

Sermon: Bartering with God

Portions adapted from "Prayer For The Unworthy," by Jeff Strite @ SermonCentral.Com

In Europe in the Middle Ages, people had a strong belief in the power of prayer. They also believed that the purer and simpler the life you led, the more God would listen to you and since Monks were supposed to live purer and simpler lives than anyone else their prayers were seen as a hotline to God. So, rich people and warriors began to pay the monks to do all the praying they were too busy to do for themselves.

The Middle Ages were also times of great conflict. Lots of wars, lots of soldiers killed on the fields of battle and at the time, the Catholic church was conflicted about the command "Thou shalt not kill." They felt that the commandment also applied to killing in war (though it doesn't). So, in 1066 after the Battle of Hastings the Catholic church demanded that each soldier do 120 days of penance for every person they killed.

In his lifetime, William the Conqueror was responsible for the death of about 10,000 people. That meant he was required to do 1,200,000 days of penance or about 3,300 years up until the year 4366 just to cleanse his soul. Even today he would still be praying with another 2,000+ years to go.

William figured if the work was split up amongst a couple hundred monks he could have his soul cleansed in less than 18 years, so he founded a string of Abbeys throughout France - where monks would pray specifically for his soul.

Not only was that practice not Biblical... it was just plain silly! God doesn't work like that, but people have developed odd opinions about prayer for centuries. That's what happens when you don't pay attention to Scripture... you create all kinds of strange theologies.

The Bible actually has a lot to say about prayer, especially with regard to salvation and forgiveness of our sins which is each person's own individual responsibility. But William wasn't too far off in our need to be praying for others and having others praying for us. As James the brother of Jesus would remind us, the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (4:16).

That's why the prayers we find in Scripture – like the one Abraham prayed in Genesis chapter 18 are so important. Here, God is showcasing Abraham's prayer for us – like He does other prayers in the Bible – we can see that prayer is both a very simple thing to do and what prayer can accomplish. So this morning, let's consider how and for what Abraham prayed.....

Abraham talked <u>WITH</u> God as a friend. He prayed humbly, boldly, and repeatedly.
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1st – Abraham **talked With God as if with a friend**. Now you might say... “Well, duh. Of course he talked with God.” That's what you'd think... but people don't always think of doing prayer that way.

Many people are hesitant to pray out loud, in front of a group, because they think that unless they have prepared some formal speech God would not be interested in what they had to say.

On the other extreme as even illustrated in our Bibles, sometimes people don't so much pray to God as they pray for show, using formal or dramatic language to impress others with their own holiness (Matthew 6:5-15).

Another mode of non-prayer is actually a covert attempt to give instruction to the audience rather than having a conversation with God. I've heard church leaders even pastors use what was supposedly a prayer as a rather obvious attempt to tell their listeners what to think or do.

But that's not how prayer works. **Prayer is talking WITH God like you'd talk with a friend.** That's what Abraham was doing here. Abraham “was called a friend of God.” (James 2:23).” Interestingly you might say that Abe's prayer actually began with casual invitation to have lunch – sit a while with me and refresh yourself – before turning to babies, future hopes and then the more serious matter of Sodom.

What? You don't think God likes to hear about your day and talk about babies?
I do! I love this portion of scripture which teaches me,

*to not be anxious about anything,
but in everything by prayer and supplication
with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God*
Philippians 4:6

Also when we talk with someone, when we have a conversation, we are expected in turn to listen to what they have to say. In the Genesis passage we read of Abraham first listening and then replying back to God who is listening to him. It is not just a one sided conversation.

In fact it is God, not Abraham, who began both the conversation about Sarah's future baby and now the future of Sodom and Gomorrah. Without such an ongoing two-way conversation, prayer cannot work. Prayer is speaking and listening. If you only speak to God when you have a request for Him to fill -- do not be surprised if you do not get a reply. God is not our heavenly concierge just waiting to do our bidding. God wants to be in conversation with us as we go through life. Like two friends walking side by side, speaking, listening and growing closer together through the years. This is what it means to have communion with God. This is what it means to pray.

As we spend time in God's word and begin to live our lives according to God's word and to pray according to God's word, and then to stop and listen ... then we will begin to hear from God as well.

On the matter of learning how to pray, my seminary professor told us a story of his visit with a terminally ill patient [let's call him Bob] who was afraid die. When asked if he had prayed about this Bob said he didn't know how to. At which point my professor grabbed a kitchen chair and set it down right beside Bob's bed, telling him to pretend like God had just walked into the room and sat down for a visit, they even rehearsed what a bit of that conversation would be like. By the end of the visit, Bob was greatly relieved and said he planned on having several long talks with God.

Sometime later when my professor called back to check on Bob, the family informed him that their dad had passed peacefully in his sleep, but that oddly when they found him he was leaning halfway out of the bed with his head resting on the chair.

That is what prayer is, two friends communing together. So first, Abraham **prayed with God**; speaking and listening in conversation, but 2nd, Abraham prayed **HUMBLY** before God.

