

“Lift Up Your Eyes,” Genesis 13:1-18 (Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 16, 2018)

So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. ³ And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴ to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD. ⁵ And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, ⁶ so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, ⁷ and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land.

⁸ Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.” ¹⁰ And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹ So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. ¹² Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. ¹³ Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

¹⁴ The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵ for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷ Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.” ¹⁸ So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD.

PRAY

Today we continue our study on the life of Abraham. Abraham is known in the Bible as a man of faith. But, as we’ll see this morning, Abraham was far from being a man of perfect faith. The man had huge lapses in his faith. We’ll look at one of those lapses this morning.

But what I want us to see is the times where Abraham demonstrated a lack of faith serve as good news for us. Abraham ultimately was not blessed by God because he was so faithful. Abraham was blessed by God because God is so gracious.

Grace is what we’ll talk about this morning. What exactly does the word “grace” mean? I don’t assume everyone knows what it means because I was 22 years old when I first understood the word. Grace means “unmerited favor.” It means you get blessing and you get love even though you’ve done nothing to deserve it. It means you get it even when you’ve actually done a lot to deserve the opposite.

Abraham in our text for today receives grace, and my prayer this morning is that through Abraham's story you'll see how you can receive grace too. First, how God deals graciously with us. Second, how God's grace changes us.

First, how God deals graciously with us. Back in the summer, when I put together our fall preaching schedule, I messed up. I didn't realize how much the events of Genesis 13 (our text for today) builds on the end of Genesis 12. My sermon text for today should have included verses 10-20 of that chapter.

So, I messed up – but I'll try and remedy my mistake by reading those verses now – and even though at this point in the narrative Abraham is referred to as “Abram” and Sarah his wife is referred to as “Sarai,” in my sermon I'm going to call them Abraham and Sarah: “Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, ‘I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife.” Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.’ ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶ And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh called Abram and said, ‘What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, “She is my sister,” so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go.’ ²⁰ And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.” Genesis 12:10-20.

Abraham did two things to demonstrate a lack of faith: first, he fled from Canaan, the land promised him by God, because he lacked faith in God's provision during a time of famine. Now that's an understandable lapse in faith.

But then there is this nauseating business with Sarah and Pharaoh. The only way to describe what Abraham did with Sarah is that Abraham acted cowardly. He wanted only to save his own neck. From verse 15 and because of a similar event in Genesis 20 we can be sure that Pharaoh and Sarah had a sexual relationship. To use modern terms, Abraham engaged in sex trafficking with his wife. We can't overemphasize how bad this was.

Now this teaches us a couple of things: first, the Bible does not whitewash the past. The biblical authors are willing to show us the patriarchs like Abraham at their worst. The Bible shows us that the “heroes of the faith” were often anything but heroic, and because the Bible shows us it is evidence of the Bible's trustworthiness and reliability as a historical document. Think about it: if you're trying to make up a religion, you'd never have the founder of your faith doing anything like this. The only explanation for why this story is in the Bible is that it actually happened.

But, more importantly, *this passage gives us insight into God's character*. Abraham doubted God's ability to protect him from famine and Pharaoh, so Abraham took matters into his own hands: he fled to Egypt and he surrendered his wife. That could not have pleased the Lord, so you'd expect him to smite and punish Abraham for his lack of faith.

But that's not what God does. Instead, he blessed Abraham as he left Egypt and returned to Canaan. This is Genesis 13:2: "Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold." We expect God to curse Abraham for his faithlessness but, instead, God blesses him – he not only gets him out of Egypt and back home but God makes him rich. ***And that's grace***. Abraham gets not what he absolutely deserves (punishment) but what he does not deserve (blessing).

So many people think of God of the Bible primarily as someone who has made a bunch of rules that he expects us to keep and he is just waiting for us to slip up. The lightning bolts are in his hand and he's ready in a moment to hurl them down at us.

But he's not like that at all. I love Matthew 7:9-11 where Jesus says, "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

If you've got kids, you don't give them presents only when they deserve it, do you? On their birthday, at Christmas, and probably many times in between they get gifts from you whether they deserve them or not, whether they've been obedient or not. And that's not even including all the housing and clothing and feeding and transportation they get all the time!

And Jesus says, "Do not dare think a human father is ever more loving or kind than the heavenly Father. You do not honor the Father in heaven when you are constantly looking over your shoulder wondering if God is going to smack you for messing up, because God deals with you according to his grace."

There is a prominent, evangelical pastor in the United States who has made a lot of headlines over the last few months because he says Christians need to unhitch themselves from the Old Testament. Basically he says we don't need to use the Old Testament anymore in the church, because it paints this picture of a God who just smites people and is quick to curse.

