

## **Your Honor, If I May...**

### *The Gospel According to Abraham, Pt. 6*

We're looking at the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis. And we will wrap things up next week. We took a break last week for our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary message, but before that, we left Abraham and Sarah entertaining three strangers that showed up at their tent flap who turned out to be "the Lord" and two angels. And today's story involves the departure of those three visitors, and I just want to go ahead and read you the text, because it's going to give us a lot to discuss. So, **Genesis 18:16–33:**

*"When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. 17 Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? 18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.*

*19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." 20 Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."*

*22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. 23 Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are 50 righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people in it?"*

*25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" 26 The LORD said, "If I find 50 righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."*

*27 Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, 28 what if the number of the righteous is five less than 50? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find 45 there," he said, "I will not destroy it." 29 Once again he spoke to him, "What if only 40 are found there?" He said, "For the sake of 40, I will not do it."*

*30 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only 30 can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find 30 there." 31 Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only 20 can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of 20, I will not destroy it."*

*32 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only 10 can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of 10, I will not destroy it." 33 When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.*

Now, let's face it, this is a very weird passage. For all the world, God and Abraham look like two people in a marketplace haggling over the price of melons. And the strangeness of it is partly because, though on the one hand this is a prayer...In fact, this is actually the first extended prayer in the Bible, the first recorded prayer in which a human being goes before God with petitions.

But the reason it's so strange and it bears a lot of thinking and reflection is because more than prayer is going on here. We *will* learn about prayer if we look at this. You can learn quite a *bit* about prayer as you look at this, but there is more. Abraham is not just praying, as we're going to see. He is "priesting." He has been invited to be the legal representative of a particular city before the almighty God, and *that's* what's so intriguing here.

Now one of our problems is the word "priest" to us is a very fuzzy word. It's a very fuzzy category. But as we go along, I think it will get clearer and clearer what a priest is. So let's talk about this text this way. Let's find what this text tells us about the first priest. Now Abraham is not technically the first priest. There is this mysterious guy named Melchizedek, who we didn't talk about. He is in Genesis 14. But this is the first example, the first case study, of priestly activity.

This passage is going to tell us about the *first* priest, and then the *Great* Priest to whom Abraham points, and then finally the *new* priests we could become if we understand the whole text properly. So we're going to learn here about the *first* priest, the *Great* Priest, and the *new* priests.

**First point, The First Priest.** As we look at the first priest - the first example of priestly work - we see, on the one hand, God *inviting* Abraham into this priestly work and then Abraham *executing* it in a surprising way. God invites him in, and then he carries it out in a very surprising way. First of all, God invites Abraham in.

In the beginning of this passage, we see the three visitors get up - remember they are "The Lord" and two angelic messengers - and they begin to walk toward Sodom and Gomorrah, which is where Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family live. And at this point, God shows Abraham that He is going down to these cities to *judge* them. And why is God going to judge them?

Well, it says there was an outcry, and that's up here in **v. 20.** "*The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin is so grievous...*" Now the Jewish Hebrew expert I've been consulting each week, Robert Alter, in his commentary on Genesis, says the word for outcry here is a Hebrew word that's used throughout the Bible to indicate "the shrieks of torment of the oppressed", the victims of cruelty, violence, and injustice.

And that goes along perfectly well with what the prophet Ezekiel indicates was basically the reason Sodom was judged. **Ezekiel 16:49** says, “*Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.*” See, that goes along with this idea of outcry.

Now, chances are that’s *not* the reason *you* thought Sodom and Gomorrah were judged. And that’s because certain societies tend to focus on sexual sins – sometimes to the exclusion – of other things that the Bible calls out as sin. But yes, there is a culture of sexual violence in that city – literally a rape culture. And that’s part of the outcry. It’s a sin to abuse people sexually and it’s a sin to abuse people economically. One commentator says, “Social immorality plays as large a role in the Sodom story as does sexual immorality.” (Victor Hamilton, *NICOT*, 21). We have to see the whole story.

