

Good Pagans, Bad Christians

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone and I'm one of the pastors here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. It's my joy to bring God's word to you today. Special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here.

And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it. Which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word. This morning we're continuing our series in the book of Genesis. You'll remember that Genesis is the very first book in the Bible.

It tells the origin story, first of the world and the universe in chapters 1 through 11. And then in chapters 11 through 51 it tells the story of God's people, the story of Israel.

We're focusing together on chapters 11 through 25 which tell the story of Abraham. We're getting near the end by the way, we're in chapter 20 this morning. And we're doing that for two reasons.

[1 : 09] First, to prepare us to return to our series in the book of Romans. Where we're going to pick up in chapter 4 which is about Abraham. So we're looking at Abraham so that later we can again look at Abraham.

We're doing it for a second reason too which is that it allows us to ask this question. What does it look like to follow God in faith? This week, Abraham does it again.

What I mean by that is he does the very same sin he did back in chapter 12. Now several months ago, you'll remember in chapter 12 he told Sarah, Hey, when we go into this foreign country I need you to lie.

And I need you to tell people you're my sister rather than my wife. And I want to do that because I'm trying to save my skin. I'm afraid that if I tell people that you're my wife they will kill me to get at you. And so in some ways, this is a repeat of what we've seen before. If we were to go on to chapter 26 of Genesis, we would see it again with Abraham's son Isaac. But there is this week a new angle which is this.

[2 : 16] Abimelech serves as a contrast to Abraham. We have a pagan king who does what's right. God's chosen Abraham who does what's wrong.

So it raises this question for us. When we come across non-Christians who are upright and moral, does it mean our faith is unnecessary?

Do we really need to follow Jesus? There's these people out there who are living good lives without him. So with that question, I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 20.

You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your Bible. No matter where you turn, Proverbs chapter 30 verse 5 tells us, every word of God proves true.

He's a shield to those who take refuge in him. So that's why we read now Genesis chapter 20 starting at verse 1. From there, Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur.

[3 : 22] And he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister. And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.

Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, she is my sister?

And she herself said, he is my brother. In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands, I have done this. Verse 6.

Then God said to him in the dream, Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart. And it was I who kept you from sinning against me.

[4 : 22] Therefore, I did not let you touch her. Now then return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.

Verse 8. So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, What have you done to us?

And how have I sinned against you that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.

And Abimelech said to Abraham, What did you see that you did this thing? Abraham said, I did it because I thought there is no fear of God at all in this place and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she is indeed my sister. The daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother. And she became my wife. And when God calls me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, This is the kindness you must do to me.

[5 : 43] At every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother. Verse 14. Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and male servants and female servants and gave them to Abraham and returned Sarah, his wife, to him.

And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before you. Dwell where it pleases you. To Sarah he said, Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver.

It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you and before everyone you are vindicated. Then Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children.

For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Our Father in heaven, we do thank you and praise you again that you have established this church here in Southwest Colorado Springs even before any of us thought of it.

[6 : 57] It was in your mind. We thank you that you have given us your word and that you use it powerfully in our lives. We ask that you would do that again this morning, that you would open our eyes, you'd unstop our ears, you'd clear our minds, you'd soften our hearts, that we would see and hear and believe and understand everything that's written in your word.

We ask most of all that we would see Jesus Christ, that he would be more precious and beautiful to us than ever before, that we would love him, we'd follow him.

We ask these things in his mighty name. Amen. In the summer of 1998, I started fourth grade and I also started violin lessons.

And for the next three summers after that, 99 and 2000 and 2001, I went to music camp on the campus of Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

And while I was there, I made a friend whose name was Lee. Lee and I were tight. We were buds. He was kind and accepting and funny and really he was just a wonderful person all around.

[8 : 14] But, Lee was not a Christian. Now, I loved Lee, but Lee lived in New Jersey and I lived in Maryland and so it was more of a camp friendship than anything else.

I remember after the last concert, one of those weeks, I was just crying in the car as my parents were driving me home because I realized, I'm not going to have this buddy anymore. But we had those summers together.

Summer of 2001 was the last summer with Lee and that fall I started seventh grade. When I started seventh grade in school, I also started seventh grade in Sunday school.

And one Sunday at our church, we had this lesson. I don't remember what it was about, but I do remember this. At the end of the lesson, and we had this handout with these little illustrations on it, we were told the application was, you should hang out and have Christian friends instead of non-Christian friends.

And the reason you should do this is because Christians are better than non-Christians. So if you do this, your Christian friends will be kinder and nicer and they won't lie.

[9 : 18] And so that's really who you should be tight with. I was furious. And I was furious because my friend Lee was better than the Christians that I knew.

