

"Hustling God"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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HUSTLING GOD

The inspiration for my sermon title this morning came from a book written by Craig Barnes. Now I haven't been able to obtain the book yet, but I would like to read it. If the book is half as good as the title, it's a must read. The title? Hustling God: Why We Work So Hard for What God Wants to Give.

Why do we try to hustle God? Why do we work so hard for what God wants to give? Why do we think that we need to impress others in order to be "somebody?" Why do we continue to act like salvation must be earned despite the fact that the Bible clearly teaches in so many ways that salvation comes to us only by grace through faith?

The Bible is filled with the stories of people who in essence wanted to hustle God. And I think that it's through their story that we learn our story. It's through their mistakes that God teaches us our mistakes as well.

JACOB

My favorite biblical example of the hustler is Jacob. Jacob was the younger son in Isaac's family. But, he wasn't the youngest by much. He was born only a few moments after his brother, Esau. The Bible tells us that he was delivered, he was holding onto his brother, Esau's heel as if Jacob's struggle to get ahead began in the womb itself.

(In fact, Jacob in Hebrew means "he grasps the heel," which was a colloquial way of saying "he deceives.")

In other words, Jacob was a born hustler. Jacob had the hustler gene. And indeed Jacob lived up to his name all his life. Jacob was a heel grabber. Jacob was one who was constantly struggling to get ahead in life.

THE BIRTHRIGHT

Now Jacob's life of hustling began when he conspired with his mother to trick his brother out of his birthright. You know the story. Mother Rebekah loved Jacob and Father Isaac loved Esau.

When Isaac was old, blind and about to die, he asked his son, Esau to go hunting and make him one more good wild game casserole before he went to the happy hunting grounds. After one last good meal, Isaac would give Esau his blessing.

(We men never quit thinking about food do we?)

Anyway, Rebekah (who evidently was the carrier of the hustler gene) heard what Isaac said to Esau, and saw an opportunity to help her boy Jacob make it to the top. She made a goat stew, covered Jacob with goatskins so that he could pass for his hairy brother and sent him to steal the blessing from Esau before he returned from his hunting trip.

Poor old Isaac was so far gone that he couldn't tell goat stew from wild game casserole ... not to mention smooth skinned Jacob from hairy Esau. When Esau arrived just a few minutes later, it was too late. Jacob had received the blessing.

The young heel grabber was now "number one" in the family, and neither Isaac nor Esau could do anything about it. Esau (who would have been seeing an anger management therapist five times a week had he lived today) vowed to kill Jacob for his treachery once father Isaac died and they had the funeral. And at this point Isaac's funeral didn't look far off. I mean how long could a man live who couldn't tell one son from another?

THE DREAM

But, Jacob (again with the help of his mother) managed to make it out of town before Esau could make good on his promise. Rebekah made up a story to tell Isaac ... something about the Canaanite girls in that area being too wild to make good wives. Isaac said, "Yes dear. Whatever you say."

And Isaac once again blessed Jacob and sent him on his way. That very night Jacob was on the road to visit relatives in Aram where he would find women who were more suitable for marriage. And on the road that night Jacob lay down with a stone for a pillow and had a beautiful dream.

Jacob dreamed that there was a stairway to heaven. Angels were going up and down the stairway. And the voice of God came to Jacob in the dream. Everything Jacob had struggled to get on his own God was going to give him free of charge. God would give Jacob land and numerous descendants. In fact God would bless the whole world through Jacob and his clan.

At this point Jacob woke up from his dream and said, "Wow. That was awesome. We need to give this place a name. I know. We'll call this place Bethel. (In Hebrew Bethel means house of God.)

THE DEAL

And then Jacob the hustler began to think about his dream. Did he rejoice that God was going to bless him despite who he was and what he had done? Not at all.

Jacob looked toward the heavens and said,
"Okay God. You've made a promise. You said that you would watch over me, bless me and give me everything I need before coming back to my home town. If you do all that, I'll cut you in for a piece of the action. I'll give you a tenth of all I own!"

