

Favoritism - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 34:1-31** (#524)

Introduction: One of the major themes we've seen throughout Jacob's life relates to family relationships. Whether it's with his brother, his father, his mother, his uncle, or the wives he ends up marrying, Jacob has navigated many of his relationships either through deceit or favoritism. Sadly, as we'll read today, that sense of favoritism hasn't been completely stamped out of his character.

I'm not sure that we grasp how much of a problem favoritism is, particularly for Christians. First, I should define what I mean: favoritism is showing a bias towards or against somebody because of their wealth, connections, what they can do for you, or similar distinctions. It is regularly condemned in the Bible. In **James 2**, favoritism – also translated as “partiality – is to have no part in our words and actions. As that chapter goes on, James explains that the problem with favoritism is that we sinful and imperfect people end up favoring those we shouldn't, and wronging those that we should care more for. Showing favoritism is actually a violation of what God commanded: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The same command against favoritism comes up again in **1 Timothy 5**, and is a major theme in Paul's letters when he writes of how God Himself does not show favoritism (**Romans 2, Ephesians 6, and Colossians 3**). We could spend a lot of time in the Old Testament as well, where the picture against favoritism is primarily related to justice in both **Exodus 23 and Leviticus 19**.

The favoritism that was first shown to Jacob was from his mother, and he learned the pattern all too well, showing his own favoritism to Rachel rather than to Leah. That favoritism will be a main feature both in this chapter and later in the story of Joseph. Given that this is such a major theme in Jacob's life, and that we read of it so often in the Bible, it would be wise for you and I to carefully and honestly think through our own lives: in what ways are you tempted by favoritism? In what situations are you acting unjustly and unkindly towards some and with a false or undue care towards others? Since our Lord does not show favoritism, we need to call upon the Spirit to change our own actions, our own thinking, so that we would better example Him to those we live with, work alongside, and meet.

But what if we don't? What if this is a sin that we just learn to accept? After all, it isn't one of the "big" ones that we Christians typically major on. If that is your question, then **Genesis 34** provides your answer, and it will do so by narrating one of the most disturbing and terrible stories that happens throughout **Genesis**. Favoritism is a bigger problem than we think – let's see what sorts of things it can lead to in our verses today...

34:1-4 You might recall that Dinah was the last child born to Leah back in **Genesis 30:21**. At that time, Leah and Rachel were engaged in their contest for Jacob's affections and things had reached a real fever pitch. While it might have seemed all the fallout from that had come and gone, here in these verses we see that the favoritism of Jacob will lead to tragedy once more.

We aren't told much about Dinah other than the fact that she "went out to see the women of the land." That's an odd phrase, and it's hard to understand what it means. The only other time this idea appears in **Genesis** is when we read of Rebekah's fears that her son, Jacob, might marry one of the Hittite women, as Esau had done. So whatever shades of meaning we might be missing, Dinah was spending time outside of her family. It's that time outside of their protection, outside of the people of God, that places her in a situation where Shechem can abuse her.

Shechem is the prince of the land – the powerful guy who gets what he wants, and he has decided – only after first abusing her – that he is drawn to Dinah. In fact, he claims to love her, so much so that he wants his father to get Dinah to be his wife.

Let me pause only for a moment to make sure we understand: nowhere does the Bible condemn Dinah. Her abuse was not her fault – it was Shechem's. While the prevailing winds of our culture might want to have the sermon stop here and go off on a tangent, the fact is that the story continues and we haven't reached the main point yet. In these early verses, if there's any point to be made, it will be to simply note that there is a certain protection of being in and around God's people. In an earthly sense, that protection will never be perfect, of course – Christians have done and can do all sorts of terrible things to one another. But, in general, when people aim to honor and respect the Lord, life is better than otherwise. Certainly, in

an eternal sense, there is protection for God's people, when we are seen safely to our heavenly home by Jesus. Yet, those are points that we get from the larger context of **Genesis**. Let's keep reading and see what *this* particular passage teaches us...

