



TIME OF GRACE®

Flawed but Blessed: How Does Grace Change Me?

Study Notes

Summary

While karma is not a Christian teaching, a form of karma does exist. The crazy cycle of sin spins every time we give each other what we deserve. Jacob and Laban's disgusting story is proof. Greed and lies spin back and forth, destroying a family that supposedly was better than the pagan Canaanites. This message warns us of the same destructive cycle in our lives and points us to Jacob's descendent who turned the other cheek on the cross, giving grace to sinners.

- The most natural, logical, and dangerous thing is _____.
- **Genesis 29:14-20:** ¹⁴ After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, ¹⁵ Laban said to him, "Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be." ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹ Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.
- **Genesis 29:21-27:** ²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her." ²² So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. ²³ But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. ²⁴ And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant. ²⁵ When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" ²⁶ Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. ²⁷ Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work."
- Karma = Long-term _____.
- **Matthew 5:39:** But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

- **1 Peter 3:9:** Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.
- Karma _____. Grace _____.

Points to Ponder

1. In which of your current relationships are you living by karma instead of by grace? What would it look like to own your sins in that relationship? What would it look like to show that person grace?
2. **Agree/Disagree:** Scores rarely get settled, because sinners keep scores in selfish ways.
3. Study Romans 5:8 and contrast God's love with the idea of karma.

Homework for Next Week

Read Genesis 32:22-32.

*"Karma: You get what you deserve. Christianity: Jesus got what you deserve."
—Unknown*

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Genesis 29
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Pastor Mike Novotny

A guy that Michelangelo personally knew, Biagio da Cesena, he had a close connection to the pope in those days. And Biagio was not the biggest fan of Michelangelo's work. But Michelangelo, instead of taking the criticism well, instead of being a good artist who knows you can't make everyone happy all the time, he decided to get his own version of revenge. And when he painted the scenes of the final judgment on this man who was being dragged into hell, he painted the actual face of Biagio. If that wasn't enough, he put big donkey ears to make him more ridiculous. He wrapped him in a serpent who had a nasty bite, to say the least.

Ah, payback. Revenge. Personal karma. And I'm not telling you that story today just cause it's kind of interesting and if you ever visit the Sistine Chapel, you'll have to look up for it. I'm telling you that story because the temptation that Michelangelo faced is the same temptation that you have to face - at your job, at your church, with your kids, in your marriage, in your dating relationship, with your brother, your sister, your mom, your dad, your next-door neighbor. If you're going to live in an imperfect world with imperfect people, sooner or later, someone will sin against you and you'll have to decide in that moment what to do. Whether to embrace grace and forgiveness or, like Michelangelo, to give people a little bit of what they've got coming. You might know karma is the name for this religious belief that says eventually what goes around, comes around. But in every human heart is this really strong desire to speed up the process of karma and to be the personal one who pays people back what they deserve.

I want to talk to you today about that temptation because here's what I know. If you have a pen, I actually want you to write this down - that the most natural and logical and dangerous thing in the world is karma. By our very nature, we all know how to get people a little bit of what they've got coming. And I also call it logical because there are few sins that we commit that seem to make more sense than hurting the people who have first hurt us. Often, our conscience will - our consciences will bother us if we do something wrong. But if someone started it, if they had it coming, it seems in that moment to not be so bad. In fact, it's so logical that sometimes our friends, our teammates, our coworkers will applaud when we give people a little taste of what they have coming. It seems so logical to the human spirit.

And yet, I say today that's dangerous. I've never seen a divorce happen without massive amounts of karma. I've never seen siblings separated for long periods of time without huge doses of karma. I've never seen a rivalry in sports or the hallways of a high school blow up without lots of karma. There are few things more dangerous to our unity, our peace, our relationships, and even our godliness than karma. And so, a question I want to ask is why do we do that? And if we

know that karma kills relationships and it blows things up out of proportion, why does it - why does it happen so frequently? Even in the church, even in Christian lives?

I heard a pastor try to answer that question a few years ago. He said it was his most brilliant idea for counseling married couples but the idea that never, ever, ever worked. He said when a husband and wife would come to him and there was tension and conflict and drama and sin, you would grab a piece of paper and draw a circle on it and handed it to the husband and say, "I want you to divide this circle up like a pie chart. And I want you to tell me how much of this conflict is her fault and how much of this is your fault." And of course, the husband would never draw the line right down the middle, right? He'd always have this little slice that was kind of his fault 'cause he wasn't perfect but most of it was due to her and the pastor was brilliant.

