

The Weight of Our Words
A New Name
Revelation 2:17 and Genesis 32:22-32
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May 22, 2022

Words carry great weight. The words we say deeply impact others and words said to us can affect us positively or negatively for a lifetime. Whoever coined the phrase, *“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me,”* had no clue what they were talking about. You may remember during the first message in this series Pastor Susan and Pastor Cody went back and forth reading 15 or more Scriptures about the power of our words to bless and to curse—to build up and to tear down. Most of those verses were familiar to me, but hearing them read together was powerful and effectively communicated the weight our words carry.

I want to thank Susan for her work in planning this series. It has been a powerful topic for us. And I want to thank you for your responsiveness—for being open to receiving what God has had for you. Two weeks ago on Mother’s Day I had the privilege of praying blessing over half a dozen people and many others were prayed for as well. And this past Sunday it was powerful to watch many people walk to the front to drop off the slips of paper with words we were cursed with or hurtful words we spoke to others. Our staff’s prayer throughout this series has been that people would be open and responsive to what God has for them.

When Susan suggested a sermon series on our words last Fall, my mind immediately went to the volatile times we live in and how our words can be like fuel poured on a fire to make it burn hotter, or like water that douses the flames. The Scripture that came to mind for me was Romans chapter 12 where Paul writes...

Romans 12:9-21 selected

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Those are excellent words for followers of Jesus to embrace in the polarizing times in which we live, but the focus Susan chose was even more apropos for us—the power words have to build up or tear down; to bless or to curse.

As I thought about concluding this series, there were so many directions I could go, but what has been on my mind over the past several weeks is the power God has to change the trajectory of our lives by “re-naming us” around the identity He has for us, rather than having us continue to live out a false script based on our past failures and shortcomings, and how others view us or the words others have spoken over us. Revelation chapter 2 records Jesus’ words to the 7 churches in Asia Minor. In verse 17 there’s an interesting statement I’d like to read for us: *“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna.”* And this is the statement I want us to really lock in on for today... *“I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.”* Revelation 2:17 My heart for each of us today is that we would fully embrace the name and identity Jesus has for us—a name that may look very different from what our past experiences would indicate or from how others have referred to us or viewed us.

To unpack that I want us to look at a prominent character from the Old Testament named, Jacob. Jacob was Abraham’s grandson, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, and he was a twin to Esau. Jacob later became the father of Joseph and 11 his brothers—the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. Jacob’s full story is found in Genesis chapters 25 through chapter 50.

Before we dive into Jacob’s story, I want to assure you I have nothing against the name, Jacob. Jacob is a good, solid name. I know at least 3 people named Jacob in our church family. As I talk about the origin of the name Jacob, I’m not suggesting that someone named Jacob should change their name or that parents stop naming their babies Jacob. When you Google Jacob you’ll see the description: *Jacob: supplanter, often interpreted as someone who seizes, circumvents or usurps.*

Jacob scrapped and fought and worked hard throughout his life. He would stop at nothing to get an advantage, even if it meant tricking or deceiving others. Jacob was a conniver. Jacob’s vanity license plate would have read ‘git r done.’ He would stop at nothing in his pursuit of success. I’ve been thinking for a while about doing an entire sermon series on Jacob’s life, because Jacob’s approach to life is one many of us can relate to.

The name “Jacob” in Hebrew literally means, “*to grab the heel.*” Isaac and Rachel’s youngest twin was given the name Jacob because he came out of his mother’s womb after his older brother, Esau grabbing his twin brother’s heel—as if Jacob were fighting to pull Esau back and get out first. Are you familiar with the phrase, “You’re pulling my leg?” It means someone is joking or trying to trick or deceive someone else. “Grabbing the heel” has the same connotation and it perfectly described Jacob.

Again, you can read all about Jacob’s life in chapters 25-50 of Genesis, but let me give you a few examples that demonstrate his penchant for deceit.

- One day Esau, who was a hunter, came in from the field famished and Jacob was cooking some stew. When Esau asked for a bowl of stew, Jacob responded, “I’ll give you some stew in exchange for your birthright as the first born son.” In Jewish culture the rights of the firstborn were sacred, but Esau was so hungry, he agreed to trade his birthright for some stew.
- When Esau and Jacob’s father, Isaac, was preparing to die, he asked Esau to hunt some game and prepare it and bring it to him for a last meal, after which he would bless his eldest son. Jacob’s mother, Rachel, overheard the conversation and she convinced Jacob to prepare a meal for his father and give it to his father as if he were his brother Esau. Because Esau was hairy and Jacob was smooth-skinned, Rachel covered his hands, arms and neck with goat skin. Isaac who was blind, was surprised that Jacob was able to hunt down and prepare his food so quickly and Jacob’s voice didn’t sound like Esau, so he questioned Jacob as to whether he was really Esau and Jacob boldly lied to his Dad. Isaac proceeded to bless Jacob with the blessing reserved for the oldest son.
- Fearing for his life, because Esau was so angry, Jacob fled to Haran and worked for a man named Laban, his uncle. It’s too long of a story to go into all the details, but Jacob ended up marrying two of Laban’s daughters, Rachel and Leah in exchange for 14 years of working for his uncle. During that time, Jacob deceived his uncle to gain greater wealth for himself and eventually to his wives, children and livestock without telling his uncle he was leaving.

