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What Radical Obedience Really Looks Like

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Series: Multipliers

Genesis 17

## **BIG IDEA - FAITH STARTS WITH GOD REVEALING HIMSELF**

There are certain ministries we don't even need to pray about whether or not we're going to get involved. We don't need to pray about, "Are we going to help widows? Are we going to help orphans? Are we going to minister to the prisoner? Are we going to serve the poor?" because the Bible is clear.

If you are new, I'm going to give you a little Bible trivia right now that you can use on somebody else. You can say this to them: "Did you know there are three 'greats' in the Bible? There is the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and the Great Compassion."

Now, whether you're here for the first time for a baptism Sunday, you probably know the Great Commandment: "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." We kind of know that one. The second one is the Great Commission. It's found at the end of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Gospels. It says, "Go into the whole world, preach the gospel, make disciples," and do what we're going to do today: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

What we often forget is the third *great* in the Bible, which is the Great Compassion. It's the call to love the least and the last. It's probably most clearly taught in Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "I was in prison..." He said a bunch of other things as well. He said, "I was in prison and you visited me."

Because of the grace of God on our church, because of the ministry of a guy you may have never heard of, Austin Needham, we are now in over 1,000 prisons. Unbelievable.

Get ready, because next week we're going to talk with Hold the Rope. We have a unique opportunity to go even deeper and wider into the prison system. We're excited about it.

I'm not exaggerating. I'll be conservative. At least once or twice a month I'm getting a personal, long, handwritten letter from a prisoner talking about the impact our church is having on them. One of my letters I got said all of these nice things. Then it said at the end, "I like the idea of Food Trucks at 5. Good idea." They're listening. Okay? They're excited about food trucks.

Listen. On Monday, which is tomorrow, we're releasing an episode of the podcast. If you don't subscribe to our podcast, subscribe to it so you get this kind of stuff. I got to sit down with a couple in our church who are just like you. They started serving in Cherry Street Prison, and they have some incredible stories. By the way, if you have a passion to serve in the prisons, whether here or in Lexington, I want you to reach out to Austin Needham.

At 5:00 tonight, there will be a group of us here worshiping, and I'll be teaching and preaching, doing what I'm doing right now. At 5:00 tonight, we have a Community Group that's going to the Cherry Street Prison and leading worship, and Tyler is going to be preaching the gospel.

Guys, here's our hope. When we came to Winston, when we launched a campus in Lexington, we've always said the same thing. You might be tired of me saying this. We don't just have a church vision; we have a city vision. We want to reach and serve and bless and minister and pray for the city. In fact, if we disappeared, we hope the city of Lexington and the city of Winston-Salem would miss us because we brought the help and hope of Jesus in good words and good deeds. Let's pray, and then we'll get to work in Genesis 17.

Lord, thank you for the opportunity to minister in prisons. Thank you for prisons that were open to us. Not all prisons are. Thank you for the power of leveraging technology, which is getting the gospel message and testimonies and stories and podcast episodes into prisons, Lord. We ask that you would give the men and women in prison the hope that can only be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We pray this in your name, amen.

I told you there are three *greats* in the Bible. There are also a lot of firsts. Turn to the book of Genesis. If you're new, we're in the book of beginnings. The Bible has a book of endings (that's Revelation), and the Bible has a book of beginnings (Genesis). In the book of beginnings, there are a lot of firsts. There's the first family. There's the first marriage. There's the first pregnancy. There's the first fight. There's the first murder. There's the first blood.

What I haven't focused on enough (and I'm doing it right now) is that Abraham is the first missionary. I don't know if you ever thought about that. Some people think being a missionary is like... "Is that a New Testament idea?" No, that's a very ancient, old idea. By the way, we just love missionaries. I mean, are you kidding me? I love them more than anything...those who cross an ocean and learn a language and say goodbye.

But here's what I want you to know as we're reading the story on Abraham: every Christian is supposed to live like a missionary where they live, learn, work, and play. Charles Spurgeon, a famous old pastor, said every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter. Technically, you're either a missionary or a mission field.