Instead of arguing the size of the slice, he would, he would say to the guy, "Okay, I believe you. But today, what I want to do is talk just about that slice. I want to talk about the ways that you have broken your vows. Before we leave today, I want you to apologize to this woman because you've lied to her and you've sinned against her. You need to repent to God and repent to her and change." And do you know what would happen? He couldn't do it. Even though the pastor agreed with him; said this is 90 percent her but let's focus on this. Do you know what he would do? He would say, "Yeah, but I wouldn't have done this if she wouldn't have done that. And I wouldn't have said this if she wouldn't have started." He couldn't even own his small percentage. He kept pointing fingers and when the pastor tried the same exercise with the wife, guess what happened? The exact same thing.

Psychologists call this the fundamental attribution error. That when I do something that's bad, it's because of the circumstances; because of what other people have done. But when you do something that's bad, it's because of you and your character. And so, I'll apologize if you want me to but really, there's nothing that I can be in control of; nothing I can change. And when two people are in a relationship and they both believe that, that they are barely at fault - and even the part that they say they're at fault at is not really their fault - relationships implode and marriages end and families and churches are ripped apart.

Which is why today we need to talk. With an open Bible, we need to have a really long, hard conversation about karma. Today, I want to tell you a long, drawn out, sometimes funny, mostly heartbreaking story about one of Jesus' ancestors. A man named Jacob who gave into the temptation of karma and it cost him in a huge way. Today, Jacob's story is going to remind us that if we think one more argument, one more point, one more conversation, one more fight, one more snarky remark is going to fix it, actually the opposite is true. Instead, this story is going to push us to a totally different place; the teaching of Jesus Christ of unconditional love, about free forgiveness, and about amazing grace.

So, I want you to keep the face of that person you're thinking about right now in the back of your mind as I tell you the story of a man named Jacob. You longtime Christians might know the context about 4,000 years ago, God chose this man named Abraham, who had a son named Isaac, who had twin sons named Esau and Jacob, but the karma started early between the two brothers. Jacob lied to his brother Esau; he deceived him. He actually impersonated him to steal Esau's

blessing from their blind father, Isaac, and when Esau sinned against, he came back even harder. He was so angry, he wanted to kill Jacob. And so, Jacob took off; he ran 600 miles to the north to his mother's brother, a man named Laban, and that's where we pick the story up today. And surprisingly, the story - for how much drama and brokenness and karma is in the midst of it - it starts with one of the sweetest, most romantic verses in the entire Bible. So, check it out on the screen as we pick things up in Genesis 29. It says, "After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, his Uncle Laban said to him, 'Just because you're a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.' Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, 'I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter, Rachel.' Laban said, 'It's better that I give her to you than to some other man, so stay here with me.'

So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her." And all the romantics said, "Awe." It says, "Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife. My time is completed and I want to make love to her.'" A little less romantic than the last thing he said. "So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob and Jacob made love to her. And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant. When morning came, there was Leah. So Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you've done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?' Laban replied, 'It's not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work.'"

Okay, that's messed up. Alright, the old sister swap. Hey, has that ever happened to you before? I mean - how we're talking in church like how? How does that even happen? Like 4,000 years ago, there was no electricity. Was it just that dark that he had no clue? Was he hammered drunk, right? Could Laban have been pouring him so much wine that he was just blacked out; had no clue what was happening? And some girl wandered into his tent? Was she wearing a thick veil? We have no clue what happened but we know this: That Jacob got a little bit of what he gave. You remember the story?

Tell me if this sounds familiar: A parent uses their own kid to lie to a person who can't see to get something they want. That's exactly what Jacob and his mother Rebecca did to Isaac and now it's exactly what Laban and Leah do back to Jacob. And sadly, the drama is nowhere close to over. So, Jacob agrees to Laban's terms. Laban's smart; did you catch it? You can marry Rachel next week if you want but you've got to sign on the dotted line; seven more years of work and he does. So Jacob marries two women who are - you know, he starts filming the first ever season of Sister Wives. Can you imagine having two wives who are sisters and things spiral fast. In fact, I call episode number one "Baby Mama, Sister Drama" because Rachel and Leah, they are at each other's throats for years and years and years and their relationship explodes. And I wish the story ended there but Jacob and his Uncle Laban are still at each other's throats.

One day, Jacob decides - because God has told him that it's time to go back home - but instead of saying goodbye, he takes off without telling Laban. He doesn't give this man a chance to kiss his

own daughters goodbye or his grandchildren; he just leaves when he says he's out shepherding the flocks. And when Laban finds out, he is so furious, he is ready to murder Jacob. He rides hard for seven straight days and if it wasn't for a dream where God spoke to him and said don't kill him, he would have. And he catches up to Jacob and he sticks a finger in his chest and says, "Why did you lie to me? Why would you run away? Why wouldn't you give me a chance to kiss my daughters and my grandchildren goodbye?" And Jacob of course doesn't apologize. He comes right back, "I'll tell you what, you've been cheating me for years. I've been working hard for you. God has made you rich because of me." And of course, Laban comes right back. He says, "Because of you, these are my kids. These are my grandchildren. These are my flocks."

