The sermon

Intro

Patterns. Habits. They can be hard to break.

There's a behavior you've read about over and over again in the Bible. You feel conviction. Because it's something you do. But you keep doing it. And you keep feeling guilty.

Maybe you understand intellectually, but for some reason there's a disconnect between practice and belief. Faith isn't creeping in and driving out the stuff within that keeps the habit going strong.

Abraham has a pattern it seems he's unwilling, unable to break. Can you relate?

Body

Passage Focus

We'll work our way step by step through the events in Gerar. Then we'll close with some applications.

READ 20:1-2

Point 1: Sarah taken again (20:1-2)

History's repeating itself. Abraham enters a new territory. Abraham introduces Sarah as his sister, not his wife. The king takes Sarah for himself. This happened before in Egypt (Gen 12:10-20).

King Abimelech apparently takes Sarah for his harem. We're not told explicitly that Sarah was taken to be a wife like in Egypt (Gen 12:19). Sarah at this point is 90 years old (Gen 17:17) and worn and too old for children (Gen 18:12). This time we're not told that Sarah's beautiful (Gen 12:14).

Why did the king want Sarah? Some commentators suggest the king wanted an alliance with Abraham who was quite wealthy and powerful at this point. Remember the 318 men trained for war within his household in chapter 14 (14:14). Perhaps it was her beauty? Sarah lived to 127 (Gen 23:1) and human life expectancy was still decreasing at this point. Abraham lived to 175 (Gen 25:7). Perhaps her beauty was retained even though she was past child-bearing years?

In any event, Abraham's lie got him in a bind again. Sarah wife was taken. But he was promised an heir with Sarah who would be named Isaac, a son who would inherit the covenant promises (Gen 17:19). How would Sarah bear Abraham a son now that Sarah's been taken?

Summary

Sarah needs to be rescued for the covenant promises to come to pass.

READ 20:3-7

Point 2: Abimelech's dream (20:3-7)

God speaks to a pagan king in a dream. Abimelech, you're going to die because you took another man's wife (20:3). Abimelech's believed to be a pagan king. Because there's nothing to indicate he knows God relationally. Because he's a dead man under God's curse. Does God deal with his people in this way?

Abimelech protests, I'm innocent (20:4). He said, ***"She is my sister."*** She said, ***"He is my brother"*** (20:5). ***"In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this"*** (20:5). Abimelech's agreeing with God. It's wrong to take another man's wife. God agrees with Abimelech's defense.

"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. Therefore I did not let you touch her. – 20:6

Because of your integrity, Abimelech, I protected you by preventing you from touching Sarah. Sarah and Abimelech never had sexual relations. We have a pagan king who thinks adultery is evil. Today, because God has written his moral law on every human heart, those who've never been exposed to God's commands have a conscience that accuses them of evil (Rom 2:14-16). Abimelech had a sense of right and wrong.

God issues a command with both promise and threat.

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." – 20:7

Promise? Return Sarah and you'll live. Threat? If you don't return Sarah, you and your wives and your female servants and your children will die. God's keeping his promise to Abraham. *"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse"* (Gen 12:3). No exceptions. Not even those who dishonor Abraham in ignorance.

In what sense in Abraham a prophet? God did reveal the future to Abraham (e.g., Israel's affliction in Egypt for 400 years; Gen 15:13-16). Abraham is God's representative/messenger on earth. ***"For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."*** – 18:19

The Old Testament prophets repeatedly called on Israel to turn from sin and follow God's ways. So that they would find themselves under God's blessing, not God's curse. Abraham was chosen to do what prophets do. And God answers Abraham's prayers. Like God answered Elijah's prayers (James 5:16-18). Elijah prayed it wouldn't rain. No rain for 42 months. When Elijah prayed for rain, it rained. Abimelech's life hangs in the balance. His only hope? He needs the lying prophet Abraham to pray for him.

Summary

God intervenes to rescue Sarah by appearing to Abimelech in a dream. Abimelech will be spared if he responds correctly. Abimelech needs Abraham to pray for him.

READ 20:8-16

Point 3: Abimelech's response (20:8-16)

Abimelech responds by telling his servants about the dream. They're afraid (20:8). Abimelech responds by locating Abraham and delivering a rebuke.