Yes! God was Abraham's friend... but He was also God! He's majestic and all powerful. You don't approach God as if He owes you a favor, because He doesn't. God is God and, frankly, the closer you get to God, the less important you're going to feel.

A family spent the night camping at a National Park in Colorado. The clear moonless sky was so filled with stars that it felt like you could reach out and touch them. After they had all gone to bed, their youngest boy came into his parent's tent dragging his sleeping bag with him. What is the matter?" they asked. "Is it getting too cold?" "No," he answered. "I just never knew I was so small." (Reader's Digest 9/81 p. 126)

When you REALLY find yourself in God's presence that's kind of how you feel. When you REALLY sense God in all His glory you feel... small. That's why Abraham admitted how **SMALL** he felt, saying "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, ***I who am but dust and ashes***" (18:27). So, while it is right to think of ourselves according to our creature/Creator relationship with God, we are still nevertheless encouraged by the access granted us through Jesus Christ to come boldly – "with confidence" – before God's throne of Grace to make our requests known (Hebrews 4:16).

So Abraham talked **WITH** God as a friend and yet he talked **HUMBLY** with God recognizing their relationship, but that did not stop him from speaking **BOLDLY** and **REPEATEDLY** with God about a matter that deeply concerned both of them.

Why did God even bring up the matter of Sodom with Abraham? Scripture says that He wanted Abe to remember this event as an object lesson to teach to his heirs - so that when they, as promised, become a great nation, they will not forget to live righteously. But I think that there was more to it than that. I think God wanted to hear Abraham's opinion on the matter. God wanted to hear what was in Abe's heart and he wanted Abe to understand what was in His heart, concerning the lives that would be lost in the two cities.

When told that God was going to investigate the sinful reputation of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham could guess what the outcome might be, he knew those cities' reputation most likely by first hand business dealings with them. There was also the matter of his nephew Lot and family who had taken up residence there.

You might think that like the later prophet Jonah, Abraham would be glad to have those cities removed from what would be his future children's homeland. Maybe just get family out and do in the rest. But instead of asking just for Lot and family, Abraham prays for the entire city. Like God, his heart and mind first turned to how many innocent people might be harmed in the process.

This is a lesson about God that I want you to remember! Often times God in the Old Testament is depicted as unloving and judgmental as if He were a completely different person from God of the New Testament who is loving and forgiving, but they are the same person. Yes God hates sin, but He has always loved and has always sought to save ALL of His lost children who have wandered away from Him. Which is why I brought up the "prayer" of Jonah in this message. Jonah didn't care about the cost of innocent lives but God did!

Jonah was the one who wanted everyone in Nineveh wiped off the face of the earth. It was God who had to remind this hateful prophet that there were in this city, *more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who did not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals* (Jonah 4:11). Commentaries differ on whether God was speaking about the children in town, or about adults who just didn't know any better way of life. The point is that God was truly concerned about these innocent people ... and also about the animals in town. Just as God should be concerned about how many innocent people might be living in Sodom and Gomorrah – which He was.

So Abraham and God are actually thinking alike when he boldly challenges God, will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? Now Sodom in ancient times was apparently a big metropolis, so Abe's sum of 50 righteous people would be only a small minority in town and yet God assured Abe that even if He only found 50 righteous people He would spare both towns.

Now here is the interesting part. It was Abraham who had initially set the number at 50 and yet he keeps coming back time and again; 6 times!!! Until he has bartered God down to 10 righteous people being sufficient to spare the entire place. God would spare the two most wicked cities in history for the sake of 10 righteous people who might be living there ... that is how much the supposedly harsh, judgmental, God of the Old Testament would rather save than destroy people.

Abraham kept coming back to God again and again and again. Did this upset God? Apparently not. In fact, Scripture records this prayer of Abraham's because God wants us to see Abraham's boldness. His willingness to repeat his request until he gets a satisfactory answer from God.

In the Gospel of Luke, "*Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*" The story was of a persistent widow who keeps returning to an unjust judge. Though the judge doesn't care, he eventually grants the widow's request because she repeatedly comes back to him. Jesus' surprising moral for his disciples is ...will not God give

justice to His elect who cry to Him day and night? ... I tell you He will give them justice speedily (18:1-7). The point being if the uncaring can be worn down by repeated requests, how much more quickly will our loving God respond to His children's repeated requests.

Why should we always pray and not give up? Because we have the privilege to boldly enter into the presence of God to talk with Him about what is on our hearts.

So Abraham boldly, repeatedly, came back to God asking not for his family and not only for the innocent, but for the entire CITY!!! Genesis tells us "... the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD" (13:13). And throughout Scripture Sodom was used as the classic example of evil, deserving of judgment (Jude 1:7).

Thus, asking God to spare an entire city of wicked people doesn't make any sense... unless that's what God wanted us to learn from this story. Scripture reminds us that these stories from the past were included to give us "hope" (Romans 15:4).

