

“CAN PEOPLE CHANGE?” **(Genesis 33:1-20)**

This morning as we come to Genesis 33, and I want to start off with a question: Can people really change? And that leads to a follow-up question: Do people change? The cynical part of us says, “Nah, I don’t think so – I know people who are just as onery today as they were forty years ago. People don’t change much from who they really are.” The hopeful, optimistic part of us says, “Yes, people can and do change – it may take time and it may be painful, but by God’s grace they can become different people.”

One tangible way you can see change is when you run into someone you haven’t seen in a long time. You’re at a wedding or funeral or reunion, and you see someone you haven’t seen in ten or twenty or thirty years – and depending on how long it’s been, you might not even recognize them. I had that happen a few years ago at my brother’s funeral service. A woman in her forties walked up to me and said, “Do you remember me?” I looked at her and had no idea. She had a big smile on her face, so I said, “Give me a minute,” and for several seconds I just looked at her and a face from the past slowly began to emerge and I said, “Debbie Macy!” Debbie had been in my youth group, some thirty years earlier, and she had changed a lot, and I had changed as well.

A dozen or so years ago some of my former youth group “kids” put together a reunion and about twenty showed up. At the end of the evening we had a sharing time and it made me glad I was a youth pastor. There were times I wanted to pack it in, but I hung in there. All but two of them were walking with the Lord – some of whom I would never have guessed would be among them. One guy was a bit of a rebel who only came to youth group for the girls – he was now a policeman and a deacon in his church. I never saw that coming.

Last year I got a call out-of-the-blue from this guy’s younger brother who I had not talked to in thirty years. Like his brother, I don’t remember him having much spiritual interest at all, but he said he felt led to call me because he recently became the youth group leader in his church (surprise, surprise), and wanted to tell me how thankful he was for youth group and the impact I had on his life. Well, that made my day! It’s a good reminder that the fruit of ministry is not always immediate – God’s work in people’s lives is often slow and gradual.

This leads us to our story this morning in Genesis 33 where we see two brothers – Jacob and Esau – who had not seen or talked to each other in over twenty years, finally are reunited. These twin brothers had been fighting with each other since the day they were conceived – they wrestled so intently in their mother’s womb that Rebekah thought she was going to die.

Esau preceded Jacob in birth by a few seconds, but Jacob was so close behind that he was grabbing on to Esau’s heel as they exited the birth canal. Esau and Jacob were as different as night and day – Esau was carefree and impulsive, while Jacob was conscientious and deliberate.

The breaking point in their relationship came when Jacob lured Esau into selling his birthright for a pot of stew. The birthright included getting the lion’s share of the inheritance and the honor of being made head of the family. While Esau was out hunting, Jacob tricked their father into giving him the family blessing intended for Esau. When Esau found out what happened, he vowed revenge. He said, “As soon as our father dies, I will kill Jacob.” The threat prompts Jacob to flee, and he goes 500 miles away to his Uncle Laban, where he spends the next twenty years. God uses these twenty years to break Jacob of his self-destructive patterns and self-reliant ways to make him the man God wanted him to be.

After twenty years of serving under Laban, God tells Jacob to go back to the Promised Land, which means that he must face the brother he had cheated. As far as he knows, Esau still has a vendetta and wants to kill him. As far as Esau knows, his younger brother is still the devious, conniving swindler he always has been. Both are expecting to meet the same person they knew before.

In chapter 32 Jacob prepares to meet Esau by sending messengers ahead with gifts to appease Esau and extend goodwill. When the messengers return with word that Esau and 400 men are coming to meet him, Jacob melts in fear... “My brother is going to massacre me and my whole family.” He ups the ante and sends wave after wave of gifts ahead to soften Esau’s wrath. The night before Jacob meets Esau, he has a wrestling match with God and loses when the Lord touches his hip and dislocates it. But Jacob also emerges as a winner because he learned to cling to God and depend on Him.

Everything is set up for an epic clash between two enemies, but the expected conflict turns into a beautiful story of reconciliation. As we go through chapter 33, we will see several signs of change on the part of both brothers, and also learn four key truths about change and transformation.

In verses 1-3 we read... “Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.”

Jacob assumes that Esau still wants vengeance, and he divides his family into three groups. He puts his servant wives and their children in front, then Leah and her children next, and Rachel and her son Joseph in the rear. It’s obvious that Jacob is continuing the family pattern of playing favorites, putting his favorite wife, Rachel, and favorite son, Joseph, in the protected position at the back of the pack. Favoritism caused a host of problems with Jacob and Esau’s parents picking favorites, and it will cause come back to haunt Jacob in chapter 37 when his favorite son is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers.

On the positive side, Jacob shows a new-found courage after wrestling with the Lord, and goes ahead of his family to face Esau. As he sees Esau out in the distance, he bows. He takes another step forward and bows again. He takes another step and bows... seven times in all. In ancient culture bowing before someone was a sign of submission, much like you would bow before a king, and bowing seven times was symbolic of complete humility. Never before in Jacob’s life could he be accused of humility. He was a prideful, self-made man who always had a deceitful plan up his sleeve. But now he walks with a limp – he’s been weakened and humbled – and must rely on the Lord.