"What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a <u>great sin</u>? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." – 20:9

Strong language. Abraham, why would you treat me so poorly when I've done you no harm? Abraham's deceit didn't affect just Abimelech. The whole kingdom was under God's curse. Abraham failed to love his neighbor. Leaving out important information had disastrous consequences!

The ***"great sin"*** is taking another man's wife. Some sins are more weighty than other sins. Adultery is a ***"great sin."*** All sin is serious because of whose commands our sin violates. Every sin we commit is breaking God's commands. Any sin we commit makes us worthy of eternal punishment. On the other hand, some sins are greater violations of a neighbor's rights than other sins. Taking your neighbor's wife is worse than taking their paperclip. One sin does a greater degree of harm to our neighbor than another sin.

Abraham, why would you do such a thing (20:10)? Abraham assumed bad things about Gerar: they have no fear of God so they'll kill me to take my wife (20:11). Then Abraham justifies his deceit. Literally, she is my sister. We share the same father, but not the same mother (20:12). Sarah was Abraham's half-sister.

When Abraham left Mesopotamia, he made a pact with Sarah/gave her instruction: ***"at every place to which we come, say of me, 'He is my bother'*** (20:13)." Abraham tells the truth about his strategy with Sarah. But his strategy was a strategy to deceive. What we have here is a believer getting called out by the world.

Abimelech responds by giving gifts (animals, servants) to Abraham (20:14). Abimelech responds by giving Sarah back to Abraham (20:14). Abimelech responds by offering Abraham whatever land in the kingdom Abraham desires (20:15). Abimelech responds by giving Sarah 1,000 pieces of silver (20:16). The silver is a sign of Sarah's innocence: no adultery has been committed.

Why the gifts for a deceiver? A sign of goodwill because he needs Abraham to pray for him (20:7).

Summary

Abimelech obeys God's instruction. Abimelech calls out Abraham for the damage Abraham has done to the kingdom. Abraham justifies his half-truth and reveals his pact. Abimelech depends on Abraham for life.

READ 20:17-18

Point 4: Abraham intercedes (20:17-18)

Abraham prays. God responds. Abimelech and his kingdom are healed. The extent of God's curse on Gerar is revealed: the womb of every woman in Abimelech's house had been closed (20:18).

Abimelech has a wife (20:17), but he takes other women too. It sounds like Abimelech had one primary wife, but multiple women of secondary wife status. Like Hagar was to Abraham. Sounds like a polygamist.

Through their sinful pact Abraham and Sarah are learning more about God. Nothing is too hard for God (Gen 18:14). He can open and close wombs as he wills. Maybe Sarah shouldn't have laughed?

Summary

Abraham the deceiver prays. Abimelech, the man of integrity, is healed. The curse is lifted from Abimelech's household. Abimelech blessed Abraham with gifts. Now God blesses Abimelech's household with fertility. God's keeping his word to Abraham.

Point 5: When believers live by fear rather than faith

Abraham is a believer. He's already trusted God to miraculously provide a son (Gen 15:4-6). By faith he left his homeland for Canaan (Gen 12:4). But he's still struggling to trust God's promises.

Given what Abraham's experienced, his faith should be stronger now. It's been about 25 years since the episode in Egypt (Gen 12:4; 17:17). Abraham's seen a lot since then.

1. He's seen God inflict plagues on Pharaoh's house for taking Sarah as his wife (Gen 12:17, 19).
2. He's seen God give him victory in battle over Chedorlaomer (Gen 14:14:15-16, 19-20).
3. He's seen God burn Sodom and Gomorrah to a crisp by fire and sulfur (Gen 19:27-28).

Abraham's seen God protect him in battle. Abraham's seen God prevent Pharaoh from taking Sarah. Abraham's seen God's ability to punish the wicked. Shouldn't Sodom and Gomorrah scream out, I'm able to act for you Abraham? Abraham was promised, *"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse"* (Gen 12:3). Abraham's seen God keep that promise. Abraham's seen God curse Egypt with plagues. But he still struggles to believe. He still hasn't changed his strategy, habit, pattern for interacting with potentially dangerous kings.

What did Abraham see? He saw a people in power. He assumed these people didn't fear God. He saw a powerful people with bad intentions. He didn't see God's ability to protect. He still struggles to believe, *"Is anything too hard for the LORD"* (Gen 18:14)? Practically, he's not confident God will keep his promise. Sounds like he doesn't believe God's able to protect him from these dangerous people. He sees his circumstances. He doesn't see God's ability.