Abraham's prayer was focused on the lost. While God listens to all kinds of prayers... this is the kind of prayer that I believe that most gets His attention, because it is also in line with His own desires and so it's the first prayer God introduces us to.

Thus, the best kind of prayer is the one where we pass by the bars in town and pray for those who frequent them. It's the kind of prayer where we pray for the person we know who is addicted to drugs, or the person who is caught up in sexual immorality of one kind or another, or for both parties in a marriage that is breaking up. I believe God wanted us to see Abraham PRAYING for Sodom to be SAVED.

But now... why would God want Abraham to pray like that? To help us understand the answer to this question we need to ask another question, how many people in Sodom deserved to be saved? Obviously, there weren't 10! But were there at least 4 who deserved to be saved (Lot/wife/daughters?)

Well, while II Peter tells us that Lot was "righteous" (2 Peter 2:7), even his righteousness was tainted by the community in which he lived. If you recall, in protection of his visitors, Lot had even offered his own daughters for the crowd to gang rape. I'm pretty sure that decision didn't win him the "Father of the Year" award. He had lived so long in Sodom that his judgment had become warped.

Then there was Lot's wife. Commanded by the angels not to look back at the city, she disobeyed and turned around. She regretted having to leave the city she'd invested her life in and because of that, she never left. She turned into a statue of salt.

Then there were Lot's daughters. Having tried but failed to get their fiancés to come with them and fearing they would never find husbands elsewhere, they got their father drunk and slept with him so they'd have the children they coveted. Their two sons went on to father the nations of Moab and Ammon, who worshipped the idol Baal and who would later attempt to hire Balaam the prophet to curse Israel's entrance into the promised land (Deuteronomy 23:3-4).

This family hardly sounds like people who deserved to be saved. Thus, there weren't ANY people in Sodom who deserved to escape - not even Lot and his family. They all fell short of being righteous.

Hmmmm. Do you realize there's a lot of people who believe that they're going to be saved (at the judgment) because they've lived good lives? They help little old ladies across the street, contribute to charities and may even go regularly to church. They feel their good deeds are enough to earn them entrance into heaven. Again, had they been reading their Bibles they would have known that there are none who are righteous, no not one and the wages of sin is death (Romans 3:10, 6:23).

To which, in response, Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus that: *“you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience — among whom WE ALL ONCE LIVED in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were BY NATURE CHILDREN OF WRATH, like the rest of mankind.”* (Ephesians 2:1-3)

In other words, every single one of us (both you and I) was dead in our sins. Not one of us deserved to be saved. We ALL once lived in the passions of our flesh and were by nature children of wrath... just like everybody else!!!

*But ... because of the great love with which He loved us,
even when we were dead in our trespasses,
God made us alive together with Christ*
Ephesians 2:4-5

Now think about this. Historians estimate that the population of Sodom was around a quarter of a million people, but only 4 were saved. Every single person in Sodom was a sinner. No one who lived there deserved to be saved (including the 4 who were saved). So, if that's true... why did God save Lot and his family? Because they belonged to Abraham. That's the only reason they got out alive.

The Bible also teaches us that not one of us deserves to be saved. Not one of us is good enough to be good enough to spend eternity in glory. So, if that's true... why would God bother to save us? Because we belong to Jesus. That's the ONLY REASON we get to go to heaven. That's why Jesus said ...

I am the way, the truth and the life.
No one comes unto the Father,
except through me.”
John 14:6

Now, as well as back then, we have only been saved by God's loving grace as His gift, which we, like Abraham can only receive by faith. As the Bible has taught from front to back; those who are righteous before God are those who live by faith in His power to keep His promises.

The next day Abraham woke to see a cloud of smoke rising like a cloud from a furnace. Abraham now realizes that his negotiations were in vain since God could not find 10 righteous souls from the combined population of the two cities. That is all we get. We are not told how Abraham felt or what his reaction was, just that he moved.

So what did Abraham learn from his conversation with God?

- He learned that yes, he could negotiate with God and pose hard questions.
- He learned that God would keep His word.
- He learned that not 10 living souls in either of those cities were found righteous in God's eyes.
- He learned that God preserved his life for a reason and wanted him away from these people forever.

Abraham had a heart for the lost citizens of those two cities and realized that he shared his world with them. But they did not share his belief in the Living God. Like Abraham, God wanted to spare the cities if He could have found some way – like Nineveh – of turning the residents around to repentance and righteousness. But neither got their wish, which is our lesson in the need for righteous living – not to be saved – but like the future nation of Israel to continue enjoying God's blessings upon our land.

That is why our Bible continues to encourage us to offer up, supplications, prayers intercessions and thanksgivings for EVERYONE, not only so that we might live peaceful, quiet and Godly lives, but also because it is pleasing in the sight of God who desires ALL people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Let's pray about this....

Prayer & Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen

Hymn:

"Because He Lives"