

January 29, 2017

Authentic Christianity  
*How Faithful are You?*  
Genesis 22:1-12

**Opening words:** Webster defines "authentic" as: genuine or real; not false or copied. The issue of being authentic is important. Our world will tolerate many things, but our world will not tolerate a fraud. It is true in the secular world and it is true in the life of the church. It is not enough to know the words of the creeds; we must live a life worthy of Jesus. In the life of the church, there is no room for hypocrites. We must be authentic Christians.

This is sermon number four in my eight-part sermon series, *Authentic Christianity*. True Christianity is designed to be life altering. It should affect your actions and your opinions. We are looking at characteristics that should be within you. Two weeks ago, we looked at compassion. Last week, we looked at hope. Next week, we look at perseverance, then love. Today, we look at faithfulness. This is my question for you today. *How Faithful are You?* Our scripture reading is Genesis 22:1-12.

**Genesis 22:1-12** Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. <sup>2</sup> Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." <sup>3</sup> Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. <sup>5</sup> He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." <sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, <sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" <sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. <sup>9</sup> When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. <sup>12</sup> "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

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Senator Mark Hatfield tells of touring Calcutta with Mother Teresa and visiting the so-called "House of Dying," where sick children are cared for in their last days, and the dispensary, where the poor line up by the hundreds to receive medical attention.

Watching Mother Teresa minister to these people, feeding and nursing those left by others to die, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering she and her co-workers faced daily. "How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?" he asked. Mother Teresa replied, "My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful, I am called to be faithful."

I will be the first one to admit it. The death of my sister has changed the way I look at my life. I have decided I have spent far too much time trying to be successful. I have decided to spend the rest of my life just being faithful. The great reformer Martin Luther once said, *"Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times."* This is the question you must answer today: How faithful are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

To answer the question, you must understand the true meaning of faithfulness. The term is misused in our time. Faith is *not* the magic wand you say to get what you want. With sincere hearts, we pray for the sick to be healed. We have been told, if you have enough faith the person will be healed. Those verses are misunderstood. Faith is not your collection of beliefs. Just because you have a spiritual thought does not make you faithful. Satan has theological thoughts too, and believes that God exists, but Satan is not faithful. Faith is *not* a flag you wave to rally the troops to get what you want. In every war, both sides think that God is on their side. In every controversial church meeting, someone on the losing side will stand up and say, "Have faith". So, what is faith? Faith is replacing your wants with God's will. That is not an easy thing to do. If you don't believe me, then look at the story of Abraham and Isaac. Let me ask you the question again: How faithful are you?

We find ourselves today in the twenty-second chapter of Genesis. It is important that you remember the background. The story does not stand alone. It is part of a storyline. This story really began in the twelfth chapter of Genesis. For it is in that chapter, God made a great treaty or covenant with Abram. God promises to bless Abram and turn his descendants into a great nation. It must have been a happy day for Abram. Who doesn't want a blessing from God? The problem is, God does things in God's time. If your descendants are going to be a great nation, then you must have children. Years later, he is still waiting for his first child to be born. Finally, Abram, now Abraham, and his wife, Sarah, welcome their first child into the world. It's a boy and they name him Isaac. Does any of this sound familiar? After waiting a lifetime, Abraham and Sarah have a son and he must have been the bright light in their lives. That is what makes this morning's scripture lesson so cruel. God decides to test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice the thing he loves the most, Isaac. There is a happy ending for everyone, except the ram. Abraham passes the test and Isaac lives! There is no longer any doubt. Abraham is a man of faith. He replaced his agenda for his life with God's will. That is a hard thing to do. That is why today's question, how faithful are you, is so relevant.

One of the leading personalities in the contemporary American church today is Rick Warren. He founded and pastored a mega-church, Saddleback Church, in California.

You may have read his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Several years ago, I read his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*. Like me, he recognizes the importance of faithfulness. He says on judgement day we are all going to stand before God, who will judge us on our faithfulness. For that reason, everyone should know if they are living a faithful life. If not, they need to make some corrections. To help people discover their faithfulness, he developed a quiz on the topic. I want to look at that quiz today so you can answer our question, how faithful are you?

