

A Godly Man

Genesis 21:22-34

I have a great concern for our country. For our rulers, even our president. I have a great concern for those who influence our culture, including many in the media. I have a concern for the whole of our culture, a concern focused upon the absence of truth and truthfulness. A negligence of truthfulness. A carelessness with regard to the truth. And sadly, all too often, that concern is for the visible church as well. It is the willingness to disregard the absolute sanctity of truth.

We live in a society that has said, “Lying doesn’t matter.” And for me, that is absolutely astounding. Truth does matter. Truthfulness matters. Both in public and in private. And in a very positive sense, our text this morning is about a godly man, a man whose word could be trusted, and therefore a worthy leader. Actually, as far as we can tell, there are two godly men here. Nothing bad is said about Abimelech, but the main character is Abraham, who no longer falls into the sins we’ve studied in previous weeks. He is, from here on out, presented as a godly man who lived by faith. And his example for us is that,

I. A GODLY MAN SHOULD BE KNOWN FOR THE TRUTHFULNESS OF HIS WORD.

This is a specific historical event, related to the events of chapter 20, referring to King Abimelech, the King of Gerar. Remember that in that chapter, it was Abraham who lied to Abimelech about the identity of his wife Sarah. And despite Abraham’s excuses, Abimelech responded graciously to Abraham, restoring his wife to him, giving him a bounty of animals and slaves, and even giving him land of his own choice.

In our text today, Abimelech asks Abraham to make a promise.

A very significant promise. A promise of peace. A treaty. A pact non-aggression.

v.23a

Abimelech is asking for a promise, an oath. And he has every expectation that Abraham would keep his word. Such a reputation for truthfulness must be the aim of any godly person. According to the prescription of the eighth commandment, truth is sacred. God’s law establishes the sanctity of truth. A man’s name should be his word, and his word should be his honor.

Abraham was such a man. Abimelech came asking for an oath, a promise. Abraham granted his request.

v.24

Specifically,

A. An oath of kindness must be kept.

This request was for kindness. It was a good thing to seek.

v.23

Remember Abimelech’s kindness to Abraham, recorded in,

Gen. 20:14 “Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. 15 And Abimelech said, “My land is before you; live wherever you like.” 16 To Sarah he said, “I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.”

Abimelech’s request was easy to understand. It would be unfair to say that it was selfish, for we ought always to have the expectation of kindness from one another. And it isn’t wrong to ask for it.

Abraham binds himself by the word of his promise to show that kindness. And he does so in a very significant way, by oath. That is, he promises “by God,” according to verse 23. He promises “with God as my witness.” He promises, as we are called upon to do in courts of law, “So help me God.”

v.23 “Now therefore, swear to me by God...”

B. An oath in God’s name must be kept.

But just a quick word about oaths, since the question should be asked, “Are oaths appropriate in the first place?” After all, Jesus specifically says,

Matt. 5:33 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ 34 But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”

Yet our Confession of Faith says that in matters which are weighty and momentous, “an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the new testament as well as under the old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority in such matters, ought to be taken.” Certainly, our Confession is not disagreeing with Jesus!

Jesus is rebuking the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who are in the habit of taking oaths vainly, carelessly, swearing by heaven or by earth, by the king or by their own head. And Jesus says, “Don’t take such foolish oaths. Let you yes be yes and no be no.”

But Jesus doesn’t forbid true occasions for oath-taking, when the oath is taken in God’s name, when you solemnly call God to

witness what you are asserting or what you are promising, and to judge you according to the truth or falsehood of what you swear. In our situation, that means oaths in courts of law, oaths entering the military or some civilian positions of authority, oaths to establish a marriage relationship, and oaths to publicly profess faith in establishing church membership or ordination to office in the church.

But when you take an oath, since you call upon God as your witness to judge your truthfulness, you must keep your word. An oath in God’s name must be kept.

And there was a further context for this promise of Abraham. It was given in the context of a covenant. A covenant between two men. And,

C. An oath confirmed by covenant must be kept.

Note the elements of the covenant ceremony, most especially animals which, as we’ve studied, were cut into two to symbolize the curse of the covenant. Those entering the covenant would walk between the two pieces of cut animals, accepting upon themselves the same fate as those animals if they were found to be covenant breakers.

v.27

And skipping to,

v.32

The treaty was a covenant, and our English translations ought to use that word specifically. This was a covenant, a bond in blood, established here between Abraham and Abimelech. And Abraham adds an element of his own, to further emphasize the necessity of covenant faithfulness and truthfulness.

v.28-31

Seven animals were separated out, seven ewe lambs from the flock. They were given by Abraham to Abimelech as a testimony, a witness. They were a goodwill gift, a living proof of Abraham's good intentions, magnifying the truthfulness of his word. He would, indeed, show kindness to Abimelech. The oath was confirmed by this giving of seven, seven lambs. In fact, oaths in that day were often given before seven witnesses.

