

"Good News For Those Who Think Repentance Is Like Sucking On A Lemon"

Genesis 12:10-13:4

4 February 2024

How in the world do you enjoy Jesus when you've been a complete idiot? That's a question that we should know the answer to because our mission here at Grace is this:

We exist to ignite a passion in every person to glorify and enjoy God everywhere and in everything.

So, how in the world do you do that when you've been a complete idiot? How do you *individually* glorify and enjoy God when you've been an idiot and made a mess of your life? And how do you ignite a passion in others to glorify and enjoy God, when you've made a mess of your life, when you have chosen sin over Jesus?

Listen, we can all be idiots sometimes. I know you probably didn't come to church expecting to, or wanting to be called an idiot, but let's be honest with each other this morning. When we ignore God's word, when we choose sin over Jesus- who does that? Idiots! That's who!

Sinners are idiots because when they sin, they choose sin over Jesus! It's dumb to choose sin over Jesus. It's dumb to ignore God's word and to try to live according to our own wisdom, right? That's dumb, right? Can we all agree that it's dumb to ignore God's word and try to do life our way? It's dumb to sin. And since we all sin and since we all choose sin over Jesus all the time, what does that make us? *Idiots*.

Listen, I know we don't like being called ignorant. We don't like being told that we are sinners. But, if we can put aside our pride and accept what God's word says about us, we really will start to experience freedom. God's word does not idealize us. It doesn't play dress up with us. God's word is honest and real about our condition. You have to love that about God. He's honest about us. And if we can learn to accept what He says about us in His word, we'll start to get some traction and begin seeing that we can walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

So, back to the question: How in the world do you *enjoy* Jesus when you totally mess up your life? How in the world do you *enjoy* Jesus when you've been a complete idiot? You have to remember the heart of the Gospel, that-

GOD ALWAYS MEETS OUR MESS WITH HIS MERCY.

That's really good news, because have you ever really blown it, I mean, really, really messed up, and you kind of dread coming back to Jesus, with your tail tucked between your legs? Have you ever felt like you should be put in a timeout because you've been a bad Christian? Have you ever promised Jesus that you would never do a particular sin again, only to go and do said sin, but do it even quicker than you thought possible? Have you ever just been a dummy and dabbled in sin, knowing it was killing you? Have you ever just stumbled over your own Christian feet?

Yeah, me too. And, I'm a pastor! Well, I've got some good news for you today-

GOD ALWAYS MEETS OUR MESS WITH HIS MERCY.

Isn't that good news? This is the heart of God: *mercy*. It is His desire. It is His delight. God always meets our mess with His mercy, always meets our failures with His forgiveness, always meets our guilt with His grace, always meets our sin with His salvation. This is how God has always dealt with sinners.

His tender heart always meets us in our mess. His mercy shows up and doesn't give us what we deserve. His mercy always trumps our sin. His mercy always has the last word. So, our sin, our mess, and the ugly situations that we create in our lives because of our sin, and the ugly situations that we find ourselves in- all that ugliness and messiness does not have the final word. Mercy does. Mercy always trumps sin.

Puritan Thomas Goodwin said it this way, "*Thy misery can never exceed His mercy.*" No matter how you mess up your life, you cannot exceed His mercy. No matter what mess you make of your life because of your sin, you cannot exceed God's mercy...because He is rich in mercy.

I have a hunch that someone here today needs to hear this. No matter how many times you play the fool and stupidly choose sin, Jesus will always welcome you home. He'll be waiting on the porch, looking for your prodigal hide to come back home. And, when you do, He'll hug you, kiss your neck, and throw you a party. He's just that kind of God. How could He be any other way?

And, that's exactly what God did with Abram after he was a complete bonehead standin' next to the Egyptian pyramids. Let me show you. Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 12. This just might become one of your favorite Old Testament passages because it was originally written to a bunch of idiots who wanted to go back to Egypt and become slaves again because they missed the taste of watermelons (see Numbers 11:4-6). It's true. Sometimes disciples can be *idiots*.

Okay. Genesis 12.

LOOK AT VERSE 10...

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. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. 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." When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

Notice that you have the phrase "in the land" mentioned 2x in verse 10. Think about it. The land that Yahweh just promised to Abram goes through a famine. So, Abram's faith will be tested as the land, just like his wife Sarai, is now barren. There's been no rain. There's no crops in the field, Lucille. The land cannot produce fruit. No non-GMO, organic gardens. The promised land is barren just like Sarai. So, what will Abram do?

Well, conventional wisdom says that you go where there is food and water, duh! And, that's what Abram does. He heads down to Egypt.