In fact, the other 12-year-olds at this church were terrible. They were kind of bullies. They were little punks. And so 12-year-old Matthew went off.

And I informed my Sunday school class that this was in fact incorrect and that there were actually some non-Christians who were nicer than Christians. To make things better, there was another girl in the class named Sydney and she backed me up.

Yeah, that's right. Tell them. And so we staged an insurrection in the seventh grade Sunday school class at Alexandria Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

And I don't think our teachers quite knew what to do. This is not a sell for teaching Sunday school, by the way. But I won't be in your class. Thankfully, it was the end of the class.

[10:22] So I think we just kind of wrapped things up quite awkwardly. But what we're getting at here is there is a tension which is this. Sometimes Christians do really terrible things.

And sometimes non-Christians do really wonderful things. Sometimes Christians behave poorly. Sometimes non-Christians behave quite well.

And what do we do with that? It's part of the challenge of this passage this morning. Genesis chapter 20 is a repeat, as I mentioned, of Genesis chapter 12.

In both, Abraham tells Sarah to lie. In both, she says she's just a sister rather than a wife to protect Abraham's life.

In chapter 12, she tells this lie to Pharaoh. In chapter 20, to Abimelech. And so both Pharaoh and Abimelech take Sarah into their household as their wives. Chapter 12, remember God afflicts Pharaoh with plagues.

[11:26] Chapter 20, God comes in a dream to warn him. That's what we see in verse 3. And there's an emphasis here on how righteous Abimelech is.

Verse 4, Abimelech says, Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Verse 5, in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands, I have done this.

Verse 6, God says, God agrees with him. Yes. You know what, Abimelech, you're right. I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart.

In a certain sense, Abimelech is innocent. He's just trying to do what's right. Now there's a sense in which he's not, right? He's done something wrong even though he didn't realize it.

And so he goes to Abraham, this is verses 9 and 10, and he is livid. What have you done to us?

[12:29] This is verse 9. You have done to me things that ought not to be done. And so he demands an explanation.

Abraham, explain yourself. Even I, a pagan, know this is not right. Abraham gives this incredibly lame explanation in verse 11.

I did it because I thought there is no fear of God at all in this place and they will kill me because of my wife.

And in that statement, there is this rich irony. because Abraham says, I thought there is no fear of God here.

And yet, who is it that doesn't fear God? It's Abraham. Abraham is the one who doesn't believe God's promise from the last chapter.

[13:29] Remember, it was just the last chapter when God came to Abraham and Sarah and says, look, or two chapters ago, says, look, within a year you're going to have a son. Abraham is the one who does not take God at his word.

Who does take God at his word? Abimelech. Abimelech, the pagan, is actually the one here who fears God.

God comes to him in a dream, gives him a word, Abimelech believes and obeys. And in case we missed it, the author of Genesis rubs it in our face in verse 8.

Abimelech tells his servants and what happens? The men were very much afraid. Three verses later, yeah, I just didn't think anyone feared God here.

So I decided to go off the map. So the way of things is reversed. Pagans act well, God's people act poorly.

[14:41] In fact, if you've lived on this earth for some time and you've been in the church, you know this. It's a common experience. There's a man named Abraham Kuyper who's a Dutch theologian and actually was prime minister of the Netherlands for a while when he wrote a lot about God's common grace and he says this, this is on page 7 of your worship guide, the world turns out to be better than expected and the church worse than expected.

Why is that? Seems counterintuitive, right? We would expect the church to always exceed our expectations. God's spirit is at work in a special way turning hearts of stone into hearts of flesh and that's not true in the outside world.

So why do things not appear, play out the way that we want to? We're going to look in two sections really broken out by this quote.

Why is the world better than expected? Why is the church worse than expected? First of all, why is the world better than expected?

The world is better than expected because despite man's rebellion against God, every person is still made in God's image.

[16:02] Despite our rebellion, every person is made in God's image. Brit read it for us this morning from Acts chapter 17.

This is on page 3 of your worship guide. Verse 28, for we are indeed his offspring. God is embracing him.

There's a sense in which we can say not everyone is God's child in the sense that not everyone has been adopted by God as one of Jesus' brothers and sisters. There's a sense in which if you're not a Christian, God is not your father.

There's another sense in which if you're not a Christian, God is your father in the sense that he made you. You can't erase the image of God in humanity.

So the image of God, it's marred, it's obscured, it's twisted, never erased. I want you to think about it this way. A number of you have had the very painful experience of being cut off by a son or a daughter.

