

The Virtue of Hypocrisy
Genesis 15:6
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God makes the covenant – Genesis 15:6

‘And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? There is often an uncertainty, an ambiguity, as to the sequence of things as life unfolds. As we saw a few weeks ago, Abraham is known as the Father of faith for, as Genesis 15:6 tells us, Abraham believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. We are called to follow Abraham’s example: believe God, believe in God’s promises to us. Abraham’s belief, his faith, is essential. But is it first? Is it primary? Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Abraham’s belief is essential, but his belief is based upon God’s promise in Genesis 15:5. And [God] brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abraham’s faith is based upon the promise given to him by God. The story of faith begins when Abraham believes God’s word. Both are needed: Abraham’s faith *and* God’s promise. Abraham’s faith is founded upon God’s promise.

Abraham provides the model, the paradigm, the pattern for all men and women of faith who follow after him. Abraham has a need. God promises to meet Abraham’s need. Abraham believes God. He believes God’s promise to

him. And upon that act of faith, God grants to Abraham salvation. Abraham believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. What God requires is belief, faith, trust. God does not require great sacrifice, mighty deeds, noble efforts or outstanding accomplishments. He requires faith. He asks that we look to him, be in relationship with him. The only thing that we are required to bring to God is ourselves. What God wants from us is to be in an on-going relationship with him. God makes the covenant. He calls us to believe in him. But that is just the first step. God next calls us to walk in the covenant.

God call us to walk in the covenant – Genesis 17:1

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless

Abraham is the Father of faith. Abraham’s story is told in Genesis chapters twelve through twenty-five. The story begins when Abraham is living in the land of Haran and God calls him to leave his hometown and travel to the land of promise, to Canaan. Note the sequence and the time-stamp in the story of Abraham. Abraham leaves Haran when he is about seventy-five years old. God promises to give Abraham an heir, a son, Abraham believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. Twenty-four years go by. When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. It is important to note that when we are told that Abraham believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness that that is the beginning of the story. Abraham’s belief starts things going. Abraham walks with God. Twenty-five years pass between the promise given and its fulfilment. Abraham does what God tells him to do: walk before me, and be blameless. Abraham believed God and

walked before God. He did so day in and day out, for years, for the rest of his life.

As Christians, we believe and preach that salvation is based upon the work of Christ alone, through faith alone. We do not earn salvation by our works. We do not convince God to save us because we are 'good people' morally 'above average' or 'well intentioned.' Our faith is not based upon *what we do*. Like Abraham, we believe God and trust that he will count it to us as righteousness. But it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that a person is saved simply because he or she one time prayed a sinner's prayer; or went forward at an evangelistic rally; or was confirmed and joined the church. Those are good things. We want people to do them. But, they are not good *in themselves*. Each is good only if it is the beginning of our walk before [God]. God tells Abraham to walk before me, and be blameless. Why does he add be blameless?

Abraham believed God and counted it to him as righteousness. In walking before God, Abraham continues in God's sight as righteous, blameless. Salvation is not founded upon something that we *one time* did. That would be salvation by works: I am saved because I *once* prayed a prayer; or I *once* went forward at a rally. Salvation is based upon belief in God's word to us and walk[ing] before [God], and be[ing] blameless. Abraham's belief in God set him on the path of *walking before* God. He lived his life before God's face. This walk is a lifelong commitment. We pick up the story of Abraham when he is seventy-five years old. He lives to be about one hundred and seventy-five. Abraham believed God and walked with him for one hundred years, until his death.

God called Abraham and established the covenant with him. He instructs Abraham to walk before him, to live his life before God's face. Nothing has changed. God calls us to

trust in his covenant, as it has now been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. He calls us to walk before him, trusting in Christ. Next, God gave to Abraham the sign of the covenant, circumcision. He gives to us the sign of the New Covenant, baptism.

