

*Foundations: Stealing...or Just Desserts?*

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*Proverbs 6:16-22; Matthew 7:12; Genesis 26:34-27:29*

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 26:34-27:29. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect word. “When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah. When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son and said to him, "My son." "Here I am," he answered. Isaac said, "I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death. Now then, get your weapons – your quiver and bow – and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die." Now Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau left for the open country to hunt game and bring it back, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, 'Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the LORD before I die.' Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies." Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I'm a man with smooth skin. What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing." His mother said to him, "My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me." So he went and got them and brought them to his mother, and she prepared some tasty food, just the way his father liked it. Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins. Then she handed to her son Jacob the tasty food and the bread she had made. He went to his father and said, "My father." "Yes, my son," he answered. "Who is it?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game so that you may give me your blessing." Isaac asked his son, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?" "The LORD your God gave me success," he replied. Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near so I can touch you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not." Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; so he blessed him. "Are you really my son Esau?" he asked. "I am," he replied. Then he said, "My son, bring me some of your game to eat, so that I may give you my blessing." Jacob brought it to him and he ate; and he brought some wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come here, my son, and kiss me." So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed. May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness – an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed."”

It's weird how we deal with cheating, isn't it? Just this week, you might have heard about the drama surrounding a Russian skater at the Olympics who tested positive for illegal substances. While she didn't medal, the controversy around Russian athletes and doping continues – even as Russia can't officially compete as a country in the games because of their recent attempts to cheat. I still have a hard time looking at a Houston Astros jersey without a little disgust at how they stole the other teams' signals to help them win a World Series. We can come up with far too many stories of people so determined to win that cheating became a regular part of their world. And in essence, cheating is an attempt to steal from another team or another athlete the prize they might rightfully deserve.

Stealing, cheating, lying...those things bother us greatly. We can easily look at someone else and be judgmental...but we're often tempted to take the easiest route, ignoring the truth and doing what we feel is necessary to get ahead. It's uncomfortable. Today's passage can be uncomfortable because while on level it's outrageous, on another level we can all think of situations where we've gone to great lengths either to hide what we've done, to get out of something we should do, or to put ourselves in a better position than we've earned.

I think the story is pretty straightforward. It's simple enough that it winds up in a lot of childrens' Bibles. Somehow the story becomes about how Esau the wronged brother forgives Jacob – as if Esau was like Jesus. But Esau is not Jesus, and the story isn't about an angry brother setting aside his wrath. It's far more complex, and as we dig, we see how messy this family really is. Behind the passage and the previous stories we've read of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Esau, is guilt that is shared amongst them.

Let's backtrack to the first stories we studied of Jacob and Esau. Before they were even born, Rebekah asked God why the babies were fighting in her womb. She learned that by God's decree, the younger Jacob, not the older Esau, was the one who would be blessed. We assume that Isaac was told about this, but we don't know for certain. And the first problem came about that the parents picked favorites – Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

But the family strife went deeper than that. Despite being his father's pride and joy, Esau despised his birthright, worth an extra third of his father's estate. Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew. He treated it shamefully. Should Jacob have demanded the birthright from Esau when he was famished? No. But Esau callously traded it away for a quick meal. His attitude shows that his father's devotion wasn't reciprocated. Esau is no hero.

And Esau's disrespect for his family shows in his choice of wives. He marries locals. God's promise was that Abraham's descendants would take over Canaan – not only to bless them but also to cleanse the land of the wickedness of the Canaanites. By choosing these women as wives, Esau shows a total lack of concern for God's plan. A guy who sells his birthright and marries into the wickedness of Canaan...what happens seems to be just desserts.

Now we come to Isaac, and we think that perhaps he is the wronged party in this story. He's old; he's blind; he says, "I don't know the day of my death." From what happens, it seems that Isaac might be easily confused. But what we don't easily see in the timeline is that after this whole incident, despite his old age, Isaac lives another *four decades*.

Isaac may be in a bad place; he may have been temporarily sick; but even if that's the case, he is not dying. He is not on his last legs. His eyesight is failing him, but in an era without glasses, you didn't have to be ancient to have bad eyesight. Here's what's so suspicious...the bestowal of blessings at the end of a patriarch's life was a major event. It was a time for the whole family to be gathered together in a formal ceremony. (Jacob will do this himself at the end of his life for his sons.) Giving the blessings was the way one generation passed on their legacy to the next. So why is Isaac doing this in secret? Why does he promise Esau to give him the blessing in secret after a successful hunt?