* INSERT ABRAM TO EGYPT SLIDE

He must have read on *Twitter* that there was food and water in Egypt, so off they go.

Now, I don't think Abram was in the wrong or sinned by going down to Egypt. Many commentators say that. But, the text doesn't say that, and that's kinda important! Abram went down to Egypt because the Nile River was there and he could water his cattle, survive, etc. So, Abram hasn't done anything wrong. He just wants to live! He just wants to survive!

Where Abram went wrong, though, was lying about Sarai. Right before they crossed the state line, right in front of the sign that said, "*Welcome to Egypt!*" Abram told Sarai to tell all the Egyptians that gawked over her that she was Abram's sister. Now, why would the Egyptians whistle at Sarai at the pyramid construction sites? Because verse 11 tells us that she was beautiful.

Yes, Sarai is 65 years-old (!), but she is beautiful. In fact, these are the very first words of Abram! His first words in Genesis are, "*I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance...*" Since we can be idiots sometimes, let me tell the married men now, say this to your wife often! Tell her that she's beautiful. Stare at her. Gawk at her. Whistle at her. Don't be a dummy.

Sidebar: Fight for your marriage! Take it from me, you don't want to see it collapse.

So, Abram is afraid that if the Egyptians find out they are married, then they would kill him and take Sarai. And that's why he wants to lie a little. It is true, Abram and Sarai are brother and sister, so it's a half-truth they are telling. In Genesis 20:12 we learn that Abram and Sarai have the same dad, but not the same mom. In the ancient Near East, this was common, especially when there were not many people around to marry.

So, the Egyptians buy the story, and they take Sarai to see Pharaoh. A quick note on the word *Pharaoh*. It means, "the Great House." Originally the term *Pharaoh* did not refer to the king of Egypt, but rather to his palace. It was not until the middle of the eighteenth Dynasty (1575–1308 B.C.) that the expression became the title of the king.

So, Sarai was most likely sent to the "Great House"- the Egyptian palace where she most likely was on her way to becoming a part of "Pharaoh's" harem. Meanwhile, Abram gets blessed with all these resources: cattle, donkeys, and servants.

Abram's "Let's fudge a little" plan is working, but he has now put Sarai at risk, as well as the fulfillment of Yahweh's promises earlier in chapter 12. Yes, God is blessing Abram. He now has enough animals to start his own petting zoo. But, he has put Sarai and the promise in danger. So, Yahweh has to intervene and save Sarai and keep Pharaoh from interfering with the blessing promised to Abram.

Abram's biggest problem, though, wasn't fibbing a little about his relationship with Sarai- it was this: *not believing the promises of God*. He let fear eat up his faith. He failed to believe Yahweh's promise. So, it was all a big mess. Abram was far away from the promised land, Sarai was in danger of becoming Mrs. Pharaoh, and instead of Abram being a blessing to the nations, Pharaoh was about to be stricken with plagues by Yahweh because of Abram's lie.

Abram had made a mess of it all and Yahweh had to fix it. Does that remind you of anything, like...your life? And, mine. We're always making a mess of things because of our sin, but God is merciful, and He often intervenes to keep us from making it even worse. His mercies truly are new every morning...*and they are new every mess*. His mercy meets us in our mess, and that ought to make you want to run down to the communion tables right now, mid-sermon. But, let's hold off and then we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper in just a little bit.

So, what happened next? If this was a show on *Netflix*, the episode would end here, and you'd watch the next one right away because you just gotta know what happens next. Well, let's find out.

LOOK AT VERSE 17...

But Yahweh afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. 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? 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." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

So, instead of being a blessing to Egypt, Abram has opened up a can of plagues. Because Pharaoh was about to say "I do" to Sarai, Yahweh had to intervene and stop the wedding before they ordered flowers. Yahweh's gift to Pharaoh and his house was a great plague. We're not sure what the plague was, but whatever it was, it got their attention and Abram got his walking papers. He and Sarai were quickly escorted out of Egypt. They messed up and almost messed up the whole Genesis 12 plan.

And, we, like them, can certainly make things messy and tarnish God's plans, but we can't keep His will from being done. It's true, we will make some terrible decisions in life. And we may make some super sin-soaked, selfish, boneheaded decisions that will wreak havoc in our lives or the lives of the people we love. And we'll have to live with the consequences. But our hope is that these things don't destroy God's ultimate plan. He uses them for His purposes, for His glory- He even uses them for our good.

