

Being Good Men Part 1

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[0 : 00] Thank you, James. And thank you, Josiah. Before we start, I definitely feel the need to pray. Shall we pray?! Lord, we thank you. We thank you that you're here with us.

We thank you that you've given us your word. Lord, help us to understand more of your heart for this world and for men in particular from your word. Lord, if there is something that I say that is not in line with your will and with the good news of the Lord Jesus, then please may it be quickly forgotten that those things that are from you, we pray, we would hold on to, that they would shape us so that, Lord, when we arrive in glory with you, we will fit right in.

And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, masculinity, one of those topics where you hesitate to say anything.

It's not that I worry about offending anyone in particular, it's more that I'm worried about offending everyone, to be honest. Because everybody has their views, don't they? So, why? Why are we talking about this? Simply put, because there's a crisis of masculinity in our world.

Here's a number. I wonder if you know what the significance of that number is. Yes. Those of you who were listening at the beginning will have guessed.

[1 : 30] That was the number of male suicides in England in 2023. That number accounts for 74% of all suicides in England.

And between 2016 and 2018 alone, there was an increase of 8.7% in male suicides. Which the guys who were compiling the report said there's a statistically significant increase.

And that's long before you think about the individual lives that that 8.7% refers to. On the other hand, only 36% of NHS referrals for talking therapies, which you might think of as a possible help in that situation.

Only 36% were for men. And men are far more likely to end up homeless, missing, sleeping rough and becoming alcoholic or dependent on drugs.

So, there's a crisis, isn't there? You only have to think about men like Liam Payne, who I mentioned a couple of weeks back. Who, in some senses, is a very apparently modern man who had everything.

[2 : 35] But, in the end, it seems tragically he had no idea. Did he? Everyone knows there's a problem with masculinity. And there are plenty of kind of problem men as well out there.

If you think about Andrew Tate, who's the other guy that I mentioned a couple of weeks back. He's marketing a kind of repackaged traditional masculinity that just treats women as accessories.

And then he claims to be religious as well. Or just this week in the news, There's Emma Raducanu, who had to deal with a man behaving in a fixated manner on her, which affected her courtside to the extent that she was in tears.

And then the story of this lady who joined the army, only to be driven to suicide herself by the behaviour of her male colleagues. There's a crisis, isn't there?

And now, part of the problem is that men in general are beginning to feel like we are a problem. It's not just that individuals are problems. And there seems to be no clear way for us, according to today's ideas, to be men.

[3 : 47] We're just told to, you know, be nice. And that's about it. We spoke about gender a couple of years ago here at church, didn't we? And we emphasised that it's part of God's plan, and that your birth gender matters.

It's not a choice. And if you look at the science of that, which is called the science of sex difference, that 100% supports that your birth gender really matters.

But as a culture, we've been telling men exactly the opposite for the last 20 years. Gender is unimportant. We want to erase the differences. And the result is that men are invited to be persons.

Of course, if you talk to most boys, they don't want to grow up to be a person. They want to grow up to be a man. But in order to be able to do that, we need to know that there is something definite, which means being a man, right?

And that we need to live up to that. And also that if we fail, that we can come back. And also that we're not alone in that, as men.

[4 : 54] But this morning isn't just for men. As I kind of indicated with the kids at the beginning, we all have a stake in a world that is full of good men, don't we?

We all want that. We will all benefit from that. We all want children, male children, to grow up to be good boys. We all have a hand in that, especially at church. Don't we?

And of course, for the women here today, part of the reason that God has called you to be Christians is to help men be good men.

And not just complain to your mates about them. So there is a problem. There is a problem, isn't there? But what exactly are the issues that men have?

Because labels like toxic masculinity, which we've heard a lot about recently, make it sound like they're new, these problems. But actually, part of this morning is showing us that the maker has known about bad masculinity for millennia, for a very long time.

[6 : 00] And he's diagnosed the problems for us. And to see what those problems are, and to see that God knew about them from long ago, and to start thinking about hope as well, we're looking at the story of Isaac, Esau, and Jacob.