And so, Jacob tried to manipulate God by giving God a tithe, a tenth of what God had given him in the first place! What a deal!
Jacob even thought that he could hustle God.

JACOB REVISITED

And I stand here to tell you that Jacob is still alive and well in our world today.

There are still many who refuse to acknowledge the fact that our life our whole life ... is an undeserved gift from God. Instead, they think that God owes them something. They think that life is a competition in which "nice guys finish last." They think that it is a "dog eat dog world."

And, according to many, the purpose of life is to finally end up as top dog. Bribe who you have to bribe in order to get your way even God himself if necessary!

But, you say, that's a silly way to view the world. If God has already given us what we need, if God is with us every step of the way, if God is for us, why should we be worried about stepping on someone else to get ahead? Why shouldn't we just trust God's plan for our life?

My point exactly. We should trust God's plan for our life but often we don't. Like Jacob we want to hedge our bets. We turn even our relationship with God into a kind of scam. In our heart of hearts we try to bribe God saying something like, "Okay, God. I'll go to church every Sunday, give to charity and not break any laws. Your job is to make my life go as smoothly as possible."

A POOR FAITH

For many people that's faith. They say in effect, "I do my part. I work hard. And God is supposed to do His part. God is supposed to bless me."

And when the inevitable tragedy occurs, that so called "faith" is crushed. People actually get angry with God (and unfortunately God's proxy, the minister), quit going to church and say things like, "A good God wouldn't let something like this happen."

(Translation: God didn't keep His end of my bargain.)

We know that Jacob had to struggle for many years before he could understand personally what God had revealed to him that first night on the road.

God had chosen him. God, out of His grace, was going to give Jacob what he needed every step of the way. What Jacob didn't need to do was make deals, devise schemes or worry.

Hustling God was not necessary.
Loving God was necessary.

PREPARED FOR GRACE

Jacob was an old man before he could understand that fact. Only as Jacob looked back on his life did he begin to understand that hustling God and hustling others was never necessary.

I sometimes wonder if the same isn't true for us as well. As it was for Jacob, a true understanding of grace only comes to us after a long stay in the foreign land, a place where hustling is the rule and grace is in short supply.

Like the person addicted to alcohol or drugs we have to come to the end of our spiritual rope and say, "Lord, I can't do this any more. I'm tired of hustling. I'm tired of trying to fool people. I'm tired of trying to fool you. I'm tired of trying to fool myself. My life is totally out of control and only you can fix it."

When our struggle reaches that point, then we are ready for grace. When we come to the end of our rope, then we understand the precious promise of the Bible, "The eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms " (Deuteronomy 33:27, NIV) When we come to the end of our rope and fall, God's arms are there to catch us.

LIFE IN THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

Jacob's life teaches us in story form what Paul is saying to us in prose in our lesson for today. Paul said that there are two ways to live. One way is life according to the flesh. And the other way is life according to the Spirit.

Now people quite often misunderstand Paul when he uses the phrases "life in the flesh" and "life in the spirit." They think of two competing natures within our psyche vying for dominance. You know. It's sort of like those cartoons when the devil is on one shoulder telling the person to do one thing and the angel is on the other person telling the person to do something else.

Forget that.
That's not what Paul means.

When Paul talks about life in the flesh and life in the Spirit, he is talking about two different ways of viewing the world. Paul is talking about our assumptions concerning the world and how those assumptions affect what we see and do. The apostle is talking about what we might call "spiritual perception."

PERCEPTION

Have you ever seen those psychological experiments dealing with perception? In one experiment a room is built in a very distorted fashion. The floor is sloping and one side is much bigger than the other.

But, when you look at that room from one particular vantage point, the room looks just like a normal room until that room is entered by another person. On one side the person looks very small. But, as they move to the other side of the room, the person looks like a giant who is about to go through the ceiling!