And so God says, “The outcry of the people who are being *crushed*, who are being violated, who are the victims of the violence and the cruelty and the injustice of these societies is so great that I’m going down to see if this means judgment.” And if you read the next chapter – which we won’t – you will see that God did indeed judge Sodom and Gomorrah. With

Lot and his family barely escaping the destruction of those cities.

Now at this point, there are some people who say, “Wait. I don’t believe in a *judging* God. I believe in a *merciful* God. But look. Outcry of the oppressed! In other words, if you have a God who *never* judges, you don’t *have* a merciful God. You can’t be simplistic with God. Austinites hate being simplistic – we embrace nuance - so don’t do that with God.

Don’t pit being merciful and being just against each other. “I don’t believe in a judging God. I believe in a merciful God.” But if you have a merciful God who hears the cry of the oppressed and He won’t judge, then He is not merciful! You can’t pit these things against each other. A God who never judges isn’t merciful. And this God in His mercy and His justice is going down because of the outcry for judgment.

*But...* what’s so intriguing here is God *invites* the intervention of Abraham. He says, “I’m going down to determine whether to judge the cities.” But he invites the intervention and the interaction with Abraham in three ways. Look at it, first of all, in v. 17, God is talking out loud - He says, “*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?*”

And by the way, if you ever look at somebody and you say, “I don’t know if I should tell you this,” when you say that, you’ve already decided to tell them. And you’re just really showing them that you trust them. Secondly, notice verse 22 where the Lord sends the other two away so He and Abraham are totally alone. That’s a way to invite you to open and to talk.

But very interestingly, you notice the Lord says in v. 21, “*I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.*” That little phrase “if not” is an invitation to Abraham to have a discussion. He is really saying, “I’m thinking about this.” So over and over again, God, in spite of the fact that He says, “I’m going to judge,” invites Abraham to step forward and intervene.

So God invites Abraham in. And Robert Alter says in v. 23 when it says, “*Then Abraham approached him...*” that word “approached” is a significant word. It’s a technical term. You’d probably even notice that if you were reading it in English here, because see, he says Abraham was *standing* before the Lord. *Then* Abraham approached him. Well, now if he was already before the Lord, what does it mean that he is approaching him? Was he a foot away, and he went to six inches away?

Robert Alter said the word approach is a technical term that means “to approach the bench”. It means to come with a case. It’s a legal term. You could read Abraham as saying here, “Your honor, if I may approach the bench?” God has invited Abraham to intervene on behalf of Sodom and be their legal representative.

And so Abraham takes up this priesthood, takes up being the representative of the people of the wicked cities – by the way, if you’re a defense attorney and people ask you “how you can defend wicked, guilty people”, you could always take them to Genesis 18...of course, you could also take them to Jesus on the cross. But anyway, then Abraham *executes* this priesthood in a way that’s very surprising in three ways. It’s surprising because his prayer for them, his pleading for them, is so *universal*, so *theological*, and so ultimately *limited*.

First, this is an incredibly **universal** prayer. Do you see what he is arguing for? He is *not* just asking that God would spare *his* family. He doesn’t say, “Could you please take Lot and my family out and then nuke the rest of those dirty pagans?” He is not doing that! Why not? He could have. He doesn’t. He is doing something remarkable.

In verse 24, he says, would you “spare the place”? Gordon Wenham, in his very scholarly commentary on Genesis, says: “In interceding for Sodom, Abraham is portrayed as fulfilling a role particularly associated with prophets. We have already noted verbal links with Moses great intercession in Exodus 32. Samuel, Amos, and Jeremiah also pleaded with God on the nation's behalf. Here Abraham is not praying for his own people (he does not mention Lot) but for Sodom, and this makes this episode unique among prophetic intercessions.” (Word Biblical Comm., Vol. 2, 53.)

Now that’s very interesting. Do see what he is saying? He is *not* saying, “Just get my people out.” He says every other version of priesthood you see, where Samuel intercedes and Jeremiah and Moses and Amos, they’re always pleading for *their* people - for believers, for their nation, for their race. But *Abraham* is saying, “I don’t just want you to save my friends. I don’t want you to save my family. Would you spare *the place*?” This is remarkably universal, but that’s not all.