And we're going to finish with Jesus. So today is kind of snapshot stories. All right? We're not going to cover everything. It's just going to be snapshots. Next week, we're going to try and peel back the wallpaper a little bit, and think a bit more practically and systematically about what God teaches about masculinity.

So here we are. Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. Just before we start in on Isaac, I want to show you a clip. It's from a film called Black Panther, which some of you might know from the Marvel Universe.

And Black Panther is on his way to becoming a hero. Here's a scene in which he communicates with his dad in the so-called spirit realm. I am not ready to be without you.

A man who has not prepared his children for his own death has failed as a father. Have I ever failed you?

[7 : 07] So, a man who has not prepared his children for his own death has failed as a father. That's Black Panther on his way to becoming a hero.

So has Isaac done that? That's the question we need to ask. Has Isaac prepared his children for his own death and possibly beyond? Now, Isaac is God's man, his chosen servant to carry the promise, the promise to Abraham that God would bless the whole world with a saviour through his family, sought out the world.

The trouble is that Isaac is also, unfortunately, spoiled. So if you were to read back in Genesis, you would see that he was spoiled by Abraham and Sarah and it comes out in his behaviour.

Yet, let's look at verse 21, chapter 25. Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer and his wife, Rebecca, became pregnant.

So for all of that, Isaac prays in line with God's promise, doesn't he? And God hears him and answers his prayer. And there's the first lesson for us.

[8 : 19] Men are never two-dimensional. They are never just good or bad. But in his upbringing as a promised child, unfortunately, there were problems. In fact, three of them. Isaac's problems are these.

Favouritism, a food fad, and a failure to father. Let's look at verses 27 and 28. The boys, Esau and Jacob, grew up. And Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.

Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau. But Rebecca loved Jacob. He likes wild game. And Esau's the hunter.

So he's the one who brings the wild game. So Isaac loves Esau better. And the thing is, it's not even about Esau. It's about this. It's about his belly.

He has a food problem. And the problem is that his bodily appetites rule his heart. If we flick over to chapter 27, verse 1.

[9 : 26] When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could not any longer see, he called for his elder son Esau and said to him, My son, here I am, he answered.

And then flicking on to verse 4 of that chapter. 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.

Sounds more like a transaction, doesn't it, than a freely given blessing? Bring me the food I like.

Then I'll bless you. And the reason that there's a reference to blindness there at the beginning which we read out is that his physical blindness is supposed to mark for us his spiritual blind spots. His problem with food. And what happens if you read the rest of chapter 27 is Isaac ends up being manipulated through that food fad because Jacob deceives him by preparing him with the tasty food that he wants.

And he ends up looking a fool. Verse 35 of chapter 27. And what's worse, the weakness is hereditary. It gets transmitted.

[10:37] Because what does Esau struggle with? Chapter 25, verse 30. This is Esau speaking to Jacob. Quick, let me have some of that red stew. I'm famished. And this is what happens, friends, when men do not control our appetites.

We have generational issues. And you can see it with food. And you can see it with alcohol. And you can see it with other things. And the result is that Isaac favours Esau, right?

Because of his problem which is transmitted to Esau. And we all know what that does in a family, don't we? Favouritism. When one child knows they are loved less, it breeds division and entitlement and all kinds of other problems.

And in fact, that is in the end where things end up. Division. So chapter 27, verse 41, near the end of this story. Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him.

He said to himself, The days of mourning for my father are near. Then I will kill my brother Jacob. That's what happens. The brothers despise each other.

[11:50] Esau plans to kill Jacob. They're estranged for decades. And eventually they kind of settle into an uneasy peace. But the two nations that come from them, if you look further into the scripture, Israel and Edom, remain at war.

Isaac struggles with food fad and favouritism and a failure to father as well. Because clearly he has not spiritually nurtured and trained his children well.

An intentional father would not have let this situation develop between his two children. And if it had, he would have stepped in and showed them a better way. Wouldn't he? An intentional father does not neglect the spiritual training of his children or delegate it to his wife alone.

He does more than provide. He nurtures. He trains. Has Isaac succeeded in training, preparing his children for his own death?

That's what's happening in chapter 27. He's approaching death. No. He hasn't. And yet, if you read through the Bible account and you look at Hebrews and other places in the New Testament, there is no doubt that God blesses and uses Isaac.

