

A Lesson in Righteousness

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[0 : 00] I'm going to begin with a little exercise. You don't have to answer or put up your hands, but just do it in your head. If I describe two people to you, which would you consider is better?

Who do you think is more righteous? Is it, for example, the man who is your trusted business partner, but who is an adulterer?

A married man having affairs with anyone or everyone in the office? Or is it the man who is faithful to his wife, but cheats on his customers all the time?

Or take the leaders of our country. Who would you prefer as your prime minister? Someone who is pro-life and does all he can to protect the rights of the unborn, but then is unmoved by the plight of asylum seekers?

Or do you prefer the PM who is a fierce advocate for refugees, but then also advocates for freely available abortions?

[1 : 00] Now, some of you will say, we want both. That is, we want all the good bits and none of the bad. Generous to refugees and pro-life, faithful to wife and honest with customers.

And it may be that there are people like these, but they're probably rare, aren't they? Because the truth is, apart from Jesus, no one's perfect. Sooner or later, we find something unrighteous with everyone.

And that's our dilemma tonight as well, because in Judah and Tamar, we have two protagonists who are less than perfect characters, whose conduct leaves much to be desired.

In fact, so sordid are the details that it would make for an excellent R-rated movie. So, what's a story like this doing in the Bible? Because it is in the Bible, and it is inspired by God.

Well, we'll have to get into the story in order to find out. And the first thing that we find is the deception of or by Judah. So, that's point one, and we're at verse one.

[2 : 09] Let's read it. At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Edulam named Hira. There, Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua.

He married her and made love to her. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son who was named Ur. She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. She gave birth to Stila and her son and named him Shelah.

It was at Kizab that she gave birth to him. Now, not everyone agrees with me, but I take it that actually Judah is doing the wrong thing by marrying a Canaanite woman.

And this is not because she was of a different race. It wasn't even that she didn't worship God or Yahweh. After all, if you read later on, it didn't seem to be a problem for Joseph who married an Egyptian or Moses who married a Midianite.

Rather, in Genesis, it's wrong because the Canaanites were already in the land, the land which God had promised to Israel. And so by marrying them, Israel would compromise God's promises to them.

[3 : 15] They would be exposed to that claim or the claim that it wasn't God who gave them the land, but that actually it was their intermarriages that did it for them. That's why you see Isaac and Jacob both had to choose wives from a distant land.

Now, what's more, Judah not only married a Canaanite, but it says there in verse 1 that he actually left his brothers. He left God's people and he became best mates with a guy called Hira, who was a Canaanite.

Now, the place Adulam isn't actually shown on this map that we had from last week. But best guess, it's actually in Canaanite country between Hebron and Timnah, which we'll get to later.

So where the family of Jacob is, is near Hebron and around there. And then once you get past that, that's into Canaanite country. Notice too as well that Judah's wife doesn't have a name.

Did you notice that? Instead, we have her father's name, Shua. As though what matters is not her identity, but her family's and the fact that she's Canaanite. It's rather like saying that someone's married into the Pekka family.

[4 : 29] The implication is that Judah's now connected with a prominent local Canaanite family. And so there's a risk then that his sons will be known more for their connection with the Shua family, a Canaanite family, than with God's people.

And it's interesting actually that we see later on that this is the exact opposite with Tamar. Tamar is mentioned, but her father's name is not mentioned.

Did you notice that? Even though he is in the story. And neither is Tamar's ancestry. Well, if Judah's poor decision wasn't bad enough, we soon discover that two of Judah's three sons are wicked in the sight of the Lord.

So verse 6, Judah got a wife for Ur, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight. So the Lord put him to death.

Then Judah said to Onan, sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother. But Onan knew that the child would not be his.

[5 : 36] So whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight. So the Lord put him to death also.

Now Ur's wickedness is not spelt out, but Onan's is. And his wickedness was his refusal to have an offspring with Tamar.

You see, in those days, as Judah says, the custom was for the second son to produce offspring on behalf of the firstborn, should the firstborn die without an heir. That was how important offspring was to secure the family line.

But because it was costly to Onan, he refused to do it. Now notice that he was actually happy to sleep with Tamar, but not to have offspring.