Secondly, it’s remarkably **theological**. Abraham is doing a *remarkable* theological exploration, and here’s why. He is not just praying; he is a lawyer. He is the defense attorney for the people. And here’s how a defense attorney starts.

The defense attorney assumes the law as a given. Right? In other words, a lawyer doesn’t come in and say to the judge, “Judge, my client is guilty of breaking this law I know, but don’t you think it’s a stupid law? I think it’s a stupid law.”

In a court, that’s irrelevant. You have to start with a law. And Abraham starts with the justice of God. In that very famous passage, v. 25, he says, “*Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” That’s not a questioning of the justice of God. He is not saying, “Well, I don’t know that you’re really just.” That’s a rhetorical question. What he is saying is, “Of course you’re just.” He says, “You are a law-giving God. You are a *righteous* God. You *cannot* ignore the law. You cannot overlook. You *demand* righteousness.”

That’s his starting point, *but then...* he moves on. And this is what he says in an astounding little question. Look at v. 24, “*Will you...not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people in it?*” He says, “Will you not spare?” And the Hebrew word for “spare” here is the word *forgive*. We already said “the place” refers to the whole group. So will you not forgive the whole, for “the sake of” the righteous few? “Will you not forgive the unrighteous many for *the sake of* the righteous few?”

And this is the astounding thing that Abraham is saying. Abraham is saying, “I’m not looking for salvation for these people *in spite* of your righteousness. You are a God who values righteousness. Here’s what I’m asking. Could you value the righteousness of the few *so much* that it covers the unrighteousness of the many? Could you spare and forgive the *whole city* for a righteous remnant inside it?”

Abraham is saying this, “Is our record all we have to go on?” If you have a record and you have *failed* the law of God, is that it? Or is it *possible* that the righteousness of someone else could cover you and save you? “I know you’re a righteous God,” says Abraham, “I’m not trying to get around that, but what I want to know is could the righteousness of someone *else*...the righteousness of the few...save the unrighteous, undeserving many?” That’s what he was looking for.

And I want to show you why this is amazing. The reason a lot of us - in fact, the reason I - have for so many years missed the gist of what Abraham is doing here is because we live in a Western culture. Especially as Americans, we live in one of the most individualistic cultures there has ever been.

What I mean by an individualistic culture is we really deny the idea of corporate responsibility. We believe in individual responsibility. See, Western people say, “It doesn’t matter what my father did or what my grandfather did. It doesn’t matter what my race did. It doesn’t matter what my country has done. I am not responsible for what *anyone* else has done. No one else’s record can influence me. I stand or fall - I am judged - strictly on what *I* have done. I am responsible for *myself* and that’s that.”

Now that’s very American. That’s very Western. That might seem right to you, but I want you to realize that most of the people in most places in the history of the world and even today have always had a more balanced view, and so does the Bible. The balanced view is, *of course*, individual responsibility is true. Of course, every culture says, as an individual, you take responsibility for what you have done, *but* virtually every other culture, *and* the Bible, says there’s also corporate responsibility.

That the record of other people you are in solidarity with, that you *participate* in some degree in that. We get really bent out of shape as Americans. And here you’re just being ethnocentric if you refuse to see what you are. For instance, as modern Westerners, we read the Bible, and we see a places like the story in Joshua chapter 7 where the Israelites conquer the small Canaanite town of Ai.

And God always says, “I do not want you to be imperialistic like other people. When you defeat a country, when you defeat a city, all the wealth goes into the tabernacle for the Lord’s work and for the alms and for the tithes. It all goes in there. You do not make yourself rich by plundering other people in the kind of imperialistic, colonial way.”

God told the Israelites when they were coming in and taking over Canaan that they were not going to do it in the imperialistic way other people did it. So He says, “When you go into a town and overthrow it, you don’t keep the money for yourself.” But a man named Achan takes pile of money and hides it under his tent, breaking the law of God. And when it’s discovered, his whole family is executed.