Sure, we may act and behave in a way that dishonors the Lord, we may act like idiots, but in the end, He can turn things around and use them for His glory. The story of redemption throughout the whole Bible is that God always meets our mess with His mercy, He always meets our failures with His forgiveness, He always meets our guilt with His grace, He always meets our sin with His salvation. This is how God has always dealt with sinners.

Abram failed the test in Egypt, but we have a Savior who never failed. Jesus was in the wilderness and endured a 40 day "famine," if you will, and He came out victorious, having resisted all temptation. And, when we fail Him, when we are faithless just like Abram, we have this promise to fall back on-

2 Timothy 2:13

"...if we are faithless, he remains faithful..."

That verse right there is your invitation from Jesus Himself to walk down to this communion table today *in faith*, even though you have been *faithless*.

And when we bring our sin to God, He does not show up with a bunch of *I-told-you-so's*. He doesn't drop a bunch of *Shame-on-yous* on us. He doesn't meet our mess with *How-dare-yous*. He always meets our mess with mercy because He is the Father of mercies.

So, what do you do when you make a mess of everything like Abram and Sarai? Where do you go? *You go home*. And, that's exactly what Abram and Sarai did.

LOOK AT CHAPTER 13, VERSE 1...

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. 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, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of Yahweh.

Abram went back to the campsite he had been at earlier, the place where he built an altar to the Lord. It's interesting that the text says he camped "*between Bethel and Ai*" because-

Bethel = *house of God*

Ai = *(place of) ruins*

This is where Abram is in his life. He's between the ruin and the mess he has created and the house of God. He's in-between the mess he created in Egypt and the altar that he built for the Lord. It's a picture of our lives. We create a mess, we may even ruin our lives by our sin and our choices, and so our past is behind us, and then in front of us is the altar, the place where we meet God. The place we left in order to go down to our own "Egypt," only to come back home again.

Remember, Moses is writing the book of Genesis to people who left Egypt and then kept on sinning and making mess after mess after mess in the wilderness. He's telling them about the time Abram was a boneheaded idiot who lived in the fear of man and did not trust the promises of God. And, he's telling us that too.

So, Abram returns to the altar that he had made that we saw last week. And, what does he do there? Verse 4 says, *"And there Abram called upon the name of Yahweh."* This is repentance. This is returning to your First Love after you totally blowing it. He calls on the name of Yahweh, the gracious, faithful, merciful God. He's collapsing on God. Crying out for mercy and grace. Genesis 13:4 is the Old Testament version of Hebrews 4:16-

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Abram was doing Hebrews 4 before Hebrews 4 was cool. He's starting over again. And, it's a reminder to us that there are fresh starts with God. Aren't you glad that there are fresh starts with God? That Jesus gives us fresh starts? Aren't you glad that you can blow it big time and just return and find grace and mercy for every need?

David says in Psalm 43:4, *"Then I will go to the altar, to God my exceeding joy."* That's what you find when you return! Your God, who is your exceeding joy! Can it be? Can there be joy at the altar? Can there be joy in repentance? Yes! Some people wrongly think that repentance is like eating liver and drinking sauerkraut juice. Some people wrongly think repentance, and coming back to the altar like Abram, is like sucking on a lemon. Ugh. But, it's not like that at all! It's sweet because you get Jesus!

Who knew that repentance could be so sweet? Owning up to your sin and selfishness doesn't seem like it would be a good thing, but it is because you get Jesus! Isn't He what you want? On the surface, repentance seems like it would be like eating liver and drinking prune juice, but it's actually comforting. Holding onto your sin, loving it so much, refusing to admit you've done wrong, *that* is eating liver and drinking prune juice. That is sucking on a lemon. That's an awful place to be.

But confession, repentance, collapsing on Jesus is good. It's a hug, that's what it is. It's a *Luke-15-prodigal-come-home-embrace*. Why? Because-

GOD ALWAYS MEETS OUR MESS WITH HIS MERCY.

Dane Ortlund says this: *"That God is rich in mercy means that your regions of deepest shame and regret are not hotels through which divine mercy passes, but homes in which divine mercy abides.. The things about you that make you cringe most, make him hug hardest."*

Isn't that wonderful? The things what we have done that just make us cringe with embarrassment- that's where Jesus hugs the hardest. Isn't that wonderful? And, isn't that what you want in a Savior?

I saw this on Instagram the other day:

*He's not an "I told you so" kind of God.
He's a
"Come here
Welcome home
I'll keep you safe
I'll keep you warm
Let me hold you
I love you
I have so much for you
I am not mad at you
Trust me
I will never leave you
My grace will never run out
Stay with me"
kind of God.*

Isn't that what you're looking for in God? Someone like that? Certainly not the opposite! Listen- prodigals and dummies and idiots who make a wreck of their lives are always welcome home. Let me ask you: Is that you today? Have you been running from Jesus? Have you made a mess of your life? You can come home. Just repent. That just means *turn*. That's what repentance means. It's a change of mind, a change of direction. Jack Miller said that repentance is just collapsing onto Jesus. That's it. You just quit running. You stop. You turn. You just fall into His loving arms.