This pastor misunderstands the story of Abraham. Abraham deserved a curse but he received blessing. And he obviously doesn't understand Psalm 103, where we read, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him." Psalm 103:8-13.

Here's the thing you must know about the God of the Bible (the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments): he loves to show us grace. And because it is grace, because by definition it is

unmerited favor, unearned favor, undeserved favor, *it literally does not matter what you do or don't do. It doesn't matter whether you've always been faithful in trusting and obeying his commands or not. It has to be that way, or else God is not dealing with us by his grace. If it does matter how we obey before God will bless us, then it's not by grace anymore, is it? It would be salvation by keeping the law.* God relates to us by sheer, sovereign grace – *no ifs, ands, or buts. Full stop.* Either God's grace is good news for everyone, no matter what they've done or haven't done, even sex traffickers, or it's not good news for anyone.

Now, a lot of us are afraid that if the Bible teaches that then people will be encouraged to live however they want to live. God deals with me by grace, they'll say, so I can do whatever I want. They're nervous that some people will hear that and think, "I like sinning, God likes showing me grace – this is a perfect arrangement," and try and take advantage of God's grace.

That's an understandable fear. We all know people we feel like were spoiled by their parents and now they are brats and don't respect their parents at all. Is that what teaching grace like this – God loves you without conditions – will do in the church?

Second, how God's grace changes us. We read in Genesis 13:5-7 that, as a result of all the grace God has shown Abraham, he's so rich that he's got a problem: there isn't enough land to support both his flocks and Lot's flocks. Abraham and Lot have to split up. They can't live together anymore. And remember, this is the land that God has already promised Abraham.

Now Abraham had, just a few months earlier, acted incredibly selfishly. So you'd expect Abraham came to Lot and said, "Nephew, we have a problem. This land, which belongs to me, is not big enough for both of us. You have to go. You're not taking my land."

That's not what Abraham did. "Then Abram said to Lot, 'Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. ⁹Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.' ¹⁰And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other.'" Genesis 13:8-11.

Abraham had the land by promise, Abraham had the land by virtue of culture because he was the elder so he had the priority, yet he gave Lot the first choice. Selfish, faithless Abraham of chapter twelve is replaced by gracious, faithful Abraham in chapter thirteen.

But what, according to the text, is the only difference, the only change, between the Abraham of chapter twelve and chapter thirteen? *The only difference is that God blessed Abraham.* He showed him unmerited favor, or grace, and it changed him.

Friends, you must know this: ***only grace can change the heart.*** Nothing else will. The law certainly won't. Punishment won't. And I can prove it to you.

We are born legalists, and that means we are born applying the law to the people around us. We have an overdeveloped sense of fairness about what we deserve.

For example: say there are two four year olds, Timmy and Johnny, fighting over a toy. They both think they should be able to play with it. But Timmy has it and won't let it go.

Finally, an authority figure, a mom, steps in and says, "Timmy, you've had it long enough. Give Johnny a turn." Timmy says, "No." And the mom says, "Timmy, if you don't, I'm taking the toy from you and putting you in timeout." So Timmy gives the toy to Johnny but he is not happy about it. What does Timmy say? He says to his mom, "That's ... not" what? "Fair!" What happened? With her use of the law and threat of punishment the mommy changed Timmy's behavior but she didn't touched his heart.

You can change behavior through the law and threat of punishment. God could have appeared to Abraham and said, "Abraham, you ought to be ashamed if you don't give Lot the first choice of the land," and Abraham probably would have done it. Or God could have appeared and said, "Abraham, if you don't give Lot the first choice of the land I'll kill you," and Abraham certainly would have done it. But Abraham's heart would not have been changed.

Yet Abraham experienced God's grace, and because he did Abraham was changed and he wanted to offer the land to Lot. God didn't have to force Abraham – ***Abraham was transformed because of grace.***

One of my favorite stories of grace in all of literature is found in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. In the winter of 1795, a hard, cold winter, Jean Valjean stole some bread out of a bakery by breaking a window. He did it to feed his sister and her children. The police catch him and he ends up serving nineteen years in prison for it.

His years in prison have made him a hardened, embittered, and violent man. When Valjean is released, he has no money, no food, no shelter. He winds up in a small town and the only person who will take him in is the bishop of the local diocese. The bishop trusts Valjean, feeds him, and gives him a bed for the night. But Valjean is so angered by life that he waits until the bishop goes to sleep, steals his silverware and silver plates, and runs into the night.

The next morning the bishop comes to his door and finds three policeman holding Valjean. They caught him with the silver. But the bishop doesn't miss a beat. He says, "Valjean, you took my silverware and silver plates, but you forgot my silver candlesticks. Why did you leave them? They are yours, too."

