

Cheating the Father

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on October the 8th, 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Cheating the Father and is from Genesis chapter 27 verses 1 to 29.

If you've watched any of the Olympics, you'll know that heroes live forever and you're probably sick of them. I'm not sure that they do necessarily live forever, but I think it's probably true that we're almost sick of them.

But having said that, we do like heroes. And part of the excitement of the Olympics, I guess, are the sort of heroic stories of the people who compete and are involved.

Not just the heroes who have gold around their necks. The heroes who overcome hardship to compete. The Nigerian, or was it a Ugandan runner whose husband was killed in a car accident just before the Olympics.

[1 : 09] People who competed having overcome injuries or only semi-overcome injuries in recent times. Heroes from Equatorial Guinea who swam twice as slowly as anybody else but got a great rousing reception.

Or heroes from a non-nation, in a sense. East Timor. A woman who ran the marathon and got a bigger ovation when she came in 42nd place.

Well behind the winner but got the biggest ovation of all. They're the sort of heroes that we love, in a sense. Every story that you read, every novel that you read, every film that you see, every play that you see, almost invariably has a hero or heroes in it.

Some character who, despite the pros and the cons, is nonetheless the hero of the story. Often they're noble.

Often they're a rescuer. Sometimes they're glamorous. Very unusually, in this chapter, there is no hero. No character stands out head and shoulders above the others as a very noble or glamorous or rescuing figure.

[2 : 24] There are four characters in this chapter and none of them is a hero. There is the father, Isaac, an old man, a greedy man, who's concerned just for one son, seems to show little love or respect for both his wife and the younger of his twin sons, a person who's really concerned to have his favourite food to fill his belly.

There's Esau, the older of the two boys by a short distance, but rather a pathetic and spoilt child, really. There's Rebecca, the wife.

When we first met her a few chapters ago, she seemed to be an ideal sort of woman, beautiful to look at, a noble character. But here she is, a scheming and devious woman, an unloved wife and mother.

And then there's Jacob, the younger of the twin boys, full of deception, lies, and blasphemy. a mother's boy.

This is a family that is bitterly divided. By the end of the chapter, its division is even more exacerbated. Nowhere in this chapter are all four of the family members together.

[3 : 46] We only ever get two at a time. And none is a hero. The first scene is verses one to four.

Isaac and Esau are together, father and elder son. The father is about a hundred years old, maybe a touch more than that. He's blind, unable to see it all clearly.

Possibly he's bedridden, it seems, from the way the story unfolds. But nonetheless, his appetite is not dimmed, and he wants his favorite food, so he asks his favorite son to go and kill his favorite game, to make his favorite stew, and then as a reward he promises him a blessing in turn.

Noticeable by his absence is the younger son. It seems that usually when a dying father or patriarch is wanting to give a blessing, he gathers all his sons and blesses differently, but each one.

Not so here. Isaac calls one son and leaves the other out. It also seems that Isaac is rather unconcerned about his favorite son's wives.

[5 : 05] His favorite son, Esau, has married Hittite women, Canaanites. That was something that Abraham, the grandson of this boy, Esau, or young man, Esau, forbade for his son, Isaac.

He sent a servant off to his own family area up in Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac from his own kinship. Isaac seems to have forgotten his father's concern about that.

And so his own son has just married a Canaanite woman and Isaac seems to be quite indifferent to that. And certainly between father and son, there seems to be little concern for the promises of God being fulfilled.

So Esau goes to kill the game. End of scene one. Scene two, the other two characters, Rebekah and the younger son Jacob.

Rebekah has overheard the discussions in the tent between her husband and her elder son. And she is anxious to prevent the blessing being given to Esau and so seeks by devious means to procure it for her younger son Jacob.

[6 : 18] Notice how serious the family division is. In verse 5 we are told that Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau.

And then it goes on in the next verse to say that Rebekah said to her son Jacob. The two sons belong to both of them. But the way the story is told it shows a very clear and sharp division.

Esau is regarded as his son Jacob is regarded as her son. Mother and son, father and son opposed to each other in this account.

Rebekah is very serious about making sure that Esau does not get the blessing. So she says in verse 8 to Jacob My son obey my word as I command you.

that's strong language especially from a woman. It's one of only two times in the Old Testament that a woman commands a man to do anything else. The other one is in the book of Esther when Esther is a queen.