And Americans think that is horribly, terribly unjust. But most of the people in the rest of the world don’t see it as out of the ordinary really. Of course there has to be a cultural responsibility, not just individual, or what kind of society can we have? This is very current. This applies to our current conversations about race. African Americans say if you’re white, you are participating in the privilege of being white, which has been brought to you by decades of unjust behavior by your ancestors in the history of this country. You are living off of that.

African Americans *do* believe in corporate responsibility. White Americans don’t want to believe it. And the Bible says there *is* such a thing as corporate responsibility. That the record of someone else with whom I have some solidarity actually does come to me, and I experience some responsibility. This is why Paul can say, when Adam sinned, *we all* sinned. The responsibility for unrighteousness flows downhill.

And Abraham knows that, *but* here Abraham is asking this fantastic question: “Could it work in reverse? If it’s true that *the sins* of others could come on to me and make me guilty, what about the possibility that *the righteousness* of someone else who I am in solidarity with could come to me as well?” And what Abraham is doing is theological exploration, and it’s radical. And it’s amazing.

Abraham, in this passage, is not moving from corporate responsibility to the individualism of the West. He’s not saying, “Could we have it every person for themselves?” Oh no. Abraham realizes that even being judged on his own individual record won’t save him either. He is saying, “Is my only hope my own record, or does the righteousness-loving God love righteousness so much that the righteousness of *someone else* could save me?”

And how far will that principle go? Abraham keeps saying, “Do you love the righteousness of 40 people, 20 people, 10 people *so* much that for their sake you’d spare the unrighteous many?” And to Abraham’s astonishment, over and over and over again God continues to say, “Yes. So great, so predominant is my will to save over my will to punish that I can love the righteousness of the few, and with it, cover the unrighteousness of the many.” Abraham is looking for that, and that’s an *amazing* thing.

And so this prayer is universal, it’s theological, but – unfortunately – it’s also **limited**. See, Abraham is negotiating with God. You know, Abraham is considered the first Jew, and my Rabbi says this passage is the only appropriate place to use the phrase, “He Jewed him down.” That’s terrible, but it is funny. And so just when Abraham seems to be getting a better and better deal...he goes home. And here’s what’s so strange. He gets to 10...and that’s it!

Now see, the fact of the matter is, Abraham *didn’t* save Sodom. His high priesthood – his legal argument - didn’t work, but here’s why. Think about this. Abraham’s prayer is like an unfinished symphony. It’s sort of like a scale going up seven notes. You just get the eighth note, and then you stop. And we all would feel like...You see, what are we waiting for in this dialogue? What should the climax be that we never hear?

We’re waiting for Abraham to say, “Lord God, I will speak one more time. How amazing that the righteousness loving but gracious God would save the city for 50, for 40, for 30, for 20, for 10. But, oh Lord, would you save for *one*? For one! Could *one* righteous person be enough to save the whole?” And we’re waiting for that question. “Would you save for one?” And we’re waiting for God to say, “Yes!” But Abraham doesn’t ask it. He goes home at 10. Why?

Well, everybody asks that question. And I think one possibility is Abraham just realized what he was doing, and he just lost his nerve. I mean, you can see it in the language. It could be Abraham finally said to himself, “What am I *doing*? Why would I press beyond this?” He just lost his nerve and went home.

But it’s also a possibility he began to realize if it did get down to one, the only one he had was Lot. And see, everybody in that city - even Lot, who was a believer and who was not cruel and vicious and oppressive and so on – but even Lot is only *relatively* righteous. So Abraham had learned a principle, and it was an amazing principle: that the righteousness of someone else could save an unrighteous person. It’s almost like Abraham discovered a path through seemingly impregnable mountains - the mountains of God’s justice - but he couldn’t walk it himself. Because he didn’t *have* one truly righteous person in the center of the city to ask God about. So he went home – his priesthood did not succeed.



