

Should Judgment Be Limited To Sodom?

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Text: Gen. 18:20-33; Luke 6:36-42

As a father of five children, I've had numerous situations when one sibling would come with some concern or grievance against another. Now, in the heat of the moment, it's tempting to simply act on the initial report and deal with the supposed offender. However, it didn't take too many situations before I realized that this was failing to recognize one small flaw in the process; the fact of the fallen human heart. The reporter is not always entirely innocent, and the offender is not always completely guilty.

You see, as much as I wanted to believe child #1, I had to act on what I knew to be an all too true spiritual fact from Scripture, that "there is none righteous, not even one." (*Rom. 3:10*) And as much as I wanted to consider my children objective and impartial, the fact was that they were most likely going to report the side of the story that would in some way benefit themselves. Therefore, I began asking one simple question before proceeding with any further action, "Now, when I ask your brother what *you* did, what are they going to tell me?" This usually brought a sudden balance to the scales.

It's interesting, when reading our Old Testament passage for today, that God proceeds with His action against Sodom and Gomorrah in much the same way. God was on a mission to investigate the facts behind numerous complaints He had received against these two pagan cities.

Gen 18:20-21 And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know."

This text brings to mind some interesting questions:

"Did God not know that Sodom and Gomorrah were evil? Did He need to physically investigate these claims brought to His attention by mere mortals?"

The answer is clearly yes...and no! God knew the true condition of these evil communities; and no, He didn't have to come physically to investigate. Psalm 14 explains:

Ps 14:2 The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there are any who understand, Who seek after God. **3** They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one. (also Ps. 33:13-15; 102:19)

This passage from Genesis shows us, in vivid human terms, the care God takes when punishment is dealt. He is never whimsical or flippant in His disciplines. He is absolutely just and punishes only as needed in appropriate, measured forms. In this case, the appropriate punishment was complete annihilation. As one text observed:

"The Lord ... did not have to inspect Sodom at close range to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry. God used an anthropomorphic expression to make clear that His judgments are not arbitrary and that there would be no miscarriage of justice in Sodom's case because the judge did not know all the facts. - Concordia self-study commentary

We then see Abraham enter into a lengthy banter with God over His plan, and the apparent injustice of wiping out an entire culture over the sins of a few. Abraham pleads for God's re-evaluation and Sodom & Gomorrah's possible salvation:

Genesis 18:22-33 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord. ²³ Abraham came near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" ²⁶ So the Lord said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account." ²⁷ And Abraham replied, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." ²⁹ He spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose forty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it on account of the forty." ³⁰ Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." ³¹ And he said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the twenty." ³² Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the ten." ³³ As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the Lord departed, and Abraham returned to his place.

But why would Abraham be so persistent? The only people he knew in that area (*as far as we know*), were his nephew Lot and his family. Why would he begin with such a large number? Some have suggested that his motivation was due to a wrong-headed understanding of sin. He may have fallen for the deception that a particular sin (homosexuality / sodomy) was limited to only a certain part of the population. Obviously not everyone in the city was participating in that specific sin.

But that would neglect the general guilt of the city. We must remember that God considers a person "guilty" if they cross any of God's standards and commands. And if we look at a shadow passage from Ezekiel, we see that there was much more sin going on amongst God's people, than even existed in Sodom and Gomorrah:

Ezekiel 16:48-50 As I live," declares the Lord God, "Sodom, your sister and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. ⁴⁹ Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. ⁵⁰ Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it.

This is the struggle that many of us face when we read of God's overwhelming punishment of the wicked. To wipe out an entire population, or thousands at a time (2 Sam 24:10ff) or even hundreds (Num. 16:20ff) is to come

face to face with the severity of God's hatred of sin, His demand for purity, and the desperately wicked condition of mankind. It challenges every believer, with vivid reality, to remember "There, but by the grace of God, go I."

This may have been why Abraham was so insistent.

"Abraham interceded for Sodom, ... not by any special interest in Lot, for in that case he would have prayed for his deliverance; ... nor did he appeal to the covenant grace of Jehovah, but to His justice alone; and on the principle that the Judge of all the earth could not possibly destroy the righteous with the wicked, he founded his entreaty that God would forgive the city if there were but fifty righteous in it, or even if there were only ten. He was led to intercede in this way ... by the love which springs from the consciousness that one's own preservation and rescue are due to compassionate grace alone; love, too, which cannot conceive of the guilt of others as too great for salvation to be possible. This sympathetic love, springing from the faith which was counted for righteousness, impelled him...." - (Keil & Delitzsch)

In other words, Abraham, knowing all too well his own doubt and failings, was struggling for assurance of God's justice on his own behalf. If God's justice is so capricious and arbitrary as to wipe out the innocent with the guilty, what hope was there for him? After all, he was guilty too. Down deep in his soul he knew that God's justice was not this way, but he struggled for verification. If the Lord was indeed the perfectly just and merciful God he believed Him to be, then there would be hope for the righteous of Sodom & Gomorrah, as well as himself.

Well, we all know the outcome of the story. In the end, both communities of Sodom and Gomorrah, with all their inhabitants and possessions (*save Lot's family*), were destroyed in a horrific firestorm. Thus we see the fact of God's harsh punishment for sin and the eventual end of His longsuffering when endless wickedness is flaunted by mankind. We see the reality of God's retribution towards evil-doers. But Genesis 18 also shows us this perfect justice balanced with mercy regarding the righteous. This is where Genesis 18 and Luke 6:36ff dovetail one another.

Luke 6:36 "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. 37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. 38 "Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure--pressed down, shaken together, {and} running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."... 41 "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 42 "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.

In the midst of God's need to punish those who practice wickedness we are confronted by His inherent desire to show mercy. We are told that "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly

grave." Now God could have reacted, as we've said. But He is not the reactive type, nor so overwhelmed by His need for vengeance that he loses sight of His passion for mercy. He verifies whether or not the stories are true and then moves accordingly (like the loving father He is).

Likewise, God expects us to balance justice, or judgment, with mercy. Abraham wanted to believe the best about the residents of Sodom & Gomorrah. Surely there had to be 50 righteous people between these two cities; enough to curtail this devastation. But God doesn't want us to pass over the sins committed by people of darkness. In fact, the opposite is true, as we are instructed elsewhere in Scripture.

Ezek 3:18 "When I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. (also Ezek. 33:8)

God is warning against a person's participation in evil, as well as one's failure to confront, in a balanced way, those practicing such wicked customs. But why? Why this emphasis on shared responsibility?

The answer is not limited to the fact that evil must be confronted and eradicated from the lives of a righteous people. God is not encouraging a self-righteous condemnation of the "guilty."

This emphasis on mutual liability is because it is the compassionate and loving thing to do. We hold each other accountable, not because we are superior and are called to "fix" the flaws in one another. We "judge" because we know that we ourselves are consumed with the same erratic and fallen natures; desperately needing accountability and correction. Our sin may not be the obvious sin on the surface, but we are certainly guilty of some sins on the list (pride and self to name just two). We are to be like the high priests spoken of in Hebrews:

Heb 5:1 For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; 2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; 3 and because of it he is obligated to offer {sacrifices} for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.

Abraham interceded for the righteous people of Sodom & Gomorrah (*though there ended up to be none*), out of a love for others and for the character of God. Jesus demands we do the same, holding others accountable as we ourselves require accountability. "We love, because He first loved us." (1 John 4:10, 19)