And they go back and forth and back and forth until the only thing they can agree on is to set up a little monument in that place. They set up a stone and they call it Mizpah, which is Hebrew for "God's going to watch." And Jacob points a finger at Laban and says, "God's going to watch." If you cross this line into my territory, God's going to watch. And Laban says the same thing back. And these two men with fingers in each other's faces, they depart and they never see each other again. The end.

And I just told you the short version of that story. If you'd read it in the Bible, it takes up all of Genesis 29, Genesis 30, and Genesis 31. It's 133 total verses. The drama and the karma spans 20 total years. And you have to ask yourself - why would God put that in the Bible? Why would he want me to spend three days worth of devotions just reading this dramatic story? If you're taking notes, I think here's one of the answers: That karma is long-term drama. That if we keep record of people's wrongs, if we want to focus on what she did wrong or what he did wrong, it will not end quickly. One argument won't fix it. One more insult won't cure it. If you want things to go on and on and on until as much damage as possible is done, then get people exactly what they deserve and embrace karma.

It kind of makes me think of this. Remember these? It's like a famous desk accessory from the 1990's, right? The official name for this is a Newton's Cradle and essentially, it's to teach this law of physics that force can travel through static objects and affect another object. And you know what happens if I pull one of these back and gravity takes effect? It goes back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. And I thought of this as I was thinking about Jacob and Laban. It's not that one sins against the other and the other sins back and they call it even. No, what happens in their long relationship - it goes sin, sin, sin, sin, sin, sin, sin, sin - and who's caught in the middle? The kids. Sisters. The grandchildren. Imagine all those boys not being able to see their grandpa? Imagine these sisters, who might have been so close before all the karma and the drama happened? This is the sound of karma. It is not over quickly, but it lasts way longer than we'd ever choose.

Except, this isn't exactly right. Because this, if I give it enough time, even just a few seconds, it will slow down and the drama will end. But not in life. When we come back at people, instead of settling the score, it gets even more intense. The damage gets greater and greater and greater and the people who are caught in the middle get hurt more than we would ever choose.

So I have to ask you a really hard spiritual question: What relationships in your life are kind of like that? You know, who's crashed into you with their words or their choices or their lack of love? And the most natural thing, like gravity, would be to come right back at them. Who doesn't get much of your love or your patience or your compassion or your encouragement? Who do you talk about, you just vent about, when they're not around? Who have you given up the teaching of Jesus for to love people who don't deserve it? I'm sure you could tell me for hours and hours and hours about all the things in their chunk of the pie. But I've got to tell you with all the compassion I can, that's not going to fix it.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says he who seeks revenge should dig two graves because that karma will not just kill that person, it will kill you, too. And there are people who are caught in the middle. There are kids who want to love their mom and their dad but the way the dad talks about mom when she's not around, they don't know what to do. I know it's hard. And I know you have 500 reasons in your heart why they deserve, why they shouldn't receive your love and your generosity, but God wants to tell you today that's not going to fix it. It's not going to help. It's going to hurt. It's going to hurt you.

That's why Jesus in one of his most famous sermons in Matthew 5, he once said this: "I tell you, do not resist an evil person." He would admit you're going to run into some evil people. "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also." Everyone would say they have it coming; he started it. She said it first. Jesus says, "No." His friend Peter picked up on this. He said it so vividly in 1 Peter 3. That passage says, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." See, God knows that the way of karma will not get you a blessing; just a curse. But if by the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart, you can return blessing when you're insulted, and something great happens in a relationship. Something great happens in your heart. You sleep well at night. You know that you've done everything that you can do.

So how do we do it? I'm guessing what I just shared with you is probably not shocking news if you're a Christian; that you should love your enemies. That you should have unconditional love for people who have hurt you. That's probably not shocking news so how? How do we do that? Now I found the answer to that question in an insult from one of my biggest enemies.

I play in a soccer league with 35 and older guys. It's a pretty chill league; there are no standings, playoffs, or trophies. But there is a guy in our soccer league who is not - he's not incredibly nice. He's a really skilled, strong, talented player but sometimes, most of the time, he's really not a nice person. And if ever in a game I can find a way to get past him, this dude - he jacks me. Like, takes out the ankles, leaves me with my face in the turf. It's ridiculous, it's uncalled for, and of course what he does, he acts like he didn't do anything wrong. And game after game after game after game, this guy does the same thing until one of my teammates decides, "Okay, it's time for karma. This guy's got it coming." So he gets tangled up with this guy and my teammate, he just whacks him. He kicks him from the ground and the guy flips out. And he screams at the ref, he wants our teammate kicked out of the game.

