

July 7, 2023

Genesis 18:20-33

Some of you may know that until I was about thirteen, I lived in Baraboo. I loved it there- I had my friends, my school, my sports teams, I was pretty content with my life there. One day, however, my parents brought us five kids together and explained to us that we were going to be moving to the Madison area, which meant a new church, new school, and new friends. I was despondent. I remember blurting out, "that's not fair! We can't do that!" To which my Father wryly responded, "Oh, I wasn't aware we needed your permission to make family decisions, Sam! We're just about done with the monthly budget, would you like to look it over and approve it for us? I have this car payment for the Honda, is it okay with you if I pay it?" For the next few months, my dad would continue to remind me of my place- he would say, "Hey guys, let's go to Pizza Ranch!" To which my young siblings said, "Yeah!" And then my dad would say, "Wait, guys. We have to get Sam's approval first. Sam, is it okay with you if we go to Pizza Ranch tonight? We'll only go if it's okay with you!" *He was right to do so. I needed to learn my place in the family.* He was the father, and I was a son. It wasn't my job to question him and tell him what was fair and unfair. It was my job to trust that he loves his family and will do all things for his family's good.

Something similar happens here in the life of Abraham, who lived in modern day Israel around 2000 BC. God comes to him and tells him exactly what he's going to do and invites his input, and Abraham prays one of the most profound, beautiful, faith-filled, humble and bold prayers that we see in the Scriptures, and it perfectly shows us what it means when address God as "**Our Father.**"

Sodom and Gamorrah were two prosperous, wealthy cities in the southern part of what is now Israel, which is a vast desert wilderness with the Dead Sea- the saltiest body of water on Earth. God initially visits Abraham with two angels telling him that a year from that day, he and his elderly wife would have a Son, and now they are going to Sodom and Gomorrah- why? God tells Abraham that the outcry has come up and their sin is literally- very heavy. What does that mean? The word "outcry" is used in the Old Testament as a way to talk about the cry of the oppressed, the marginalized, the women who were violated, the poor who were abused, the children that were abandoned, the people who were used for slave labor, and God is loving and good and he hears those cries, and apparently there were so many cries of the oppressed in Sodom and Gomorrah that God came to personally see if it was as bad as he thought. Why would he do that? Because he's a loving God and seeks to interact with his creation- and because he specifically wants to talk to Abraham. Here, God actually wants Abraham to talk to him. He invites him to tell him his opinion, to pray to him for Sodom and Gamorrah because through this, Abraham and his descendants are going to benefit and learn something beautiful about God.

Here then is the first thing we get from this. **Prayer is not an option for Christians.** It's something we are called to do. God invites us to talk to him just as much as he invites Abraham- who are we to say, "no thanks, I'm good?" The question isn't, "Why should I pray," but rather "Why wouldn't I?" The only reason you wouldn't is because you either think God isn't big enough or loving enough to hear you or

answer you, or you've been tricked into thinking that you are okay and you are in control of the things and so he really isn't worth your time. Prayer isn't a way for you to earn God's favor, but it is certainly a helpful gauge of your relationship with God and how aware you are of the reality of your dependence on him. Prayer isn't a chore- it's a privilege that we don't deserve and the more you come to know how great of a gift it is, the more you'll use it.

But how should we pray? Watch Abraham. First, Abraham doesn't do what I did with my dad and say, "I don't think that's fair," but holds God to his own standard! He says, "Lord! You're the judge of all the earth! You are goodness and justice itself. You're holy and perfect and good! What if there were fifty righteous people in the city who know you and obey you even though most of their neighbors don't? Would you destroy them as if they were wicked? I know the wicked deserve it, but how could you treat the righteous like this? You have revealed yourself as a just God- according to your standard, this isn't justice!" And God says, "you're right. If I go down there and there are fifty righteous people, I will spare (or forgive) the entire city." That immediately brings to my knees awe of the mercy and wisdom of God. God values righteousness, honesty, goodness, love, charity, and he loves his people so greatly that he would actually spare and forgive the many evil, dangerous, depraved for the few righteous good. And God is so wise that he pushes Abraham just enough to get Abraham to confess this marvelous truth. But it doesn't end there- Abraham then, humbly, meekly goes to God and says, "I don't deserve to have you hear me, I'm dust and ashes, I'm unworthy of your ear, but because I know you are good, I'm going to ask. What if there's only forty-five?" God says, "Okay. forty-five." And then, Abraham realizes that he should quit while he's ahead and accept what God says- accept he doesn't. "Forty?" "Yes." Okay, Abraham, *enough*. "Thirty?" *Abraham!* "Yes." Twenty?" *What are you thinking?* "Yes." "Ten?" *Stop it!* "Yes." Be honest! How many of you would be annoyed if someone talked to you like this, so bold, so persistent, so shameless, so daring, testing your patience, seeing how gracious you really are? You and I may be, but God isn't. In fact, he's delighted. He's filled with joy over this prayer. God loves this prayer. Why?

Because this prayer is humble. Abraham doesn't presume the right to make demands- he admits that he's nothing and is appealing to God's divine, endless mercy, and he therefore assumes that God's mercy is truly endless and keeps on asking to see just how endless it is. This prayer is bold. He holds God accountable to his own word- which is the ultimate sign of faith. Abraham has so much faith in God that he refuses to think that God would contradict his holy Word- which would make him a liar, and this God does not lie! And it turns out that he was right. This prayer is persistent. This prayer is desperate. This prayer is radical. This isn't the kind of prayer you pray if your God is simply a boss or judge who you need to appease. This isn't the kind of prayer you pray if your God is simply a nice guy who never challenges you. This isn't the kind of prayer you pray to a God you're afraid of. This isn't the kind of prayer you pray to a God who says, "if you obey me well enough, i'll let you into my family." This is the kind of prayer that can only be prayed by a child to his Father. And that is what makes Christianity unlike any other religion in the world.

Please understand, Judaism and especially Islam would consider it scandalous and blasphemous to call someone as holy and mighty as God, "Father." The Hindus and Easterners would call us naïve for thinking of God as a personal being that we can talk to and receive a response from. There are some who would say, "oh, we call him Father, too." Mormons, Sikhs, and other different groups would refer to God as "father" because he is the creator and we are all his "offspring" in a way. You must understand: while we do believe God is our creator, that's really not what we are saying when we refer to him as our "Father." Look in your bulletin at Galatians 4. Ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin and their descendents rebelled against God deserve to die, God had a plan. God the Father would send God the Son, true God, one in being with the Father yet distinguished from the Father, and he sent him into the world to become a human being and to obey God's Law perfectly, and then to be abandoned forever by his Father on the cross in our place, and because he did so, he earned for the right to be Sons and Daughters along with Jesus. The same love and affection and joy that the Father has in God the Son is the love and affection and joy that God has in you. He identifies you with his Son Jesus, therefore you are his son or daughter. That is your identity. That is your status. You are a former slave turned Son or Daughter of the King, and he wants nothing else than to hear from you because he delights in you. That is what you are saying when you say, "Our Father in Heaven." