

What the World Needs to Hear

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 22, 2021.

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Romans 4:13–25).¹

Paul makes two observations about God’s promise to Abraham and his offspring: First, that “he would be heir of the world,” and second, that his inheritance “did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” The first describes Abraham’s inheritance; the second describes the means by which it was received. But central to this statement is the “world,” a word that Paul uses to summarize the inheritance promised. What does Paul mean by the “world,” and why does he use it here?

As to an earthly inheritance, God promised Abraham “all the land of Canaan” (Gen. 17:8), quite an inheritance but hardly the world. Hebrews helpfully translates this earthly inheritance to the heavenly revealing that Abraham “was looking forward to the city with firm foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10 NET). This is a beautiful eternal perspective, but is the city of God the world?

Consider carefully the words of God’s original promise to Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). It’s the last part of this promise that I want to draw to your attention: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” In explaining this to the Galatians, Paul translates this Hebrew expression not as “all the families of the earth” but “all the nations” (Gal. 3:8). The Greek word translated “nations” is the word *ethnos*, which may also be translated “people” or “peoples,” connoting a variety of kind. It is here that we find the correlation with Paul’s use of the word “world,” a word that varies in meaning in the New

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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Testament based on context, but here means a variety of, or all kinds, of people. In other words, God's promise to Abraham includes blessing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev. 7:9) through Abraham.

But how can a variety of people be an inheritance to Abraham and his offspring? The key is in the singularity of "offspring." Paul explains this intricacy to the Galatians, saying, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). In other words, a blessed variety of people is Christ's inheritance through God's promise to Abraham, "a people for his own possession" (1Pet. 2:9), an offspring (plural) of the nations. And it is God's blessing to this people that comes not by works of the law but by faith in Christ, "who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification," and through whom we inherit eternal life.

This makes Jesus' familiar words to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John come to life: "For God so loved *the world*, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 emphasis added). As God promised to bless the world through Abraham so his offspring, who is Christ, has! And we look to him alone by faith. This is good news for the world!

But as good as this good news is to us, I fear that we have forgotten that the world needs it as much as we do. I fear that rather than preaching the gospel of God's grace we are demanding the works of the law, in complete contradiction to God's work in our life. We who have received grace and walk by faith are preaching law and demanding condemnation. Of course, you may disagree with me, but let me ask you a few searching questions. For example, do you stand against abortion but not tell a worried mother of the hope of eternal life? Do you oppose sexual perversion but not show the love of Christ to the least of these (Matt. 25:40)? Do you judge the thief but not share God's grace to the needy? Do you shame the liar but not tell the truth of forgiveness of sin? Do you condemn the coveter but not share the satisfaction of the riches of God's grace?

What I see so obviously today is that many conservative Christians have deceived themselves into believing that being salt and light means telling, posting, sharing, declaring what they oppose and what they hate most about the world. And in doing so, they have become nothing more than unloving legalists who stand at the shore of eternity tying burdens around the necks of our neighbors and then demanding that they swim across the ocean. Whether there is or there is not a Moral Majority, your neighbor's soul is for eternity. Whether the culture war is lost or won, we are called to surrender to the holy One.

What the world needs to hear is not your tirade over culture or your moral shaming but instead that your faith rests on grace. What the world needs to hear from you is that you hope not in works but by faith. What the world needs to hear from you is not more of your exalted opinions but that your faith glorifies God. What the world needs to hear is the gospel, and God has determined that they hear it from you.

Our Faith Rests on Grace

We are tempted to judge the world by the law and condemn our neighbor as a transgressor, but that is not how God dealt with Abraham; it's not how God dealt with you either. Abraham was called not for his obedience to the law but by God's grace. Abraham received God's promise not by performance or persuasion but by the unmerited favor of God. And "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). He was justified by faith, and faith comes by the grace of God.

What is true of Abraham is true of you: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring," including "the one who shares the faith of Abraham." That's you. That's me. That's everyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. Our faith rests not on what we have done, do, or will do for God but solely on God's grace in Christ.