Sure, the consequences of your sin might remain. Sometimes that's the way. Sometimes you can't get away from the consequences of your bad decisions, your sin, your "prodigaling."

But, if it's true that you can't get away from the consequences, let me ask you: What's better? Consequences with Jesus or consequences without Jesus? Trust me. Take it from this professional idiot. Better to do consequences with Jesus by your side than go it alone. Jesus offers mercy and grace to aid you with your consequences.

Have you been running from Jesus? Maybe you've been dabbling in porn, or drink, or harboring bitterness, you fill in the blank _____. Just come home. Come back to the altar. Come back to your exceeding joy. Come to this table where you will find God, your exceeding joy.

So, cheer up! Jesus likes idiots who make a mess of their lives. In fact, some of Jesus' best friends are idiots: Abram, the 12 disciples, me....you!

And, that's how we enjoy Jesus when we mess up our lives. It's simple, but oh so significant. We bring our sin to Him. We confess. We repent. When we take God at His word and we believe what it says, the Holy Spirit comes and digs up the sins that we have buried deep within, the sins that we have let relax comfortably in our hearts. We bring them to Jesus, we bring our failures- *we go to the altar like Abram*- and we receive His grace, and then we really begin to enjoy Him.

Do you want to enjoy Jesus? I mean, really, really enjoy Him? That's how you do it.

Imagine what new work of the Holy Spirit would happen here at Grace if we simply brought our failures to Jesus and received His grace with the empty hands of faith? I think we'd actually begin to enjoy Jesus. Imagine that? Enjoying the God who lived and died for us and for our sins. Imagine that?

Imagine what new work of the Holy Spirit would happen here at Grace if we started confessing our sins and started taking Jesus at His word? How might God change our families, our marriages, our relationships, our church, our city if we started confessing our sins, if we started taking Jesus at His word?

I think God is saying to us today, *"Try me. Start confessing your sins, start taking me at My word, start believing my promises, give up your own ideas, and forsake your so-called wisdom. And, come to the altar. Let me unearth those buried sins that are resting comfortably in the deep recesses of your heart, and watch how my Spirit will usher in a new season of joy and mission. Come to the altar and I will be your exceeding joy."*

Now the question is: Who wants in? Who wants to see the Holy Spirit usher in a new season of joy and mission here at Grace? Who wants to see the Holy Spirit usher in a new season of joy and mission in their life? Who wants in?

This is where it starts. Right here. At this table. Where we celebrate that Jesus paid it all. Right here at this table, we celebrate the wonderful Gospel truth that-

GOD ALWAYS MEETS OUR MESS WITH HIS MERCY.

Let's meet Him here to today. Let's go to the altar of God, to God our exceeding joy.

"Good News For Those Who Think Repentance Is Like Sucking On A Lemon"

Genesis 12:10-13:4

Sermon Study Questions

1. Discuss our mission statement at Grace: *We exist to ignite a passion in every person to glorify and enjoy God everywhere and in everything.* How can you glorify and enjoy God this week?
2. What was Abram's biggest screw up: 1) going down to Egypt? 2) telling a half-truth about Sarai 3) not trusting the promises of God?
3. READ 2 Timothy 2:13. Where do you need this promise in your life?
4. Discuss this quote from the sermon:

David says in Psalm 43:4, "Then I will go to the altar, to God my exceeding joy." That's what you find when you return! Your God, who is your exceeding joy! Can it be? Can there be joy at the altar? Can there be joy in repentance? Yes! Some people wrongly think that repentance is like eating liver and drinking sauerkraut juice.

Some people wrongly think repentance, and coming back to the altar like Abram, is like sucking on a lemon. Ugh. But, it's not like that at all! It's sweet because you get Jesus!

5. Discuss what Dane Ortlund said:

"That God is rich in mercy means that your regions of deepest shame and regret are not hotels through which divine mercy passes, but homes in which divine mercy abides...The things about you that make you cringe most, make him hug hardest."

6. Discuss the following:

He's not an "I told you so" kind of God.

He's a

"Come here

Welcome home

I'll keep you safe

I'll keep you warm

Let me hold you

I love you

I have so much for you

I am not mad at you

Trust me

I will never leave you

My grace will never run out

Stay with me"

kind of God.