And all of that is confirmed by the name of the place, the name which they gave to the place. The name Beersheba. We read in verse 25 about he a dispute between the men was the ownership of this particular well, and the Hebrew word for well is the word "beer." The first half of the name Beersheba. And the word sheba can actually mean two different things. The same word has two very different meanings. One is oath. And the other is the number seven. Notice how those ideas are combined here.

So Beersheba means either the "well of seven," meaning a treaty confirmed by the gift of seven. Or it means the "well of an oath," meaning the place the oath was taken. Actually, I believe it means both. It was the well of the oath of seven. And the point of it all was truthfulness!

The application is so plain. Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no. At all times. And in times of great importance, let your oaths be taken in God's name, and keep them. Thus we always need to beware of the dangers all around us which undermine the sanctity of the truth. So beware of the ways in which you yourself might be tempted to compromise. A godly man should be known for the truthfulness of his word. Secondly,

II. A GODLY MAN SHOULD BE QUICK TO RESOLVE DISAGREEMENTS.

The context here was disagreement. Conflict. A problem. I've already alluded to the issue of contention, which was ownership of this particular well.

v.25

Immediately after Abraham swore an oath to Abimelech, he raised this issue directly, giving us the wise example that,

A. Personal offenses must be addressed.

This is so different from the attitude so common today. Personal offenses must be ignored, we are told, so that we don't make the situation worse. Resolving conflict is such a difficult thing, to be sure, and such a challenging thing to do well. But the first principle of conflict resolution is to address the issue directly. The point is, issues need to be discussed. Conflicts need to be addressed. Not ignored. And most especially, sin needs to be identified.

Abraham did precisely that, with no anger, no temper, no accusations or harsh language. He didn't yell, he wasn't sarcastic, and he wasn't authoritarian or self-righteous. He just brought the issue up for a forthright response. Abimelech's servants had seized a well which he had dug and which belonged to him.

How did Abimelech respond? Exactly how he should have. He made it right. Abimelech was personally unaware of what happened, though the context of the treaty proves that he gave Abraham assurances that the well would be returned. Abimelech didn't offer excuses, and his response satisfied Abraham so much so that the two entered into a treaty, more precisely a covenant.

v.26-27

The point is that,

B. Personal offenses must be resolved.

And they won't be resolved unless they are addressed.

Now, I should say that often, in the closest of relationships, a great many personal offenses are overlooked, covered. Scripture teaches that love covers a multitude of sins, and a sin covered means a sin forgiven. There are occasions when you might, in love, choose not to hold an offense against someone. In that sense, you unilaterally grant forgiveness, that is to say, promising yourself never to bring up the issue again. Most small offenses would be covered by love, particularly within a marriage or family.

Yet in love, you must not keep a record of wrongs. Many people fail to confront a particular conflict, but don't rid themselves of it, either. That is, they keep that record of wrongs, and when the list finally gets long enough, or when a more substantial conflict arises, out comes the whole list. Many marriages have been ruined by just such a pattern, which is a failure to realize that by God's definition, love does not keep a record of wrongs. Therefore, you either have to grant unilateral forgiveness, or you must address the issue directly.

A couple of NT exhortations in line with Abraham's example, first,

Gal. 6:1 "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

To carry each other's burdens is to confront someone in their sin in order to bring them to repentance and restoration.

Likewise,

Matt. 18:15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and

tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." That's the first step of conflict management. Go to the one who has sinned against you. Don't go to someone else, for that would be gossip. Don't let it stew inside of you silently, for that would be the root of bitterness. Instead, go to the person yourself so that the conflict can be resolved.

However, I want to be careful here not to be merely moralistic. By that I mean, the point of this story is not merely to convey a moral lesson. I don't want to read this account, explain the events that happened, and then pronounce the moral of the story. Yet to a certain degree, that is exactly what I have done so far. So let's raise our eyes a bit, so that they aren't focused upon Abraham nor upon Abimelech. Let's think about God directly.