Okay, this wasn't my best moment as a Christian but I start laughing. Like, out loud, across the field, like, "Come on, dude! You do stuff like that every single game to me!" And have I ever told you how he responded? From across the field he points at me and he says, "Shut your mouth, holy man." I said, "Dang it." I should have told these guys I was a plumber or something.

You know, but I've been thinking about what he said and I was thinking, he was right. I am a holy man. And that is why I should have shut my mouth. I don't say I'm a holy man because of my job. I say I'm a holy man because of Jesus. Because Jesus does not believe in karma because Jesus took up a cross. There are no lightning bolts that come down to my head. Instead, the favor and the love and the compassion of God - because of his grace, I am holy and if you believe in Jesus, that's what God says about you, too. You're a holy man, a holy woman, because the God that we worship knows nothing about karma. He knows everything about grace.

I want you to write this down because this is what is so unique about the Christian faith; that karma kills but grace saves. Grace is that unconditional, undeserved, I can't believe I'm receiving this kind of love that God has shown to you in Jesus. And did you notice the grace of God in this story? In the middle of all the baby mama, sister karma drama, did you see the kindness and love and compassionate heart of God? I mean, in the midst of all the sin and selfishness and payback, did you see what God was doing? He was keeping his promise. God had said to Abraham and then Isaac and Jacob, "I will bless you with this massive family so big, it's like the stars in the sky. You won't be able to count them." And do you know how that family happened? Through that. Through all of these sons, God was keeping his promise. He was being good to his people. And some of you might know that fourth son who was born, Judah, had a very special place in that promise. Nineteen hundred some years after Judah, there would be born someone from Judah's line; the line of the tribe of Judah. His name was Jesus. And Jesus, when he would hang on a cross, he would look down on his enemies and he would pray, "Father, forgive them," which is what he says to us. "Father, forgive them. They don't know."

See, the grace of God has changed your name. It's changed who you are. It's changed how the Father sees you and once you look up at that kind of grace - the grace that has saved you - you're ready to look out at those people, who like you, have done a lot of things wrong. And you know exactly how to treat them and you never know, maybe the thing you haven't yet tried and committed yourself to might actually work. "Shut your mouth, holy man," he said. And I knew that if we were keeping score, the guy still owed me a thousand times over.

But do you know the terrible part about being a Christian? Our God doesn't let you get away with sin. And so, I sat there after the game, taking off my shin guards and my conscience was just burning and I knew it wasn't right, even if it was logical. And I didn't want to do it but the Holy Spirit pushed me a thousand times until I ran and I caught the guy just before he got to the parking lot. And I tried to own my little slice of that pie. I said, "Hey man, I'm sorry. I ran my mouth. I hate it when people do that. I know better. I'm sorry." And do you know what the meanest guy in our soccer league did? He put his arm around me and he said, "I'm sorry, too." And the drama was done.

Brothers and sisters, I know it's not always that quick, that easy, or that simple. I know some of the things you have been through are way bigger than getting fouled on some sports field. But there is power in grace. It is the grace of Jesus that has saved you and it is the grace that we extend to others that can save our relationships. So may God fill us with that grace; as it overflows out of our hearts and lives and change us all. Karma kills. But grace saves.

Let's pray.

Dear Jesus, we're tired of the drama and the tension, how heavy our consciences feel, how much regret we have when we give in to that quick word when people have it coming. I know, God, there's so many people who have been through divorce in this room; there's so many people who don't see eye to eye with their own children. There are so many things happening at work and at school. God, it seems like we need a miracle to change that and so that's what we're praying today.

We know that you love peace. We know that you love forgiveness. We know that this is your will and so we pray may your will be done among us. Jesus, you taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer that God would forgive us our sins as we forgive those who've sinned against us. And you know how evil it was when they sinned against us but we pray now that that would not be our excuse but instead it would be our reason to forgive as we've first been forgiven at the cross.

God, I think about what could be. We can't fix every relationship; that's out of our control but we can do our part so help us. And at the end of the day, God, help us remember that you are a God who doesn't keep a record of wrongs or sins; that you love us despite all the ups and downs. That because of the cross of Jesus, you're not flying back in revenge. Instead, there's just your smiling face that is filled with grace. We can't wait to see your face, God. Help us until we see that day. And we pray it all in your powerful and beautiful name, Amen.