He doesn’t expect what happens next. Verse 4 says... “But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.” You can imagine the overwhelming relief Jacob feels – all the worry and fretting and strategizing and sleepless nights was all for nothing. Esau’s mercy and forgiveness towards his brother is conveyed in five expressive verbs – he ran, he embraced, he threw his arms around, he kissed, and he wept.

His actions are very similar to the father of the prodigal son who returned home not knowing what to expect from his father. Luke 15:20 says, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

It's a beautiful picture of the gospel, showing that when we humble ourselves and repent, our Heavenly Father runs out to meet us and welcomes us home – He throws His arms around us and embraces us. He is eager and willing to forgive us when we come humbly before Him and confess our sins.

It's obvious that Esau has also changed. The last we saw him he was enraged – he was ready to string his brother up and kill him. We're not told what changed him, but part of it may have just been the passage of time. When Rebekah sent Jacob off to Laban in chapter 27, she said, "Stay with him until your brother's fury subsides," implying that anger wears off given time.

I've always heard that when you get angry, count to ten. Allow yourself time to cool off before you act rashly. In the heat of the moment, when your emotions are running high, is when you're tempted to do something you later regret. Esau has had twenty years to cool down, and though he hadn't forgotten what his brother did to him, his anger had subsided. It probably didn't hurt that Jacob had sent gifts ahead showing remorse for what he had done.

But I believe there's another factor in Esau's change of heart, and that is God. God promised to be with Jacob and watch over him, and give him safe passage back to the land. In order for that to happen, Jacob needed to make peace with Esau, and God providentially saw to it that it happened. Esau is not described in the Bible as a godly man, but God worked in his heart to forgive Jacob so that Jacob could return to the land and build the nation of Israel in the Promised Land.

Not only had the attitudes of the two brothers changed, so had their economic prosperity. When Jacob fled twenty years earlier, he was a single man with only a staff in his hand. Esau notices that he now has a large group of people that accompany him. Verses 5-7... Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. Jacob is quick to attribute praise to God for his large family, and his children meet their uncle for the first time.

Esau also notices that Jacob has an enormous herd of animals with him. Verse 8... Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?" "To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said. It's amazing to see Jacob, who so selfishly connived to steal Esau's blessing, now wants to give what God has blessed him with back to Esau. "Take them," he says. "I want you to have them."

Jacob appears to be doing what Zacchaeus did in Luke 19. Like Jacob, Zacchaeus was a swindler and cheat. As a tax collector, he had become wealthy by overcharging people – he not only collected money for Rome, but he collected additional money to keep for himself. He became wealthy at the expense of poor people, and because he worked for Rome, nobody could hold him accountable. Then one day Zacchaeus met Jesus and his life was transformed. Those he had cheated were critical and skeptical of his conversion. Zacchaeus stood up and... He said, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Luke 19:8b).

True repentance leads to a desire to make restitution for wrongs committed. Repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry," but a willingness to proactively compensate the person you've wronged.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stressed the importance of being reconciled with your brother. He said, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). If you want to be right with God, you must first be right with others. Before you bring your sacrifice to God and worship, go to your brother and be reconciled. Do whatever you can, in your power, to make things right with those you have wronged.

Jacob wants to demonstrate his repentance by giving back to Esau what he had stolen. Verse 9... But Esau said, “I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself.” Who are these two brothers? The same two that fought in their mother’s womb now take turns deferring to one another. The things they were willing to steal and kill for twenty years earlier now are not important. Time has a way of changing our perspective, especially when it comes to material possessions.

As we grow in Christ, our mindset about money and material things should change. We should adopt the attitude of the Apostle Paul who said, “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (1 Timothy 6:6-8). The things of this world should become less and less important – we should not only be content with what God has given us, but we should be generous and willing to share what we have with others.

In this story Esau displays contentment – “I have plenty – you keep what you have” – and Jacob displays generosity – “You take it – I don’t need it.” Contentment and generosity are two virtues every believer should be growing in, and practicing them shows trust in the Lord to provide and love for our neighbor to give freely as we have been given.

Verses 10-11... “No, please!” said Jacob. “If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need.” And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.

Jacob and Esau remind me of two people fighting over who’s going to grab the check and pay for dinner. Jacob insists that Esau accept his gift, and his reason is that “seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” A day earlier Jacob had been afraid to see Esau’s face, but during the night he came face to face with God in their wrestling match – he saw the gracious face of God who spared his life and blessed him. Now he sees the gracious face of Esau who spares his life and blesses him with forgiveness. After Jacob insists on giving Esau a gift of restitution, Esau finally accepts it.

In verses 12-16 the goodwill between the two brothers continues... Then Esau said, “Let us be on our way; I’ll accompany you.” But Jacob said to him, “My lord knows that the children are tender and that I must care for the ewes and cows that are nursing their young. If they are driven hard just one day, all the animals will die. So let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I move along slowly at the pace of the flocks and herds before me and the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.” Esau said, “Then let me leave some of my men with you.” “But why do that?” Jacob asked. “Just let me find favor in the eyes of my lord.” So that day Esau started on his way back to Seir.