[13:05] Despite all of this. And there's a word for that, isn't there? Grace. So that's Isaac. What about Esau?

I don't know if you've heard of the Manosphere. You've heard of the Manosphere? It's a particularly dark corner of the internet. What a kind of alternative ways of being men flourish. I would advise you not to go there.

I would advise you to make sure your children don't go anywhere near it. But if you were to go there, you would find a group of men who call themselves Men Going Their Own Way. Here's how men going their own way are described by one app that tries to point us away from them.

Men Going Their Own Way. At the surface level, members of the Men Going Their Own Way community advocate avoiding serious relationships, marriage, and even dating to protect their independence and focus on their goals and interests.

And this app then says, well, it doesn't sound such a bad thing, right? Yes, it does. It sounds like a very bad thing. Even before you get to the links to misogyny and women hating, it sounds selfish, doesn't it?

[14:21] It sounds like avoiding hard choices. It sounds like individualism gone mad. It sounds destructive for women and children and most of all men who are supposed to share their strength, not keep it all for themselves.

Esau is a man going his own way. Let's look at verses 25 and 27. The first to come out was red and his whole body was like a hairy garment.

So they named him Esau. And then verse 27, the boys grew up and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country. So Esau is the macho man, isn't he? He's the one who chugs a six-pack, goes and wrestles bears in the woods, and never, ever, ever cooks dinner. Because that's for women and mummy's boys like Jacob. What's this man's problem? Apart from the obvious. Esau is a boy. He's not a man.

And we can see this in the way that he handles representative responsibility. What do I mean by that? What's representative responsibility? Well, if I want to speak to the trustees of a particular organisation, I would go and speak to the chair of trustees first.

[15:35] That's not because he or she is more valuable than the other trustees, but because that's their role within the organisation, to represent. And that's what's expected of Esau.

And to some extent, all men. And we'll come back to that more next week. But that is why the birthright blessings come to Esau. Not because they are all for him, but because he represents all of his family.

He's the custodian of that blessing. He's the guardian of that blessing. Just like Adam was the guardian of the Garden of Eden. Right? The problem with Esau is that he refuses that responsibility and he ducks out of it.

Verses 29 to 34. We know the story by now. Jacob is cooking. Esau comes in. He says to Jacob, give me some of that stew. I'm famished. Jacob says, sure.

Sell me your birthright. And Esau says, oh, look, I'm about to die. Slightly exaggerated, isn't it? What good is the birthright to me? Jacob, he's got his thinking cap on.

[16:40] Yeah, but you're going to swear it first. And Esau swears. Jacob gives him the bread. He ate and drank and got up and left. As the eldest, the birthright, the joy of carrying God's promise to save people was his.

God's blessing to the entire world. And Esau has the privilege of taking it and carrying it with him. And he exchanges it for a plate of stew. His calling is to share God's joy with the entire world to bring hope and happiness.

And he despises it. What does he do instead? He instead chooses to trade his eternal inheritance for immediate gratification, doesn't he?

And that is the heart of Esau's problem as a man. He cannot look beyond what he wants right now. He cannot choose blessing in the long run. Delayed gratification. He is not in control of his appetites, his desires, his urges.

They control him. And so actually, he is less free, isn't he? Men going their own way are not more free.

[18:00] They are less free. It's a lack of self-control, isn't it? And it spills out into other parts of his life. So if you were to flick over to, excuse me, chapter 26, verse 34, you read this.

When Esau was 40 years old, he married Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basimath, daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebecca.

Instead of choosing a family, a wife from God's family, as he knows he should, he just follows his libido into marriage with women who do not know God, the God who promised to bless his family. And that way of life brings only grief. And abandoning God's ways means that this is actually one of the biggest issues for boys today as well.

Here's a quote from a sociological study published in 2018. Boys today particularly lack the ability to delay gratification, and so they make bad short-term choices which limit long-term flourishing.

[19:10] In the end, Esau leaves the family to carve his own path, follow his dreams, if you like. And he plays no real part in the greatest story ever told.

He plays no real part in the plan of salvation. As men, we dream of leaving a lasting legacy, don't we? Esau has none.