You and I, however, know that we need a priest who eternally stays before God. And we need a priest who doesn't just *know* about that case but who *executes* the case. You see, the Bible - in fact, the New Testament - says this is the "good news", that as great as Abraham was, he wasn't able to save Sodom because we need a greater priest.

**That's the second point, The Great Priest.** And here's who that priest is - as we all know. It's Jesus. Let's compare. Abraham prayed for people who *could* have hurt him. It's amazing that he prayed for the Canaanites when he has had to keep the Canaanites off with swords. I mean, the Canaanites were hostile people to him - we've already seen that in his story. He prayed for people who could have hurt him, but Jesus Christ, the great High Priest, prayed for people who were *killing* him. *As* they were killing him. He prayed for them on the cross. He said, "Father, forgive them. They don't realize what they're doing."

Abraham *risked* his life for the people he was praying for. Remember Hagar was amazed she walked away alive from talking to the Lord God Almighty. Remember that? Abraham is going before the Lord God Almighty and *arguing* with him! It's terrifying. He *risks* his life for those people, but Jesus Christ *gave* his life for the people he was praying for. He gave his life.

As we're told in **Hebrews 7:27**, Jesus was a High Priest who perfectly meets our need. "*Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day...He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.*" But here's the main point. The main point is Abraham *discovered* the case. Abraham discovered the principle that "The righteousness of someone else can save me."

Abraham discovered that principle, but Jesus Christ *executed* the principle, because what Jesus Christ did was he came to earth and on the night before he died, he gave what's called the great High Priestly Prayer in John 17. And in the midst of that prayer, he basically said, "Father, I want you to love them even as you love me. I want you to treat them as if they were me." See, the High Priest legally stands before the bench, but this is what he says.

He says, **John 17:19 KJV**, "*And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.*" "I have become the only truly righteous person who has ever lived. I have lived the life they should have lived and I'm about to die the death they should have died. I'm about to love you, God, with all my heart, soul, strength, and mind by going to the cross and loving you even as you forsake me. No one has ever done that. And I'm going to love my neighbor as myself. I'm going to be *finally* the only truly righteous one who ever lived." Because, you see, we can complete the symphony in Jesus.

Abraham *should* have said, “Oh Lord God, would you save for *one*? For the sake of one?” And God, of course, would say, “Yes, if you have the right one, if you have my Son.” And here’s the gospel. The gospel is when you believe in Jesus Christ, you enter into solidarity with him, and *his* righteousness becomes *yours*. You are *spared* for his sake. That’s what Abraham wants to know. “Would you spare an unrighteous person for the sake of a righteous person?”

And God says, “Yes! If it’s the right one.” And when you enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ - when you believe in what he has done, when you give yourself to him, he becomes your high priest. And that means that in yourself, you are utterly *flawed* before God, right? But in Jesus Christ, you are utterly *righteous* before God. Jesus Christ becomes the High Priest that cannot be turned down. Why?

Because he is the *perfect* High Priest. He is the *eternal* High Priest. He is the one who never goes home. This is why it says in **Hebrews 7:23-25**, “*Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*”

He *lives* to intercede for them! Jesus says to Peter, “Peter, you’re going to deny me.” “Oh no, I’m not,” says Peter. Jesus says, “Peter, zip it, you’re going to deny me...but I have prayed for you. So when you recover, strengthen the brethren.” Did you hear that? He doesn’t say, “Peter, you’re going to deny me, but I think you have what it takes.” No.

He says, “Peter, you’ll deny me, but I’ve *prayed* for you. I’m your *priest*.” And therefore...What? “*If* you recover...”? He doesn’t say, “I’ve prayed for you, and *if* you recover...” No. Because Jesus Christ always gets what he asks for. Jesus Christ is the High Priest who *cannot* be turned down. Jesus Christ is *the one* truly righteous man who saves the unrighteous by his righteousness. Now, if you understand that, we move to our last point.