Likewise, when our eyes are on our circumstances, what's out there, who's out there, and our eyes aren't on God, fear overpowers faith. Fear dictates our decisions, not faith. Like Abraham, we need to see a big God who cares for us.

Practical question: are there places in my life where fear is overpowering faith?

Point 6: When believers get called out by the world

Abraham failed to walk in integrity. He failed to love his neighbor by withholding critical information. He put his wife in danger of adultery. He brought God's curse upon Abimelech's household.

Then Abraham got called out by Abimelech. Why would you place me and my household in danger by allowing me to take your wife and saying nothing? Why would you allow me and my household to be cursed by your God? Don't you have a heart? Don't you care about others? Don't you care about us? Why would you want to subject us to the wrath of your God? Where's your integrity Abraham?

The pagan king gives God's prophet a lesson on morality.

God calls us to be salt and light. Salt = flavor = attractiveness, desirable = fruits of the Spirit, compassion, honesty, humility, etc. The salt on the chip attracts us to dish. Likewise, our godly characteristics and behavior can attract people to God. Light = our salty life can't be hidden. It needs to be seen. It needs to be lived out in the presence of non-Christians. And as we live well in the world, some will see our manner of life and want it for themselves. And they'll turn to Jesus in faith and repentance and give God the glory he deserves. Abraham's behavior isn't attractive.

Sometimes we fail. And the world, because it knows about our allegiance to Jesus, calls us out. When the world, at work, at school, in our families, sees us act selfishly, slander people, lie, have a foul mouth, speak harshly to our parents, dress immodestly, be lazy at work, they have reason to call us out. Abimelech had reason to call Abraham out.

What do we do when they call us out? Assuming the charge is legitimate, I think we tell the truth. I think we humble ourselves. I think we apologize. I think we tell them they're right. We might share why we did what we did and where we went wrong. We might share how grieved we are about how we represented Jesus. We might use the opportunity to share the gospel. The good news of forgiveness of sins and a new heart. We might tell them how God deals with us when we sin. We might tell them how we still struggle with sinful desires, habits, etc. And how we go about doing battle with sin.

In God's providence, it can be an opportunity for self-examination. An opportunity to demonstrate humility. An opportunity to talk about God, sin, and the gospel.

Practical question: does the world have a legitimate basis for calling me out?

Point 7: Abraham's relationship with God was all grace

God's relationship with Abraham is all grace. Do you see how radical this interaction is? In Genesis 12, God appears to Abraham and tells him, *"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse"* (Gen 12:3). These promises aren't conditional on Abraham's obedience. When Abraham lies, Abimelech gets a death sentence and his household becomes barren. Abraham lies. Abimelech gets cursed. Abraham lies. Abimelech has to get Abraham to pray for him. I guess the promises to Abraham aren't conditional!

Grace means unmerited favor, unmerited kindness. When grace happens, humans do nothing to merit God's blessing. When grace happens, God gives sinful humans what they don't deserve: blessing. The liar Abraham was blessed despite his sin.

The Christian gospel is the good news, a message, about God's grace, (Acts 20:24, 32). On the cross, Jesus died as a substitute, taking the place of sinners. The sinless Son of God gave his life as a ransom for many so that whoever believes might be forgiven of their sins and have eternal life. The just suffered for the unjust.

On the cross Jesus got what we deserve: the wrath of God. If you trust in Jesus, you'll get what you don't deserve: forgiveness of sins, eternal life. That's grace. Unmerited blessing. Our sin, breaking God's commands, doing life our own way, earns God's wrath. For those who trust in him, Jesus earned our eternal life through his sinless life and sacrificial death.

If you understand these things and would say, I haven't experienced God's grace, I haven't experienced God's mercy, I don't have eternal life, I would encourage you to understand that sin is real human condition. People break God's commands. Our hearts want the wrong things. I would encourage you to understand there's a God who created us and holds us accountable and furnished proof by rising from the dead.

Understand that God is merciful and generous and the only way of mercy is through Jesus' death on the cross. Admit to God that you've sinned by breaking his commands. Believe that Jesus died in your place to take away your sins. Ask God for forgiveness on the basis of Jesus' death. And trust that God forgives everyone who comes to him through his Son Jesus.

Tell us if you believe.