

Wrestling with God

People of God, in my sermon this morning I want to help us answer the question - **How do we receive the blessing of God?**

In the story we heard this morning from Gen. 32, Jacob wrestled with God all night, and God said to Jacob, “let me go, for the day has broken.” And Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And God then changed Jacob’s name to Israel, which means, “he strives with God”, and God said, “your name is now Israel for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” And then God blessed him.

Jacob strove with God and with men, and has prevailed in receiving the blessing of God. God’s favor was upon him, he flourished and prospered, and he had the abiding joy of knowing that he saw God face to face, and did not die.

But this statement that Jacob strove with God and men, was not just a statement about the wrestling match. This was a description of Jacob’s whole life up to this point. In the womb Jacob was wrestling with Esau. As they grew up, Jacob had to strive for his father’s affection. Esau was the firstborn, and a man’s man. A hunter, and Isaac loved him. But Jacob was good at household management, and was not the kind of son his father wanted him to be. “Why can’t you be more like your brother Esau?” Isaac may have even said to Jacob.

But Jacob, being the blameless man he was, sought the blessing of the firstborn from his brother Esau. One time, Esau came in from hunting game in the field and was famished. And being the type of person who thinks more with his belly than with his heart, Jacob knew that his brother Esau was not worthy of the inheritance of the first born son. His mother Rebekah most likely spoke over him

the prophecy that was told her by the LORD saying, “The older shall serve the younger.”

Esau was the older of the twin brothers, and being the kind of materialistic man he was, Jacob figured Esau would probably squander his father’s inheritance on himself, and not take care of his father’s possessions. Jacob would be much better suited to handle his father’s affairs after all, being skilled in administration and in household management.

So Esau asks for some of the red stew Jacob was cooking, and Jacob seized the opportunity to capitalize on the Lord’s promise to his mother, and he said would give the stew to him, if he sold him his birthright. And Esau, again, thinking more with his belly than with his heart toward the covenant promises of God, despised his birthright, and sold it to Jacob for a pot of stew.

After this, Jacob lived many more years in his father’s household as a second rate son. Jacob strove again with God and men, when he sought his father’s blessing by pretending to be his brother Esau. Isaac was getting ready to die and he told Esau to go and catch some game and cook it up and feed it to him one last time before he dies, and he will then bless him.

But His wife Rebekah overheard it, prepared the food while Esau was out hunting, and gave it to Jacob to give to his father instead. Now consider, that if Rebekah knew of God's promise that the older would serve the younger, don't you think that she would have told her husband Isaac what God said to her about their sons?

Isaac knew God’s purposes and plan’s but he hardened his heart and thought more with his natural affection than he did with his gospel affection. And decided to give Esau the blessing any way.

“Isaac’s behavior forced Jacob, along with the help of his mother Rebekah, to deceive Isaac in order to receive the blessing and thus fulfill God’s promise.

It is not Jacob and Rebekah who should be viewed negatively here, but Isaac, who sought to interfere with God’s plan. Rebekah is actually the heroine in the story, as she protected the covenant by tricking the serpent. She is the one who insisted that Jacob go through with the deception of Isaac in order to receive the blessing of God.”¹

So, she dressed him up in Esau’s clothes so that he smelt and felt like Esau. Jacob went in to his father’s tent, fed the food to his father, and tricked his father into giving him the blessing instead of giving it to Esau.

Jacob then left the tent, with his brother’s birthright and blessing in tow. Esau returned and served his father the game. And it was then discovered what Jacob had done. Rebekah then told Jacob to flee to her brother Laban because Esau was going to kill him.

Jacob strove again with God and men, when he worked 7 years for Laban’s daughter Rachel. But Laban deceived Jacob, and gave him his firstborn daughter Leah instead. He then had to serve another 7 years for Rachel. And over the many Laban changed Jacob’s wages 10 times. But because Jacob was a man who sought the blessing of God, who sought to be faithful to God, and wanted his covenant blessing above all things, God blessed him with many children, and also multiplied his flocks and herds, and he multiplied greatly.

