

Shortcuts that Aren't!

6th Weekend of Easter – April 30/May 1, 2005

Sermon Background Study

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness . . .” (Matthew 6:33)

Genesis 15:1-6; 16:1-4; 21:1-3 (New Living Translation)

Afterward the LORD spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, “Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great.”

²But Abram replied, “O Sovereign LORD, what good are all your blessings when I don’t even have a son? Since I don’t have a son, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. ³You have given me no children, so one of my servants will have to be my heir.”

⁴Then the LORD said to him, “No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own to inherit everything I am giving you.” ⁵Then the LORD brought Abram outside beneath the night sky and told him, “Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that—too many to count!” ⁶And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD declared him righteous because of his faith.

But Sarai, Abram’s wife, had no children. So Sarai took her servant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, ²and gave her to Abram so she could bear his children. “The LORD has kept me from having any children,” Sarai said to Abram. “Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her.” And Abram agreed. ³So Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. (This happened ten years after Abram first arrived in the land of Canaan.)

⁴So Abram slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress Sarai with contempt.

Then the LORD did exactly what he had promised. ²Sarah became pregnant, and she gave a son to Abraham in his old age. It all happened at the time God had said it would. ³And Abraham named his son Isaac.

we are enticed by many attractive shortcuts on our trip toward the Good Life, toward God and his kingdom. But these shortcuts are not what they seem. They only lead us away from our destination. They are shortcuts to nowhere.

The father who creates a few extra tax deductions out of thin air knowing that he’ll probably never be audited. The student who grabs a paper off the internet and turns it in as his own. The executive who comes up with yet another clever means of masking her company’s poor performance. The pastor who, having had a terribly busy week, grabs a great sermon off the internet but never tells her congregation. The athlete who, despite the health risks, injects himself with steroids to get an edge on the football field. . . . I could, of course, go on. David Callahan has dubbed America a “cheating culture” in his book by that name. He’s got an entire website dedicated to documenting the ease with which we cheat in all areas of our lives.¹ But lest we think this only a modern phenomenon, let’s look at the story of one couple who decided to take a shortcut of their own.

A child promised and one delivered

God had come to Abram² telling him to leave his home and go to a new land. God had promised Abram that he would make of Abram a great nation and that all the families on the earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:1-3). So Abram and his wife, Sarai, headed for Canaan.

After awhile, God’s promise that Abram will be father of a great nation seems a bit threadbare. Abram is not anyone’s father. He and Sarai remain childless. It certainly looks to Abram as if his estate and God’s promises will pass to one of Abram’s servants. But in a vision, God reiterates his promise to Abram, telling him that his descendents will be as numerous as the stars. And Abraham trusted God.

¹David Callahan’s book is *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*. His website is www.cheatingculture.com. It is packed with lots of information and links. There is something there that will make each of us gulp a little guiltily.

²The names here can be a bit confusing. Abram and Sarai are the birth names of the couple. When God gives Abram the rite of circumcision as a sign of God’s covenant, God also renames the couple, Abraham and Sarah, meaning “ancestor of a multitude” and “princess” respectively.

Sarai knew what the problem was as much as Abram. He needed an heir, a son. She was long past the child-bearing years herself, so she hatched a plan. She sent an Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, to sleep with her husband so that Hagar could get pregnant by Abram and produce the needed heir. Seemed like a good idea. Abram didn't object. And the plan worked just fine. Hagar got pregnant.

Well, you can imagine how things turned out. Hagar was no sooner pregnant than she began to look at Sarai with contempt. Sarai blames her husband for the way Hagar is treating her but Abram washes his hands of the whole thing, making it clear that this is Sarai's problem to deal with. Sarai's solution is to come down hard on Hagar, who runs away from the camp. However, an angel of the Lord finds Hagar and tells her to return and put up with Sarai's abuse. The angel tells Hagar that her son is to be named Ishmael and that she will have countless offspring. So Hagar returns to Abram and has her baby, the first-born son of Abraham.

A second son

But, of course, God didn't really need Abram's and Sarai's help with this. After the birth of Ishmael, God reiterates his promise of an heir. Abraham and Sarah will have a son and they are to name him

Why Not Cheat?

That almost seems like an odd question. One answer would be: God says so. It's true, but still not enough for me. I was always the sort of kid who made his parents explain why. Why does cheating at work or home or school take us away from God rather than toward God? Perhaps one reason goes something like this.

The biblical teachings about how we are to live our lives can be summed up in two simple instructions: love God and love neighbor.

Why do we cheat? Because of the unrelenting, inescapable pressure of competition. Whether it is the college we want, the promotion we want, the house we want to buy, or the championship we want to win – competition drives it all.