- 1. Do you possess the right values?** Life is a great gift. Do you spend your time in this world pursuing things that are truly important, or do you waste your time on the trivial? Faithful people always have their eyes fixed on God.
- 2. Do you care for the interests of others?** In other words, do you care about the needs of others, or are you preoccupied with yourself? Faithful people live compassionate lives.
- 3. Do you live with integrity before an unbelieving world?** Never forget it, your life is your greatest witness. Are you living in a way that is attracting people to God, or are you living in a way that is confusing people about God? Faithful people draw out the best in others.
- 4. Do you keep your promises?** In other words, are you as good as your word, or do the people in your life find you undependable? Faithful people respect others.
- 5. Do you develop your God-given gifts?** God has given everyone a gift. Are you using that gift, or are you wasting it? Faithful people are always a positive influence.
- 6. Do you obey God's commandments?** We are not dumb people. There is no such thing as ignorance of the law. Most of us know what God expects from us. Do you love God? Do you love other people unconditionally? Faithful people are obedient.
- 7. Do you pass on what you learned?** This question is not talking about living in the "good old days." Those stories of your glorious past are only interesting to you. No one cares. No one wants to hear them. This question is about sharing what you have learned about God. Faithful people share their wisdom.

So how did you do on the quiz? Are you a faithful person? Or, are you an unfaithful person? It is better to find out today than on judgement day. Is God the driving force in your life, or are you focusing on your own interests? If you found this quiz to be either helpful or disturbing, say, "**Amen!**" God wants us to live faithful lives, so occasionally he rewards us for our faithfulness.

I became pastor of this church in 1994, twenty-three years ago. When I tell other United Methodist clergy about my longevity, I get one of two reactions: I am either a

goat or a hero. Some dislike my longevity because they have been forced to move. Others think I am a hero because I have bucked the system. I will be honest with you. Several years ago, I struggled with my own longevity. There came a point where I knew if I didn't move then, I would never move. I would simply be too old to move. Can I be honest with you? There is only one reason I have stayed here. It had nothing to do with the church. Looking back, it wasn't even personal reasons. I am here for only one reason. I believe God wants me here. I can't imagine not being the pastor of this church, yet I was still restless. I began to wonder about the road I didn't travel. I remember praying for some insight. God heard and answered my prayer.

It was about that time I had my annual consultation with our District Superintendent. Dan is always trying to connect me to someone in the system. He suggested I talk to someone within the annual conference that I respected. He gave me a short list of names and I selected one. I did respect this guy. Our careers ran parallel for many years. He had served one church for many years, then he chose the path I didn't take. He became a District Superintendent and now serves one of the largest churches in this Annual Conference. In time, he called me and we agreed to meet at a Panera in the Akron area. When the day came, I reluctantly went. In the middle of the afternoon, I walked in and he greeted me with a handshake and a smile. We bought our cups of coffee and sat in the corner. He began by saying, "Why did Dan want me to meet with you?" I said, "He is trying to reconnect me." He gave me a blank stare and asked, "Is your church have any problems?" I said, "No more than normal." Then he asked, "Is your church experiencing any conflict?" I said, "No more than normal." Finally, he asked, "Is your church struggling financially?" I said, "No. We are the ultimate non-profit." Then, we talked about nothing of substance for a few minutes. As we were about to leave, I said, "I don't want to sound like a stalker, but I have always admired your work. I have always felt bad about the way things played out at your church." His replacement at his former church had done some real damage. It was like pulling my finger out of the dike. He shared everything with me. The phone calls from his former parishioners, who were mad he left. His painful years as a District Superintendent. He prayed every day the phone wouldn't ring, but it always rang. There was always a problem. He said, he left that position with a case of post-traumatic stress syndrome. The church he is now serving, one of the largest, longed for his predecessor, and his heart was still at his former church. For him, every day was a struggle. His retirement couldn't come soon enough. When he finally finished, he looked at his watch and said, "Sorry to unload on you. I should run. I have a meeting tonight." I said, "I am just going to go home." I have never forgotten that discussion. It changed the way I looked at my job. It changed the way I look at you. I stopped taking you for granted. Most of all, I was thankful I listened to God and stayed. I haven't missed anything at all. I will say it. With that part of my life, I was faithful. How faithful are you?

Is the goal in your life to be successful? Is the goal in your life to be faithful? Remember the words of Martin Luther, *"Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** How faithful are you?