God gives the sign of the covenant – Genesis 17:10

¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, the world was shocked when the rulers destroyed two large statues of the Buddha. In recent months in Iraq the Islamic State has destroyed the city of Palmyra, ancient Christian monasteries and churches, and even the traditional site of the home of the prophet Jonah. In Saudi Arabia, there is even a movement to destroy sites associated with the history of the religion of Islam – among them the planned demolition of the home of the prophet Muhammed! Radical Muslims, especially those influenced by the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia, believe that all that is needed is adherence, submission, to the requirements of Islam, here and now, in the present. All that is required is that people live their lives and society be organized as dictated by the Koran and the traditions of Islam. There is no need for a connection to history, or the preservation of historical sites – especially sites association with religions other than Islam!

Indeed, an important contrast between the Bible and the Koran is that there are no theophany's in the Koran. A theophany is when God manifests himself to his people in some way. God appears to Abraham repeatedly. God appeared to Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. The greatest theophany in the Bible is the birth of Jesus Christ.

He is God incarnate. The Koran does not speak of Allah appearing to his people. There is a greater distance between Allah and his followers. Muslims believe that the Koran was given by Allah to Muhammed, but it was dictated to the prophet by the angel Gabriel. Even in giving the Koran, Allah is still far off, distant, known only through an intermediary.

In contrast to the spiritual starkness of Islam, the Bible recognizes the fullness of our humanity. We are embodied people. We need physical signs to assist us in the expression of our faith. Under the old covenant, circumcision for males was the physical sign of being part of God's covenant. Today, in the church age, that sign is baptism, for both males and females.

Faith, belief, is an unseen reality. How do we show what is present in our heart, or in our mind? How do we reveal our faith and trust in God? Under the old covenant, the practice of circumcision indicated the passing on of the covenant from one generation to the next. A baby boy would arrive and eight days later, in a religious ceremony called a bris, the boy would be circumcised. A new generation arrives in the form of a baby boy and the first thing that the parents do is the ceremony reaffirms the covenant with God. The covenant was passed on from one generation to the next. Circumcision was a physical act that marked a Jewish man as belonging to the community of Judaism. It was a sign and seal of being a part of the covenant God had established with Abraham.

And, it was a source of pride and confidence for the Jewish community. And in that, an issue arises. It is needed that the outward sign reflects an inner reality.

The outward sign is to reflect an inner reality –

Deuteronomy 10:12 - 14

¹²“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.

The Old Testament does not talk much about life after death. The belief was that when a person died, they went to the place of the dead, Sheol. A euphemism for death was sleep. The dead would sleep with their fathers. When we sleep we continue to exist, but our reality in sleep is circumscribed by dreams, passivity, and waiting. Sheol was not a place of punishment. It was a waiting area, a holding cell. At some point, the possibility of punishment after death began to develop. The imagery to describe death as a place of punishment was Gehenna. Originally Gehenna was a valley outside the walls of Jerusalem. It was reached by going out the Dung Gate. It was the city garbage dump. It may also have been associated with child sacrifice as well. It smelled. It was not a pleasant place. The idea arose that punishment after death would be unpleasant, like the valley of Gehenna.

If Gehenna was the place of punishment after death, the natural question would be “Who gets sent there?” There was an ancient Jewish saying that “*No person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna.*” This saying does not answer the question regarding who ends up in Gehenna, but it does provide a guarantee that Jews (or at least Jewish men), would not end up there. And therein lies the problem.

It will always be a temptation to put too much weight and authority in the outward sign alone. “*No person who is*

circumcised will go down to Gehenna.” “In order to be saved, you must be baptized, by immersion.” “I may not practice my faith much, but I pay my tithe, my name is on the church roll book.” [Yes, but is it written in the Lamb’s Book of Life?] “To be fully Christian requires a second blessing, being baptized in the Spirit, speaking in tongues.” Let me tell you a funny, though sad, story about that last illustration. I had a conversation years ago with a Pentecostal fellow who was quite adamant about the need to be “baptized in the Spirit” and to speak in tongues. He was actively ‘evangelizing’ me to pray for the spiritual gift of the tongues. At some point in the conversation I mentioned John Stott, commenting about how he was such an outstanding Bible teacher. My friend agreed, adding, “Just think of how great he will be once he gets baptized in the Spirit?” 😊

As embodied persons, we draw strength and insight from spiritual signs. The signs are to point us to spiritual truth, inner reality. But, for the outward sign to have true substance, it must be connected to a true, inner reality. The outward sign is seen. The inner reality is unseen. The outer sign has value only if it truly connected, reflective of the inner spiritual reality. The outer sign requires the inner reality to give it fullness of meaning. The outward sign has value in and of itself (because it points to the inner spiritual reality) but it only finds completion when both realities, seen and unseen, are present.