Esau is a little boy in a big man's body. And yet, even for Esau, there is blessing. The end of chapter 27, Isaac, who thought he'd run out of blessings, gives Esau a blessing.

And if you read chapters 32 and 33, you see he prospers. He grows. There's no way he deserves it, is there? Not on this account. But just because he is somewhere near God's great work, he benefits from God's great kindness.

And there's a word for that, isn't there? Grace. So that's Esau. Do you remember we talked about Eric Little?

[20 : 19] It was a few months ago, wasn't it? He had to say something that he knew would be unpopular and that he knew would deprive him of the chance of success and fame.

Because he wouldn't run on a Sunday. He felt that for him, that was wrong. And he wouldn't ignore God's will for his life. And he didn't just reach out and grab the prize on his own terms by any means necessary, did he?

He trusts God. And he gets absolutely pilloried by the public, and it's all over. There's no race, there's no gold medal, there's no glory. Not for Eric Little. Except, of course, that God honours those who honour him.

And he wins the 200 metres gold in Paris. Now that's being a good man. Not the bit about winning the race, but trusting God and giving up the glory.

You see how Jacob, God's chosen man, matches up to that standard. What does Jacob do when he's faced with that physically overbearing older brother, Esau, and a father who loves that brother best?

[21 : 28] What does he do? He kind of retreats into the background, doesn't he? And he stew. He cooks up some schemes. He already knew that the blessing was going to be his.

Do you remember right at the beginning of our reading, verse 23, the older will serve the younger. He knew. Does he trust God to come through on that? No.

I'll get mine, thinks Jacob, by any means necessary, as long as it doesn't involve physical danger or the chance of being found out. That's basically 25 and 27, those chapters in summary.

verses 29 to 34, look back there in chapter 25. It's the same story now from Jacob's point of view. What does Jacob do? He uses Esau's weakness to manipulate him, doesn't he? Trick him, Esau says later on. And then he leans on his mum to help him deceive his dad and manipulate him as well, chapter 27.

[22 : 36] That's the way to get the blessing, he thinks. It's not very Eric Liddell, is it? Maybe you're thinking, hang on, why criticise Jacob? He's the little guy, he's probably getting beaten up and bullied by his big brother all the time.

He's been smart, sure he's broken some rules, but he's got what he wanted. He's got his revenge. Stood up for the little guy, maybe?

This is not God's way, is it? And we see that played out in the rest of the Bible because it becomes a pattern in Jacob's life, this deceiving and trickery.

He does it to Laban and that breeds similar behaviour because then Laban ends up deceiving him as well and his sons end up fooling him. They tell him lies about Joseph's death, don't they?

And what does it do to Jacob's family, this behaviour? He ends up with brothers that hate each other, again. This is not healthy masculinity, is it?

[23 : 42] Integrity and faith are just missing from Jacob's approach. What else is missing? A healthy male friendship, completely absent from this story, isn't it?

Where's the brother to support him instead of be his rival? Where's the father to guide him? And he has that chance with Laban, his father-in-law, but he sabotages it. Jacob's poisoned all the wells and so he ends up basically a loner.

That's the overriding impression when you read the rest of Genesis for Jacob. He's alone. And we'll come back to that next week as well. But, for all his problems, Jacob goes on a journey with God and it changes him.

Because if you know your Bibles, you know that in chapter 32, after years of growing, he's in a position where he has the guts to wrestle with God and the gentleness to cry when he hears that his son is dead.

Both of those things. He's far from perfect, but he grows an absolute determination to hold on to God until God gives him what he has promised. Jacob carries God's promise.

[25 : 00] Despite his gaslighting and his grasping for power and his lack of trust, God reshapes Jacob into something like a good man. And that's why he gets a new name, Israel.

And there's a word for that, isn't there? Grace. I just want to invite you to take a moment or two to reflect on these three men.

Is there anything of Isaac, Esau or Jacob in us? And ladies, if you're thinking, what do I do with this? Then I'd encourage you not to think about your husbands or brothers at this moment, but instead think about your fathers and how your father's failures or successes might have influenced you.

Okay? Just take a moment. don't forget what you've been thinking about.

