
Love the Giver, Not Just the Gift (Genesis 22:1-18)
2/18/2018 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



One Christmas, Evan gave his son, Cory, a computer. Cory was ecstatic! He squealed, “I love you, dad” and then ran off to play with the new gift. Cory absolutely loved his new computer. He played with it every day. As time went on, however, Evan began to notice that Cory spent more time with the gift than with him. When Evan tried to spend more time with Cory, sometimes Cory would flat out refuse and go off instead to play on the computer. As the child was spending more and more time with the computer and less and less time with his father, Evan told Cory that this was not good and that he might have to take the computer away. Cory became furious. He threw a tantrum, and even screamed, “I hate you!”

Was Cory right to be angry? In his mind, his father was taking away something he loved so how could his father possibly love him by doing that? But the father saw it differently. He saw his son developing an unhealthy attachment. He saw his son stuck in an immature state, loving a gift more than the one who gave the gift in the first place.

As Christians, we know that God is the One who has given us everything we have. He has given us our families and loved ones. He has given us the money that we live off of. He has given us our abilities and time to pursue all different number of careers and hobbies. But like Cory, how easily do we fall into loving those gifts more than the giver? As we begin our walk through the season of Lent, God calls us to repentance. We are reminded that the life of repentance is a constant life of struggle. As we walk the account of Abraham’s testing, God will show us our absolute failure to put him first, but he will also renew our commitment to a life of repentance through his complete commitment to put us first. Today, as we again see the Lord provide, we learn to Love the Giver, Not Just the Gift.

Abraham had no children. He and his wife were too old to have any, and, even though they had tried to have kids their whole life, it just never happened. Then God appeared to Abraham and graciously gave him and his wife a child, Isaac. Miraculously, this 100 year old man and his 90 year old wife had a child! More than that, God promised them grandchildren, and great grandchildren, that an entire nation would come from Isaac’s descendants! God gave Abraham more than he could even have asked for.

Then in the middle of all that joy, God gives Abraham a test; a hard test. He tells Abraham to take his son, his only son, whom he loves, Isaac, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. What? God doesn’t do that! Why would God want someone to sacrifice a child? Doesn’t God care about life? Why would He give Abraham a child after all that only to take it away like this? Hadn’t God promised that a great nation would come from Isaac!? How can He ask this of Abraham? We don’t know how long Abraham wrestled with those questions, But we do know that gets up early the next morning, wasting no time, and goes to the place for the sacrifice.

He traveled for 3 days, with nothing to think about except that he had to sacrifice his

son, his only son, whom he loved, Isaac. He and Isaac leave their servants behind, Isaac carrying the wood that would soon burn up his body, Abraham carrying the fire and the knife that would soon destroy his son. And the two of them go, together.

As if this weren't hard enough, Isaac has an all too pointed question for Abraham, "Father?" he says, "The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Could Abraham bring himself to say it? Did he have to fight back tears? Did his voice falter? All he could get out is, "God will provide." And the two of them go, together.

They arrive at their destination, Abraham builds the altar, and ties up his son, his only son, whom he loves, Isaac. He places him on the altar. Then he grabs the knife and prepares to slay his son, his only son, whom he loves, Isaac.

Wow. What devotion to God! When we read the account of Abraham, can any of us say that we love God that much? Abraham not only obeyed God, this section of God's word says that he even got up early to start on the task God had given him. How many of us would find it all too easy to just put the task off for a week, or a month, or who knows how long?

But I think Abraham understood something that few of us get today. Abraham understood priorities. Sometimes having one thing means not having another. Think of the family that consistently runs out of money before they run out of month, but they are eating out every night, or they insist on paying for the most expensive TV package or the highest data plan on their phones. They could fix their financial situation fairly easily if they were willing to give those things up and live within their means. But they don't. It's hard to give those things up. So they keep suffering.

Or think of the husband who has a rocky relationship with his wife. He knows that he'll have to put in time and effort to fix things, but he has so much fun hanging out with the guys on the weekend. He could easily find time to work on his marriage, if he was willing to sacrifice some of that fun time. But he doesn't. It's hard to give those things up. So his marriage keeps suffering.

Sacrifice is just the nature of things. If you get married, you give up the possibility of a relationship with someone else. If you want to make more money, you'll have to give up time you could spend on other things. If you want to be a good person, you'll have to give up on those things you love but you know are wrong. Few of us get this. I think every one of us has something that we know deep down that we should get rid of, and that life will be so much better when we do, but we don't.

But Abraham did get it. He knew that the important things require sacrifice. Abraham knew that putting God first meant that he could not put his son first. Abraham knew that putting his son first was idolatry. Abraham knew that even his son was a gift from God, and so Abraham learned to love the Giver, not just the gift.