34:5-17 We've read of Dinah and Shechem, but what about her brothers? What about her father? Jacob's response is puzzling, isn't it? Which of you fathers would hear about somebody abusing your daughter and just sit there passively, doing nothing? That sort of passivity would sure look a lot like hatred. And isn't that exactly what we've seen from Jacob before? He loves Rachel. Later in **Genesis**, we'll see his favor for the sons of Rachel much more so than the sons of Leah. And here, we see that no favor of his extends to his daughter, Dinah. His favoritism leads him to passivity, which will be highlighted all the more as the chapter goes on. There's a lesson here, even if it seems simple: favoritism leads to blind spots. It puts us in real danger of neglecting to do the good that we are called to do, which **James 4** calls out as nothing less than sin. Beware favoritism! Now, back to the story...

As Jacob is waiting, he is met by two groups of people. We first read of Hamor, Shechem's father, who has come to Jacob alongside Shechem himself. Second, we find that Jacob's sons have found out what happened to Dinah, and they react very differently than their father – their response is marked by anger and outrage.

Neither Hamor nor Shechem seems to really see that any problem has occurred or that any wrong has been done. At most, they believe that this unpleasantness can be solved by Shechem getting what he wants yet again: by Dinah being given to him as a wife. But, this isn't the solution that it seems: remember that God's people were separate and distinct from the nations around them. And while the law itself hasn't been given yet, we've already read many times how intermarrying with other people led to problems – not from a racial or even cultural sense, but rather because marrying into a family that didn't worship the Lord tended then (as so often now!) to lead to worshipping other gods.

Shechem decides to speak up at this point – I can only imagine the boiling outrage that all of Jacob's sons must have felt with each word he spoke – and he asks to

find favor in the eyes of Jacob. Favor! After what he did?! He even offers, perhaps with a nod towards realizing that the brothers aren't happy, to pay whatever price Jacob would require for the marriage.

What's interesting, then – especially given Jacob's earlier behavior – is that it is the sons who answer, not Jacob himself. And the sons have learned well from their father, because they've learned how to deceive others. That sinful skill is what they employ here: they act as if giving Dinah in marriage would be a solution, except for their own beliefs requiring that the males among God's people were to be circumcised. Only if Shechem and his people would be willing to go through the procedure, would intermarriage be possible.

This, dear friends, is deceit of the highest level. Circumcision itself wasn't the promise, but instead was the sign of the promise. Simply calling others to be circumcised did not somehow make them into the people of God, nor did it set them apart in God's eyes. Which, by the way, also sheds some light on the ways that we practice baptism and communion. Both of those ordinances are signs of a spiritual reality, but they themselves aren't the reality. It's a bit like a person's signature on a check or legal document: the signature is important, but only because it refers to the person. So it is with baptism and communion and so it is here with circumcision. What Jacob's sons are proposing simply could not ever be the case. Yet, following in their father's footsteps, they offer it up anyways, with a deeper and more deceptive plot in mind.

Let me make a note here: Jacob's favoritism leads him to care little for Dinah or what has been done to her, and now we are seeing that it also leads him to not intervene with the deception that his sons are offering. Do you see how his sin of favoritism is leading to more and more sins? It's growing, which is what all sin does. Never think that any sin, no matter how little it may seem, will stay that way. It won't. It grows, it leads to something worse. It's like saying that somebody only has a "little cancer." If the doctor told you that and refused to treat it, wouldn't you be upset? The best time to treat cancer is before it spreads, not after! So it is with sin. Don't wait until it is full grown and leading to death, fight it as soon as you are aware and not a moment later. I'm reminded of John Owen's very helpful saying: "be killing sin, or it will be killing you." There's no middle-ground option. One or

the other is true of you – which is it? We kill sin by confessing it to the Lord, by confessing it to one another, by getting help or accountability as appropriate. We kill it by making radical changes to our lives to spare us from temptation where we are weak. How are you doing in the fight against indwelling sin? Do you have anybody who is praying for you – praying specifically about your struggles? Are you asking anyone for help? Are you bringing your sins into the light before the Lord, confessing them and basking in the forgiveness that He offers? This is vital folks – don't neglect God's grace offered to you. Now, let's keep reading...

