

“Nice but Unnecessary”

Genesis 34

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Dr. Jerry Nelson

Eugene Peterson in his book The Unnecessary Pastor writes, “There are powerful cultural forces determined to turn...us... into kindly religious figures, men and women who provide guidance through difficult times, who dole out inspiration and good cheer on a weekly schedule, who provide smiling reassurance that ‘God’s in his heaven...’”

Others and I have noticed that the world likes us Christians as long as we don’t take our religion too seriously and we keep our religion to ourselves.

Forty years ago, presidential candidate John Kennedy had to assure the pundits and much of the American public that his religion would have absolutely no bearing on his presidency.

Forty years later, presidential candidates are still doing the same – making it clear to the “talking heads” and the voting public that their religion will not influence their policies or actions.

It was refreshing to hear of the devout faith of Joseph Liebermann but then distressing to hear his political operatives bend over backwards to assure the public that Liebermann’s private beliefs would have no bearing on his public life.

Likewise, the culture doesn’t mind that we are Christians as long as our Christianity is inconsequential.

No one minds what you believe privately as long as your private beliefs don’t influence your behavior toward them.

If you are indistinguishable from the rest of the culture publicly and verbally, then you are free to believe what you will and privately practice what you like.

Conversely if you practice what you believe, say what the Bible says, and seek to do what God has commanded us to do, you will be met with the greatest hostility.

I can't be certain this is a good example but it is a current one. The Boy Scouts of America is being attacked ferociously by elements in our society because they dare to practice what they have believed that it is not in the best interest of boys to have practicing homosexuals as leaders of the troops.

The Southern Baptist denomination was attacked with virulent hostility because it was public about its desire to see Mormons and Jews come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

I experienced some of that hostility when I dared to say at the Columbine memorial that I longed for those who were suffering most to know the love and comfort that Jesus alone can bring.

In the weeks that followed some made it clear that it was nice to have a clergyman say something at the memorial service but it was wrong to foist my personal beliefs on anyone else.

It appears that throughout history the world has had two ways of dealing with God's people, either emasculate them or annihilate them.

Historians tells us that when Jesus was physically here on earth, there were many itinerate preachers moving around the countryside preaching their particular religion. Most of them were tolerated because they were harmless. But when the religious and political leaders couldn't render Jesus harmless by absorbing him into the culture, they sought to kill him.

Even Satan himself attempted to render Jesus impotent by offering him a deal and when that didn't succeed he sought to destroy Jesus.

There are Christians today living in parts of India, Indonesia, Sudan, Afghanistan or Pakistan, among other countries, where they live with either constant or frequent fear for their very lives.

They are being physically threatened and killed.

The people around them are trying to eradicate them.

In our country we don't live under the threat of being killed for our Christianity.

But the threat to Christianity in our culture is probably even greater– it is absorption.

The Christian lives with a daily pressure to be assimilated into the dominant culture and rendered impotent.

The life goals of a man of the world compared to a man of God are quite different.

The Christian lives for the kingdom of God rather than for personal peace and affluence.

The values of a woman of the world compared to a woman of God are quite different.

The Christian values humility, love, and patience rather than self-sufficiency, self-assertion, and aggressiveness.

The life choices and practices of a man or woman of the world are quite different from the choices and practices of a man or woman of God.

The Christian makes life-style choices about how they spend their time, their energy and their money based on how they will serve the cause of Christ rather than how they will immediately serve him or her.

But the dominant culture is forever tempting and pressuring us into accepting its goals, its values and its lifestyle choices and practices and thereby render us impotent.

As I studied Genesis 34, three issues seemed to be primary:

1. We see how the dominant culture tried to assimilate God's people to make them impotent.
2. We see two ineffective ways of responding to that attempted assimilation.
3. And we see God's gracious and sovereign hand in the midst of it, protecting his people.

Jacob became the father of twelve sons who in turn became the fathers of the 12 families that later would be the nation of Israel.

God's intention from the days of Jacob's grandfather Abraham had been to create a people belonging to him who would be his means to bless the world.

This family, this new nation, was not called to serve only itself but to be God's instrument to change the world.
But to be that instrument they had to survive.

What we have witnessed over and over again in the middle chapters of Genesis are the many times the family was almost destroyed either by its own sin, or circumstances, or the hostile intentions of those around them.

Jacob had seen God's protection of him and his family in awesome fashion when Jacob escaped first Laban's evil intentions and then Esau's.

By the end of chapter 33 we see that Jacob, after 20 years, has finally made it back to Canaan.

We have every reason to think that he is now safely home or home and safe.

But what we see is Jacob and his sons almost destroy themselves and the future of their family by their foolish responses to the unbelievers around them.