And the key here is the words offspring. It's actually mentioned three times in these two verses. And as I said last week, it's related to that important question in Genesis of who the seed or the offspring will be who will fulfill God's promises to Abraham.

[6 : 45] And later readers of this story would know, in fact, that it's actually true Judah's line. So Onan's sin is actually very significant. It's got nothing to do with the act of spilling the semen, but everything to do with the intent behind it, his refusal to produce offspring, because when he does that, he is defying God's purposes and plan.

And that was wickedness to God. Anyway, the attention now turns to Shelah, the third and younger son. And in verse 11, Judah then said to his daughter-in-law, Tamar, live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up.

For he thought he may die too, just like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's household. Now we know that Tamar doesn't at first see that Judah was being deceitful and that actually he had no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar.

We do, but she doesn't. But this was actually very cruel because it denied Tamar the right to marriage and motherhood. It's one thing to ask her to live as a widow for a time, but quite another to ask her to do it for a lifetime.

And the irony is, Judah's actually doing what Onan did. He was stopping God from blessing him with offspring. And in verse 12, we find out actually how long-suffering Tamar was.

[8 : 18] For it was a very long time, it says in verse 12, that before Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, dies. And then almost by way of contrast, we see Judah's lack of patience in the very next sentence.

For he recovers from his grief, like almost immediately. And then he's off in the flesh with his mate Hira to Timna. And on the surface, it's to check out the sheep and the shearing.

But we soon find out, just like with the last time, that they were actually up to no good. This was, as I like to think of it, another boy's weekend in Bali. But now Tamar seizes her moment to act in verse 13.

When Tamar was told, it says, your father-in-law is on his way to Timna to shear his sheep. She took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enam, which is on the road to Timna.

For she saw that though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife. So at some stage, Tamar must have realized Judah's deception.

[9 : 29] But rather than confront him over it, she decides to deceive him instead. Now again, Enam is not on the map, but it's probably near Adulam, perhaps slightly more towards Timna, because this is on the road to Timna.

And probably it was the location of a Canaanite shrine, because Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute. Verse 15, when Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face.

And not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, come now, let me sleep with you. It's all rather crude, actually, but Judah's sexual indiscretions, I think, must have been known to Tamar.

For otherwise, why would she use this method of deception? But we have to realize that Tamar's aim is not to seduce Judah. She doesn't actually want to have a relationship with him, nor is she doing it for the money.

All she wanted was actually to secure her position in the family, and to have offspring, which was her right as a wife. But the only way she thought she could do it was to play the prostitute, to deceive Judah into sleeping with her.

[10 : 49] And so there's the exchange that she asks, what will you give me to sleep with you? He says, I'll send you a young goat from a flock, from my flock. Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it, she says.

She asks, he says, what pledge should I give you? And she says, Now, the seal and the staff and the cord are what Andrew Reid, not the Andrew Reid down the back there, but Heather's Andrew Reid, in his commentary, is what Andrew Reid calls the credit cards of the ancient world.

It was symbols of security, identity, and authority. Now, Judah, of course, he thought, I'm just putting it up, and I'm going to get it back when I pay up with the goat. But what he doesn't know, of course, is that Tamar will use that to protect her very own life.

It's a sort of high-risk game that she's playing. But the deed is done. Tamar falls pregnant without Judah knowing, and then she returns home and then resumes her role as a widow.

Thereafter, we have a bit of an interlude in verse 20 where Judah sends Hira with a goat to retrieve the pet pledge. Tamar is nowhere to be found, which is puzzling for a prostitute because normally prostitutes want the money.

[12 : 04] They don't want the seal, what are they going to do with the seal and the staff, whereas with the goat, they can sort of trade it and get some money for it. Anyway, eventually he calls off the search because he doesn't want word to get out and he's made to look like a fool.

So things go quiet for about three months, which is the amount of time I think you need for a baby to show. But finally, verse 24, we have the final scene where the truth of both Judah's and Tamar's deception is finally revealed.

