
Repeating the Same Old Sins

Genesis 20

So, here we go again. You have to wonder: why on earth would Abraham and Sarah do this again? They wander into someone else's territory and repeat the lie that got them into trouble in Egypt.

But then, do you ever do stupid, even sinful, stuff more than once? Aren't we prone to repeat certain kinds of sins? Let's think about that for a moment

There are sins that we go back to because we simply enjoy them and don't want to give them up.

There are sins that we commit a lot because we are enslaved to them and don't know how to have victory over them.

There are sins that woven into the way we think about life and need to be exposed by loving counsel, whether individually or corporately.

Let's think carefully about this portion of God's Word and the help it will bring to many who struggle with repeating the same old sins.

Confrontation: An Intervention Bringing Change (v.1-7)

In a few brief but startling words, Moses describes for us a familiar problem.

20 From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. ²And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. ³But 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." ⁴Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent people? ⁵Did 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

Its Repeated Failure (v.1-2)

Here are Abraham and Sarah with all their clan, traveling about the land they are to inherit. They have now moving through an area that was then known as Gerar whose king was a man named Abimelech. Once again, we are told that Abraham says that Sarah is his sister. And once again, the local king adds her to his harem.

Its Dramatic Warning (v.3-5)

God steps in and in a dream confronts Abimelech. The words here are startling and frightening. "You are a dead man..." Abimelech has not yet been with Sarah. God warns him not to touch her because she is another man's wife. Abimelech responds by protesting his innocence. He took her honestly not knowing she was married. He had been told that she was Abraham's sister. He has done it innocently and in integrity.

Now a couple of things strike me here:

God is moving to protect the purity of marriage and the completion of His promised plan. He intervenes to keep Sarah pure. When Sarah bears the promised child there will be no

question as to his paternity. Even in the midst of Abraham's sin, God's plan and purpose will not be thwarted.

God has allowed the situation to go this far. Here is heat in Abimelech and Abraham's lives. God is at work to show what is in their hearts. Rather than preventing this situation altogether, He moves through it to accomplish His plan and purpose.

So we need to take note of this. God is at work *even when people are sinning and even repeating a besetting sin*. Now this does not excuse Abraham nor make God the cause or culprit in Abraham's sin. So, God is at work in your life as well even in your sinning to expose your heart. Here, Abimelech is shown to be a man of integrity and innocence in this situation. Abraham is exposed as fearful, weak and deceptive.

So, God is at work in your life. When you choose your sin; when you go back and repeat the same old sins, God is at work to expose your heart to you and sometimes to others. Please hear me well – that does not excuse your sin. But it does mean that you are living your whole life before the face of God. With Abraham and with you, your king is not pleased and He is at work.

Its Divine Instruction (v.6-7)

." ⁶Then 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. Therefore I did not let you touch her. ⁷Now 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."

God responds to Abimelech's protest by saying, "I know you are innocent – I kept you from sinning. However, I am telling you to make this right." God instructs him to return Sarah and to ask for Abraham to pray for him. Further, God warns him strongly not to disobey. If he does not do what God has said, God will kill him.

Why such a strong warning? Because God's promises and purposes are at stake. We are seeing right in the text the mystery of how God works. He prevents Abimelech sinning with Sarah and warns him not to do it and return her. Sarah is going to bear the promised son. But God is going to great lengths, even in the midst of Abraham's sin, to protect and authenticate Sarah's virtue. Israel and all of God's people are being assured that there is no question that God will keep His promises, *even when people fail*.

Why such a strong warning? Because Abimelech, contrary to what Abraham thinks, actually does fear God. He does know and will respond to this great and awesome God. His fear of God is an important part of his conduct, his obedience. Yes, love for God and God's love for us are one part of what compels us to obey Him. Along with that a respect and reverence for the holy power and majesty of God also compels us to obey.

This is why the book of Hebrews is so powerful. Here is an amazing, loving God who died for His people. Here is a towering majesty, a consuming fire whom we serve and obey with holy awe and fear. So we do fear God, not in a servile fear or in unholy terror – it is not a psychological phobia. Holiness does not come from *theophobia*. Holiness comes from the fear of awe and the attribution of power and majesty. Maybe the reason we so easily go back to the same old sins is that we do not fear, do not have an awe and respect for God as we ought.

Submission: An Obedience Exposing Sin (v.8-13)

So, Abimelech obeys immediately. He gathers his household and servants, probably including his tribal leaders and informs them of what is going on. While it may not be obvious in the text, we have to remember that Abimelech is about to confront the most powerful tribal leader in the region and expose his lies. It is only prudent to inform his retinue before doing so.

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. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you did this thing?"

Its Probing Questions (v.8-10)

Then he summons Abraham and asks a series of probing and exposing questions. At the heart of the questions is nailing Abraham for putting Abimelech in a position so that he has transgressed against God. He is incredulous. What has he done that Abraham would put he and his clan under the judgment of God?