Today, we're going to pick up in the story of Abraham, and he's 99 years old. He has been waiting for God to do what God said he was going to do for 24 years. Do you know what happened 24 years ago? 9/11. That's a long time ago since the Twin Towers fell. That's how long this guy has been waiting.

Here's what I want you to know, because some of you are waiting. There are God's promises and there's God's timing. A lot of unanswered prayer requests and a lot of heartbreak for people is they have God's promises that have been made, but they've not seen the promises manifested in their lives.

So, we're going to cover Genesis 17. We're going to learn some more things from Abraham about faith. Let's pick up in verse 1. **"When Abram..."** Who's going to become *Abraham*. I also might call him *Abe*. All three names. It says, **"When Abram was ninety-nine years old..."** Is anyone in here 99? Raise your hand, if you *can* raise your hand at 99 years old. Guys, we don't have anyone in here 99. That's old. Do you know what they say is the only good thing about being 99? Very little peer pressure.

Guys, God sometimes calls you when you don't even expect it. God sometimes calls you in a new season of life. It's like you're an empty nester, new season, new calling on your life, new word from God. See, Abraham is going to continually take God at his word and take his next step. Let me show you what happens.

Verse 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...'"** Okay. The first thing I want us to learn today is *faith starts with God, not you*. Here's the problem with you and me: we live in a man-centered world, which is why the Bible doesn't make any sense to us. We live in a selfie world.

I told you before. I read this article, unfortunately, about Taylor Swift. In the article, she says no one asks her for autographs anymore. She says it's because everyone wants a selfie. What does a selfie say? "I'm the center of the world." Have you ever looked at

pictures you're not in? They're boring. You're like, "Where are all of the family pictures where I'm in them?" We've become the very center of our worlds.

Here's what's interesting. God cares about Abram. He does. But he doesn't come with the therapeutic nature of the modern American culture. "Oh, Abram, I'm so sorry. What are you going through? Tell me your whole story." God cares about all that, but God starts with who he is.

So, the first thing God gives him is a new name that God calls himself. Some of you need to learn something new about God. That's why you're stuck. There's something about God you don't know and you need to learn today. He says, "Here's my new name, Abram. I've not told anyone this yet." By the way, the Bible is progressive revelation. From Genesis to the book of Revelation, God... It's divine disclosure.

God tells us more and more and more about himself, only what we can handle. Then a little bit more, and he builds on it. By the way, if you're a normal person who's self-aware and has social skills (the rest of you, listen in), you don't overwhelm people the first time you meet them with everything about you. It's too much for them to handle. That's the sign of someone who doesn't have social skills. They tell you their whole story the moment you meet them. God says, "I'm going to tell you a little bit about me at a time."

He uses the phrase *God Almighty*. It's *El Shaddai*. It's used 40 times in the Old Testament. It means God of the mountains. You know, by application, the God who's there, the God who provides, the God who protects. So, he says, "You need to know something about me." Then he gives him two commandments. He says, "Walk before me." Do you see this in verse 1? I want you to see that what I'm saying is right out of the text. He says, "Walk before me and be blameless."

Now, "Walk before me" is a new command. You're like, "No, it isn't. Didn't Adam and Eve walk with God?" Yeah, that's different. Adam and Eve walked with God. Enoch (if you read that story earlier in Genesis; we didn't get to it) walked with God and was no more. If you pick up the New Testament... Sometimes we even talk about "The Christian walk is hard." That's all true.

But "Walk before me..." Here's what it means: "Walk knowing I'm watching," which we can relate to nowadays, because somebody is always watching. Right? You know, for the last decade, we've all had an unbelievably high-definition camera and video recorder in our back pocket, so everybody is always watching. Then there are cameras everywhere.

I think it was 10 years ago, roughly, they celebrated... It happened in Atlanta. It was the first time they caught a car thief completely by video. They found him in eight minutes. In Beijing, China, last I looked into it, there are 800,000 cameras. It's a surveillance state.

They're using AI to watch the faces of the citizens to see how they're responding to what the government is doing. Yikes! Then, nowadays, we bug our own houses with Alexa. What are we doing? Someone is always listening.