Before I read the Genesis text for today I want you to see three other passages that I think bear on the major point of this text:

Deut 7:1-6 (Though not written in Jacob's day they were well known to the first readers)

When the LORD your God brings you into the land... Make no treaty with them (the inhabitants)... Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods... For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

I Peter 2:9-12 (Being a chosen people is also true of the church)

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing

wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

2 Corinthians 6:14-18

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers...What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Now stand please in honor of God's word as I read Genesis 34 STANDING

There is more than enough fault to go around for what happened to Dinah.

First consider Jacob's role:

33:18 says that Jacob "camped within sight of the city" of Shechem reminding me of Lot's error of getting too close to the city of Sodom that the influences of that place corrupted his family.

34:1 says that Dinah "went out to visit the women of the land".

She was probably around 15 years of age and apparently neither Jacob nor her brothers did anything to dissuade her from putting herself in a vulnerable place.

Then consider Dinah: Dinah herself maybe flew too close to the fire. I don't mean she asked for it but I do mean that she foolishly flirted with danger.

Because of the many references to the young man Shechem's affection for Dinah there is reason to believe that he and Dinah had spent more than a little time together.

Dinah had no business building a romantic relationship with a man whose values were so antithetical to God's calling on her life.

Lastly consider the young man Shechem: Certainly he is at greatest fault.

This young man seems to be more amoral than immoral.

He is controlled by his hormones and his emotions – not by any unchangeable values.

There is not a hint of repentance for his actions.

I.

What happens after the rape is probably a greater threat to this new nation, that God is building, than anything before.

What Jacob's enemies couldn't do by force the Hivites (Shechem's people) might do through peace, prosperity and convenience.

Hamor, Shechem's father and the ruler of the area, came to Jacob and suggested a way out of the predicament they were in.

My boy has violated your girl but rather than us get into a big battle over this, why don't we just have them get married. It's convenient.

Furthermore why don't we pursue having our other children also marry each other so that we can form an alliance? Peace will prevail.

And of course there is a great financial advantage to you in this since you will be an economic insider rather than an outsider. Your prosperity will be guaranteed.

Who could ask for anything more.

You'll be one of us, peace and prosperity will be ours, and it will very conveniently deal with the sticky wicket our kids have gotten us all into.

No sooner does Hamor, the father, offer all these advantages to Jacob when Shechem himself sweetens the offer by saying that he is more than willing to pay anything for the privilege of marrying Dinah.

Jacob's offered a signing bonus.

There it is – a huge temptation to compromise his faith, his family and his future.

Our culture does the same thing. The dominant culture in which we live is constantly pressuring us to compromise.

Instead of concentrating on living a Christ-like life and giving ourselves to his mission in the world, we are tempted everyday with living for ourselves.

Let me give you just one illustration of the way the culture tempts us.

Television is not the enemy and it is not the tool of the Devil.

But television is a major force in absorbing us into the dominant culture.

98.3% of homes have television

2.2 television sets per home

4.5 hours average time per person

By high school graduation:

More time in front of TV than in school

500,000 commercials (Dawn 73-74)

Television shapes our perception of reality.

It tells us what is acceptable and unacceptable and important and unimportant.

It forms how we view the world and life.

Sociologist William Fore wrote, "The mass-media worldview tells us that we are basically good, that happiness is the chief end of life, and that happiness consists in obtaining material goods. The media transform the value of sexuality into sex appeal, the value of self-respect into pride, the value of will-to-live into will-to-power. They exacerbate acquisitiveness into greed; they deal with insecurity by generating more insecurity and anxiety by generating more anxiety. They change the value of recreation into competition and the value of rest into escape. And perhaps worst of all, the media constrict our experience and substitute media-world for real world so that we become less and less able to make the fine value judgments that living in such a complex world requires. (In Dawn 81-82)

It's hard to give significant money for the work of the kingdom when we have been told 500,000 times before we are 18 how much we need that money for ourselves.

It's hard to develop biblical, God-honoring opposite-sex relationships when the stories we watch on television and in movies are powerfully demonstrating a different ethic.

It's hard to know and much harder to give our lives to serving God's purposes in the world when we are forever told how much we need to be taking care of ourselves.

In thousands of ways every day we are being enticed away from God's purposes for our lives and lured into a whole different world-view and lifestyle.

The dominant secular culture in America doesn't have to kill Christians instead it politely lets Christians retain the shell of Christianity while gutting the interior.

The Hivites, Hamor and Shechem, came to Jacob and made him a great offer.

All he had to do was sell his soul and he could have it all here and now.

Ila.

How does Jacob respond?

Jacob's silence is deafening – the text says he kept quiet about what happened to Dinah.

Six times in the text Dinah is referred to as "Jacob's daughter". This is his daughter for heaven's sake, likely his only daughter, and he is silent.

