

"Learning To Pretend"
Sermon Series on *A Faithful God for a Fallen People*
(Gen. 27:1-45 selected verses)
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Introduction.

Several years ago there was a film that captured the attention of movie goers and critics alike, and it won four Academy Awards. The film was entitled *Ordinary People*, and it starred Mary Tyler Moore and Donald Sutherland and was directed by Robert Redford. It was the story of a typical “ordinary” family living in the suburbs of Chicago.

The film begins after the older of two sons has been killed in a drowning accident that was caused by his own foolishness. The younger son is racked by guilt, so that increasingly he finds that he’s unable to cope with life. The mother is domineering. The father is weak. In the end, the younger son attempts suicide and the father leaves home. Just another typical family – ordinary people!

The fact of the matter is that all of our families, mine included, have their fair share of pathology and dysfunction. Our families may not have the level of problems depicted in the movie, but we all struggle to make a life together as a family. At times we find it difficult to live the Christian life even in our own homes. *Especially* in our own homes.

When I think about that film, I reflect on the home of Isaac and Rebekah. We’ve already seen enough in our previous study of the book of Genesis to make us wonder how in the world this family could be the one in which God was at work and through which the blessing of the Messiah would come one day. Isaac is weak. Rebekah is domineering. Esau is ruled by his appetites, while Jacob is deceptive.

And yet, the miracle of grace is that God works through ordinary dysfunctional families just like this one. And that gives me hope as I think about the dysfunction in my own family. If God could work through them, then maybe there’s hope that He can work through my family too. The truth is God isn’t limited by our dysfunction in order to accomplish His good work in the world. Even through ordinary broken people like Isaac and Rebekah, or you and me for that matter, God wants to do His work of grace. Let’s take a closer look.

I. The Determination of a Father.

This passage is actually the story of four people - Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. We begin with Isaac because he’s mentioned first. The text tells us that he was old, and he sensed that his death was nearing. In fact, Isaac lived another 43

years by some scholar's calculations (e.g. Luther), but he felt like his health was failing and that he was about to die.

Isaac was determined to pass on the coveted blessing of the father to Esau, his first-born and favorite son. He wanted to do this in spite of the fact that God had previously stated that it should go to Jacob. It was customary in the Ancient Near East that a father would bestow material and spiritual blessings on his first-born as a part of a ceremony of blessing. Isaac had a taste for wild game, and he wanted to indulge his appetites before giving his blessing, so he asked Esau to hunt for something and prepare a tasty meal for him to eat. Then Isaac would give Esau his blessing.

Why the urgency? Why the secrecy? The patriarch knew that if he announced to the family what he intended to do, the household would disrupt in dissension. Rebekah would protest and perhaps she would make her husband's life miserable. So Isaac decided to give his blessing secretly. What should have been a joyful and public celebration was turned into an urgent request made in secrecy. Of even greater concern is the fact that Isaac was determined to go against the expressed will of God. You'll recall that when Jacob and Esau were wrestling in the womb of Rebekah, the Lord told her that the older boy would serve the younger. Isaac couldn't accept that, so he tried to manipulate the situation for it to turn out a different way.

Have you ever tried to manipulate a situation, perhaps even in your own family, only to have it backfire on you? You didn't trust God's will, and you thought you had a better idea. So you did something secretly, and it messed everything up. We should never play favorites with our children or manipulate our kids. Instead, we should be eager to bless each of our sons and daughters and cherish them for who they are as individuals. Isaac never learned this, and his family paid dearly for it for many years. The sins of the father were visited on the children, all because of a father's determination.

II. The Scheming of a Mother.

Lest we think the problems in this family were all Isaac's fault, let's recognize that Rebekah contributed her fair share to the family's dysfunction. The passage tells us that Rebekah conspired with Jacob to steal Isaac's blessing, and she developed a plan to deceive her husband. Perhaps Rebekah spiritualized her aspirations for Jacob, and she rationalized that she was only helping God fulfill His promise. However, her fault lay in failing to trust God to bring the blessing to Jacob in His own way and in His time. She took matters into her own hands, and she wasn't willing to wait on the Lord.

True enough, the blessing went to Jacob as she planned, but the end result was 20 years of an unexpected exile for Rebekah's favorite son. And it was an exile for which he not been prepared because of his sheltered life growing up. Whenever

we take matters into our own hands and try to help God out, we shouldn't be surprised to discover that it leads to disastrous results. The end never justifies the means, and plotting and scheming almost never works out well.

How many of you mothers have tried to plot and scheme to get a blessing for your kids? How often have you been tempted to take matters into your own hands and help God out? I've noticed that in every community Lorie and I have lived, parents try to position, manipulate and scheme so their children can get ahead. We sign up our kids to get in the right preschool. We lobby to get them on the right sports team that has all the good athletes. We think that if they get the right education they'll get the right job, so they can marry the right person and live happily-ever-after. But that's a lie from hell, and we buy into it every single day!

You and I don't have to manipulate and plot and scheme. We have a sovereign God who loves us, who loves our kids more than we do, and the Bible says that He wants the best for them and for us. His promises are sure; His blessing will come. But we must learn to wait on God's timing for things and allow Him to do His work in His own way. I think our kids would be a lot better off if we did a lot more praying and less scheming.

III. The Deception of a Son.

Playing make-believe and dressing up was one of the great pastimes of our kids growing-up. Here's a picture of our boys when they were children. It's one of my favorites. Over the course of my own childhood I dressed up and pretended I was a variety of things – a fireman, an astronaut, a soldier, a professional football player, even Tarzan. In all these efforts I pretended I was someone else. It's cute when children dress up and pretend, but when an adult does it we know there's something tragically wrong.