Here's the principle. How do you act when you know someone is watching? Answer: better. Who knows what family dinner looks like when you really have it, but when you have a guest over, everyone is so kind and well behaved. "No, you go first." Right? We act better when we know somebody is watching.

God says, "I want you to walk before me," and then he says the second thing: "I want you to be blameless." *Blameless* is not the same as *sinless*. We know this because the Bible calls people who are sinners *blameless*. I believe David in the Psalms calls himself *blameless*. *Blameless* is not about perfection but progress, not perfection but direction.

We had this guy, Pastor James Merritt, Dr. James Merritt. He was here at our Heights Conference. Some of you heard him. Well, I always have a finishing phone call before the person comes to speak. I remember talking to him on the phone. He's 72 years old. Right before I was about to hang up, he said, "Kyle, I want to tell you something."

This is what he said to me: "I'm not sinless, but I am blameless." I felt the intensity of that moment. I said, "Yeah?" He said, "I want you to know I have no unconfessed sin in my life." Who in here can say that? Then he said, "There's nothing in my life that will embarrass you or your church. Thank you for the invitation."

*Blameless* is the idea that I am going to sin, but when I sin... Spiritual maturity is I more quickly confess and repent. I know my sins, I know my weaknesses, I talk about them a lot, and I don't pretend to be someone I'm not.

By the way, how do you grow in being more blameless? I'll give you a helpful paradigm I learned in seminary. I use this probably once a month with people. It's supposed to encourage you, hopefully, on how you might be growing when you don't even know you're growing. It's *frequency, duration, intensity, triggers...FDIT*. I know; it's not a great acronym.

Here's the thing, though. Men especially, whenever they're thinking, "Am I growing in an area?" all they ever think about is frequency. "Well, I looked at something I shouldn't have six times last week, and I looked at it seven times this week, and I looked at it five times two weeks ago." They only think about frequency. What about a couple who's fighting who say, "We fight four days a week"? The next question you should ask is, "Well, how many days a week did you fight last year?"

"Oh, seven days a week."

"Well, praise the Lord. Four is a lot less than seven when it comes to fighting."

The second question you could ask is "How about duration?" It's like, "Okay. So, you're still fighting four days a week from what you were doing last year. How long are you fighting?"

"Oh, they're a lot less. Our fights are a lot shorter, and we can resolve them more quickly. We don't both have a headache the next morning, and we're not doing the fight and flight thing."

"Praise the Lord."

*Intensity.* Now, that's the hardest one to describe, but you know what I'm saying. How did it feel? There are different levels of lust or anger or bitterness in the intensity of how it feels. *Triggers* are "How many different people and places can I be around where I'm not tempted to give in to this sin in my life?" These are to encourage you.

Now, I want to talk about this. He says, "Walk before me and be blameless." Then look at verse 2. Here's what he says next: **"...that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.' Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.'"** So now he gives him the promise again with some more details.

Here's what I want you to know: if you're going to grow as a Christian, you need to think God's thoughts after him. When you get to know God better and get to know his Word better, you're going to have a different perspective, which is going to give you different priorities. Let's get really simple here. What is God promising Abraham? People and place. Land, lineage, and legacy. In other words, we need to start thinking generationally, not instantaneously.

Jonathan Edwards, who many consider the greatest theologian America has ever produced, prayed every day for five generations of his family. I'm guessing some of us in here forget to pray for the people we live in the house with, or maybe we even forget to pray for ourselves. Jonathan Edwards prayed for his great-great-grandkids, which means he prayed for people he would never meet.

The Bible puts this emphasis on land, lineage, people, and place. Now, here's what I'm thinking. If God came to the average modern American today and gave them this promise, they wouldn't even want it. Isn't that interesting? Just read Genesis. Genesis is like one massive promise of having kids, primarily.

Now, I know in our church there are so many young people and older people who want to have kids and can't get pregnant or can't stay pregnant. They want to be married and they're not. Hope deferred makes the heart sick. I'm not talking to you. I'm just talking to the culture that we're in that goes, "God's promises don't even make sense in this culture, because we live in a culture where more and more people don't even want to have kids."

