

“Ready to Wrestle”

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28).

Wrestling is an intensely intimate sport. In fact, I don't think there is any sport that is as physical and as personal as wrestling. There are plenty of contact sports out there, but in basketball too much contact is a foul; after a hit is made in football, players separate and return to the huddle; and even boxers keep their opponents at arm's length. But this isn't the case with wrestling. Wrestling is done at the most basic physical level with all equipment and excuses stripped away and it makes all other sports seem polite by comparison.

In high school I used to joke with my friends on the wrestling team about the revealing uniforms and flimsy shoes they wore, but the truth is that my basketball mentality wouldn't have lasted ten seconds on the wrestling mat. I'll never forget the t-shirt that I once saw a wrestler wearing. In bold, black letters across his chest it read, "YOU CAN'T *PLAY* WRESTLING." And if you think about it, that slogan is absolutely true. Wrestling is serious business and in every wrestling match the participants meet each other man to man, fully committed to the task at hand, and then lock arms and deal with each other face to face until the conflict has been resolved.

In today's reading from Genesis, we find a wrestling match of unparalleled proportions. In this story, the patriarch Jacob is about to meet his brother Esau, a man who years earlier Jacob had swindled out of his birthright. His confrontation with Esau is imminent and, while he anxiously waits for the meeting with his brother, Jacob suddenly finds himself in the wrestling match of his life. The text us tells that "a man wrestled with him" throughout the night, but as the story unfolds, and as other portions of Scripture tell us (Genesis 32:30; 48:16; Hosea 12:3-4), Jacob's wrestling match was not simply with some nameless stranger...it was with God Himself clothed in human form.

As day begins to break, this man who is God, commands Jacob to release Him, and even cripples him at the hip with a touch of his finger, and yet Jacob clings to his opponent with great tenacity, demanding a blessing before he will let Him go. The mystical wrestling match is finally resolved when the Lord grants His blessing to Jacob, giving him the new identity of "Israel," because Jacob had "struggled with God and with men" and had overcome.

There is so much wrapped up in this amazing Old Testament story, and it's tempting to read this story of Jacob's wrestling match with God as an example of how we ought to hold on to the Lord in our own lives until we receive God's blessing. It may be motivational to look at the text this way, but to walk away from this story with the simplistic idea that we only need to tighten our grasp on God to gain His favor would be absolutely wrong. In fact, I would say that to truly understand the meaning of this text for our lives we need to recognize that honestly confronting and holding on to God, or anyone else for that matter, is the last thing our sinful hearts are inclined to do.

For the most part, we live lives of spiritual and emotional isolation, and we are very good at keeping others at arm's length. The culture around us says "live and let live" and we gladly oblige. We have been raised with the notion to mind our own business, and while there is great sense in not trying to control the lives of others, we take this maxim too far and we so easily turn our backs on each other.

We are unwilling to confront issues that separate us. We are unwilling to bear each other's burdens. We are unwilling to meet face to face and lock arms until our conflicts have been resolved. We refuse to apologize and we fail to forgive. We work hard at protecting ourselves, and whether because of pride or fear, we are reluctant to wrestle each other, and our conflicts remain unresolved. We are unwilling to confront issues that separate us and the results of our reluctance to wrestle are strained relationships, hurting hearts, and broken families.

Not only do we avoid the issues we have with others, but we also avoid the issues we have with God. We are all-too-often unwilling to enter the struggle. We are unwilling to commit to God's Word like we should; we are unwilling to sacrifice in our giving to the Lord; and even though we may come to church each week and say our prayers each night, in one way or another our sinful, selfish natures are unwilling to submit to God's Word - especially when it calls us to repentance. The result of *this* unwillingness to wrestle is a separation from God, and the separation we have created in our relationship with God is very serious because it has eternal implications, and it is also a separation we are powerless to repair! This realization makes today's reading even more critical.

You see, one of the most important aspects of the wrestling match in today's text is the way in which it begins. Jacob's wrestling match with God doesn't happen because Jacob musters up the courage to confront God with his concerns. This midnight clash doesn't happen because Jacob went out looking for a fight. Our text tells us that, "Jacob was alone, and a *man* wrestled with *him*" (Genesis 32:24). It is God who initiates the encounter. It is God who creates the conflict. And it is God who grabs a hold of Jacob and begins this divine wrestling match.

The purpose of God's struggle with Jacob is clear. In this life-changing story, God brings Jacob into this intimate conflict for one reason. God wrestles with Jacob so that He can bless him, and that is exactly what God does for us. God comes to us in our complacency; God comes to us in our stubbornness; God comes to us in our pride; and through the power of His Word, God creates a conflict so that as a result of the struggle He can bless us.

We often view God's work in our lives as something that is meek; as something that brings peace; as something that restores us gently and these things certainly do happen, but these things happen only through an intensely intimate conflict, and that conflict was worked out for us through the Cross of Jesus Christ. On the Cross, Jesus entered the struggle for us. He took on our pride. He took on our fear. He took on our desire for isolation. He took on our sin. And through the terrible struggle of the Cross, Jesus Christ overcame for us. He overcame our sin; He overcame our fear; and for us Christ overcame death.

On the Cross, the Man who is God entered into the ultimate struggle so that for us there can be peace; there can be forgiveness; and there can be life. Peter writes that "Christ died for sins once for all...to bring you to God" (I Peter 3:18). And because of what Christ did for us on the Cross, we can cling to God with all that we are, knowing that we have been blessed.

Jesus Christ has overcome! In Christ, God has forgiven us, He has given us a future in heaven, and through our new identity in Christ, He has also given us the power to deal with each other in a whole new way. In Christ, the people we have avoided are now people that we can wrestle with face to face. The Hebrew word used for wrestle in today's reading can also be translated to mean "to struggle with" or "to get dirty." And now, because Christ died for me and for you and for all the people with whom we've had conflicts, we can get into the dirt of the sin that has separated us from each other, and we can deal with each other in honesty and with forgiveness.

In his book "Life Together," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man...(But) Christ opened the way up to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one" (Bonhoeffer, 23-24). In our reading the Man who is God wrestles with Jacob, blesses him, and restores his relationship with his brother Esau.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jacob's story is a great reminder that because of Christ, you can overcome. You can talk to your spouse about things that have come between you, you can confront issues with friends or co-workers, and you can even wrestle with the Lord. When our relationships in this life become strained, when physical health fails, when emotional exhaustion and spiritual despair seem to overpower us, we can wrestle and we can hang on because our true identity is in Christ and, in Christ, we have been blessed. We have overcome! Go in peace because you are ready to wrestle! Amen.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954).