[7 : 24] She's serious here and she's telling Jacob what to do. This is not a consultation, it's a command. She commands him to get two kids, young goats.

she herself will do the cooking to make her husband's favorite stew. At first Jacob her son balks at the idea not because of any compunction or not on moral grounds, not because he's doubtful that this is the right thing to do, not for any pious reason, simply because he isn't sure that it's going to work.

He says to her in verse 11, look my brother Esau is a hairy man and I'm a man of smooth skin, perhaps my father will feel me and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.

That is, I'm not sure that this is going to work. Well, so desperate and determined is Rebecca that she says in reply to him, let your curse be on me, my son.

Only obey my word and go, get them for me. She's prepared to take on a curse, not just a curse from her husband but ultimately from God in order to make sure that her elder son Esau does not get blessed by Isaac.

[8 : 45] From here on, Jacob complies without objection. He does what his mother tells him. He's clearly a pawn in his mother's hand in many respects and nonetheless conspires with her to deceive his father and his elder brother.

But she's the one who's taken the initiative. She's the one who concocts both the scheme and the stew. She's the one who dresses Jacob in his brother's clothes to deceive her husband.

She's the one who gets some skins from animals to tie around his hands and his neck so that just in case the father might touch him, he thinks that he's the hairy Esau, not the smooth Jacob.

Jacob does what his mother says and he goes into his father into his tent. Will the scheme work? That's the tension in this story.

Scene three, Isaac and Jacob. And this is verses 18 to 29. And the opening words of Isaac the father to Jacob the son create that tension.

[9 : 53] My father Jacob said and the father said here I am. Who are you? My son. Who are you?

It's hard to quite work out the reason behind the question. But does it betray some suspicion about what's going on? He obviously thinks that it's too soon for Esau to be back with game for his stew.

That comes out later on explicitly and maybe his question betrays the fact that Jacob rarely saw him. We're not sure. Jacob's answer is rather wordy in verse 19.

It may suggest some nerves that he just starts talking garrulously almost babbling away to try and cover his nerves and to convince his father. I'm Esau your first born an outright lie to start with. I have done all you told me. Now sit up and eat of my game so that you may bless me. But Isaac remains suspicious. He said to his son in verse 20, How is it that you have found it so quickly my son?

[11:09] I think he's puzzled. I think he's unsure. He certainly seems suspicious. And Jacob's reply is not only another lie, but also blasphemy because the Lord your God granted me success.

What a lie. Taking the Lord's name in vain in order to procure a blessing. But still Isaac is suspicious.

He's not convinced yet. His sense of sight doesn't help him. Doesn't help him determine is this Jacob or is this Esau? His sense of hearing seems to have raised an alarm.

It sounds like Jacob not Esau. So now he tries his sense of touch. He says in verse 21, Come near that I may feel you my son to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.

Good thing Rebecca tied some animal skins to his hand and to his neck so that Jacob appears hairier than he normally is. The sense of touch. So Jacob went up to his father Isaac who felt him and said the voice is Jacob's but the hands are the hands of Esau.

[12:25] He didn't recognize him because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands. Here we have some conflicting evidence. Isaac is blind. His sense of sight won't work for him.

The sense of hearing says Jacob. His sense of touch says Esau. He remains unconvinced. And though at the end of verse 23 it says so he blessed him. It's almost a premature resolution to the problem.

We might breathe a quick sigh of relief and think the schemes worked. But immediately we find that that's not actually the case. Probably it just means that he greeted him because usually when you would greet somebody it would be a statement of blessing.

The full blessing remains later on in verse 27 onwards. But immediately Isaac then says, Are you really my son Esau? Clearly you see he's not convinced.

Clearly he thinks something suspicious is going on here. So now he tries his sense of taste. He calls for the food. And he ate and he has some wine and he drinks.

[13:31] We're not sure what he made of the meal. We're not told at the end that he said oh this is fantastic. Just like Esau makes. But there's no objection. So presumably the meal has passed the taste test.

Then the final test. Sight won't work. Voice says Jacob or the hearing says Jacob. But touch and taste seem to imply Esau.

The last sense, the sense of smell. And so his father Isaac said to him, Come near and kiss me my son. So he came near and kissed him.

And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments. It's the smell of Esau. They're Esau's clothes. And at last, finally, he seems convinced.

This, now he realises, is his son Esau. There's been an ongoing tension here in this story about whether Jacob's deceit will be detected or not.

[14:34] It's almost humorous. There's an episode in one of the episodes of Fawlty Towers where Basil and Sybil are always fighting and it's their anniversary.