Now, when you take this promise (you know, it takes the whole Bible to make the whole Christian), you realize God isn't just promising us physical children, but spiritual children, but children and grandchildren. So, he makes this promise. Look at what happens next. ***"Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him..."***

We're going to show you this one more time, but there are two times where, when God speaks, Abraham just responds and falls to the ground in worship, which is another principle: *faith leads to worship*. We're trying, by the grace of God, to build a church where people can respond to God's Word passionately.

We are embodied creatures. That might mean sometimes, when you hear God's Word, you might respond in celebration. By the way, people raise their hands for different reasons. I don't know if you know this. Some people raise their hand... That's what you'd do if your favorite team scored. You'd raise your hand. It's also what you'd do if you were surrendering to somebody. It's also what you'd do if you were 4 years old and wanted your dad to pick you up.

You can't always see what's going on in someone's heart when they do something. You may want to try... There's no pressure here. You can worship God however you want. You may want to try to be more expressive. You can even do, like, "I have heartburn." I mean, whatever you want to do. You can hold the small TV. You can hold the large TV. I don't care what you do. You may want to try to be more expressive in your worship. We see this. In some ways, it's involuntary for Abraham.

Let me show you this. Verse 4: ***"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations."*** So now God mentions covenant. I'm not going to get really deep into covenant. Didn't Zach Meyer do an incredible job last week talking about that? Wasn't that great? Yes. He did an incredible job.

*Covenant* is this idea of partnership. Here's what you do need to know. In the Bible, there are two types of covenants. Last week, Zach did a great job talking about what's called a *unilateral covenant*. A *unilateral covenant* is where God does both sides. You know, "I'm going to walk in between the dead animals, and I'm going to keep both sides of the covenant." Very special.

A *bilateral covenant* is where two parties come together, and they each make commitments to one another with what they're going to do. That's a lot of times how God does covenants in the Bible. They're usually some version of "I will bless and multiply you *if...*" In the New Testament, it's primarily, "I will bless and multiply if you trust me and teach and train others."

So, he has this idea of covenant, but let me show you this. Verse 5: **"No longer shall your name be called Abram..."** Notice this. God says, "I have a new name I want you to know, and you have a new name I want you to know." **"No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."**

Now, this may not seem like a big deal to us because, for the most part, modern people choose the name of their kids based on what is cute and cool at the time. Do you know what the name *Kyle* means? Handsome. No. It means narrow. I've been trying to think for a week of how to redeem it. I don't know how.

My youngest son Elon... I went to Elon University, and that was a significant spiritual place for me, and *Elon* is the Hebrew word for oak tree, and Elon Musk is a billionaire. So, we're doing biblical and billionaire. No, it had nothing to do with Elon Musk, but in all seriousness, it had to do with... And Elon knows this. Elon knows his name means oak tree.

Here's the thing. When God comes to Abram and goes, "Abram, your name will no longer be Abram..." By the way, God does that with Saul, who becomes Paul. Simon becomes Peter. Jacob becomes Israel. God does this. When God comes to Abram and goes, "Your name is no longer going to be Abram," I bet Abram is like, "Thank God!" Because *Abram* means exalted dad. How embarrassing is that? Your name is Exalted Dad. "How many kids do you have?" "Well, we've not been able to have kids."

He says, "Instead of your name being Exalted Dad, your name will be *Abraham*, which means father of a multitude." Here's what's interesting. I want you to see what he says in verse 5. **"No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."** That's the perfect tense. God speaks about future things as if they've already happened in your life.

Here's the big idea practically for us: the New Testament ethic is "Become who God says you already are." That's amazing. It's like, "Okay. I've been set free from the penalty, the power, and the pollution of sin. I need to live out of that identity." It's identity before activity. It's *who* before *do*. I have to live no longer like a slave but like a son or daughter.

So, here's what he's doing. Watch all the new things. He's saying, "You need to know something new about me. You need a new command. (Walk before me and be blameless.) You need a new name." Then (this will be fun), "You need a new sign." Let me show you this.

Actually, let's go down to verse 15. I want to mention this. He also gives Sarai a new name. **"And God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai...'"** She gets a name change too. They both do. **"...but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."**

So, what does *Sarai* mean? Contentious. That's what her name meant. I don't know what her parents saw, but that's what they called her. What's interesting is she has kind of been contentious. She's manipulative with her husband and encourages him to sleep with Hagar. Zach didn't have time to get into this. In chapter 16, if you want to read it with your Community Group, it's a hot mess.

Basically, she later gets mad at Hagar, and it says she sent her away and dealt with her harshly, which is the first cancel culture in the Bible right there. So, he says, "Your name now is going to be Sarah, which means princess. Not because you're perfect, but because God is king, you get to be a princess."

Now, what's interesting here is his promise... We talk a lot about Abraham. Right? We say something like, "Did you know that Abraham is a father of the faith?" Some people call him *the* father of the faith. Why doesn't anyone ever talk about how Sarah is the *mother* of the faith? I've never heard anyone say that. Sarah is literally the mother of the Jewish people.

See, we have done a terrible job (the church might be the only place left where this *can* happen) of lifting up the joy and wonder of being a mom. Again, I know in our church we get that, but I just want you to know, I hear stories about ladies who get pregnant and feel like they can't tell anyone at work because they're not going to be happy. They're going to be thinking about how it's going to take them away from their job.

We live in a time where people don't think about children. They don't think about motherhood. They don't think about being a dad. You know, it's interesting. Just in the last week or two, a new song came out. Now, I'm warning you; it has a bad word in it if you listen to it on the way home. A song came out called "I Sit in Parks." I had never heard of this lady, but I guess it went kind of viral.

She has, like, 7 million monthly listeners on Spotify. That sounds like a lot. She's 32 years old, and she wrote a song called "I Sit in Parks." It's sad. It's about how she goes to parks

to watch families, and she wonders if she has been lied to. She has this clever line something like, "I was always told that my next album was due. That's the only thing I was ever worried about being due."

Now, here's the problem. If you didn't know this, we are a Protestant evangelical church. Welcome. Here's the thing. Much of what happens in Protestant evangelicalism is a response to Roman Catholicism. I told you I'm a retired Roman Catholic. I grew up Roman Catholic. For example, if you go to a Roman Catholic church, they do Communion every week. So, the Protestants are like, "Eh, we're doing it quarterly."

I'm serious. Why? The Bible says, "Do this often in remembrance," but we don't want to be Catholic. The other area where Protestants get it wrong is we don't talk enough about Mary. And we wonder why no one understands motherhood. Well, the Catholics pray to Mary, and we shouldn't do that. Catholics wrongly think she was a perpetual virgin, which she wasn't. The Bible says Jesus had half-brothers and sisters. But we've forgotten...

There are three famous images in Christianity. I'll tell you them. You've only really seen two of them often. The first is Christ on the cross. It's the picture of sacrifice. It's the center of our faith. The second is Jesus at the Lord's Supper. Very, very famous image. You've seen it. It's everywhere. The third image is of Mary holding baby Jesus, ready to willingly give him up into the world. We have forgotten the sacred image of the protective mother over the child until he's ready to go into the world.

So, he gets a new name, she gets a new name, and now they get a new sign. You have to see this. Verse 9: **"And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you...'"** He's like, "This is awesome. What do I need to do?" **"Every male among you shall be circumcised."**

Now, you can look around in here. We had to pull out some extra seats. It's fairly crowded here, especially on Sunday mornings. I know the same is true in Lexington. We've been thinking, "How can we open up more seats?" We've decided I'm just going to preach a sermon on circumcision. So, if you're like, "It's crowded. I couldn't park here," just come back next week. There will be more seats.

Have you ever heard a sermon on circumcision? No, you have not. It makes you uncomfortable that I'm even going to talk about it. Listen. God talks about things that make us uncomfortable. I love it, because people always have chronological snobbery. "Oh, these silly people thousands of years ago thinking they could mark their bodies in a

painful and permanent way and it would mean something." What do you call tattoos? It got quiet in here.

I'm not against tattoos. Jesus has a tattoo. Revelation 19. He has a tattoo on his leg. "King of Kings. Lord of Lords." I've talked to people who have gotten tattoos. I'm not cool enough. I don't have one. But they wouldn't want it if it wasn't painful. They wouldn't want it if it wasn't permanent. It always has meaning. They want to show you. "This is the Chinese word for fellowship." It means something. I'm being serious.

So, I want to talk about what circumcision is about. Think with me for a second. Why would God do something *there*? Or ask this question: Why a permanent mark? That's one question. Why something that's only for the men? Come on. That's strange. Why not do something the men *and* the women can do? Why something in such a vulnerable, private area?

Well, in part, God says, "If *that* part of you is committed to me, then *all* of you will be committed to me." How often is it that every part of a man's life is committed to the Lord except *that* part? I'll give you three reasons, specifically, why circumcision. You're like, "I cannot believe I'm taking notes on this. 'Three things I didn't know about circumcision.'"

By the way, we do not have circumcision Sunday; we have baptism Sunday. I heard a story. This is a true story. I heard a story of an older pastor. He said this young guy comes to faith in Christ and starts reading the Bible. He just starts in Genesis and reads it. He comes to his office and says, "Pastor Ray, I need you to circumcise me." Pastor Ray goes, "I said to him, 'Keep reading. It gets better.'"

I'll give you three reasons why circumcision, particularly. First, we have to get the men. You have to start with the men, and you have to get the men. Our church is unique. If you look around here... We still probably have a few more ladies than men, but there are a lot of men in this church. Thank God. We love the ladies. We want as many of them as possible. We love that the ladies love Jesus, but we need the men.

Here's the thing. If you're the first person to come to faith in Christ in your family and you're the child, there's a 3 percent chance the rest of the family comes to faith in Christ. If you are the first person to come to Christ in your family and your name is "Mom," it jumps all the way up to 17 percent. But if Dad is the first person to come to faith in Christ in the family, there's a 93 percent chance the rest of the family comes to faith in Christ.

I want you to know we are a church for all people, for men and for women, but we are particularly going after the men. Women have to get used to some of my teaching style. People all the time are like, "It's very direct." That's how men are. Men need to be

spoken to very directly. I was just talking to a guy last week. He said, "I didn't like when you said this certain thing when I first started coming around. I had to get used to it."

Here's the thing. Men do not follow women into women places...except the club. That's the only place men follow women. "Let the women in free. It's \$25 a guy to get in here." All of the guys are like, "I'm coming. I'm coming." Women much more easily step into masculine spaces. It's much easier for the woman to go, "Okay. We'll go out to the sports bar and watch the game." The guy doesn't really want to go to the nail salon. We have to get the men.

Part of that is direct teaching that's rational and logical. Here's what men want. Men are practical theologians. They want to know, "How do I forgive my dad? How do I make money? How do I meet a woman? How do I stay married? How do I raise my kids?" Those are the kinds of things we teach here.

Secondly, it puts marriage, family, and children at the center of the Christian faith. It just does. There's no other way to read it. That's why the symbol is there, because that's at the center. Look. I've been in all types of churches. The worst men in churches (and there have to be some in here) are the men who know every theological concept. Everything is theoretical to them.

They have an eschatology. They have thoughts on Arminianism and Calvinism, and their wife hates them. Do you know this guy? It's so obvious. It's like, "Oh, gosh." He speaks up in Sunday school, and his kids are embarrassed. You don't want to be that kind of guy. You want to lead at home first. You want to view your home as the first mission field and the first church.

Thirdly... Though you may think those two are important, *this* is the most important. Up until this point in the Bible, sacrifice is taught, but you sacrifice what you have. You know, Cain has his fruits and vegetables, and Abel has his meat. After Noah gets off the ark, he sacrifices what he has. Listen. Circumcision is the first time you sacrifice who you are. Wow! That's a deep idea.

We act things out all the time that we don't understand what we're doing. In circumcision, you sacrifice the part for the sake of the whole. You cut off something and throw it away. That's sacrifice. Now, if I were to ask you... You know, don't say it out loud. You probably won't even tell your Community Group. If you don't have a good DNA Group, you won't even tell them.

What do you need to sacrifice? Like, the real thing you need to sacrifice, not the right answer that makes you sound good. "I could pray more." Here's what you could ask: What is the worst part about you that you still love? That's what you have to sacrifice.

Sacrifice is, by definition, I give up something I love for something I love even more. So, you didn't know, but there's so much packed into this idea.

Let me show you what happens next. Verse 12: **"He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations..."** "This isn't just for you, Abe. It's for everybody, all of the men." **"...whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring..."**

He basically says, "I'm thinking grandchildren. I'm thinking generations. I need you to pass on this sign, but when you pass on the sign, you have to pass on the significance and the substance of the sign." Basically, religion is sign without substance. This is why they became prideful about this. The Jewish people started to go, "We're the circumcised, and you're the uncircumcised."

That's why Paul has to write in the New Testament, "It's about the circumcision of the heart. You guys forgot the main point. You forgot the big *E* on the eye chart." How many people just in Winston-Salem grew up in the church? They have all of the signs; they have none of the substance. They have a Bible. They don't read it. They pray, but they don't really talk to God. They sing the songs, but they don't worship.

Matt Chandler, who's a pastor in Dallas, Texas, said one time... Imagine this. Thank God this doesn't happen to us, because we vet people before baptism. He said some lady gets up to get baptized, and he's about to baptize her. He asks, "Why are you getting baptized?" and she says, "I'm getting baptized because my mom has cancer." He was like, "You're not getting baptized today. I'm not sure what has happened that you think what baptism is about is healing for somebody." I mean, it's a crazy example, but this is what happens. People forget what these signs even mean.

So, let me show you what he does next. Verse 17: **"Then Abraham fell on his face..."** This time he laughed, probably in both delight and doubt, a mixture. **"...and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' And Abraham said to God..."** You've got to love this, a dad praying for his son. We need more of that.

**"And Abraham said to God, 'Oh that Ishmael might live before you!'"** Pray for your kids, but realize that God sometimes says, "I have a different plan for them than you do." **"God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.'"** That's the first time we get his name.

**"I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly."** "I have a different plan for him." **"He shall father**

**twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac...**" Which means laughter. **"...whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."** Now look at verse 22. You have to see this.

**"When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him."**

Look at verse 24. It's unbelievable. **"Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin."** And the silly excuses we have for not obeying God. When someone says, "I don't know if I need to get baptized. I became a Christian two years ago. I'm afraid that if I get up there and get baptized, people are going to think I'm a brand-new believer..." We understand that. But if you think about the excuses we make, where you have a guy who's almost 100 years old, willing to do *this*...

He starts with his family. Verse 25: **"And Ishmael his son was thirteen..."** That's interesting. Historically, the Arabs have circumcised at 13 because they tie themselves to Ishmael. The Jewish people circumcise at 8 days old because they connect themselves to Isaac.

**"And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised."** Look at verse 27. This is how the chapter ends. **"And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him."** Can you imagine the conversation Abraham had to have with all of those men? "Guys, God spoke to me."

"Well, praise the Lord."

"He's making a covenant with us. We're going to be a people and a nation."

"Yeah!"

"And he has given us a sign."

"Oh, I want to see signs and wonders. What sign did he give you?"

"All of us will be circumcised."

Now, I joke, but you think about it... Here's what people ask. People ask this question all the time. How did Abraham do it? "Abraham, how, at 99 years old, were you able not only to obey God...? How were you able to get all of the men? How were you able to get

every guy, without exception, to be circumcised and to go through something painful and to be willing to sacrifice?"

Here's why. Here's the last thing we learn about faith: *faith always goes first*. Think about it this way. Abraham said, "The only way I can do this, that I'm going to have the moral integrity to call other people to sacrifice, is if I go first." Here's what you need to know. I'm speaking to all of us, but I'm especially speaking to men, maybe especially speaking to fathers. You can't *point* the way; you have to *lead* the way.

