

Jacob's Ill-Gotten Blessing

He Who Wrestles with God: A Study of the Life of Jacob, Sermon 3

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Over Christmas, our church receives many Christmas cards. It's a joy! The typical card has a family picture on one side with some family updates on the back, letting you know what's happened in the year gone by. We've made a practice of hanging the cards in our office kitchen so we can be cheered by the wonderful people of our church year-round.¹

One thing each card has in common is that everyone looks happy. I've yet to see a card with people frowning and fighting. Nor have I read the back of any card that's enumerated the failures of the past year. The message seems to be, *we are so blessed!*

This is not the type of card the family featured in Genesis 27 could send. By the end of this chapter, Isaac and Rebekah, their sons Esau and Jacob, cannot be in the same room together—and for fear of bloodshed. The scene ends with Rebekah warning her favorite son, Jacob, and sending him into exile:

Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran⁴⁴ and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away.... Then I will send and bring you from there (Gen 27:43-45).

At least one lesson from today's passage is that no family is perfect, not even God's. And this is meant as a type of comfort, as we will see. Because God refuses to give up on this broken family and is even able to bring good out of their sinfulness.

The story of Jacob stealing the blessing

The story of Jacob stealing his brother Esau's blessing may be familiar to you if you grew up in the church. But whether you're hearing it for the first or hundredth time, there are at least two types of insights to be learned from this passage. The first has to do with patterns of human misbehavior, and the second with patterns of divine action. In this story, Moses warns Israel, and the church, of ways

not to behave. But he also encourages, because we are to see in the debacle of this family, that **God can work good even out of our bad—that our sin does not ultimately undermine His blessing**. So first, (1) Patterns of Human Misbehavior. And second, (2) Patterns of Divine Providence.

I. Patterns of Human Misbehavior

Jacob and Esau are forty years old when we come to Genesis 27, and their father, Isaac, is old, blind, and he thinks he's dying. This raises the question of passing on the blessing, a crucial family moment in the ancient world. Typically, the father calls all his sons,² and while the oldest gets the lion's share, provision was made for all.³

But Isaac only calls Esau and plans to give him everything—the first note that sounds off in our passage:

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. ³ Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, ⁴ and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.” (Gen 27:1-4)

Rebekah, however, is listening through the thin tent walls. She calls Jacob, explains what's afoot, and hatches a plan. They will exploit the father's blindness by playing to his other senses: Jacob will dress up in Esau's clothes, hence he'll smell like his brother. Rebekah will make food that tastes like Esau's. And they'll cover Jacob's smooth skin with goat skins, so he feels as hairy as Esau.

The rest of the story is as masterfully told as it is suspenseful. Isaac is suspicious throughout, but eventually, the ruse works, and he blesses Jacob thinking it's Esau. And only seconds after Jacob exists, Esau reenters, only to learn that his blessing has been irrevocably lost.

There are no heroes in this story. And Moses has prepared us for the two factions. Earlier in Genesis 25, we learned the parents had picked favorites:

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob (Gen 25:27-28).

This parental favoritism underlies this scene and is another thing gone wrong in this family.

Let's pause and consider these allied pairs. First Isaac and Esau, then Rebekah and Jacob. What is it about their behavior that Moses warns us of?

Ruled by the appetite rather than the Word

Both Isaac and Esau share the problem of being ruled by the appetite: the cravings of their flesh get the best of them.

In Genesis 25, it's Esau's ridiculous craving for stew that leads him to sell his birthright. In Genesis 27, it's Isaac's craving for tasty game that makes him vulnerable. Six times this phrase "tasty food"⁴ describes Isaac's craving. The only other time it appears in the Bible is in Proverbs, and with caution: do not desire the "delicacies" of the rich, for they are deceptive."⁵ Eight times the term for "game" or "meat" is used. And Isaac is unashamed: "prepare for me delicious food, such as I love" (27:4).

And notice how Moses focuses on Isaac's senses in explaining how he's finally deceived: *touch, smell, taste*.

- **Touch:** Verse 21, "Isaac said to Jacob, 'Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.' ²² So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him" (27:21).
- **Taste:** Next, verse he tastes the food: "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." ²⁵ Then he said, "Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you. So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank." (27:24-25)
- **Smell:** And smell, verse 26, "Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." ²⁷ So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him" (27:26-27).

- **Hear:** Now Isaac is blind while all this happens. But notice that there is still one sense, that if Isaac had trusted, would have protected him from deceit, *hearing*: Verse 22, “So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau” (27:22).

This is not accidental. For the people of God, the most important sense was not sight, but hearing. God revealed Himself to Abraham and Isaac—and eventually Israel—not by His physical presence, but by His Word. Hence the passage of paramount importance in the Old Testament, Deut 6,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. (Deut 6:4-6).