**Third and final point, The New Priests.** Now, we’ve said that Abraham was the first priest, because what is a priest? A priest is a bridge. A bridge spans a gap and brings people across the gap in a way they couldn’t without the bridge. On the one hand, a priest brings people to God. Otherwise, they couldn’t get there. A priest is grounded in God *and* grounded in the people.

Look at Abraham. On the one hand, what an incredible priest he is. A priest stands in the presence of God. Look at the intimacy. Look at the prayer life. Look at the access he has to the presence of God. Look at how he prays. Oh, there's a priest! He *knows* God. He is *close* to God. He has the *presence* of God. But on the other hand, in the Bible the priest is not just one who stands in the presence of God, but the priest is also one who is *deeply* sympathetic to the needy, to the hurting, to the broken.

The priest is the one who helped the poor. Why is it that Jesus is always saying to the leper, "You've been cleansed. Go show yourself to a priest"? Why? Because the priests were the public health officers. The priests were the ones who worked with the poor, with the broken, with the downtrodden. And you see this in Abraham. Abraham is *deeply* sympathetic, but not just sympathetic to his own kind, his own people, his own race. The Canaanites! The oppressors!

Abraham is a *great* priest. He is so deeply sympathetic to the most unsympathetic of people. And he is so deeply intimate with God. He is a *bridge*. He is grounded on both sides of the gap. Therefore, what? It's *astounding* then when the Bible says in so many places... **Revelation 1:6**, "...and [Christ] has made us to be a kingdom and **priests** to serve his God and Father..."

And Peter says in **1 Peter 2:9**, "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession...*" The Bible says that that "priestliness", that access to the presence of God, and that ability to minister and serve people which once was only for the elites, for the Abrahams and the Moseses and the Aarons and so on, is now the calling and the office of every...single...Christian...believer. You're a priest.

Now, there is a way that a lot of sermons and books apply this principle. And I'm warning you that it is not a very good way – although if you've been around church long, you've heard this admonition. And that is to say, "Look at Abraham's prayer life, and look at his servant heart. That's priestliness: deeply intimate with God, deeply intimate with people. Intimate prayer life. Servant heart. That's priestliness."

And then they said, "Now be like Abraham. Don't you want to be like Abraham? Doesn't the Bible say we should all be priests? Be like Abraham. On the one hand, have a great prayer life. Intimate. Sense God's presence. Be in love with Him. Don't just sort of put your prayers up there. Have this great, intimate prayer life."

“But on the other hand, be *deeply* sympathetic to people - all kinds of people. The people of the city. *All* the people of the city, even the oppressors. Look down your nose at no one. Give the cold shoulder to no one. Be like Abraham.” That’s the usual application. And what are you going to do? Would you look at yourself for a minute? Let me ask you a question. How *is* your prayer life? Can you pray like Abraham? Do you have his boldness? Do you have his familiarity? Do you have this sense of God being present? Do you have this intimacy...or do you just sort of say your prayers? You say, “Well, my prayer life is nothing like that.”

Ok, well then, do you have a servant heart, or are there certain people you just look down at? Are there certain people you’re just intimidated by? A priest is scared of no one and disdainful of no one. That’s why they’re so deeply sympathetic. Is there anyone you can’t be sympathetic with? Is there anyone you can’t bleed for, care for, love for, go to God for? You see? “Be like Abraham!”

Now what if I close this sermon now? Actually, time is up anyway, so I should close this sermon now, but I can’t. And I’ll tell you why. Because that would *crush* you. If you’re going to try to go right from Abraham to yourself, you’re going to be crushed. You’ll never live up to it.

Follow the structure of the sermon, because that’s the structure of Christian growth. The only way you’re going to become like Abraham is if first you believe in the one to whom Abraham points.

You’ll never be *like* Abraham unless you *rest in* and *believe in* the one to whom Abraham points. And that is not just rhetoric. This is as practical as it can be. What I’m simply saying is this. I know there are a lot of Christians here who believe Jesus Christ is their high priest. You’ve heard this before, and you believe it. But you don’t have an intimate prayer life. It’s not there. You say your prayers. Your prayers are kind of like sticking messages in a bottle and throwing them in the surf.