Here's what happens. I see this happen occasionally. People are brokenhearted because their kid goes off to college... They're in their single years, and they're living in some city, and they say, "You know what? Our kid isn't going to church." Sometimes that's from really, really faithful families.

But do you know what it is a lot of times? It's families that did not prioritize being part of a local church while their kids were in the home. I mean, you were there on Christmas, and you were there on Easter, and if there wasn't basketball or baseball or hockey or dance, you tried. You know, generous kids come out of generous families with generous mom and dads.

So, you have two types of authority in life. You have *positional* authority. It's good. It's necessary. It's "I'm your dad. I'm your mom. I'm your Community Group leader. I'm your boss. I'm your pastor." People only put up with positional leadership if they have to. I'll tell you what people long for. They long for *moral* authority. They long for someone who goes, "Look, man. I'm doing it. There's nothing I'm asking you to do that I wouldn't do."

Do you know what's amazing? The Bible says Jesus Christ was cut off from the Father at the cross. Do you know what the word *circumcised* literally means? It means to be cut off. So, when we look at this, we think, "Wait a second." If there's a new name of God we need to know, it's very clear what it is: Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, who didn't sacrifice the part for the whole but sacrificed all of himself. He didn't tithe his blood; he gave it all that we might be brought in.

So, here's what I want to know: What step of faith do you need to take today? In a moment, we're going to sing a song, and some of you, for the first time, are going to sing the words and mean it. Maybe you raise your hands or maybe you don't, but you're going to get more excited about singing this song than you were about Wake beating Chapel Hill last night. You're going to be excited about it.

Some of you need to embrace the identity God has given you. You are not what other people say you are. You are not your past. You are not what somebody has done to you. You are who God has said you are, and I want you to embrace it. Yes! Some of you need

to sacrifice. There's no cheat code. There's no shortcut. There's no hack in the Christian life. You're going to have to sacrifice, which means you give up something you love for something you love even more.

Specifically, to the men, I want to ask you, men, if you will go first. In fact, men, the first thing I'm going to ask you to do is to stand. Don't be ashamed. Stand up if you are a man. Everybody who's a man, stand up in here. I want to speak to the men. Men, look around this room. Be encouraged. There are few churches that have this many men. I am standing with you. If I was down there, I would be standing up.

I'm asking you to go first. I'm asking you to go first with me in 2026. I'm asking you to dream about the stories that are going to be told because somebody in your family, somebody with your last name, is going to say, "I remember when Dad went first." I'm asking you to lead the way in spiritual disciplines. You get up early.

I'm asking you to lead the way in sacrifice. Make sure your wife and your kids get what they need and you get the leftovers. I'm asking you to lead in generosity in this church. Turn up the temperature. I'm asking you to lead in evangelism. Let's reach out to people who are far from God and close to us. I'm asking you to lead your families.

You are not just the spiritual leader in the home. If someone says you're the spiritual leader in the home, that's something a woman made up in a women's Bible study. You are the leader in your home. That means you are a servant-hearted, Christlike, sacrificial leader. Let's pray for each other. If you're near these men, you can put your hand on them, if you know them, and if you don't know them, maybe.

We need to laugh together, Lord. It is good to laugh. Abraham laughed. I pray these men would look at the future and laugh. Lord, we need strong men, men who are tough *for* people, who are tender *with* people. Lord, some of these men have never seen a man go first. Their dad didn't go first. Their grandfather didn't go first. So they're looking around going, "Who will go first?"

Lord, here's what we know. Life and family are way too complicated to fight about everything and figure out who's going first. The men are going first. The dads are going first. Lord, would you honor it and would you bless it? Would you give these men an understanding of the divine calling you have given them as brothers, as husbands, and as fathers?

Now may we join in worshiping you just like the father in our faith, Abraham, did. Because, Jesus Christ, you went first from heaven to earth so we could go from earth to heaven one day. You went first to the cross, the ultimate sacrifice, which frees us up to sacrifice.