It is at this point that we find another significant contrast between the Christian faith and radical Islam. Radical expressions of Islam are interested primarily in the outward expression of belief: have you confessed that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammed is his prophet? Do you pray five times a day? Have you made your pilgrimage, the Haji, to Mecca? And so on. What you and your heart

may think regarding these expressions of Muslim duty is of secondary importance. Do you do them?

And, sometimes we Christians make the mistake of contrasting Judaism and Christianity by saying that in Judaism all that mattered was obedience, observance of the Law of Moses. And, certainly, observing the law was important. But God never wanted the *mere* observance of the law. The book of Deuteronomy sums up what God expected of the Jewish people. Deuteronomy, by the way, is a collection of three sermons preached by Moses to the Jewish people. Moses asks rhetorically, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? The keeping of the commandments is not an end in itself. Keeping the commandments was in order to walk in God's ways, to love him and serve him. The outward keeping of the law was connected to the inner reality of loving God and walking with him.

God gives the covenant. God calls us to walk in the covenant. God gives the outward sign of the covenant which, for us in the church age, is baptism. That outward sign is important. It has value. But, the outward sign's full importance is only realized when it is matched to the inner spiritual reality to which it points. Next, somewhat surprisingly, what is required of us is what God must give.

**What is required of us is what God must give –
Deuteronomy 30:6**

⁶And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

The imagery of circumcision provides a powerful reinforcement of the need for a connection between the seen and the unseen world. In this verse from Deuteronomy, and in a couple of other places in the Old Testament, God's people are told that they need to circumcise their heart. The reference is to the legendary stubbornness of the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. An uncircumcised heart is a stubborn heart. In other places the biblical writers speak of people with uncircumcised lips, meaning they do not speak rightly or well. The prophet Jeremiah (6:10) writes of those with uncircumcised ears they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it. It was true for the ancient Jews, and it is true for us, we are not the men and women whom we ought to be. We must learn to love God. We must be taught to hear his word. We need to be remade in order to speak truth, to speak words of grace.

In our own power, by our own resources, what is required of us is impossible. We are not the men and women we ought to be and, in our own power and by our own efforts, we are incapable of becoming the persons whom we ought to be. God understands this. God knows our weakness and need. Moses tells us (Deuteronomy 30:6) And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. What we need, God must give. And, note that the promise given by God is covenantal: it is given to Moses' hearers and their offspring.

If you have walked with God. If you continue to walk with God. You can say with confidence that God is at work in your life. I remember hearing R.C. Sproul take a call on his radio program where the caller was comparing his own

spiritual walk against some very high standards. This man was beating himself for his failure to measure against these high spiritual standards. R. C. redirected his focus. He asked the man, "Do you love God at all?" The man replied, "Yes. Of course." R. C. reassured him that he was on the right path. What did God require of Abraham? Abraham was to walk before me, and be blameless. Yes, we are not the men and women whom we ought to be. But do you love God at all? What we need, God must give. And, the fact that you are here in worship this morning is an indicator that God is at work in your life. He is giving you what you need.

All this brings us to our last point this morning. You may find it surprising. I want to speak about the virtue of hypocrisy, for it drives us to God.