After leaving Laban with his entire entourage of wives, children, servants and livestock, Jacob received word that his brother, Esau, whom he had stolen the blessing from was approaching him. Jacob hadn’t seen Esau since he stole his blessing and he assumed that Esau was set on avenging himself for this wrong. Jacob once again went into his conniving role. He arranged several large groups of flocks and servants to approach Esau and tell him they were a gift from his brother. In this way he hoped to bribe Esau into forgiving him for the wrong Jacob had done. He went to great lengths to protect himself by sending his wives and children and servants and livestock ahead of him while Jacob stayed at the very back, hoping that by the time he reached his brother, his anger would have diminished. I’d like to pick up Jacob’s story by reading Genesis chapter 32 verses 22-32.

Genesis 32:22-32

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.



There is considerable mystery surrounding what happened that night. Did Jacob have a dream? and Who was he wrestling with? are questions that quickly come to mind. What we do know is that Jacob had an encounter with God; Jacob, as was his nature, refused to give up until he was blessed; the being he was wrestling asked him what his name was; Jacob acknowledged who he was with all that name entailed; Jacob's name was changed to Israel—meaning “fighter of God” or “one who struggles with God”; and, Jacob left that place with a limp.

Jacob's wrestling match was a profound encounter that forever shaped his life. In wrestling with God and demanding a blessing from God, Jacob acknowledged that it was God's favor and blessing he really needed and that his own striving, manipulating and attempts to control his life and destiny weren't getting him where he wanted and needed to be. God cemented this understanding in Jacob's mind, by asking him to state his name. In other words, Jacob, who are you and how have you tried to navigate through your life? To which Jacob responded, *“I'm a man who has always done whatever it took to get ahead, even when that meant deceiving, manipulating and trying to control others so I could have what I wanted.”* And to that God responded, *“From this day forward you have a new name, Israel. Now you'll struggle with me, because you know I'm the one who bestows blessing and favor. Before this encounter you tried to get what you wanted by struggling with people, but from this time forward, you'll know God is the one you need to struggle with.”* Jacob's encounter with God was life-changing. His name and identity would never be the same.

I'd like us to look at Jacob's wrestling match with God and his name change in two ways. First, I'm convinced many of us relate to Jacob's approach to life that says, *“If it's to be, it's up to me.”* If we want something, we need to pursue it. No one else is going to hand it to us. There are aspects of that approach to life that can be admirable, but it also pushes God to the margins of our life. We struggle with ourselves, we struggle with others, we struggle with life, but ultimately we need to pursue and struggle with God—the one who blesses us and extends his favor to us. If your tendency is to strive in your own strength for what you want or think you need, I encourage you this morning to transition from striving to pursuing God.

Secondly, and more in line with what we've been focused on during this series, I encourage each of us today to exchange our name for the name God has for us. As we've

emphasized throughout this series, all of us tend to forge our identity based on our past experiences and what people have said about us. Susan and Cody did an excellent job in week 1 of this series emphasizing how a positive view of our children can bless them, as opposed to the negative views we assign them that can function as a curse. For example, recognizing that our son who enjoys taking things apart isn't destructive, he is curious. Or our daughter who is frequently changing plans and seems to get bored easily isn't irresponsible, she's adventuresome. On a personal level, I grew up on a farm, and to this day, I love planting and helping things grow. But to this day I'm not gifted mechanically or building things. Looking at directions for how things get put together don't easily compute for me. We joke around our house when I successfully do something simple like changing a light bulb or putting something together that Mr. Miscellaneous (that's me) has struck again. 😊 I can laugh about that now, but during my teen years I didn't think I was very smart, because I struggled to follow written directions and diagrams and maps just don't make sense to me. I'm spatially challenged. Being made fun of or ridiculed for not being able to figure those things out and feeling inferior to people to whom those things came naturally made me think I was stupid. It wasn't until I was in my 20s that I began to understand there are many different kinds of intelligence and while some types of learning didn't come naturally to me, there were other areas in which I was gifted.

Last week many of us came to the front of the church and placed pieces of paper on which we had written words of cursing that have been spoken over us or words that we spoke inappropriately over others. Watching people stream down the aisle in both services was so powerful, because I understood what those pieces of paper signified. This morning I want to encourage you to complete an exchange—trading those slips of paper that you wrote on last week for a white stone that signifies God's new name for you. I encourage you to pick up a stone and to take it home and write God's name for you on it, and then place that stone somewhere you'll be reminded of what God is doing in you. Jacob moved from struggling with people and striving in his own power to pursuing and struggling with God and his name was changed. What name change does God have for you this morning?