The only thing that makes sense is that Isaac, who loves Esau, is trying to pull a fast one himself! If Rebekah has shared with Isaac God's decision to bless Jacob and not Esau, then the thing that is logical is that Isaac is simply not inviting the messenger that gave him the news he didn't want to hear. He wants Esau to have the blessing...and he wants his favorite meal. Isaac may say he's got one foot in the grave, but what he's really doing is making sure that Esau gets the blessing before his wife bugs him again about Jacob receiving it.

What about Rebekah? She's the one person we are absolutely certain knows God's will about the blessing that is to come to Jacob. She wants God's will to be done, but she wants it because it's on the son she favors. Perhaps because Sarah was long dead by the time she married Isaac, she doesn't relate to the stories of how Abraham and Sarah's plan to make God's promises come about turned into a disaster. But she does the same thing – she attempts to force the situation rather than letting God make it come about. And before the day is out, her favorite son will be out on his own – because the Bible doesn't tell us when she dies, we're not sure they ever see each other again. All because she tries to take things into her own hands.

Then there's Jacob. Jacob has shown himself to be a guy willing to take advantage of a situation when it suits him. He can be a trickster. And when we follow the timelines, we realize that this is not a teenager unknowingly sucked into a scheme by his mom. He and Esau are actually 77! Of course, because God allowed His people longer lives in this era, this is closer to our 40 than our 77. But still, Jacob is no spring chicken. He may be manipulated by his mother, but he's old enough to know right from wrong. His objections aren't to getting his father's blessing meant for Esau; his objections are to the ridiculousness of the plan. He eventually gets on board when he thinks he can get away with it.

When we get that close-up view on the story, we realize that everyone has ulterior motives; no one is guilt-free. Everyone is looking out for their own self-interests. That leads me to the first idea I want us to recognize this morning: *the desires of the human heart are untrustworthy*. Rebekah is the one person in the narrative who is absolutely aware of God's promise that Jacob would be the blessed son. And yet even she acts out of a desire for her favored son to win out, and rather than to rely on God to do what He promised, she schemes a way for Jacob to get the blessing by trickery. And she's the best motivated of them all!

The subterfuge and dysfunctional family relationships on display here mirror a lot of what we see in our own lives – maybe not between brothers squabbling to receive their parents' estate, but in many other ways. Human motivations are selfish unless we have been redeemed and restoration started by the Holy Spirit.

As Psalm 14 warns us, “There is no one who does good, not even one.” I have met people who have stopped believing in God or following Jesus because their prayers weren’t answered the way they wanted. Sometimes you hear what they were praying for and it’s no wonder God didn’t answer them. And sometimes, the things they ask for seem reasonable and good. Yet the question is, did they pray in faith trusting that the LORD knew what was best for them, or did they pray to test God, seeking proof of Him?

This is something I keep coming back to in my life over and over: *check your motivations*. Even the best things can have terrible motivations. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian church, he said, “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill...the former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.”

There are good and faithful churches, good and faithful preachers. But there are bad ones too, motivated by the wrong things. That’s why we examine ourselves closely. Our motivations get all entangled. I want to preach Christ and glorify Him and make disciples, but how do I pay the bills? How do I pay my rent? And often, it leads to compromise. Compromise in tackling the difficult issues of the day, compromise in letting people be complacent and not actively engage in discipleship. The list goes on.

So it goes with every one of us. We are masters at self-justification. Rebekah and Jacob are only trying to seek out what God has already said belongs to Jacob. Isaac is attempting to give his firstborn son the blessing that is his by the worldly practice of his time. Esau may have sold off his birthright, but he’s still the firstborn, “deserving” of what’s his. So often we think the same way. We justify our actions. We sin and we say, “It’s alright because...” Whenever we do that, we are heading on the wrong path, the path away from God and His righteousness.