You don’t have a sense of the presence of God. You don’t go after God in prayer like this. You’re not as humble as Abraham *or* as bold. Look at **v.27**, “*Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes...”*” Such a balance. Look at the boldness! Conservative people cannot be as bold as Abraham, and liberal people cannot be as humble. Look at what he has here. Look at the humility and the boldness.

Do you have that kind of prayer life? No. You're never going to get there just by trying. Though you may *say* you believe Jesus is your high priest, you're not *practicing* it. That means you're not *resting* in it. You're not *understanding* it. You're not *savoring* it. You're not *appropriating* it. You're not *rejoicing* in it.

Why do you have trouble having that kind of servant heart? Some of you hate rich people. Some of you hate pretty people. Some of you, perhaps, have some racial prejudice. Some of you look down your nose at all kinds of people, and you know it. And you're *not* very sympathetic, and you're kind of absorbed in your own problems. Why? It's because you do not rest in, meditate on, and rejoice in Jesus as your high priest. Let me show you what I mean.

All failures to be like Abraham stem from a failure to truly believe in the one to whom Abraham points.

You're never going to have the prayer life Abraham has and the servant heart Abraham has just by trying. You have to go back to your lack of faith in the true High Priest. Is Jesus Christ your example? Do you relate to God really on the basis of trying to be like Jesus?

If that's the case, then there will be days in which you feel like dust and ashes but not bold. There will be other days in which you feel very bold but not like

dust and ashes. See, there are days you're doing well. You feel confident, but you're not humble. There are days you're doing poorly. You feel humble, but you're not confident. But look at Abraham. He says, "I'm bold" and, "I'm dust and ashes" in the same sentence! Do you know why? Because he understands the gospel.

Even way back then, he understands the gospel, and it goes like this. If Jesus Christ is not just your example or your helper, but your *high priest*...in yourself, you are deeply flawed. In him, you are completely righteous...and both at the same time. We say the gospel humbles you to the dirt and lifts you to the heavens *at the same time!* That leads to a counterintuitive combination of boldness and humility that no other spiritual condition can create. Religion can't create it. Irreligion can't create it.

The intimacy that you see in prayer comes because Abraham has some grasp of the gospel. But *you* have *far* more information than Abraham had. If Jesus Christ is your high priest, you can have that kind of prayer life. On the other hand, where does this servant heart come from? Where does this deep sympathy come from? If in the High Priest you are utterly flawed, that makes you so humble you can't feel superior to anyone. Because you know that "there but for the grace of God go I."

But you can't get that by just trying harder to pray more and to be nicer people. You have to take hold of the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. You have to understand it, and you have to think about it. You have to rejoice in it, and you have to meditate on it. You have to reflect in it. You have to practice it. You have to live in accord with it...until you become a *priestly* person, a person deeply, deeply intimate with Christ and deeply intimate with other people.

That's what the great old hymn by Charles Wesley invites us to do. (*And Can It Be That I Should Gain*)

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him, is mine;  
Alive in him, my living head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine.  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

*Bold* I approach the eternal throne. *Bold* I approach the bench and claim the crown in Christ my own. Live with the boldness and the humility of that. It will make you a priestly person. And let me tell you something. Little communities, even of 10, in a big city like Austin, little communities of people who have that kind of joy in their hearts, that kind of access to God, that kind of intercessory prayer for their friends and neighbors, that kind of sympathy and servant heart to the people around them, that will redeem cities.

Some say Abraham might have stopped at 10 because he realized it's *communities*. In rabbinical teaching, you had to have 10 people to form a synagogue. Now, those laws came generations after Abraham, but we do know that written tradition always followed oral tradition, so it's possible that there was some similar arrangement. But Abraham probably knew it's priestly *communities* that will redeem broken cities, not just individuals...communities. Let us be one. We have a few more than 10. Let's be bold and let's be compassionate.

Let's pray...