Now, we know that is impossible for a person to change size as they walk from one side of the room to the other. But, we still "see" things that way. Why? Because the room "looks" normal from our perspective and our brain adjusts reality to fit our perception!

Well, the same kind of thing happens when it comes to our spiritual assumptions. If we live according to the flesh, we assume certain things about our world. For example, we might believe something like "it's a dog eat dog world, nice guys finish last, you've got to look out for number one, and God helps those who help themselves."

In other words, in order to be successful we have to work hard, crush the competition and cheat when necessary. We see the world that way because our assumptions have trained us to see it that way. Unless we get some new assumptions about the world, we will not change. We will spend our lives doing the "hustle," always trying to make the "deal" in order to enrich our lives.

A COURSE IN ETHICS?

I am rather amused that some of the most prestigious schools in our land are wringing their hands about all the unethical practices going on in the business world. "Maybe," they say, "we need some more courses in ethics so that our graduates will know right from wrong."

I'm afraid that a few more courses in ethics will not do much to help the problem. What we need is a whole new world ... a whole new world of assumptions.

The problem is a "world," a culture in which the dollar is almighty. Until we start trusting God for salvation instead of our own ability to earn and produce, we will not be able to see what is wrong

or right. Right and wrong will remain fluid terms according to what our desires and interests are at the moment.

We will be slaves to a lifestyle that is at the same time very attractive and the essence of death.

This is not a new thing. It was the same thing that Paul was talking about long ago. Life in the flesh, according to the apostle, leads to death. Life in the flesh, Jacob's story teaches us, is life lived in futility, alienated from the plans and purposes of God.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

What is the cure for life in the flesh?
Life in the Spirit.

Life in the Spirit is not just a few more courses in ethics. Life in the Spirit is a whole new way of living, a whole new set of assumptions that allows to see things much differently. Life in the Spirit is a whole new world of values based not upon what we can do for ourselves but upon what God in Christ has already done for us.

So exactly what is the primary assumption of this new life in the Spirit?
Simply put it is this: we are God's children.

When we come to that realization, our life changes completely because our assumptions change completely. This realization was a part of John Wesley's famous conversion experience. He said that he "exchanged the faith of a servant for the faith of a son."

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

A member was telling me this week about the difference her cataract surgery had made on her ability to see colors. She said she went around the house looking at things saying, "Wow. I didn't know this thing was that color."

Her world was, in a small way, changed by her surgery.
She no longer sees things the same way.

So it is when we come to appreciate the fact that we are, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, God's children.

No longer do we view the world as a hostile place where only the strong survive.
We view the world as "our Father's world."
No longer do we view God as a harsh taskmaster to be appeased by hard work and the devotion of a slave. Now we view God as our heavenly Father.

CALLING GOD DADDY

More than that, Paul said that those who live in the Spirit can cry out to their heavenly Father and use the most intimate of titles, "Abba." That word "Abba" was the familiar term used by children for a beloved father. We might substitute the word "daddy."

This is Father's Day, and many of us are lucky enough to give thanks for or remember a "daddy" to whom we could always turn. No matter what the subject, no matter what the problem, he was always there. No matter how great the storm or perplexing the situation, somehow the reassurance of daddy could make it better.

Well, in the same way, those who live in the Spirit cry out to God.
God is not just the Creator of the Universe. God is also our father, our daddy, and we are his adopted children.

I like the way Luther put it.

He wrote about this intimate word for Father, Abba,

"This is but a little word, and yet notwithstanding it comprehendeth all things Although I be oppressed with anguish and terror on every side and seem to be forsaken and utterly cast away from thy presence, yet I am thy child and Thou art my Father for Christ's sake. I am beloved because of the Beloved."

Friends, I can say nothing better than this today, "You are God's child. God loves you and cares for you. By the power of the Spirit live as if that promise is true. It will change everything. It has the power to turn hustlers into believers.

Amen.