At the suggestion of his mother, Jacob went to his father while his brother was out hunting, and he secured his father's blessing by pretending to be Esau. Jacob even covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with goatskins to resemble his hairy brother, and he wore the best clothes of Esau to complete the disguise. Jacob then added to the deception by lying to his father, and he even dragged the name of God into the whole mess. What a pathetic scene.

It's amazing to see what lengths people will go to in order to get what they want in life. They'll lie, cheat, and deceive even their own family in order to secure the blessing they so desperately seek. But in stealing the blessing, Jacob lost his integrity, and he would never be the same again. It's important to remember that God had already determined to give a blessing to Jacob when he was in his mother's womb. But he couldn't trust that.

A question that naturally arises in a situation like this is why did God bless Jacob when his life was so full of lies and deceit? We want to believe that people who are blessed by God look like they deserve a blessing. We expect a blessing

comes as a reward to those who live a good and holy life. The fact of the matter is that the Bible scandalizes our sense of justice with the persistent notion of God's grace. This family doesn't look like a blessing, but they sure needed one, just like the rest of us do. And that is precisely why God blesses us as well. You and I don't deserve it. We can't earn it. But the blessing of God comes to us anyway because of His grace.

All our lives, even as Christians, you and I try to make people think we're someone we're not, just like Jacob did. We do our best to pretend. We try to project an image, on Facebook or in real life, and we work hard to look like the person we think will receive a blessing. We try to keep the chinks out of our armor so that no one really knows just how badly we're doing on the inside. We're desperately afraid that if people knew what we were really like, they wouldn't like us or they'd reject us. So we spend a lot of our time and energy pretending, projecting, and covering up, just like Jacob.

Let me suggest to you, we don't have to pretend in order to receive the blessing of God. It has been promised to us from before we were born. God's love and favor can't be earned, and it's never deserved. The only way to receive God's blessing is to be honest and to be yourself. Acknowledge you're a sinner. Admit that you need a Savior. Confess all your pretending and simply stand in the loving light of God's grace to find redemption for your soul and healing for your heart. When you do, you'll discover that your real identity is found most in Christ. You're a child of God, and He loves you. That's the greatest blessing you could ever receive. Do you believe that?

IV. The Bitterness of a Brother.

When Esau returned home, he, too, prepared a meal for his father from the wild game he had hunted. But when he brought it to Isaac, he soon learned of the deception by his brother and the way Jacob had stolen Esau's blessing. In anguish Esau cried out and pled with his father. *"Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too!"* (27:38). And the Bible says he wept aloud. The only blessing Isaac could muster was a parody of the blessing he had already given to Jacob.

From that day on, Esau held a grudge against his brother, and he plotted to kill Jacob. When Rebekah learned of Esau's plan, she sent Jacob away to Haran, a distance about almost 400 miles, to stay with her brother Laban. What started out as a plan to lay low only for a short season turned into 20 long years, and Rebekah would not see her boy again for a very long time. The consequence of their sin would be a heavy toll to pay.

In many ways it's easy to sympathize with Esau in this story. But, remember, Esau was willing to sell his birthright to Jacob earlier in this story for a bowl of stew. He was a person who was controlled by his appetites, and it came back to

haunt him. Esau wept, but his tears were because of frustrated selfishness and not genuine regret for the things he had done.

Conclusion.

Quite a picture, this family of four is. It's a sad story which has many lessons to teach us. As we close this morning, let me ask you some questions. *In what ways are you trying to manipulate situations to work out the way you want, and how might God be calling you to trust Him and quit all your scheming?*

Also, *how is your life marked by deception, and in what ways are you pretending to be someone else? Finally, are you allowing bitterness to build up in your heart because of something someone has done to you? How might God be calling you to forgive that person, even if they don't deserve it? In what ways is your bitterness the result of selfishness, and is there any sin from which you need to repent this today?*

The family I grew up in was far from perfect. We looked pretty good on the outside – a typical family in the 1950s. But there was a lot of dysfunction in my home. We weren't quite as bad as the family in *Ordinary People*, but we had our own problems. My dad was a great man in many ways, but he had many character flaws, and he was domineering and chauvinistic. My mother a believer in Jesus Christ, and she was full of faith. But she was also co-dependent, and she enabled a lot of bad behavior. We three brothers had problems of our own, and, as you know, one of my brothers was a cocaine addict for 20 years.

As an adult I've had to unpack some very negative baggage from my family of origin since I became a Christian, and in many ways I had to learn a whole new way of loving and living. I look back now with such gratitude to God for the ways He helped me break some very negative and unhealthy patterns I learned growing up, and also break what some might even call a family curse. And I've tried to live a different way with my own family.

However, lest you think I'm something I'm not, Lorie and I made a lot of mistakes raising our kids, and we don't have the perfect marriage. We did many things wrong raising our children, and it's only by the grace of God that they have turned as well as they have. And Lorie and I work very hard every day to make our marriage work. It's not easy, and it requires a lot of grace.

All this is to say that each of us come from homes that were or are dysfunctional in one way or another. And each of us also has probably contributed in large and small ways to the pathology of our families. But the good news in this story in the Bible is that it reminds us that God isn't bound by our dysfunction or by our sin, and He can still give you the blessing you may have missed when you were growing up. Our heavenly Father loves you, and He is there for you. He has a blessing in Christ He wants to give you.

In the coming week talk about these matters with your family and friends and explore the ways you can apply the truths of this passage to your own life. Quit your scheming, trust in God, and live in truth. The blessing of God awaits you in Christ, because He is a faithful God for a fallen people. Amen.