34:18-29 Hamor and his son seem to think that all is good with this deal, so they immediately go back to their people and convince them that getting circumcised is a great idea. I think we are meant to see something beyond a young man wanting to marry a woman here – likely there are larger political considerations on at least Hamor's mind, especially with his comments about how the people of Shechem will gain economically from this – which, you'll note, was not a part of the deal that he offered to Jacob. There's deception enough for everyone here, isn't there? Nevertheless, the men of the city end up convinced, and all are circumcised.

Three days later, while the men of the city are still in pain, Simeon and Levi – sons of Leah and therefore blood brothers of Dinah – fall upon them, killing every male in the city. Dinah, who has apparently been in Shechem's house, either willingly or as something of a hostage, is taken away. Then the rest of Jacob's sons come forth and plunder the city in an act of revenge. They capture the women and children, and they take all the herds and livestock.

Dear church, isn't there a part of us that reads these words and thinks “hey, it's regrettable, but Shechem deserved it. He had it coming.” Beware of that thought – it shows a certain favoritism in itself! This isn't justice, it's revenge. As horrible as Shechem's actions were, even in our current world we don't normally give the death penalty for these kinds of crimes. And we certainly wouldn't say that slaughtering and plundering an entire city would be an appropriate or just response! Justice is not being served. What these sons of Jacob have plotted and now performed is nothing less than murder. It is sin, every bit as much as Shechem's actions with Dinah.

In **Romans 3**, we read that “None is righteous, no not one...” Nobody stands spotless before the Lord. Instead, we have all “sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” I think we see that truth perfectly exemplified in this chapter. Dinah has been terribly wronged, yet Jacob doesn’t give her justice. Neither do her brothers. Frankly, nobody really comes out of this story looking good, do they? Brothers and sisters, we need a righteousness greater than anything you and I can muster. We need to be made right with God and yet that’s the very thing that we have no power, no strategy, no ability to do on our own. Praise the Lord, then, that there is a Savior, One through whom all who believe “are justified by his grace as a gift...”

Do you trust that Savior? Do you yearn for His righteousness rather than your own? Do you look for the Lord’s justice against your enemies rather than you coming up with some sort of imperfect plan that only feeds sin all the more? Do you enjoy His care given – without favoritism – to all who call upon Him?

There’s one more part of our story, let’s read it and then come to our conclusion...

34:30-31 Here, at the very end, we finally find Jacob and his sons speaking to one another. Jacob is primarily worried for himself – note all the “me and my” in these verses. While his concerns are very real and practical, his primary worry still has nothing to do with Dinah, nor with the sin his sons have now committed. The brothers, on the other hand, see this revenge as appropriate and think that Jacob’s concerns are wrong-headed: “at least we did something for Dinah!”

Can we really say that anything has been done for Dinah? She needed her father’s love and protection, but she didn’t get it. She needed her brothers to look to the Lord for wisdom and respond by holding Shechem to what was right and wrong, but that didn’t happen either. And the root of all of this – from Jacob and his family’s side – is favoritism. The sins of Shechem are evident and I doubt I have to point them out. But the sins of Jacob and his family are the ones that we are likely more tempted to overlook as God’s people. The lesson? Ask the Lord to examine you, to bring to light any sin that you are hiding. Far better for the Great Physician to do the work in you now, than to let the disease fester. God’s grace is bigger than your sins, and His mercy is extended to all who trust Him. Let’s worship our God who gives us grace in spite of ourselves today...