So let me throw another thought at us: *careful self-examination reveals the wickedness (and silliness) of our schemes*. Jacob and Rebekah shouldn’t have been able to get away with this. Their plan is hair-brained. Jacob sees the problems immediately, and mom says, “I’ll take the curse – just do it.” The only reason they get away with it is because Isaac is disabled, unable to see clearly – and even then, Isaac nearly catches them because Jacob doesn’t sound like Esau. It is a goofy, awful, sinful plan. By the time the plan is through, Jacob not only lies multiple times, he takes the name of the LORD in vain, claiming the LORD gave him success on the hunt. That’s wicked. And when we see Esau’s reaction next week, we’ll *really* say, “What were they thinking?” As my coffee mug quoting R.C. Sproul says, “What’s wrong with you people?”

Will we examine our hearts? Or will we jump into sin the same way? Some of the things I’m most embarrassed about in my life are situations where I did the wrong thing and then tried to cover it up. I’m guessing you’ve had the same experience. Psalm 32 describes it: “Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD” -- and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

I think a lot of us may feel the weight of God's hand of judgment on us for sins we've committed. Part of it may be that we have a limited view of sin. Most people think they are OK because they haven't committed a grave sin. "I haven't killed anyone or committed adultery." Those are two I hear a lot. But when you look at the list of things Proverbs 6 mentioned this morning, only one is murder. The others? Arrogance. Lying. Scheming. Thoughtless rushing into sin. False witness. Stirring up trouble. I start seeing myself in there more and more!

The good news is, there is forgiveness in Christ for all who confess their sins and turn to Him. Our examination reveals our guilt, but Christ is revealed as righteousness for us. He took on the burden of our sins so that we would not be burdened by them forever, condemned for eternity by our disobedience. Instead, all who confess their sins will find forgiveness. Over the course of time – a long time, as a matter of fact – Jacob will come to that realization. It's not like I want to skip to the end of the story, but that's a long time coming, and we thankfully live in the time of salvation. We live in the time of Jesus. We should never live thinking that we can't live in the freedom and wholeness of God's forgiveness today.

And so we're going to end with a big self-examination question today: *am I committed, this day, this hour, to being a disciple of Christ?* I don't mean a churchgoer. I don't mean a person who puts down "Christian" on a form about their religion. I mean, are you committed to following Christ wherever He leads you? Are you committed to serving others, to living under Jesus' authority, to giving your life to God for His purposes?

Because Isaac's family are not pagans. They have all been to the altar where Isaac makes sacrifices for the family. They know the name of the LORD. They are not into the immoral practices of their neighbors. These could be the family that sits down the way from you at church – what we used to say as "down the pew." They worship; they "put in their time." But faithfulness to God hasn't sunk in at the deepest levels – partially because the Holy Spirit has not yet come, and partially because they are still learning themselves. We'll see a lot of growth in Jacob over the course of his story.

What I fear – what concerns me most as a pastor – is not filling the seats. It's not having a great worship service every week that fills me with anxiety. What I am most anxious about is when we do not take discipleship seriously. Because we are not called to believe in the existence of God; we are called to believe God and to obey Him. It's a joyful calling, but a serious one. No one is called to spend 1 hour out of every 168 attending church and that's it. We're called to live lives as disciples, followers, learning, growing, living out what it means to be God's people.

What I greatly fear is that someone in our worship today will one day die and meet Christ and will be told, "Go away – I never knew you." And that person will say, "But I went to church every Sunday!" (How many of us can say that?) And Jesus will say, "But you never formed a relationship with me. You never did what I told you to do. You didn't give your life to me so I could redeem and restore it. Go out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." That thought haunts me. I don't want that for anyone, but most of all, I don't want that for anyone here, anyone that might think that going to church is their obligation to keep up to make God happy.

God doesn't need people who say they believe He exists but live like He doesn't. That's ultimately what we see today, a family acting on their basest impulses rather than trusting in the LORD. And while redemption for some in the story is coming, it's going to take a long time and a lot of heartache. I don't that want that for us; I don't want that for anyone who's part of the CrossWay family. But it means committing to really following Christ in everyday life. My goal over the coming weeks and months and even years is to be a church where we develop fully formed disciples following Christ in every part of life.

Next week, we'll see the aftermath of Jacob's trickery. Because despite Esau's own issues, he's not going to take this lying down. But for now, may we examine our hearts, checking our own desires, committing to be true disciples, and avoiding the pitfalls that come from following our own way.