When Hamor comes to suggest a marriage, Jacob says nothing.

When his own sons agree with Hamor's idea of mingling their families, Jacob is quiet.

When his own sons abuse the sacred sign of the covenant, circumcision, by suggesting that these pagan idol-worshippers be circumcised, Jacob says nothing.

Jacob doesn't do anything.

He is content to let everything God has called him for, everything he has even had to suffer to learn, slip away.

He was called to be a man of God, to lead a family of God, to be the start of an entire nation that would be used by God in the future to bless the whole world.

And Jacob does nothing, as it is about to slip away.

I can't tell from the text what has gotten into Jacob.

Is it fear of the Hivites?

Is it indifference to his daughter Dinah (after all she was the daughter of the unloved Leah and not the daughter of his favorite Rachel)?

Is it laziness or apathy?

Is it greed – he sees a good deal when its offered and he wants it – and it won't cost that much?

After all the Hivites are even willing to accommodate our religion – they are willing to be circumcised.

Sure my daughter can marry the man. After all he says he believes in a God and he's even willing to go to church at least on days the Broncos aren't playing.

Doing nothing is all it takes to allow the culture to absorb us.

We and our children don't stand a chance if we are not intentionally and actively counter-culture.

I'm not talking about wearing funny clothing and speaking in Elizabethan English.

- I'm talking about filling our minds with the Word of God to counter the word of the world.
- I'm talking about at least seriously curtailing the time and ways we allow ourselves to be influenced by a world-view that is antithetical to the kingdom of God.
- I'm talking about being salt and light in the world instead of being baking soda and black holes.

Dads and moms, students and adults – what is shaping you and your children's values, ideals, and goals in life?

Are you passively allowing the culture to absorb you?

IIb.

Jacob's sons took a very different approach

They are outraged!

The two sons that are mentioned by name, Simeon and Levi, were full brothers of Dinah – they had the same mother.

If Jacob wouldn't stand up for the honor of their sister, they would.

While the major motivation for their response seems to be revenge, there is at least some indication in verse 7 that the sons understood something of the significance of the sexual union of a daughter of God and a son of man – it was disgraceful and it should not be done.

Except for the intervention of God, that we will look at later, their actions would have led to the destruction of this family as surely as Jacob's inaction.

The brothers use deceit, the misuse of the sacred, excessive force, and even unrelated greed to avenge their sister.

We don't know until late in the story what the brothers have in mind but we are told early that they were using deception.

They take the very sign of their special relationship to God, circumcision, and they profane it by employing it in their deceptive plan.

And they do not kill only Shechem, they kill every man in the city.

And then they allow their other brothers to plunder the city even to the point of taking the women and children into slavery.

The result?

Even Jacob had enough sense to realize that.

Genesis 34:30 "Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the...people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed.'"

Jacob's a poor one to be lecturing anyone, but he is right.

You hot-heads have stirred up real trouble now.

You talk about “persona non grata” – in their nostrils we now stink?

The world, the dominant culture, is not the enemy.

Jacob and his family had been called by God to be a blessing to the world not to destroy it.

In our day the religious liberals accommodate the world and the religious conservatives alienate it.

We are not called to annihilate the world but to influence it.

Neither Jacob nor his sons knew how to do that.

Do we?

II Corinthians 10:3-4 “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.”

Media personalities, newspaper editors, theatre owners, Hollywood movie moguls, the ACLU lawyers, political candidates, school board members, and others are not the enemies.

Most of us are sorely tempted to acquiesce like Jacob or to fight with Jacob’s sons – but our weapons are prayer, faith, holy lives and love.

What should Jacob and his sons have done?

It is not within the purview of this message or this text to answer that question but to raise it.

III.

The last lesson learned in this text is about God’s sovereign grace in spite of this family’s sin.

Over and over again that seems to be the situation - God bailing his people out.

I’m grateful for that.

In 35:1 God came to Jacob and told him to go to Bethel and Jacob obeys.

And in 35:5 we learn that God intervened to protect Jacob's family.

Genesis 35:5 "Then they set out and the terror of God fell upon the towns all around them so that no one pursued them."

There is good indication that God used the situation to move Jacob to where he should have gone in the first place.

Jacob was ready to settle down near Shechem, he was ready to let his family be absorbed into the pagan culture surrounding him and God saved him.

This doesn't make God responsible for Jacob's sons' treacherous and savage actions but it does illustrate again that God will use all situations, even evil ones, to work his gracious plan for his children and the world.

I close with what I think are the dominant issues raised by this text:

1. In what ways is our culture absorbing you – making you no different than it – and thus disabling you making you unable to influence it?
2. What has been your response to the culture – do you acquiesce to it or alienate it?
3. Will you respond to God's call to live in the world but not of it so we may be a blessing to it?

Prayer