Then, God pronounces through Abimelech the decisive condemnation in verse 9. "You have done to me things that ought not to be done." Not the least of these is perpetrating a deceit that allowed Abimelech to take Sarah as his wife. Here is a man who is innocent and did act with integrity who now has the sword of God hanging over his life and family.

Once again, we are met with the power of wise and skilled questions to expose sin and uncover heart issues. Why and what questions aimed at uncovering motivations, exposing heart beliefs and wants are at the heart of Biblical change. I love that last question he asks, "What did you see that you did this?" You can hear the perplexity and anger in these questions.

Its Revealing Answers (v.11-13)

Abraham's answers give the reasons for his choices.

¹¹ 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.' ¹² Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, "He is my brother." ' "

Think about these three answers:

They don't fear God and thus I fear for my life. This reason was given when he went to Egypt. Right or wrong, he makes an evaluation that fuels his fear. Since they don't fear God, then they will do anything including killing me, to get my wife. Now this fear is probably grounded in a common practice in cultures around him. Yet, is this a symptom of a failure to trust God or to make wise decisions?

I am not really telling a lie. Sarah is his half-sister. Abraham is her half-brother. When he asserts this, he knows that the people they tell this to will then assume that she is available. The lie is not exactly in what he says, but in what he doesn't say. The effect is that the Pharaoh and Abimelech believed something that is not true and then acted on it

without Abraham and Sarah correcting them. So, he can say what he wants, but he intends to deceive others.

This is an agreement Sarah and I have. When Abraham and Sarah left Ur and Haran, Abraham got Sarah to agree to do this. They agreed that she would say, when asked, that Abraham was her brother. He seems to have persuaded her with an appeal to a woman's heart. "This is the kindness you can show me..." would come across a little bit like, "If you love me and want me to be around, then..."

This is the way we have always done this. Then the classic, "This is the way we have always done it all these years." Now, notice the phrase, "at every place to which we come." Does this mean that everywhere that they have gone where there was a powerful king, they have done this? Are the Egypt and Gerar incidents just the times that the king actually took Sarah? It is possible. It is also possible that he is trying to justify himself with another half-truth. In other words, "What is the big deal? We have done this everywhere and it has not been a problem. Sorry it has created a problem for you, but generally this has worked out."

Let's stop and think about how this relates to our own repeating of the same old sins over and over again.

Thematic Heart Issues

Thematic doubt, fear and not trusting in God are at the root of much-repeated sin. Many of you will go back to the same sins over and over again because you fear people instead of fearing God. Maybe you are going too far in dating relationship because you fear if you don't you'll lose your boyfriend. Maybe you keep drinking too much because you are afraid of losing your friends or being ridiculed by them. Maybe you don't give as you ought or minister as you can because you are fearful you won't be able to meet your bills or have the lifestyle or retirement you want. Can you see this in your life?

But it doesn't have to be fear. Maybe the reason you keep sinning is because there is another thematic heart issue. Fear of man is huge in causing people to crave affection, affirmation and approval. But there might also be coveting which fuels constant financial struggles, irresponsible buying splurges, sexual escapades and so on. Maybe a heart idol simply will not be taken down and destroyed.

Therefore, we need to look at those repeated sins, those besetting sins, and see if we can diagnose the underlying root. We should look in our Bibles for illustrations of these things and see how God deals with them. We should carefully study Romans 5-8 seeing how Paul deals with sin issues. We can talk to a wise Christian friend or a Biblical counselor. Maybe our spouses will be able to help. But make no mistake, it needs to be dealt with and straightaway.

Deceit and Lying

Most repeated sins involve deceit and lying. Many of these besetting sins are deceptions in themselves. People deceive their employers, their spouses, their churches in the process of committing their sins. Deceit and lying are one of the threads, one the colors in the fabric of their sin. The very great problem of deceit laden sins is that you will begin to deceive yourself. Thus, you become more and more blind to the sin and more and more skilled at the justifications.

Many of these besetting sins are covered and hidden with deceits. Lies are told to cover up both the committal of the sins and the consequences of the sins. You know what I mean: I remember the coming home late from a date and lying to my parents about having a flat tire. Listen, when you find yourself regularly coving up for a oft repeated sin, you need help. You need the kind of counsel that relies totally on the sufficiency of Christ and His Word.

So, It will require the clear confrontation with truth to penetrate the fog of these lies. People will have to lovingly and carefully speak truth over a long period of time. Sometimes God will break it by a kind of public exposure that brings radical heart repentance and lasting change.

Planning for our Sins

We too often have careful strategies in place that allow or even encourage our repeated sins. Abraham and Sarah have a strategy, a promise between them. They think they are mitigating a danger to Abraham. What they are doing is providing for sin. The practice of this deceit is the “default” action. They don’t have to consult. If they are in a hostile place and people are asking about the relationship between them, the answer is not, “He is my husband.” The answer is, “He is my brother.”

