israel." Remember Jacob means cheater, swindler, crook. The name Israel has two different meanings. It

can mean, "he who struggles with God." And it can also mean, "prince of God."

God does the deepest work in our identity, in who we are and how we understand ourselves, in our concept of ourselves, and in our self esteem. When God wants to change us, God starts with the way we see ourselves. Because that affects everything. God saw Jacob's potential. God saw that beneath that scoundrel, that manipulator, that schemer was a prince, someone he could do great things through. God changed Jacob's name and from that point on Jacob was a different person.

Verse 31 is an interesting verse. It says, "The sun rose up above Jacob as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip." During that all night wrestling experience God dislocated Jacob's hip, and as a result of that experience, for the rest of Jacob's life he walked with a limp. This was a reminder of two very important truths that we also need to remember every day.

First, our thigh is the most powerful muscle in our body. When God touched Jacob there, God touched him at the point of his greatest strength. That would be a reminder to Jacob, constantly, as he limped the rest of his life that Jacob was to depend on God, and not on his own strength. It is also a reminder to us. That we must depend on God, and not on our own strength to work the changes in our lives.

Secondly, when you look at Jacob's life, you'll see that every time he got in trouble he ran. That was his modus operandi. Whatever the situation, when he got in trouble, he split. So God is saying, "I know how to fix that temptation. I'll just put a limp in his walk so he will never run again." So Jacob's limp became a very visible reminder that it is never God's will to run from a personal problem. Running never solves a thing. We have to face the problem in God's power and strength.

Now which of these four steps are you in right now? Which of these represents where you are in your life? Step one. Crisis. Has God been trying to get your attention? Have you been wrestling with a situation or a relationship for weeks or months? It might be a major crisis, a major shake up, or it might be a perpetual irritation, a frustration that you have to deal with. Sometimes it takes a crisis, hitting bottom, to

push us in the new direction and open us to how we need to change. Maybe you need step two—the commitment step. Have you made a commitment to stick with the struggle until God brings some good out of it and God turns that burden into a blessing? Ask God for staying power and be willing to seek help to hang in there.

Maybe you are ready for step three—confession. What is your name this morning? What weakness do you need to admit? What problem do you need to face up to and realize that the thing is destroying your life, your family, your career? All of us need to face the facts about ourselves. If we want to change we've got to go through step three. Otherwise things are going to remain the same. Finally, step four. Cooperation. Take a step of faith and say, "God, I want to cooperate with you. I want to trust you to change me. I want to relax and place my life in your hands. Jesus Christ, come into my life, and make me what you want me to be."

Friends, the lesson of Jacob can be summed up in these ten words, "You don't have to stay the same! You can change." If God can change Jacob, God can change anybody. Listen to these words from Ephesians 4—"You have been taught to put away your former way of life, your old self...and to cloth yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God." That is what Christianity is all about. Jesus Christ changes lives. And he wants to do it to you. He knows that underneath every Jacob there's a prince or a princess. Let him bring out the best in your life. You don't have to stay the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.