[17:14] So I want you to imagine if that's not your experience, imagine with me that your son cuts you off. He says, you know what, I'm just not going to talk to you anymore. Done with you. As far as I'm concerned, mom and dad are erased from my life.

No matter what, if he is your biological son, he still looks like you. Right?

He still has your nose. He might still have your spouse's smile. His physical appearance doesn't change even if he has cut you off.

When he talks, he probably still has some of your verbal tics. When he walks, he might remind some people of your dad, his grandfather.

The point is this, you can act as if your parents don't exist. You can't escape the resemblance.

[18:23] Same is true of us and God. You can act as if God does not exist. You cannot escape the resemblance.

Why is the world better than expected? Because everyone is still made in the image of God. The image of God can be obscured, it can be marred, it can be twisted, it will never be erased.

Christ. How is it that we explain non-Christians who are kind and generous and moral and upright in many ways, well, in the broad sense, God is still their father.

And so in some ways, they still look like him. It is possible to accept the gifts and not acknowledge the giver.

You can distance yourself from God as much as you want. You cannot erase his image.

[19:41] It is critical for us to understand this, to really comprehend it, because if we don't, we are setting ourselves up for disillusionment in this world. We are setting ourselves up for disillusionment when we meet wonderful people who are not Christians.

Remember last week, I told you kids, hey, if you want to go to college, great. Make sure you pick a college where there's a community of believers who can sustain and uphold your faith.

This week, I'll add this. When you go to college, you will meet wonderful, thoughtful, smart, and moral pagans.

And if you're not prepared for that, it will shake your faith. Wait, this person is so good, what is my religion worth?

It doesn't mean that your religion is worthless. It means that the image of God shines through in them despite and in the midst of their sin.

[20:51] It does not mean your religion is worthless. It means that the image of God shines out in them despite and in the midst of their sin and rebellion.

What is it that I say every week? There's no one so good they don't need God's grace. And no one so bad they can't have it.

This part's the first half. There's no one so good they don't need God's grace. We can also remember this as we talk with non-Christians we can affirm all the good and beautiful wonderful things in their lives and we can point them to its source.

I've mentioned to you several times that for the last three years or so my chiropractor and I have had this ongoing conversation about faith and Christianity and one of the lines he likes to use is well I act like a Christian.

And I have several responses to that. One of them I have shared with you well you act like a Christian except in the most important way which is that you don't worship the living God. But the other response is this and I've said this to him multiple times yes you do because God is your father.

[22 : 04] The last time I said that to him he said well I thought you'd say that. Right what are you saying when you say I act like a Christian? You're saying I don't need God. I don't need religion to be a good person.

Well guess what? You're giving witness to God even as you deny him. And your moral behavior however great it is it's twisted, it's distorted, it's pointed in the wrong direction.

And that's what I mean when I say well you act like a Christian except in the most important way that you don't worship the living God. The last time I said that to him he said yeah you know I kind of get that. You know the things that I do that are good are kind of pointed in the wrong direction for the wrong reason.

Yes. Exactly right. Are you going to accept God's gifts and then insult the giver?

Are you going to look like God the father and then act like he doesn't exist? What greater insult could there be?

[23 : 23] Yes, non-Christians are better than expected because the image of God is still there. That doesn't mean they don't need God.

It gives witness to the fact they've rejected him. Remember Romans chapter 1 the conscience convicts the fact that we know right from wrong shows our need for God.

It doesn't excuse us. It's the first half. The world better than expected. Perhaps this is the harder one.

The church worse than expected. God's grace. We should think, we would hope, right, that someone who's come to Christ, who said, yes, I'm a sinner in need of God's grace, and the Holy Spirit is at work in a powerful, an extra special way transforming a heart of stone into a heart of flesh, would always be behaving better than the world around them.

And yet Abraham shows us that's not true, right? A Bimelech has the fear of God, at least in this episode, Abraham does not. Well, come back to the phrase I mentioned earlier.

[24 : 35] No one's so good they don't need God's grace, and no one's so bad they can't have it. First half, why are non-Christians so good?

No one's so good they don't need God's grace. Why are Christians sometimes so terrible, and no one so bad they can't have it?

You don't become perfect the day you become a Christian. Be great that were true, be great if God came and just after that point you never sinned.

Some churches teach that that's possible. No, the reality of a Christian is not that every sin in your life is just taken to a place where it has no temptation or power over you.

No, the promise of the Christian life is that you are growing holier year by year. The question is not are you perfect? The question is are you in a different place than you were ten years ago?

[25 : 45] is there evidence that the Spirit of God is at work in your life? And where a Christian is today depends on where they started.

Where a Christian is today depends on where they started. Is Abraham holier than he was in chapter 12? Yeah, I think so.