The virtue of hypocrisy – it drives us to God – Romans 2:25 - 29

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God

Many times I have heard people say to me "I do not go to church. Churches are full of hypocrites." I always reply, "I agree. Come anyway; one more will not matter." Hypocrisy goes hand in hand with the work of the church. We are not the men and women we ought to be. We aspire to more than we can achieve. We are born into a covenant community

and we learn to take our place within it. We are all better or worse than our theology. We are all hypocrites. Say “Amen!” somebody! 😊

Circumcision taught a spiritual truth. It marked one as being part of the covenant community. Baptism has value. To be baptized as an infant says that you were born into a household where at least one person confessed faith in Jesus Christ. You began your life as part of the covenant community. Your baptism set you on the pathway to God as a child of the covenant. At the same time, what we believe and teach is that what we need God must give. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot circumcise our own hearts. Apart from Christ we are spiritually dead. If we are to be reborn, God must do it. If it is to happen, God will be behind it. God acts. We react.

At this point I want to address what I see as an error of application in our understanding of Reformed Theology. We believe, rightly, that salvation is entirely the work of God. We do not contribute to it. We do not add anything to the work of Christ. The Bible clearly teaches these truths. At the same time, the error of application of occurs when we choose to be completely passive: thinking “God does it all, so I am not going to do anything at all.” No. That is not a correct application of Reformed Theology.

You may have heard the story about the faithful elderly Christian who was caught in his home as a storm was approaching. His neighbor offered him a to evacuate before the storm arrived in its fullness. The man thanked him, but said “No,” adding “the Lord will provide.” The flood waters began to rise and another neighbor offered the man a chance to escape with him in his canoe. Again, the man turned him down, saying “The Lord will provide.” The power

went out. The flood waters increased and the man's house was washed away, with him in it and he drowned. Standing before St. Peter at the Pearly Gates the man expressed his surprise that he had died. "I truly thought that the Lord would provide." St. Peter looked at his notes and said that he was surprised too. "It says here that the Lord sent to you a neighbor with a car **and** another neighbor with a canoe."

God is at work in our world and in our lives through ordinary means. He sends a neighbor with a car, or another with a canoe. God is not like Zeus. He does not, normally, send a lightning bolt. He works through ordinary means. What this means practically is that in our need, the important thing is to bring our needs to God's throne. Bring the need before God; and in doing so, you bring yourself into God's presence. Becky Pippert once suggested to a friend that she begin having "Pagan quiet times." Becky's friend did not believe in Christ at that point. But she was willing to take up the challenge. Each day she read a bit from the Bible and then she would speak to the four walls saying, "God, if you are there, reveal yourself to me." Then one day, she read Matthew 5:40 – 41 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. The young woman puzzled over this. She said to the four walls "Jesus, why would you say that?" Later that day she found herself in a situation where another person was attempting to cheat her from something that rightfully belonged to her. As the confrontation unfolded, she remembered Jesus' words. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. She let it go. She let herself be cheated. As she did so, she found that her unbelieving heart had been transformed. She believed.

Where are you in your walk of faith today? Do you

believe. Are you a skeptic? Do want to believe, but find yourself tripped up by doubts? Does your wife believe, but you are not sure? Is your husband faithful, but you are hesitant? What I want to say is this: be honest with God and with yourself. Interact with God. Ask him to be at work. We often minimize the role that asking plays in our spiritual lives. Abraham had a need for a son, an heir. He asked God. What need do you have? Lift it to the divine throne. Interact with God.

You may be thinking to yourself, “Pastor Mark how can I do that? I have too many doubts. I am not sure what I believe, or *if* I believe. How can I do that?” I am not asking you to believe. I am asking you to be honest. Honest with yourself. Honest before God – or the four walls. Whatever your need might be, lift it up. Test God. Ask him to be at work in your life. See how God might meet you in the challenges you face today.

Say “Amen!” Somebody.

Prayer of Response

O God of love, we give thanks to you that you illumine our way through life with the words of your Son. Give us the light we need, awaken us to the needs of others, and at the end bring all the world to your feast; through

Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen.

Deuteronomy 10:12 – 22

¹²“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. ¹⁵Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. ¹⁶Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. ¹⁷For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ²⁰You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. ²²Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.

Mark 7:20 – 23

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Deuteronomy 6:5

⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Deuteronomy 9:6

⁶ “Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people