I guess the first thing that's revealed is Tamar's bump. And it causes quite a scandal because Tamar's supposed to be a widow. Judah is enraged because his name and that of his dead son probably is being put to shame.

But perhaps too, he might be seeing this as his opportunity or excuse to be rid of Tamar, to find a safer wife, so to speak, for Shelah. So Judah said, bring her out and have her burned to death.

And this is when Tamar placed the ace up her sleeve. Verse 25, she sent a message to her father-in-law. I am pregnant by the man who owns these, she said.

[13 : 18] And she added, see if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are. And of course, Judah immediately recognizes them and his conscience is pricked.

His sin and wrongdoing has finally been exposed and he knows it. And when that happens, there's normally one of two ways to respond, isn't it?

We either hold our ground and try and deny the undeniable or we can humble ourselves, admit that we've done wrong and come completely clean.

Now, I don't know about the rest of you, but I hate admitting I'm wrong. Now, most of the time it's not a problem because I'm normally right. Or so I think.

But on the rare occasions when I'm not, I hate admitting it. You know, we all know why that is. It's pride, isn't it? I like to think that I'm righteous.

[14:18] But sadly, pride and righteousness do not go hand in hand. Instead, humility and righteousness do. Now, to Judah's great credit, he actually swallows his pride and he says in verse 26, she is more righteous than I since I wouldn't give her to my son, Sheila.

And he did not sleep with her again. And I think that this confession by Judah is actually significant in his life because as we read the story from here on in, it turns out to be a turning point in Judah's life.

But this is also the key verse of the passage. So let's try and unpack what it actually means. You see, even though Judah commends Tamar's righteousness, he wasn't actually doing it on account of her deception, nor because she played the prostitute.

Rather, he's comparing her righteousness against his own unrighteous act, that of withholding Sheila to her.

His act was unrighteous because he wasn't allowing God to bless him with offspring by Sheila. And she was righteous because she was doing exactly the opposite, trying to get offspring even though it was an unsavory means by which she did it.

[15:45] So the Bible isn't condoning deception or sexual immorality. In fact, I think when the Jews at the time read this, they would have considered both Judah and Tamar unrighteous with the deception and the sins.

And so Judah's declaration would actually have meant to become as a shock to them, as probably it does for us as well. If you like, both Judah and Tamar are unrighteous, but because Tamar does this one thing, her single-mindedness to produce offspring, it makes her more righteous than Judah.

Or put it another way, it makes Judah more unrighteous than her. And it may even be that Tamar wasn't aware of the promises of God or God's plan for Israel.

She may simply be motivated by her own desire to want to secure her place in Judah's family. And yet, because her actions are aligned with God's plans, she's considered by Judah.

Remember, this is Judah looking at her and saying, she is more righteous than I am. That is, Judah is looking on his own actions, him knowing the promises of God and yet frustrating God's plans and then recognizing, I'm actually unrighteous compared to what Tamar has done.

[17:02] And so, God blesses Tamar's actions graciously whether she knew it or not.

So, reading the last few verses, for when the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it to his wrist and said, this one came out first.

But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out and she said, so this is how you have broken out. And he was named Perez. Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out and he was named Zerah.

Here again, we get echoes of Jacob's story. Twins are born, just like Jacob and Esau. And although Zerah comes out first, technically, and has that scarlet thread put on his wrist, it's Perez, the younger, so to speak, who's the chosen, just like Jacob.

And this is actually confirmed in our New Testament reading, which Michelle read for us tonight in Matthew 1. So I've got it on the slide. So you see there at the bottom, both brothers are mentioned there, but then it says it's through Perez that Jesus, the Messiah, comes.

[18:20] Now Tamar, however, is clearly the hero or a hero because she's one of only four women apart from Mary in the genealogy. If you read Chronicles, Shelah actually goes on to have sons himself, but God actually doesn't choose Shelah's sons, but chooses Tamar's son to be the one to carry the line to the Messiah.

And so revered is Tamar, actually, from this incident among the Israelites, that she's actually remembered down through the generations. So if you read Ruth, for instance, she's actually used as a role model for Ruth when the women bless her with these words.

So I've got that on the screen. They say, through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, they're speaking to Boaz, but about Ruth, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.

