

## Wealth Without Ethics

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

Although it was God's plan for Jacob to succeed Isaac and receive his family's inheritance, Jacob did not trust God to ensure his future. Instead, he used deception and theft to obtain his family's blessing. Jacob's unethical dealing with his father and his brother resulted in a deep and long-lived split in the family enterprise. His lack of ethics in obtaining his wealth put Jacob, his entire family, and God's blessings in serious jeopardy.

What Jacob did not understand is that God's covenantal blessings are gifts to be received, not prizes to grasp. God's blessings carry the responsibility that they be used for others benefit, not hoarded unto oneself. Although Jacob, unlike his brother Esau, had faith enough in God's blessing to value receiving it from his father, Jacob relied on his own abilities to secure what he valued, rather than looking to God to provide. While it was good that Jacob valued the family birthright, it was faithless for him to exploit hungry Esau into selling it to him. While it was understandable for Jacob to want his father's blessing, it was underhanded to deceive his father into giving it to him. Jacob's subsequent life as a fugitive from the family testifies to the odious nature of his behavior.

After escaping from the wrath of his brother Esau, Jacob worked for his uncle Laban for twenty-one frustrating years, during which time Laban broke a string of promises to him. During this time Jacob learned the trade

of breeding animals, and he used this skill to get back at Laban. Through breeding techniques, Jacob increased his flocks, while depriving Laban of the best genetic stock. It got to the point that Laban's sons were complaining that "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father" (Genesis 31:1-2). Jacob ultimately fled from Laban's house in the same manner that he had departed from his original family.

Jacob claimed his financial gains were gifts from God, saying, "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed" (Genesis 31:42). Still, when profit comes at the expense of exploiting and deceiving others, something is wrong. Jacob's schemes hurt those who were closest to him and drove him away from his family over and over again. It would be a stretch to say this represents God's ideal model of wealth creation. Like Jacob and his blind spots, we too need to be aware of how readily we might fool even ourselves into believing that unethical actions are justified.

Jacob's relentless drive to gain benefits for himself at the expense of others reveals how his fears made him resistant to God's transforming grace. To the extent we come to believe in God's promises, we will be less inclined toward manipulating circumstances and deceiving others. Wealth without ethics, while enticing, is not the whole story of God's blessing.