Bring it into this next section. How do we know that these things are not good? How do we know that real toxic masculinity and the stuff that Andrew Tate peddles is bad?

[26 : 40] How do we know that? How can we convince anybody of that in a world where all opinions are apparently equal and the truth is subjective? You know, my truth is just as good as your truth.

How will we show people the grace that has been shown to Jacob and Isaac and even Esau? We can't without the Lord, can we? We have to say these things are bad because the maker says so. And we must point people to Jesus. So here we are in Matthew chapter 4. Jesus is in the wilderness doing the Bear Grylls things. Did you pick up the parallels to Genesis?

Jesus faces and defeats all of the flaws and temptations that claim Jacob and Esau and all the others. What happens? He's in the wilderness. He's been fasting for 40 days.

Forget about it. He's been on a long hunting trip. And the tempter comes and offers him food. Just reach out and grab it. It's within your grasp. Take the apple, people.

[27 : 45] In other words, all you need to do is acknowledge me. Sell your birthright. And Jesus says, that is not God's way. Jesus is strong and bold like Esau, isn't he?

Because you'd have to be to stand up to the devil and tell him no. But he is also self-controlled. And instead of ducking responsibility like a little boy, Jesus, who's the second Adam, takes up representative responsibility for all.

And he carries it all the way to the cross. He takes on that mission to bring God's joy to the world and he absolutely slays.

Sorry if I'm not cool enough to use that word. Here is Jesus, an attempt to offer him power and legacy and influence all in an instant.

Doesn't he? Jesus is gentle and shrewd like Jacob. But the difference is he trusts God's way of achieving those things for him, even though it means death.

[28 : 59] He refuses to manipulate events and sees what is rightfully his. unlike Jacob. He is honest and faithful to God's way.

And in the end, what does he receive? The name that is above every name. The name at which every knee will bow. Jesus is the evidence that there is a divine father who is better than Isaac, one who doesn't play favourites.

One who gently leads his children and points the way. a father who prepares his children not for his own death but theirs and then life beyond.

Jesus says no to worshipping other things. Jesus is the good man. Jesus is the fulfilment of that birthright promise. He shows everybody what God's design for masculinity is.

So here's a second opportunity to reflect. Do you have Jesus? Not just as an example to follow, because we need more than that, don't we?

[30 : 09] But as a saviour who redeems our failings, as a Lord who lovingly leads us and has the right to tell us what to do, and as a friend who walks alongside us, giving us power by his spirit to grow like Jacob, to change, to be good men.

Do you have Jesus? Isaac, Jacob and Esau show us where men can end up without a heavenly father, without Jesus as a brother.

And if we don't accept God's idea of what it is to be good, that's where we will end up. God's history here is also our first clue that God isn't really interested in the typical male stereotypes, because it's the home loving Jacob who ends up carrying the promise of God's joy.

And God's blessing here gives us all hope, doesn't it? All of us men who know that we are less than good men, who know that we have failed.

for all of us, just like for these men, there is grace. And the closer we are to Jesus, the more grace. Jacob finds a new name in his wrestling with Jesus, and he carries the scar of that, if you know the story, for the rest of his life.

[31 : 42] And that's the hope that Jesus offers all men here today. Wrestle with your maker, realize you can't defeat him, join him, carry the scars, in honour of the scars that Jesus carries.

We talked about Bear Grylls a little bit, here's a quote from him. Faith, faith in Jesus, it's about what keeps you strong and gives you backbone in life.

And that's it. Ultimately, to be a good man, ultimately, we need to trust in the only good man, and give ourselves to him. And that's Jesus.

Let's pray. Lord God, I confess that I have not been the man that you want me to be.
Thank you, Lord, that you accept the confession of all men here who are willing to admit that. Thank
you, Lord, so much for your grace and goodness, even to men who fail.
[33 : 00] Thank you for sending Jesus to eradicate our flaws and failures. Thank you for sending
your spirit who gives us power to change.

Lord God, will you help men here to be more like you by your grace. Will you help women here to
help? In Jesus' name, Amen.

We're going to sing in response to what we've heard. Oh, church, arise. arise. arise. Oh, church,
Oh, church, Oh, church, Thank you.