And as we know, Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David. Well, that's the story. And for us, brothers and sisters, the fact is Tamar and Judah only had the faintest inkling, I would say, of how God's promises would turn out.

And yet, their righteousness was measured against how they aligned their lives to God's plan and promises. Now, we, on the other hand, we have God's plan revealed to us clearly and fully in the New Testament.

[19 : 55] we know what God's plan is through Jesus. Now, there are numerous places we can find this, but let's just look at one tonight, Luke 24, verses 44 and 47.

Here, Jesus tells his disciples that God's plan, which he sets out in verse 46 and 47, is that the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Jesus says this is the fulfillment of all that has been written in the Old Testament, the Lord, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Friends, if you own a car, then you probably know a thing or two about tires, and in particular, the importance of wheel alignment.

I often neglect to do that, I don't want to pay the money for it, and then I suffer for it. But often you can't really tell just by looking at your car's tires, whether they align or not.

But if you take them to Bob James or something like that, they'll measure it for you, and they'll tell you whether all your four wheels are aligned or parallel or not. And to align your wheels is actually important because you want them all to be working in line with your steering.

[21 : 20] Otherwise, you're going to get uneven wear and tear and your tires are going to degrade faster than they should. And you didn't want to be driving with one of the tires sort of going against the grain for fuel efficiency and all that kind of stuff.

So it makes good sense to align your wheels, to do it regularly. And friends, that's the same with our lives as well and for us as a church. God has clearly revealed his plan for the world to us, that salvation lies in this direction, repentance and forgiveness through belief in Jesus.

And as we saw last week in Acts, salvation is found by no other name than in Jesus. And so as individuals, God wants us then to align ourselves with that plan in order to be saved.

Firstly, to come to Jesus in repentance if we haven't, to humble ourselves and admit that we've gone our own way. And the truth is, no amount of good work that we do apart from that will actually align us with God's plan.

We are not saved by doing good works. As Jesus says, we are saved by repenting and submitting to Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. So friends, if there's anyone of us here that have not done that as yet, then please, can I urge you, this is the first thing to do.

[22 : 48] But then when we have, we need to, just as we go regularly for real alignment, keep aligning our lives to God's plan as well in our life. All our choices and decisions in life, big or small, who we marry, what jobs we do, how we spend our money, what we do with our free time even, all these and more should be considered against God's plan for the world.

Do they help us to serve him? Do they help the preaching of the gospel? Do they model the life of a forgiven disciple of Jesus?

And when we pray to God, how much of our prayers reflect God's plan for the world? Do we ask God to help us to live according to his will?

Or take us as individual Christians, are we still doing things that pull against what God is doing? And that's the same measure we can apply to ourselves as a church as well.

So our mission should be fully aligned with God's plan. And that means putting Jesus front and center in all that we do at church. It means highlighting that Jesus' death and resurrection is what saves us.

[24 : 08] not all the good works that we can do, even for other people. It means calling people to repentance so that their sins are forgiven. It means doing our part to bring this message to all nations.

And friends, all this calls for faithfulness, to sticking to God's plan without wavering. We don't have to rediscover God's plan every other year or every decade. He's already revealed it to us in his word and through Jesus.

It doesn't change. The course has been charted for us already and it's straight ahead all the time. That's what we're called to do, to faithfully keep those wheels aligned.

Not to change the message of the gospel, not to do something different just because the world isn't buying it, not to be tempted to veer left or right.

So friends, if you've been misaligning your lives with God's plan so far, then can I ask you, like Judah, the thing to do right now is to repent and get your wheel realigned with God's plan.

[25 : 19] There's no point just confessing and then continuing to live the same way. It means getting your life back on track. But if you've already done that, then like Tamar, what we're to do is to be single-minded in staying that course, prayerfully and obediently, continuing to align our lives with God.

Well, let me pray to ask God to help us to do that. Father, thank you for revealing your promises to us in Christ Jesus. Thank you for sending him so that repentance can be preached and forgiveness of sins can be found in him.

Father, help us to live our lives so that your will and plan can be fulfilled in and through us. Help all our lives to be aligned with your plan. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.