What the world needs to hear from you is that your faith rests on grace. Tell them the truth:

you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following [not God but] the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature [not children of God but] children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

Don't be afraid that this is your past, because you are not defined by it. You can look the world squarely in the eyes and humbly say, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5). The world needs to hear that your life is not defined by your past but by God's presence.

It's true that the world will not hear you if you are demeaning, ridiculing, or insulting. It's true that no one was ever shamed or argued into the Kingdom of Heaven. That's why we must lift our heads above the fray and regain our gospel-centered orientation. Stop ruining your witness and start living as crucified (Gal. 2:20). When you are tempted to judge the world by the law and condemn your neighbor as a transgressor, remember that it is God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." Thankfully, you are not the one who created *ex nihilo* nor who resurrects the dead. God is, and he can save the vilest of sinners, like you and me, by his grace. So, our faith rests on grace and in it we hope.

We Hope by Faith

We are tempted to render the world hopeless by the law and render our neighbor eternally condemned, but that is not how God dealt with Abraham; it's not how he dealt with you either. Consider that everything practically speaking was not in favor of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. He was an aged, childless nomad whose wife was barren. How could he be "the father of many nations" without a child? Who wouldn't have a sense of hopelessness in Abraham's circumstances?

But the faith that God gave Abraham did not falter, as it never will, but grew: “[Abraham] did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God. He was fully convinced that what God promised he was also able to do” (Rom. 4:20-21 NET). Therefore, “In hope [Abraham] believed against hope.” Though his circumstances shouted hopelessness, Abraham had hope, not because he looked to himself and his faithfulness but because he looked to the One who promised.

You and I like Abraham, may be tempted to look around at the world around us and feel discouraged, even hopeless. But this comes not by faith but by focusing on self, obsessing over circumstances, and forgetting to trust the Lord. We may be tempted to ignore God’s provision and in desperation take matters into our own hands, like Abraham and Sarah with Hagar (Gen. 16:2-4). But this merely breeds distrust, animosity, and cynicism, which blesses neither you nor the world.

What the world needs to hear from you is that you hope by faith. The world needs to hear that while the law brings wrath, the gospel brings hope, that while the law condemns, “There is...no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). You can testify by faith that “the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). You may even admit your own temptation to “live according to the flesh” (Rom. 8:5) and to play the judge demanding obedience to the law, but don’t stay there too long... Because what the world needs to hear is a lot less about you and more about how “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:3-4a).

Instead of attempting to shout and shame your neighbor into moral submission, why not open up and vulnerably admit that while “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). And because of this promise, you hope by faith, a faith that glorifies God.

Our Faith Glorifies God

We are tempted to vilify the world for dishonoring God, but that is not how God dealt with Abraham; it’s not how God dealt with you either. God’s promise rests not on the world’s faithlessness but on God’s faithfulness. What he promised, he would fulfill, and so he did. Let us not forget that “those whom [God] predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30), so from eternity past to eternity future God is always faithful. This Abraham believed, waiting on the Lord, for years. And so, he was strengthened as his faith grew, trusting the Lord no matter what.

Abraham was dependent upon the Lord. From leaving his land, people, and family to living a nomadic life, from believing the promise despite his old age and his wife’s condition, Abraham trusted the Lord. Did he doubt at times? Can you say, “Ishmael” (Gen. 16)? Did he question occasionally? Can you say, “number the stars” (Gen. 15:5)? But the Lord preserved Abraham and he persevered, and so God was glorified. For, God is glorified in us when we are dependent upon him.

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What the world needs to hear from you is that your faith glorifies God. In God's mercy, he did not give you what you deserve, and so he gets the glory. In God's grace, he gave you what you did not deserve, and so he gets the glory. When the world hears from you of God's mercy and grace, God gets the glory.

Indeed, the world is full of sinful and wicked deeds, breaking God's perfect law by the nanosecond. And there is no question that the wages of their sin is death. But you are neither judge nor executioner—just a sinner saved by God's mercy and grace. What the world needs to hear from you is that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

Ultimately, what the world needs to hear from us is that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Abraham believed God's promise looking forward to its fulfillment in Christ (John 8:56). We believe God's promise looking back to its fulfillment in Christ. This promise we carry to our neighbor and the nations.

For God so loved the world, so then shall we.