The police look at each other confused, and say, "You mean this man didn't steal from you? He was telling the truth when he said you gave them to him? He looked so guilty." But they have no case after the bishop spoke, so they leave.

Then the bishop says to Valjean, "Do not forget, do not ever forget, that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man." Then the book says, "Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The bishop had

emphasized the words when he uttered them. He resumed with solemnity: ‘Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.’” And Jean Valjean, for the rest of the book, is transformed from a violent, angry man into a loving, generous man.

Likewise, friends, do you know that Jesus Christ has bought your soul? The Bible says we are **dead in our transgressions and sins**. There is no spiritual life in us at all that pleases God. Even our best deeds and kindest thoughts are to some degree mixed up with sinful motives.

Yet in Ephesians 2:4-5 we read this: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved ...”

In Jesus Christ, God shows you grace. He gives you spiritual life in your soul. He changes your heart and makes it possible for you to change.

I said earlier that God’s grace is offered you no ifs, ands, or buts. But one thing must be true of you before God’s grace can do its work in you. **You have to know that you desperately need to change**. If you refuse to admit what a wreck you are and insist everything wrong in your life is someone else’s fault, God will give you over to your sins and allow you to reject him.

But if you know you’re a mess and if you acknowledge your selfish, legalistic heart, Jesus will give you life. He’ll show you mercy after mercy after mercy and will fight every minute of every day to provide you everlasting joy. As one of my favorite hymns puts it: “All the fitness God requires is that you feel your need of him.”

And if you receive God’s grace, *you will be changed because it can’t be helped*. No one touched by the grace of God can walk away unaffected. You just can’t keep living the way you were, because God’s grace is the most powerful force in the universe. **It raises the dead**.

This get us back to our earlier question: will we take advantage of God’s grace and continue to sin? *Absolutely we will*. In this life, we can’t help it. It’s not right but we will continue to sin.

But that doesn’t mean God’s grace isn’t changing us. When you become a Christian and grace makes sense to you it does not mean you suddenly get rid of all your sins. *It does mean you become aware of your sins*. Before you become a Christian your sins aren’t big deals – everyone else, they’re the problem. After you become a Christian, though, you are more conscious of your flaws and shortcomings. The log in your eye is bigger than the speck in your brother. One of the biggest signs God’s grace is working in your life is that you begin to hate your sins more than you hate the sins of the people around you.

And once you’ve experienced God’s grace in Jesus Christ the way you make progress out of your sins is not fear or guilt: fear that God will get you and will punish you, or guilt over how horrible you are. **Grace means fear and guilt are no longer part of the equation**.

Instead, you change by looking at the promises offered you by God's grace. That's how Abraham changed. Genesis 13:14-15: "14 The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, 15 for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever."

Do you want to change? Do you want to stop being so selfish, anxious, angry, and lustful all the time? Then lift up your eyes and see what you deserve – just like Abraham in Egypt, we deserve punishment. We don't deserve blessing from God. Then lift up your eyes and see Jesus – on the cross, taking the punishment you deserve. Then lift up your eyes one more time and see Jesus – raised from the dead, securing all the blessings of God for you, guaranteeing that no matter what happens, just like Abraham, God has promised to always love you and take care for you.

Can you lift up your eyes and see all that? The more you do, the more you'll change, because *only grace changes the heart.*

More than fifty years ago Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached a sermon where he pointed out that the apostle Paul had opponents who said he was too radical in his preaching of grace, that it was only going to encourage people to sin. It was a sermon on Romans 6:1-2, one of those texts where Paul was defending himself against those accusations. In his sermon Dr. Lloyd-Jones said this: "I would say to all preachers: If your preaching of salvation has not been misunderstood in that way, then you had better examine your sermons again, and you had better make sure that you really are preaching the salvation that is offered in the New Testament to the ungodly, to the sinner, to those who are dead in trespasses and sins, to those who are enemies of God. There is this kind of dangerous element about the true presentation of the doctrine of salvation."

My friends, when you try to explain the gospel to other people, do they misunderstand you like that? Maybe some of you have misunderstood me this morning as saying that grace means the law shouldn't punish those who commit crimes, or parents shouldn't discipline children, or bosses can never fire employees, or we shouldn't have healthy boundaries in relationships. That's not what I mean, those things must happen in a fallen world, but did you misunderstand me as saying that? Good – you must if I'm going to preach the gospel rightly. You've got to risk the misunderstanding.

Even more importantly: when you think of the gospel yourself, are you tempted to misunderstand it like that and try and take advantage of God and keep sinning in some ways because he is so gracious? Friends, if that thought never tempts you then I don't think you really understand the gospel. **The God of the Bible is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he does not treat us as our sins deserve.** He loves to show us grace. Lift up your eyes and see how much God loves you. PRAY