Have you learned that yet? It's a hard lesson. The important things require sacrifice. Putting God first means you can't put yourself first, or your family, or your status, or your

finances, or your comfort, or your safety. That's hard. But putting any of those things before God is idolatry. To love any of those things more than God is to love the gift more than the Giver.

As sinful people, it is even worse than that though, doesn't it? Because we even struggle to give up our sins for our God. It is one thing for us to come to church and to say that we love God, but it is far different to leave our lives of sin for God. God calls us to repentance, but instead of turning away from our sins, we continue in them. We justify ourselves, saying, "Oh, but I'm *really* sorry this time!" But our actions always speak louder than our feelings and words do. Those actions say we love those sins more than God.

And what do we deserve for that? With the father who gave a gift to his child, didn't he have every right to take away the gift when his child grew an unhealthy attachment to it? Doesn't he have a right to punish his child for loving the gift more than the one who gave it? In the same way, why shouldn't God take away all the gifts that we love so much? Why shouldn't he just leave us to our sins? Why shouldn't he just give us what we deserve: eternity, without his blessings and gifts, in hell?

And yet, God does not give us what we deserve. He does not take away the gifts he's given us even as we love them more than we should. He does not leave us to our sins. He does not leave us to the hell we deserve. Instead, as we begin Lent, God calls us to repentance, to a changed life. Like Abraham's test, it will not be easy, it will not be comfortable. God calls us to turn from our sins. We who love the gifts more than the Giver, are instead to put God first in every aspect of our lives.

And it will be a struggle. That's what a life of repentance is: a struggle. That's the life of a Christian. We can look at Abraham's example and think, "I could never be like that! I could never give up the things I love so much."

And yet, the reality is we aren't that different from Abraham. You see, Abraham was not so willing to give up his son because *he* was just so much better than we are. No, his willing obedience to God, his willingness to sacrifice for what is right came from a source to which we all have access.

First, Abraham loved God, because God loved him first. God first shows His love to Abraham. The first time God appears to Abraham, before Abraham even does anything for God, God promises to bless him. Is this not how God comes to us? Before we have done anything great for God, God comes to us with his blessings. God blesses us richly with everything we need in our lives and even more, all before we even know Him. More than that, he introduces himself to us through the gospel message of salvation in Jesus. Our relationship with God doesn't even start until we have heard what God was willing to sacrifice for us, so that we could be saved eternally. The One whom we are to put first is the One who puts us first every day with his gracious forgiveness, his promises of eternal life, and his daily provision and protection.

Second, Abraham trusted that God would turn even this sacrifice into another blessing. Notice that Abraham tells his servants, "We will come back." Later, in the book

of Hebrews, we see that Abraham trusted that even though he was going to sacrifice his son, God would raise his son to life. God had promised to make Isaac's descendants into a great nation, and Abraham trusted God to do this, even though God had told him to sacrifice Isaac. God had promised many descendants through Isaac, so there was no way Isaac would remain dead. Somehow, Isaac would be ok, because God had promised. The same goes for us! God does not call us simply to give up everything to follow Him, but first, before anything, God promises us His richest blessings! What is it to give our money to God, if He has already promised to provide everything we need? What is it to give our time to God, if He has promised us eternal life in heavenly bliss? What is it to leave behind our sins, if God has promised every blessing to us who follow Him? And still more, Jesus even promises in the gospels, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age... and in the age to come eternal life.

Third, Abraham knew that God loved him infinitely more than he loved God. Notice in our Old Testament lesson, God does not even allow Abraham to finish going through with the sacrifice. Instead, He stops Abraham, and provides a substitute for Isaac. How can this not remind us of Jesus? Though we may falter in our devotion to God, God will never fail in His love for us! Abraham was willing to give up his son for God, but God actually did give up His Son for us! He has already showed that He loves us so much that Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself for us. He is willing to be totally devoted to us. That is why Abraham could be totally devoted to God and love Him more than anything. That is why we can be totally devoted to God and love Him more than anything.

Was it easy for Abraham to sacrifice his son? Absolutely not. He was human, like you and me. He had to struggle with the emotions of what he wanted right now and what he ultimately wanted. When God calls us to repentance, it is not an easy thing either. It won't be comfortable. It won't be easy, but God does promise us that it will be worth it. Stay in the Word and learn just how devoted your God is to you. Learn to sacrifice for what is important. Learn to love God first of all because God loved you first. Learn that God will pay you back much more than you sacrifice for him. Learn that God already loves you infinitely more than you will ever love him. Learn to Love the Giver, Not Just the Gift. Amen.