Esau lived in Seir, a mountainous region south of the Dead Sea, and about 75 miles south of where they were presently. Esau wants his brother to come with him, but Jacob decides not to, at least not right away. He even turns down Esau's offer of leaving his men to help him out. Although they have patched up their relationship, Jacob wants to keep some distance between himself and Esau – just as Abraham and Lot maintained a friendly relationship but lived separately from each other.

It's a good reminder that reconciling with someone does not mean that your trust in them is automatically restored. It doesn't mean that boundaries in your relationship cannot and should not be established. I'm sure Jacob and Esau enjoyed some great family reunions, but Jacob was going to build a nation apart from Esau.

Verse 17... “Jacob, however, went to Sukkoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Sukkoth.” Rather than go south – where Esau lived outside the Promised land – Jacob moves west to the land God gave to him and his fathers. For some reason, Jacob decides to live just to the east of the Jordan River for a while, but in verse 18 he moves into the Promised Land... “After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent. There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel” (18-20).

The city of Shechem is about 35 miles north of Jerusalem, and is in the center of the Promised Land. It was the first place Abraham came to in the land, and became a very significant, sacred location to the Jewish people as the place where Abraham first built an altar to the Lord, marking the land as God's land.

Jacob purchases some land near Shechem which signified that was putting down roots in the land God promised. He later dug a well that would become the site where Jesus had His conversation with the woman at the well. Shechem would also be known as the burial site of Joseph, whose bones were brought up from Egypt after the exodus and buried on the plot of ground Jacob purchased.

Like his grandfather Abraham, he built an altar and named it “the God of Israel.” The altar planted a flag in the ground, and marked the land as belonging to the Lord – and all who passed by in the future would remember the one, true God of Israel.

Genesis 33 is a beautiful example of how people can and do change, and from this story we learn four important truths about change. Number one, **change is a work of God**. How does Esau change from an angry, vengeful, bitter man to someone who runs out to embrace and forgive his brother? God did a work in his heart. In order for God to fulfill His promises to Jacob and bring him back to the land, he needed to make peace with Esau, and God worked to change Esau's attitude towards his brother.

And how does Jacob change from being a prideful, deceitful con-artist to a humble, repentant brother insisting on making restitution for the wrong he had done? God did a work in his heart.

Apart from the deep, Spirit-filled work of God in our lives there is no lasting transformation. Jeremiah 13:23 says, “Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.” This explains why so many people remain unchanged and continue doing what they've always done.

But Ezekiel 36:26 says everything changes when God works in the heart. He says, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” When our hearts are yielded to God, He softens them. He takes our hardened, sinful, selfish hearts and transforms them into soft, moldable, forgiving, generous hearts. God does the work – the only thing we do is give Him full access to our hearts and allow Him to change us however He sees fit.

That leads to the second truth of change, and that is that **change takes place through adversity**. Jacob’s change came through the school of hard knocks, and it took God wounding him in their wrestling match to cause Jacob to yield to God. Jacob was a tough nut, and it took tough measures to break him.

As you think back through your life, wouldn’t you say that your greatest times of growth and change came through deep times of pain and hardship? Adversity is the greatest agent of change. Sometimes it takes a crisis or tragedy to get our attention. The prodigal son did not change until he had hit rock bottom. Peter did not change until he denied the Lord three times and was stripped of his pride. The Apostle Paul did not change until God knocked him to the ground on the road to Damascus and blinded him.

God can change anyone whose heart is humbled and repentant. Genuine change cannot take place through self-discipline or willpower – our flesh can only take us so far – real change only comes when we are broken and yielded to the work of God in our hearts.

The third truth of transformation we see in this story is that **change is slow and gradual**. Some people change very quickly. My grandmother stopped smoking the day she was saved in 1948. She said she threw her cigarettes away and never smoked again. Sometimes the change in people is immediate and dramatic. But most of the time transformation is slow.

British preacher Alan Redpath said, “The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime.” It took twenty years for God to break Jacob, and the process of transformation continued the rest of his life. Even in Jacob’s reconciliation with Esau, you can see some of his old tendencies surface – such as showing favoritism to certain family members, and reverting back to old patterns of scheming and manipulating. Transformation is a lifelong process that will not end until we are with the Lord and are completely transformed. Until then, we are a work in progress, and our goal is to look more and more like Christ every day.

The fourth truth of transformation that comes out in this story is that **change is evidenced by changed behavior**. Someone can say, “I’ve changed,” but the proof is not by what you say, but what you do. Twenty years earlier Jacob was a prideful, self-confident deceiver, but now he is humble and willing to give back everything he had stolen. The last time Jacob saw his brother, Esau was full of rage and ready to kill him – now he embraces Jacob and forgives him. Jesus said, “You will know people by their fruit.” When God is truly at work in our hearts, it will show outwardly by the way we treat others. It will be evidenced by changed behavior.

Can people change? Absolutely! Do people change? It depends. It depends on if your heart is yielded and submitted to God – and it often takes great adversity to bring about the desire for change. Once we are yielded to God, His work will slowly and gradually be evident in our behavior, and the change God works in our hearts will testify to the world the glory of God.