Worth Beyond Achievement
Genesis 32:22-32 / Philippians 3:3–11

"Know Yourself!"

In ancient Greece, at the temple of Delphi, there was an inscription that read, *"Know yourself."* Socrates took that phrase as the starting point of his philosophy. And it has shaped the Christian tradition as well. The desert monks often said, *"Know yourself, and you will know God."* You see, knowing ourselves and knowing God are deeply connected. The life of faith is not just about learning more facts about God. At its heart, faith is about coming to know God, our Creator—and in that, discovering our true selves. So let me ask you: how well do you really know yourself?

Who Am I?

We think we know ourselves. But often, we confuse ourselves with our performance. Picture this: you're at a gathering, and it's time to introduce yourself. How do you begin? Most of us start with our name. Then our job—or what we used to do. Maybe something about family, or where we went to school. Why do we introduce ourselves this way? Because society has trained us: *what you accomplish is who you are.* And when we hear that message again and again, we start to believe it.

But here's the danger: when we let those standards define us, we confuse our worth with performance. A child who hears praise only for A's but disappointment for D's learns: "I am loved for what I do, not for who I am." That message follows us into adulthood. Many people live under the fear: "If I succeed, I matter. If I fail, I am nothing." We strive endlessly to prove our value by working hard and trying to be successful. Hard work is not the problem. The problem is believing that our worth depends on success. Then We put on masks to look accomplished and successful. We smile while inside we're exhausted. And eventually, those masks weigh so heavy, it's hard to breathe.

Jacob

There's someone in Scripture who knew all about this—the pressure to prove himself. Do you know who that was? Jacob. When Jacob was born, he came out holding Esau's heel. That one image summed up his whole life—always grasping, always striving, always wrestling to get ahead.

In the ancient world, the firstborn got the privilege, the inheritance, the blessing. Jacob was just a step behind, and he felt it. I know that feeling. When I was a kid, my father gave my brother and me allowance. But he said, *"The firstborn should get more—it's biblical."* So if I got a dollar, my brother got a dollar fifty. We were only a year apart, but I hated that! Can you imagine Jacob, literally born a step late, always feeling like he missed out?

Esau had it all—he was the firstborn, a skilled hunter, everything a father in that time would admire. So Isaac, their father, loved Esau more. But for Jacob, growing up without that full love became both a wound and a driving force. Inside, he heard the message: *"I have to succeed to be loved. I have to succeed to matter."*

And so he chased success by any means. He bought Esau's birthright with a bowl of stew. Later, with his mother's help, he deceived his father to steal Esau's blessing. Do you remember what he did? He put on Esau's clothes. He covered his smooth skin with goatskin to feel like his brother. He pretended to be someone else—the person his father favored.

Jacob put on a mask to be blessed. He hid his true self behind someone else's image. And friends, if we're honest, that doesn't sound so foreign, does it? How often do we, too, put on masks—trying to look like the person others will approve, the person others will bless or admire?

Masks and Deception

We do it all the time. At work, we put on the mask of competence. At church, the mask of piety. Online, the mask of the perfect life. But masks take energy to maintain. And the more we rely on them, the further we drift from our true selves—and from God.

Have you ever met someone whose life looked perfect on the outside—but behind closed doors, things were falling apart? I once met a mother like that. Always smiling, always talking about her wonderful kids. But inside, she was deeply insecure, anxious, even harsh at home. She was terrified of what others would think if she wasn't the perfect parent. Friends, that's the trap of masks. We think they'll win us approval. But in the end, they leave us empty, exhausted, and alone.

A magnificent Defeat

Jacob was no different. He knew that emptiness. Driven by the false message—*"I must succeed in order to have worth"*—he lived obsessed with results and chased success at any cost. He deceived his brother, his father, even his uncle Laban, and in the end became very wealthy. In fact, the name *Jacob* can also mean *"the deceiver."*

So what happened to Jacob, who ran so hard after success? He got what he wanted. He became wealthy—flocks, herds, servants. But was he happy? No. He was still running—from his brother, from guilt, from himself.

And then came the night at the River Jabbok. Jacob sent everything across—family, wealth, possessions—and he was left alone. No masks. No tricks. Just him. That night, he wrestled with God. He fought all night, but in the end, his hip was struck. He could no longer stand on his own strength. From a human point of view, it was total defeat. But Frederick Buechner calls it *"a magnificent defeat."* Because in that weakness, Jacob was grasped—not by achievement, but by grace. God gave him a new name: Israel. Not "the deceiver," but "the one held by God." Jacob discovered what we all need to know: our worth is not in our victories. Our worth is in being chosen, held, and renamed by God's love.

My Grandfather's Blessings

In her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Naomi Remen tells a story about her grandfather. Rachel grew up in a home where expectations were very high. Her father was a doctor, her mother a nurse, and both wanted their daughter to excel. If she ever brought home less than a perfect score, she didn't hear "Good job"—she heard, "Where did those missing points go?" It was a family atmosphere full of pressure to succeed.

But her grandfather was different. Every Friday, when the family gathered for the Sabbath meal, her grandfather would place his hands on her head and bless her. He didn't bless her because she got straight A's. He didn't bless her because she behaved perfectly. He blessed her even when she made mistakes, even when she failed. Week after week, he laid his hands on her and prayed God's blessing over her life.

Only years later, after her grandfather had passed away, did she realize how much this shaped her. Through those blessings she discovered something life-changing: She was not loved because she achieved something. She was loved because she was *herself*. Through her

grandfather's blessing, she discovered God's blessing—God's love that does not depend on success or failure.

Friends, maybe many of us have lived like Jacob. We push and strive. We compete and compare. We put on masks. Deep down we believe the lie: *"I am valuable only if I succeed."* But the gospel at the Jabbok River says something different. It tells us the truth: God does not love us because of what we've achieved. God loves us first, just as we are, and God will hold us to the very end.

Our worth is not up for debate. It has already been decided. We are God's children. We are precious in God's sight. We are dearly loved. So when life feels heavy… when that inner voice whispers, *"You're only valuable if you succeed,"* remember this: You are already loved. Your worth is already secured in Christ." You are already blessed. You are already God's beloved child. And may that truth set you free. Amen.