And Sybil thinks that Basil, John Cleese, has forgotten about it, so she storms off in a huff to play golf with her friend Audrey. Basil has invited all his friends around for the anniversary.

What's he going to do? He'd be too embarrassed to tell them that they've had a row. So he gets Polly the maid dressed up as his wife, plonks her in bed, wraps a scarf around her head, stuffs things in her mouth so it looks as though she's really ill, and she dims the lights so that his insistent guests can come up and pay respects to her but not get too close in case they get sick from the disease that she's got.

And throughout all the humor of that episode, the same thing is here. Will it be detected or not? Well, inevitably of course, Sybil arrives home, meets the guests downstairs and the whole charade is exposed to an extent.

This story is full of tension. Will Jacob's deceit be detected or not? And several times it looks as though it's on the verge of Isaac detecting it, full of suspicion.

[15:57] temptation. But finally, he gives way, finally he seems convinced, and finally he gives the blessing to Jacob. And through all this time we may well be thinking, hurry up.

Hurry up and convince him because Esau could come back with the food at any time. Just in time it seems, Isaac blesses Jacob.

The smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed, he says. And now in this blessing he gives three things. Firstly, abundance in agriculture.

Rain and dew, good crops, animals and so on. May God give you the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. It's a typical Old Testament blessing.

Full of agricultural prosperity. The second thing, also typical of blessings in the Old Testament, is some sort of political dominance in effect over other nations and over enemies.

[17:05] Not only other nations here, but your brothers as well. Let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you.

That's the second thing, political domination. But they echo the words we heard last week. where Rebecca the mother, remember, had the twins in her womb.

She was full of discomfort and pain, cried out to the Lord about what is going on here. And the word from the Lord was that you have two nations in your womb, two boys, two nations.

But it is the elder who will serve the younger. And here now, in a different way, those words are being confirmed and fulfilled. In the words of blessing from Isaac to Jacob.

Yes, there are two nations, two brothers, but it is Jacob who will have domination over the others.

And the third part of the blessing, at the very end of verse 29, cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you.

[18:08] Words that echo God's promises to Abraham in chapter 12, but in slightly different wording that suggests there will be more enmity. than was promised to Abraham.

End of scene 3. Jacob has been blessed. His and Rebecca's scheme has succeeded it seems. Scene 4.

Back to Isaac now with Esau, the other brother, the elder of the two twins. Verses 20, verses 30 rather to 40. And it's a bit like a comic opera.

Because there's a sense in which it's just as soon as Jacob left Esau arrived. As though you're watching a play and just as Jacob exits stage left, Esau arrives stage right.

Just in time, in the nick of time, Jacob has received blessing from Isaac and now Esau returns. And he comes in and his words convey a sense of buoyancy as though he's flushed with success at his killing and his cooking.

[19:14] Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game so that you may bless me. Isaac's response though brings him down to earth with a jolt.

Isaac says, who are you? Not who are you my son as he asked Jacob, but just who are you? Isaac is suddenly confused.

He's just been fed and he's just blessed. And now in comes somebody who no doubt sounds like Esau and appears to be like Esau in the words that he's saying and all of a sudden Isaac is wondering what's gone on here.

And Esau responds, I'm your first born son, Esau. Isaac presumably recognizes the voice and his response is that he trembled violently.

It's a very vivid and unusual expression. It's somebody who's in an uncontrollable rage or just puzzlement.

[20:18] Very violent. Trembling. Shaking. Confused with what's been going on. Extreme panic if you like. And he says to his son Esau, who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me and I ate it all before you came.

And I've blessed him. And Esau's response is extreme distress. He screams.

When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry. A blood-curdling scream almost. And then a pathetic whimper.

He said to his father, bless me, me also father. It's like a pathetic plea of a little spoilt child who can't get his own way.

Can't I be blessed too? He's distraught. But his words are fairly pathetic. And three times he expresses the same sentiment to his father.

[21:27] There as I've read in verse 34, in verse 36 the same. Have you not reserved a blessing for me? He says at the end of verse 36. And then in verse 38, the same sort of thing.

Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father. And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. We might well think that Isaac could just retract his blessing to Jacob.

Bring it back and say, Jacob, my blessing to you is illegitimate. I thought you were Esau. My words do not stand. I'm blessing Esau, not Jacob.

Can't he still bless Esau? Well, clearly not. Three times that is made clear. Verse 33, he says to Esau, who was it that came and gave me food and I blessed him?

