

# “Little White Lies”

Genesis 27: 1-24

A Sermon for Rally Day 2006



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*In Boston, a minister noticed a group of boys standing around a small stray dog. “What are you doing, boys?” he asked. “Telling lies.” one of them replied. “The one who tells the biggest lie gets to keep this dog.” The minister was shocked and said to them, “When I was your age, I would never have thought of telling a lie.” The boys looked at each other, seemingly a little disappointed. Finally one shrugged, pointed at the minister, and said, “I guess he wins the dog.”*

I’ve entitled the sermon for this morning, “Little White Lies,” in conjunction with the next unit for our children’s Sunday School emphasis on “Truthfulness and Honesty.”

According to a USA Today poll, 91% of Americans lie routinely.

- 36% of those tell dark, important lies
- 86% lie regularly to their parents
- 75% lie to friends
- 73% lie to siblings
- 69% lie to spouses
- 81% lie about feelings
- 43% lie about income
- 40% lie about sex
- 20% can’t get through a single day with out telling at least one little white lie.

One thing for sure, most little white lies aren’t really little, and the only thing little is what becomes of people who tell them.

Enter the four characters of our scripture lesson. First is Isaac whose name means “laughter,” because his parents laughed when they were told Sarah would give birth to him at the tender age of 90. Clearly, the laugh is on him in this story, and believe me they’re not laughing with him, they’re laughing at him. His wife is named Rebekah, which means “noose” and the adjective attached to that word is “captivating.” She was clearly a very attractive and bright lady, and she clearly is the one who creates the snare, the trap in this story. Then there is Esau, the first born of twins. His name literally means “redhead,” though a closer look at his earlier years would tempt you to call him “deadhead.” He is the one who just two chapters earlier sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. He was pure brawn, a rugged man’s man – a hunter, and an athlete. Esau and father Isaac were very close. Then there is Jacob, the younger of the twins who was so named because he was holding on to the foot of his older brother when they were born. Jacob literally means “grabber” or “trickster,” and how he lived up to that name. He preferred to watch the flocks around home, the “brains” of the bunch, and a mama’s boy of the first order.

Isaac loses his sight, which makes him think of his own mortality. He would actually live another 60 or 70 years, but his affliction makes him think of the blessing that he would pass on to his children. Generally,

such a special time would be done with all the family present and blessings would be pronounced on each one. When Jacob does this in the end of Genesis, he blesses all twelve of his sons. But Isaac only wishes to bless Esau. This goes all over Rebekah, who has continually had to fight for Jacob with his father. Besides, Esau has not made the wisest choices in life, including marriage to non-Jewish wives who were constantly a source of family conflict. Unwise, foolish. The apple didn't fall far from dad's tree. There used to be an old game show called, "What Would You Do For Money?" Some might wear an idiotic costume or do a gross stunt – witness the many episodes of "Fear Factor." Others will choose to do unnecessary risks. But the question of the morning is "Would you lie for money?" Many do lie for money – about themselves, about other people, and about situations.

*Several years ago, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey ran a help-wanted ad for electricians with expertise at using Sontag connectors. The response they got was interesting. They received 170 applications from people claiming they had expertise with Sontag connectors, even though there is no such thing. The Authority had run the ad to find out how many applicants falsify résumés. And as someone said, the closest any of us will come to perfection is our résumés. (Leadership, Vol. 15.1)*

Money is at the very center of this deception. With Isaac's blessing, deadhead Esau would be given the role as executor of his estate, the control of his affairs and get twice the value of his estate as his twin brother. Rebekah and Jacob choose to lie for money, possibly lots of it. The family of Abraham became powerful and rich and we know that both Jacob and Esau did very well for themselves financially.

The plot by Rebekah and Jacob is comically ridiculous. Jacob is to disguise himself as his twin brother, who he was nothing like. They were fraternal, not identical twins. Esau has a gruff voice, while Jacob's is more gentle. Esau is hairy and Jacob is smooth-skinned. Jacob, in contrast to the requested hunting expedition, goes to his father's own flock of goats and brings two to be prepared by his mother. That way he will get the blessing of his father before Esau returns. The "wild game" (actually domesticated goats) will be prepared just like Isaac likes it – and he never knows the difference. Jacob will be wearing Esau's finest clothes and will smell just like him. Now to make him hairy, Rebekah covers Jacob's arms with goat skin, yes goat skin.