Actually, the passage begins with reference to God and it ends with reference to God. Abraham is introduced here not merely as a man who kept his word. Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of the Philistine army, didn't come to Abraham to make this treaty because he was a good and honest man. In fact, amazingly, Abimelech is so directly aware of Abraham's previous propensity to lie!

But what does Abimelech say of Abraham?

v.22

What a glorious reputation! One which we should all wish for. How good it would be for you if people could look at you and look at your life and conclude that “God is with you in everything you do.” How good that would be for us as a church!

How does Abimelech know that about Abraham? He certainly has to remember how God answered Abraham’s prayers on his behalf.

Gen. 20:17. “Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants. Then they bore children; 18 for the LORD had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.”

Indeed, through Abimelech’s example, we see that neighboring kings were concerned about retaining Abraham’s good will, for if God was with him, they would be in great danger if they should be against him. We’ll see virtually the same recognition with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. God was with them. They were, of course, the chosen representatives in the line of God’s covenant, so naturally he would be with them. And ultimately, that God would be with a man is a testimony of God’s sovereign grace, for none of us deserve such an honor.

But I don’t think that the emphasis here is on God’s choice to walk with Abraham, but rather upon Abraham’s faithfulness to walk with God. Abimelech’s description of Abraham is of great honor. Nothing greater could be said of any of us! “God is with you in all that you do.”

Indeed,

III.A GODLY MAN SHOULD GAIN A REPUTATION WHICH IS FOCUSED UPON GOD.

Remember the description of Enoch?

Gen. 5:21 Enoch lived sixty-five years, and begot Methuselah. 22 After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years, and had sons and daughters. 23 So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. 24 And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.”

And Noah?

Gen. 6:9 “This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God.”

Similarly, seen from the eyes of Abimelech and Phicol,

A. Abraham was a man known to walk with God.

The focus of his life was upon God, that is, he walked by faith.

Hebr. 11:8 “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Abraham lived with his eyes fixed upon God, not fixed upon the things of this world. He was not looking for the physical comfort and satisfaction of the things of this world, but was instead “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” He was looking to God, and to all of his glory. He simply was unconcerned with the affairs of this world.

How difficult it is for us to achieve such a god-focus in our lives. We are so wrapped up in the things of this world. Some of those things are absolutely necessary and inescapable. Like caring for children, or working so that we can feed our families.

Sometimes, for those in ill health, all of life becomes a great struggle which requires their full attention.

It's hard to achieve this sort of focus upon God, because the world all around us tries to crowd him out. But it is precisely that God-focus to which we must aspire.

In the words of the NT, found in,
Col. 3:1 "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."

The contrast is so pointedly described in,
Phil. 3:17 "Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. 18 For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things. 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself."

The appropriate question for you is this, "What is your mind set upon?" Is it set upon the things of this world, earthly things? Or is it set upon things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God? The answer to those questions will certainly determine how you live your life.

As you study this chapter of Genesis, make it your ambition to gain a reputation like that of Abraham. Let it be your ambition to demonstrate the presence of God by the way that you live and by the way that you conduct yourselves. Make it your commitment most of all that you do not live your life for the approval of others, but rather for the approval of God. If you consider what other people think of you, pray hard and work diligently so that what they might think of you is this, that you walk with God.

Abraham's reputation as a man known to walk with God had one very obvious foundation.

B. Abraham was a man known for public worship. v.33-34

Abraham called upon the name of the Lord. That expression means one thing above all else, public worship. We've seen this before. For example,

Gen. 12:8 "From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD."

Also, the first instance of public worship,
Gen.4:26 "Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD."

God's people are known for public worship. Here, Abraham planted a tree, a tamarisk tree, which resembles a cypress. The place of worship was marked out, very likely by God's own direct command. And he worshipped. Notice the name of the Lord mentioned here, the Eternal God. The Everlasting God.

Abraham knew God. He knew who God was. And he walked

with God. He worshipped God. That worship wasn't for his own enjoyment or pleasure, but rather for the one whom he called "Everlasting." God was the focus of his worship, and God was the focus of his whole life.

May the same be said of us. However painfully you might sense your own sinfulness, however much your own insignificance is magnified, however unimportant you may feel, and whatever size the Lord allows our church to be, nothing greater could ever be said of us than that we as a people are known to walk with God and known for public worship.

As for myself, I am easily reminded of how much and how quickly my focus can be taken off God and placed upon the things of this world. Yet nonetheless, I would aspire to be known as Abraham was known, for he was a man whose eyes were fixed upon God. May we all aspire to just that, to be known as one about whom it can be said, "God is with you in all that you do."