And later, Paul stresses the same: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

God does not deny the goodness of our other senses—He created them. But across Genesis, there is a caution against prizing the mouth, belly, or eye, over the ear: Adam fails in eating, Noah in drinking, Esau in eating, and Isaac—appearing a glutton in this scene—in tasting. Remember what lured Eve:

when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate (Gen 3:6).

Isaac knew that God’s Word had announced that Esau would serve Jacob (Gen 25:23), but he ignores it. Esau knew the Word of promise spoken over his family, but in despising his birthright, ignores it. Genesis warns against impulsivity and over-indulging the senses: **we must not give priority to the appetite over the voice of God in our ears.**

Manipulation instead of trust

Rebekah and Jacob are no gluttons. They’re far more in control—perhaps too in control. From the time we meet Rebekah in Genesis 24, she is a picture of action and competence. And Jacob, he is single-

minded in his ambition. Born grasping his brother's heel, he seems always aware of what the birthright and blessing entail—and set on getting it.

We may feel sympathy for them at points. After all, God's Word has declared that Esau will serve Jacob, and Isaac and Esau are flouting this. But it is with the way Rebekah and Jacob go about intervening that our passage finds fault. Instead of trusting God and waiting upon Him to bring about His purposes, they take matters into their own hands, manipulate and deceive in order to get what they want—which is just how their actions were finally understood:

Isaac said to Esau, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing."

³⁶ Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." (Gen 27:35-36)

The sin of manipulation—especially when used to achieve a seemingly godly goal—is a sin that lies in a lack of trust in God, and a lack of respect for others. We assume we know better than God how to bring about His goals. And we assume that it's okay to lie to people along the way. It is the old ethical mistake of assuming the ends justify the means.

And when we do this, when we are not forthright but deceiving in how we go about things, even when we win, we lose. Just look at the cost for Rebekah and Jacob. Jacob is sent into exile in Paddan-Aram. He never sees Rebekah again. Jacob and Esau are separated for twenty years. Isaac, while he lives for a few more decades, becomes a shadow we scarcely can see. And one day Jacob will be bereft of his own son, Joseph, due to the deception of Joseph's brothers.

There is no resolution when our passage concludes—we have to study the rest of Jacob's life to see where things go. But at this juncture, Moses expects Israel and the Church to feel the misbehavior of these characters in ourselves. We too, are Isaacs and Esaus, Rebekahs and Jacobs.

However, situated in the larger vista of God's work, brokenness and sin are not the final message of this passage. We are to see more deeply that even here, in this mess, God is at work. So, we turn from patterns of human misbehavior to patterns of divine providence—how exactly does God's power interact with our failings? I see three lessons about this in our passage.

II. Patterns of Divine Providence

A. Providence does not minimize human responsibility

In the story of Jacob and Esau, the word of providence has already been sounded: “the older will serve the younger” (25:23). God has elected Jacob; Jacob will receive the blessing. We might imagine Moses could stop writing at this point because we know how the story will end. As one commentator puts it, speaking cynically:

Well, Providence has revealed itself, and everything is settled.... Jacob and Rebekah do what they cannot help doing. They perform God’s will ... as unfree vehicles of predestination their actions are neither right nor wrong for the tension between right and wrong, thus morality itself, has been extinguished, taken away.

But, the author goes on,

How different is our text in reality! ... The characters, we feel, have not been degraded to puppets and are not a bit overshadowed by predestination; they act freely and on their own decision. It is beyond dispute that they have their own responsibility. The fact that God’s will is known already does not deprive the people in Genesis 25-27 of their independence and their dignity, it does not relieve them of their responsibility to choose between good and evil.⁶

This lesson we must see: **the Bible has no problem holding in tension God’s sovereign purposes and our responsibility as actors in his world.** If we let the Bible frame reality for us, we must hold these things together, as Paul does:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to do his good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13).

God’s choosing of Jacob in no way minimizes Jacob’s role as a responsible actor in God’s world. Divine providence and human responsibility simply must be held in tension.

Which brings us to our second lesson.

B. Providence can bring good out of our bad

God nowhere approves of the misbehavior in this scene—rather, He allows strict consequences for it. But through it, He still works to further his plan. Jacob leaves but with the blessing. And he goes to Paddan-Aram, and there will marry and have children. And one such child is Judah, from whom Jesus is descended. And one such child is Joseph, who will end up saving Egypt and Israel during a famine.