We've seen Abraham's great acts of faith. We're going to see them, especially in chapter 22. Is Abraham perfect? Of course not. No one so good they don't need God's grace.

Abimelech. No one so bad they can't have it. Abraham. So if someone comes to you and says, I can't believe you're a Christian based on the things you do.

yes, that should convict you. And I hope you can say this, you should have seen me 10 years ago. If you think this is bad, you should have seen where God had to start with me.

[26 : 59] You should have seen the work that he's doing. We also see in this passage that even in the life of believers, sin patterns run deep.

Abraham's fear flared up. This was his go-to pattern in chapter 12 to lie about Sarah. Abraham's fear flares up here again. Many chapters later, it does the same exact play.

In fact, it's going to get worse. This pattern is going to run across generations. In chapter 26, which we're not going to get to in this series, Abraham's son Isaac does the exact same thing.

with his wife, Rebecca. He lies about her. He says, oh, she's just my sister. Where did he learn that from? Remember last week, Lot and his daughters, the children always know.

We'll say this. There's a part in our confession of faith that we subscribe to as a church that says some sins are worse than others. It goes into this long explanation of what makes one sin worse than another sin.

[28 : 08] one of the things it says is sins by older people are worse than sins by younger people. Why would that be? You've had more life, right?

You've had more time to grow in holiness and in God's word. So there's something actually that's worse about chapter 20 than chapter 12. Man, Abraham should know better, right?

He doesn't have the excuse of youth and foolishness. By the way, if you think I'm picking on old people, that part of the confession also says sins by pastors are worse. So what goes around comes around.

But Abraham's older here, right? God has made a specific promise. Two chapters ago, he said in a year, Sarah's going to give birth, and then what does he do? He puts her at risk. The point is this, are you growing?

Is there evidence that God's spirit is at work in your heart, in your mind, in your life? Are you today someone who has more of the fruit of the spirit than you did two and five and ten years ago?

[29 : 29] More love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control? Is there evidence that God is at work? I told you earlier, there's a disillusionment that can come, if we haven't wrapped our minds around this, there's a disillusionment that can come when we meet wonderful people who aren't Christians.

We need to have these categories, we need to think about these things. There's also a disillusionment that comes if we haven't thought about these things from meeting terrible Christians. I think, man, you know, people will tell you sometimes, well, I love Jesus, I just can't stand his followers.

Of course, one of his followers, unfortunately, is in the mirror. And yet, the Bible tells us, right, no one's so good, they don't need God's grace.

No one's so bad, they can't have it. And so, when we meet Christians who do terrible things, what should we think? Wow. God saves people like me.

We need to be realistic about the world. We need to be prepared for both. Can't let our faith be rattled when we meet wonderful pagans. Can't let our faith be rattled when we meet terrible Christians.

[30 : 53] The way we avoid that is we understand God's grace. God's grace is not about my behavior.

We'll realize no one's so good, they don't need God's grace. No one so bad, they can't have it. It's a great humility that comes for us with this as well.

God is not impressed with you. If you think that you're a Christian because of your great and superior behavior, you have, as I say a lot recently, lost the plot.

You lost the plot. God did not choose Abraham because he was great. God chose Abraham because God was merciful. Christian, God did not choose you because you were or are great.

God chose you because God is merciful. The scandal of the gospel is this, that good people still need it and bad people can have it.

[32 : 07] Scandal of the gospel is this, good people need it, bad people can have it. Christians behave poorly sometimes, non-Christians behave quite well, and it's explained by this, this is on page 7 of your worship guide.

God's grace does not come to people who morally outperform others, but to those who admit their failure to perform and who acknowledge their need for a savior.

The kingdom of God is not a meritocracy. good Christians and bad Christians and good pagans both fall short of the glory of God.

Both face the reality that the wages of sin is death. Both need a merciful savior as their only hope in life and in death.

Is Jesus your savior? savior? Is he your only hope in life and in death? can you say, I'm never so good.

[33 : 24] I don't need God's grace. If you can, you won't be shaken. You won't be shaken when those who don't know God are examples, positive examples.

And you won't be shaken when those who do know God are negative examples. You'll say, whatever happens, it's God's grace for me.

Christian, it's God's grace for you. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you that the kingdom of God is not a meritocracy because if it were, none of us would make it.

We ask instead, instead of looking at ourselves and those around us, we would set our eyes on you. We would have the right horizon line, that we would compare ourselves, not to others, but to you and your holiness. That would drive us to your grace, drive us to see how beautiful and glorious your mercy is, that we would follow you and love you with all our hearts and all our lives.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.