In all kinds of ways, people tend to strategize, knowingly or not, in order to return to their repeated sins. You make space on your calendars and in your schedules. You have that little stash of money that you don’t have to account for. You have that bookmark on your Web browser. You know what hotels to ask to stay at. You take a certain route home, go up and down certain aisles at the bookstore or in the library.

If we will deal with these little strategies, we will often go far to conquer our sins. These deceits and strategies are the ways, in the words of Romans 6, that we present ourselves as instruments of unrighteousness. Thus, we must repent by stopping our strategizing for sin and replacing it with strategies for righteousness. We must present ourselves as instruments of righteousness.

Habitual/Enslavement by our Sins

Repeated sins have become habitual and sometimes, even a part of our character. Many of us grew up with the label inherited from the wise Puritans of “besetting sins.” These are sins practiced so much that they have woven deep ruts into our heart and into our behavior. They are almost like sin mannerisms. While this is probably not a besetting, enslaving sin for Abraham, we will see this very clearly in the character and conduct of Jacob. Deceiving is just what Jacob does. It is his default setting.

So, many of you return over and over again to a besetting sin. Again, I point you to the great delivering truths of Romans 5-8. If you are a believer, you are in the new realm of Christ, under grace, a slave and child of God (Romans 5). You should not live as though you are still controlled by the old realm of the flesh. You must know this truth, surrender totally to your King, put off and put on by presenting you and your body to God (Romans 6). You also must not try to live in the old realm where the Law governed. If you do, the effect of trying to live by Law is to have the flesh stirred up to do what is being forbidden (Romans 7). Now you must live as having been delivered by the Lord Jesus Christ and live in the new realm by grace in the Spirit where being loved by God brings holiness and gives confidence no matter how hard it gets (Romans 8)

Here then is a word of hope – you do not have to be at the mercy of these sorts of sin. There is forgiveness, victory and freedom in the cross of Jesus Christ and in His enabling grace.

Declaration: A Vindication Leading to Ministry (v.14-18)

The final paragraph brings the conflict and tension to a resolution. In many ways, this seems so strange to us. After all, isn't the wrong person giving the gifts and making the pronouncements? Why is Abraham seeming to prosper even more during this time?

¹⁴Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. ¹⁵And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." ¹⁶To 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." ¹⁷Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. ¹⁸For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Its Generous Pronouncement (v.14-16)

Abimelech is obeying God. He is returning Sarah, untouched, as God commanded. He is also doing what his culture would expect. Even though he acted in innocence and integrity, in the eyes of others, he has wronged Abraham. He has taken his wife and now returns her along with a load of gifts. He opens up his lands for Abraham to live in. Here is a great generosity, not because of Abraham, but because of God.

Abimelech also declares publicly that Sarah is pure. He has not touched her. He vindicates her innocence. This is the point of this narrative. Sarah is solely Abraham's wife. She has never been with another man. This is critical because in the next chapter and presumably without much lapse of time, Sarah becomes pregnant with their son.

Its Intercessory Prayer (v.17-18)

Now that the issues are resolved Abraham intercedes for Abimelech. He has wronged this man. He has lied to him and allowed him to take his wife. He has then tried to excuse his behavior. Now, and I think decisively, he has been exposed and he will not do this again.

We now find out that because of taking Sarah, God has struck Abimelech's family and all his household with infertility. The irony here cannot be missed. Here is a barren wife, taken wrongly into another marriage, and God judges them with barrenness. But Abraham intercedes to God who heals them.

Are not the mercies of God wonderful? Is it not so very encouraging to know that God forgives and will hear our prayers? Why should God hear this lying patriarch and prophet? God hears him, not because he is righteous, but rather because of the righteousness of Another.

Reflect and Respond

I want, in closing, to give you some things think about as you respond to God's Word.

Give thanks that obstacles do not halt God's advances. Abraham has sinned again. He has put the purity of his wife and the lineage of his son in jeopardy. But God has moved to keep on advancing His purposes and His plans. This massive theme at the core of Genesis encourages me so much. There will be obstacles. But God is not halted and His purposes are not frustrated.

Recognize that most of us struggle with repeating some sin, often again and again. We really need the Word of God to penetrate our hearts. We need the counsel of loving brothers and sisters to show us the way. We will have the providence of God exposing us. So, we invite you to the hope that is in Christ and help that is available in this church.

Always acknowledge, when we are experiencing victory over sin, that it is God's good work in us by grace. He keeps us from our sin. He warns us so that we will not sin. He makes ways of escape so that we do not have to sin. If your heart is full this morning because you know that you used to have a besetting sin, let that be a heart full of humble gratitude not prideful self-congratulation.

Brothers and sisters, turn away from repeating the same old sins. Turn to walking in humble trust and radical obedience to your God and King.