¹ J. Brandon Meeks, <https://catechesia.com/2021/08/16/redeeming-israel-righteous-deception-holy-espionage/>

As it became apparent that his prosperity resulted in him losing the favor of Laban, Jacob packed up his household with all his livestock, and he left Laban's house to the land of his father. He had to wrestle with Laban one last time, but before Laban overtook Jacob God came and warned Laban not to say anything good or bad to him.

Laban then caught up with Jacob and complained about how Jacob tricked Laban. But is only a trickster to the unfaithful. He deceives the evil, only to be faithful to God. He tricks his brother out of the birth right. He tricks his father out of the blessing. He tricks Laban out of his flocks by choosing on the speckled and spotted. And because of this, God blessed him. Jacob is righteous, and Laban is the deceiver.

And so Jacob said, to Laban:

³⁸These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. ³⁹That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. ⁴⁰There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. ⁴¹Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. ⁴²Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night."

Jacob's point here is that his righteousness consisted of being abused, defrauded, and having bearing the loss of his own flock

when Laban's flocks were attacked. He bore in his body the harshness of the Sun by Day and the frost by night, and Laban deceived him in the matter of Leah and Rachel and he also changed his wages 10 times. And how did Jacob respond? He took it. He bore the brunt of Laban's evil heart, and did not complain, but entrusted himself to God, who judges justly.

So after that, Jacob and Laban make a covenant that they will leave each other alone, and Jacob proceeds going back to the land. As he was going, he realized that he was entering into Esau's territory, he starts to get worried. Esau of course has become a mighty man and was riding out to meet Jacob with 400 men. I don't think this was a welcoming party. He was probably ready to fight against Jacob with his own private army.

Jacob used his wisdom and considered what kind of man Esau was, a materialistic sort of fellow, so he sought to appease the wrath of Esau by giving him as a present 20 female goats and 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 milking cows and their calves, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys. And he sent each drove by itself to Esau, and he instructed his servants that when they came to Esau and he asked "What is the meaning of this?" They were to say, "these belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present to my lord Esau." Drove by drove they did this, for Jacob thought, "Perhaps I may appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I shall see his face."

Notice, Jacob didn't meet force with force. Jacob met force with grace. Jacob met hostility with kindness. Jacob met wrath with peace. And met violence with presents. This is the way we wrestle

with man by wrestling with God, when we seek to walk in the ways of the Lord, who teaches us:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To the one who strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the other also, and from the one who takes your cloak, give to him your tunic. Do this and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful.

Likewise Paul says in Romans 12 –

Repay no one evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore

*“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
If he is thirsty, give him a drink;
For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”*

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

And as James 3 says:

¹³*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. ¹⁷But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

It is therefore after this scene in Genesis when Esau received all these gifts in answer to his wrath, that a man comes to wrestle with Jacob in the middle of the night. Now if you were Jacob, who would you think it was coming to wrestle with you and attack you. Probably Esau. Or maybe even Laban who broke his covenant and came to attack Jacob and take what he perceived to be his flocks and children back. But it wasn't Esau or Laban that Jacob wrestled with, it was God.

And this is an important point, people of God. As we reflect back on Jacob's life, it wasn't even really men that Jacob wrestled with in the person of his father Isaac, and his brother Jacob, and his uncle Laban. It was God the whole time. Because the greatest battle that we have to wrestle is the one inside of us with God, whether we choose to strive with spirit against the flesh, or with the flesh against the spirit.

And the difficult people that God brings into your life are God's agent of transformation and growth for you. These are God's wrestling partners he sends to you. You are either going to wrestle with God according to His ways, and walk by faith and humility, and patience and prayer, and love and kindness and, mercy, or you are going to cast off the Spirit and fight the flesh with the flesh and in the process lose your soul.

Many times we have to wrestle with people throughout our lives. Difficult brothers, nasty sisters, disapproving fathers, harsh mothers, greedy uncles, mean husbands, manipulating wives, lying and malicious names on the internet. Principalities and powers in Heavenly places. But the question you need to answer is, who are you really wrestling with? Who are you really fighting against? God

or man? And how are you going to fight? Because this determines if you receive the blessing of God or not.