And at the end of verse 33, and blessed he shall be. That is, I can't change what I've done. Esau responds with his pathetic plea and Isaac counters again in verse 35.

[22 : 39] Your brother came deceitfully and he has taken away your blessing. That is, as though the blessing is unique and tangible. Jacob's taken it and therefore Esau can't have it.

As though it's a toy or a teddy bear or something like that. Jacob's got it, you can't have it. There's only one. And he's got it and it's too late. And again Esau replies with his pathetic plea and again Isaac answers him in verse 37.

I've already made him your Lord and I've given him all his brothers as servants and with grain and wine. I've sustained him. What thing can I do for you, my son? That is, there's nothing left.

I can't pray you the same blessing that I've prayed for your brother. Now in order to understand what's going on here, it's crucial that we see that this blessing is irrevocable.

It's powerful. When it's been issued and spoken by Isaac, it can't be brought back and given to another. He can't just add another blessing in competition to it, to his other son either.

[23 : 43] You see, the blessing is not a prayer. It's not Isaac praying that good fortune will come Esau's way in the future and he realizes that he's prayed it for the wrong person. He can't just pray the same thing again for the other son.

It's not so much a prayer as a statement of prophecy and as a statement of prophecy it's not just a word of Isaac, ultimately it's a word of God being spoken here. It's a bit like a signed will that gives everything to Jacob as it happens and nothing then is left for Esau.

The will can't be overridden, it can't be changed in this case. What then this is saying is that ultimately the word of blessing is a word from God, not just Isaac.

And as God's word it cannot and will not be thwarted or changed or deflected. It fulfills the word that God spoke to Rebekah when she was pregnant with the twins.

The elder shall serve the younger. And here is a word from God reinforcing that. Yes, Jacob will be the one of domination and blessing and Esau will serve Jacob, not vice versa.

[24 : 55] Oh yes, the circumstances that led to Jacob getting the blessing are full of cunning and shrewdness and deceit and craftiness. evil and lies and even blasphemy. But nowhere is that condoned.

Just because Jacob ends up with a blessing does not mean that God's saying well done for being devious and deceitful. Far from it. As I've said, there's no hero here in this story.

But we are reminded that the end, which is the blessing that God determines for Jacob, does not in a sense justify the means here. That is, Jacob is not justified for being devious and cunning and shrewd just because God wanted ultimately to give him the blessing.

The end does not justify the means in Christian ethics. Judas is the clearest example of that. The end of Judas' betrayal was Jesus dying for the sins of the world.

A good end. But Judas is never justified for his own betrayal. Better for him that he never lived than he did. But we're reminded here that God's purposes will triumph through human deceit sometimes, despite human deceit sometimes.

[26 : 11] Certainly the dubious character of Jacob who receives the blessing probably raises concerns for us. Why should a scheming Jacob, a lying, blasphemous Jacob, receive such a blessing from God?

It doesn't seem fair. On the other hand, it doesn't seem particularly right that Esau should get it either. He seems like a spoilt brat. He's married outside into the Canaanites, something that his grandfather Abraham thought was an unwise thing to do.

He doesn't seem to show any concern for the promises of God. He despised his own birthright. He's not a noble character or hero either. Neither of them particularly deserves any blessing at all.

But why should God give Jacob a blessing for being such a deceptive brother? But then that's always the case in scripture. In the end, nobody deserves the blessings of God.

Nobody deserves the salvation God has to offer. Jacob didn't. Israel didn't. Moses didn't. King David didn't.

[27 : 17] The Bible's full of God's people being adulterers and murderers, liars and deceivers and blasphemers and idolaters. many of them are punished for their sins. But those who receive the blessings of God do not merit it or deserve it.

You see, the Bible is consistently pulling the carpet out from under our feet. We have no claim on God's blessing. We have no claim on God's salvation.

We're no more deserving than Jacob. Whether or not we've blasphemed or lied in the way he has, morally we're no better than he is. Ultimately, in scripture, the grounds for blessing and salvation are God's mercy and grace, not our moral rectitude.

And that, in the end, is what this passage is teaching us. We stand before God empty-handed to receive his mercy and his grace. We cannot come with any claim of moral rectitude to receive blessing.

But just as God inexplicably chose Jacob to be the recipient of his blessing and through him to bless his descendants, the nation of Israel, so too are we, sinners before God, and yet, in his mercy, recipients of blessing.

[28 : 43] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.