It's time to execute. Jacob presents his gift, trying to disguise his voice, "Father, I have prepared what I have hunted especially for you – only the best for you, dad." "You have been very quick today." And Jacob replies, "The LORD your God gave me success." Lying in the name of God. It doesn't get any lower than that...or more common. "Bring it to me," says Esau. "Son, this is a very special time in your life. Come closer, let me touch you." Jacob reluctantly does so, knowing that this will probably never work. Esau says, as he touches the goat skin, "Yes, these are the hairy arms of Esau, but the voice sounds more like Jacob. Are you really Esau?" Is Esau really fooled, or has he figured it all out? That would explain why he doesn't repeal the blessing later. Surely he knows the family fortune would never be secure in the hands of Esau. We'll never know. Isaac smells Esau's clothes and determines that this is indeed his eldest son. He gives Jacob the blessing of his older brother, and with it the wealth and power of the family.

But the consequences of lying and deception are always bigger than we think. Ask the folks of Enron. Ask the Oklahoma Sooners, as they develop a new quarterback. Esau returns with the prize of his hunting expedition, specially prepared. Things have not been so good, lately. Maybe things are beginning to turn around. He is shocked to discover that the meal has already been had and the blessing has already been given. He cries out, "He deceived you, Dad. I'm the one who deserves the blessing." Isaac refuses. Then Isaac says, "Well, at least bless me, too." Again, Isaac refuses. He cries out bitterly saying to his younger brother, "No wonder we call you Jacob – the grabber, the deceiver." Esau swears revenge upon his brother. So now the price paid becomes Rebekah's. She sends her son off "for a little while" to brother Laban. That little while would be twenty years, during which time Rebekah dies without ever seeing her favorite son. The price of lying is high.

Isaac recovers from it. Esau bounces back, too. But what about Jacob? He runs to uncle Laban and on the way, at Bethel, he has a vision of a ladder going up to heaven. He has an experience of God, but it doesn't take. While he is in exile, he is deceived by brother Laban, and then Jacob counter-deceives. In the end he runs for his life from Laban just as he had done with his twin brother. Clearly, his whole life became a lie. How true it is that little white lies lead to bigger ones until our lives become a huge deception. Sir Walter Scott was right when he wrote, "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

Yes, everybody lies. But somewhere our lies find us out and we're left with nowhere to turn. It's in that very moment that we bump up against the end of ourselves and the beginning of God. When Jesus met the woman at the well in John 4, she claimed to have no husband. Jesus told her she had five husbands and the one she was with now was not her husband. He then offered her living water. When Peter lied about knowing Christ, in John 21, Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love me?" Why three times? Three times Peter had denied him. Three times he had lied. Jesus was inviting him to come clean so that he could begin again as his disciple. That one is interesting because Peter was already a follower. Sometimes we can gather as the church and be a liars' club, pretending that we are people that have it all together, who live no lies. We play the game and inside we are broken and trapped. Jesus said, "**You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.**"

I am not here this morning to scold us all for lying. Nor am I inviting you to make a commitment today to be a more honest person. We lie for reasons: because we are afraid of being rejected, because we doubt that God will take care of us, because we don't like who we are or what we have done. We lie to get ahead, because we think that's the only way to get there. The truth is not just in the facts. The truth is in an encounter with God in Jesus Christ who said he was and still is "**the way, the truth, and the life.**"

In the end, for Jacob, there was only one way out. It happens in Genesis 32, when Jacob finally has it out with God. He has a wrestling match with God about who he had been: the fraud, the manipulator, the grabber. He finally surrenders to God and God gives him a new name, Israel. The answer for Jacob was not just getting a new beginning, but becoming a new person. Jacob starts over and he is able to reconcile with his brother Esau and discover love that is manipulation-free and lie-free. That's the gift that God has for you this morning. You can come clean and be forgiven. You can know the truth and be set free. You can become a whole new person by the grace and love of God. Why not today? Why not right now?