When we are not wrestling with God, we are tempted to fight with men as men, and that means we fight with fire. Or more precisely, flesh with flesh. If a person slaps you on the right cheek, you slap them back. A person insults you, you insult them back. Your husband is harsh so you speak harshly back to him. Your wife treats you with disrespect so you disrespect her in return. Your children are rude, so you insult them and punish them in anger. Your father doesn't show you the approval you desire, so you get mad and throw things at him. Your son doesn't put forth his full potential so you get angry with him and yell at him and call him names, wishing he was some other way. Students aren't reaching the standard that you set up for them to meet, and so you guilt manipulate and insult and embarrass them in order to get your way.

All these are ways in which we wrestle with man as man does, in your own sinful and self-centered ways and according to the flesh. But what will it take for you to understand that you are not wrestling merely with other people, you are not striving with man as man, but you are wrestling with God in the form of man?

For if you recognize that you are wrestling with God, and not man, then you also should recognize that you can only overcome God when you wrestle with him in his ways, chiefly, by humility, and faith, and patience, and much prayer, and in love and mercy, and compassion. These are the weapons of our warfare. We fight against the strong God and win when we come to him in the weakness of humble faith and patience and prayer, calling upon

God to fix the situation and change people's hearts as we serve them in love and mercy and kindness and gentleness and lowliness of spirit.

Jacob can't change his father Isaac by screaming God's word of promise at him. Jacob can't change Esau by matching force for force. Jacob can't change who Laban was by pitching a fit every time he unjustly changed his wages, or even when he gave him Leah instead of Rachel.

The point is, that if we try to fight back against the evils that attack us by adopting their same evil tactics against them, none of that is going to work. The only way we can prevail against the Esau's of life is if we spend time wrestling with God as Jacob did, with humility, and patience, and prayer.

The Canaanite woman in our gospel lesson likewise wrestles with Jesus in this way. She comes out to find Jesus, and she was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." Right away she came to Jesus in humility, calling him Lord. But Jesus ignores her cries.

Have you ever cried out to God only to have him ignore you? Don't give up. You have to wrestle with God to receive the blessing you seek.

So she cries out more after the disciples until the disciples had enough and they too begged Jesus to help her. If your prayers aren't being effective, then recruit others to pray with you. But Jesus only gives another reason why he can't help her, saying: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But even that didn't dissuade her. So she came and fell before and begged him, "Lord, help me." And Jesus again refuses her saying,

“It is not right to give the children’s bread to the little household dogs.” But she said, “Yes Lord, yet even the little dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from the masters table.” And here she humbles herself even more, acknowledging that as a Canaanite she is nothing but a household dog in the house of faith of Israel. But Jesus is the Master of the house, and surely he can allow her to eat some of the scraps that fall off the table to the ground. And then Jesus said, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as your desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

And Jacob also prevailed and received the blessing of God because he submitted to God and sought his will in everything. Jacob was a righteous man. He was blameless. He came to God in prayer and he gave his concerns over to God, and he himself worried about how to attain the blessing of God. And he received it in God’s way, by humility, patience, and prayer, and faith, and mercy.

Now when you wrestle with God in prayer for a long enough time, don’t be surprised when God injures you. The seed of the woman walks with a limp because he bruised his heel. But his heel bruise happened when he crushed the serpents head. The Church likewise walks with a limp throughout history, being injured from the battle that we do with the devil. But God is the one who puts Satan under our feet, when we carry our crosses, and die to ourselves, and seek the ways of humility, and patience, and prayer, and faith.

Israel is formed by struggle, by wrestling with God and man, being touched by God and broken and injured, and still maintaining his righteousness and thus seeking the blessing of God. Thus Jesus says, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed*

are the meek, Blessed are the pure in heart, Blessed are the peacemakers, Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. And blessed are you when other revile, and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in Heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

If you want to be blessed, then expect to be broken and injured by God in the process. For only broken people who have suffered for righteousness' sake can know truly of the wholeness and blessing that comes from God as a result of such divine encounters.

Indeed God is the one who tests our faith in these wrestling matches with men. But it is God who we wrestle with, in order that we be refined and strengthened. *For tribulation produces perseverance; perseverance produces character; character produces hope. And hope in Christ does not disappoint.* (Rom. 5:1-5).

So wrestle with God, and don't let go, and God will bless you, so long as your wrestling is in submission to His will and ways, by humility, and patience, and prayers of faith and acts of loving kindness and mercy. Amen.