This debacle in Genesis 27 is just another thread in a larger tapestry that conveys the message, so well captured at the end of Genesis, “What man intends for evil, God uses for good” (Gen 50:22). Or as Paul phrases it: “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

And so, Moses wants the failings of this family to ultimately be comforting to us. Why? Because we, too, will fail. And we need to know that God does not give up on failures. Every Sunday, God comes into the presence of this church—filled with sinners—and he gets to work. He doesn’t abandon His people; He transforms them.

In whatever situation you are in, you must understand that if you are in Christ, the Providential Hand of God is at work—meaning, there is more going on than you can see.

Do you know it’s common to be unaware of how many forces are at work in your life? Consider an example from the natural world. I am exerting effort to stand here, to think, and to speak. But is that all that’s going on? No. My heart is beating, my lungs are breathing, my brain is firing—things I mostly don’t think about. And there is more. Even while I stand up, gravity is at work to keep me grounded. Then there are the tectonic plates below me, floating on molten rock, the earth spinning on its axis at 1,000 mph, orbiting the sun at 67,000 mph, and the universe is expanding at a rate of 41.9 miles per second. So, to speak of what forces are at work right now is complicated.

So, too, when we try to grasp what’s really happening in history, or with nations in our world, in our families, or in individual lives. There is simply far more going on spiritually than we know. Moses wants the people of God, in the midst of any and every situation, to rest on truths like this:

“I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come” says the Lord, “I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah 46:10).

Providence does not minimize human responsibility. But the power of providence—God’s divine hand—brings good even out of our bad.

Finally, a third lesson has to do with how God ultimately gives His blessing to broken people who don’t deserve it.

C. You don’t have to earn the blessing because Christ’s work earned it for you

The theme that dominates this whole scene is blessing. Isaac must give it, and everybody else wants it, but no one seems to deserve it. What is this blessing? The blessing of God in the Bible is nothing less than His presence in your life, a presence that brings peace and joy, and which overflows in His favor, often leading to the blessings of life all around you. Our own cravings to receive the blessing of our fathers or mothers is a faint echo of our need for God’s blessing.

And this scene, in its failings, actually points to how God brings his blessing to us. We need to follow Jacob’s line to the birth of Jesus.

Jesus, a descendant of Jacob, is born into the mess of this family. And Jesus, too, bears the pain of deception and betrayal—and with a kiss. Jacob betrayed his father with a kiss—“Isaac said to him, ‘Come near and kiss me, my son.’²⁷ So he came near and kissed him” (27:26-27). Jesus, too, was betrayed with a kiss:

Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd....⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.”⁴⁹ And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” And he kissed him” (Matt 26:47-49).

And Jesus, like Esau, ends up taking the anti-blessing and getting rejected. Jesus is cursed instead of blessed, that’s what the crucifixion means. But in taking this rejection and curse, Jesus takes the

ultimate consequence for Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob's sins—and even ours. And because of this, Jesus can now offer us the true blessing:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal 3:13-14).

Friends, the blessing of God comes to us in Christ. It entails forgiveness of sin, the Holy Spirit, and the promise of the resurrection, but most of all, it means we once again are united to God.

Perhaps it's hard for you to write your Christmas cards—you're not sure what to make of the year that has gone by, with its ups and downs, with your own sins and failings. But imagine if God Himself wrote it; knowing exactly what is going on in your life, explaining—with eternity in mind—all the amazing good He is working in you, even despite your failings. This is the message of Jacob's ill-gotten blessing; God blesses people like Jacob—like us—despite us.

Questions for Small Groups

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Genesis 27. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. What do you think the biblical idea of God's blessing entails? (read Eph 1:3-10).
2. Would you describe your life as “blessed” in the biblical sense? Why or why not?
3. Today, where might Christians/Churches be tempted to manipulate or deceive in an effort to bring about good things?

4. Today, where might people be prizing the senses of their taste and belly over what God's word is saying in their ears?
 5. It is hard for us to understand how God's providence and human responsibility hold together. Read Phil 2:12-13 and talk with a friend or your small group about this. Should we totally understand this mystery? Is it okay to not fully understand how things work in God's economy? Why or why not?
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Endnotes

1. I owe this Christmas Card analogy to pastor Sinclair Ferguson, who I heard use it.
2. Jacob calls all twelve of his sons, Genesis 49; Moses calls all twelve tribes of Israel, Deuteronomy 33.
3. In Deuteronomy there is a case explained where when a man has two wives, and sons by each, the eldest gets a "double portion," but there must be something for the others: "If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, ¹⁶ then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, ¹⁷ but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the first fruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his" (Deut 21:15-17).
4. מטעם mat'am, mat-am; a delicacy:—dainty (meat), savory meat.
5. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food (**Prov. 23:3**); Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy; do not desire his delicacies, (**Prov. 23:6**)
6. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 117.