And competition is inherently relational. There are a limited number of acceptances each year at Rice. Some will get in, some will not. Those who have more money drive up the competition for the house we want. Every varsity program has to turn kids away. When we cheat, we harm those against whom we are competing because in our desire to succeed we have been unjust and unkind, treating others in ways that we hope we would never be treated.

Cheating diminishes us. It's like rust that we allow to accumulate on the image of God in each of us. Life may be a race, but the prize is the "heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). We strain forward to what is ahead, but never over the bodies of our fellow runners. We can embrace the competition that is life, while we keep our eyes upon what is worthy of God and of ourselves.

Isaac, meaning "he laughs." I suspect that God picks this name because God has a sense of humor, for Abraham laughs at the very idea that he and Sarah would have a child – they are both nearing a hundred years old! Even Sarah laughs at the suggestion that she would have a baby. How ridiculous.

Laugh as they might, God is God. So Sarah did conceive and give birth to Isaac, with whom God would establish his covenant, as God would with Isaac's son, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel.

As for Hagar and Ishmael? At a big party thrown in Isaac's honor, Sarah saw her son playing with Ishmael. She asked Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. . . . And he did.

Trusting God

Not long after the publication of Callahan's *The Cheating Culture*, the editors of *Christianity Today* wrote a brief editorial, "Spiritual Shortcuts." They noted that for Christians, this is a spiritual problem, quoting Eugene Peterson, "One aspect of the world that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently." This is as true in our spiritual lives as it is elsewhere. The one-minute Bible, the five-minute devotional, five keys to spiritual success and so on. As the editors note, these have their place as tidbits but are too often confused for the real meat of discipleship.

Whether we cheat on our taxes, plagiarize an assignment, or seek instant discipleship, we are being impatient with God, acting as if God has created the wrong way of life. In this sermon series, we've used the journey as a metaphor for life, but life actually is a journey. Each day, we are to wake up, put one foot in front of the other and continue our journey toward God. It is not quick and it is certainly not easy, but we trust God that his way is the path that leads to the abundant life.

Sarah took a shortcut that seemed like such an easy solution. But it led only to anger, oppression, and separation. None of us are exempt from the temptations that grabbed Sarah. But with God's help and the encouragement of others, we pray that we might resist the temptation to take shortcuts that aren't.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on Abraham and Sarah)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Genesis 15 God reiterates his covenant with Abraham	Day 2 Genesis 16 The birth of Ishmael
Day 3 Genesis 17 The sign of the covenant	Day 4 Genesis 18:1-15 A son is promised to Abraham and Sarah
Day 5 Genesis 21:1-22 The birth of Isaac; Hagar and Ishmael are sent away	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

A Special Four-week Teaching Series with Scott Engle

Our Times and the End-Times: A fresh look at biblical prophecy

Beginning Sunday May 15 at 9:30 in Wesley Hall

The popularity of the *Left Behind* series generated a lot of new interest in Christian teachings about the End of Days. Now, we have NBC's popular mini-series, *Revelations*. In this four-week Wesley Hall teaching series, we'll take a look at what the Bible actually has to say about the End-Times. Will there be one Antichrist or many antichrists? Will believers be yanked away into safety as the world descends into chaos and tribulation? When will all this happen? What does any of this have to do with heaven? What does the Bible have to say about the "new heavens and the new earth"? What are we to make of the book of Revelation? What is our own place in all of this and what does it have to do with the lives we lead now?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Whether it is plagiarizing, using performance-enhancing drugs, or fudging on our taxes, we've all been tempted by inappropriate shortcuts and we've all taken a few of them. This is a good place to begin your discussion. Why do we cheat? I once taught a college class for seniors. Of 63 students in the class, I caught 16 plagiarizing! Why so many? Even if we take away the risk of penalty and take away the harm done to others, do you think that cheating diminishes the individual? How?
2. When reflecting upon "spiritual shortcuts," the editors of *Christianity Today* wrote, "Our destination is the heavenly city, but unlike other journeys, God has made it so that the views and trials, the experiences and people we meet along the way make this journey a 'destination' of its own, a process by which we prepare for the moment we come 'face to face' (1 Cor. 13:12)." What are your thoughts on this? If the journey is a destination in its own right, then how might we view shortcuts? What is the result of taking shortcuts on such a journey? Might we not miss the destination?
3. When Sarah hatches her plan to have Hagar sleep with her husband, might she have seen herself as the instrument of God's plan for Abraham to have an heir? Often in the Bible, humans are God's agents, the ones through whom God carries out his divine purposes. How could Sarah know that *she* would bear the heir? This is the great blessing of all these biblical stories. Things are never quite as simple as they might seem and often a lot more surprising. Hagar is the first woman in the Bible to be visited by an angel and the first woman to whom God makes promises and the only person in the OT who names God! Lots of surprises.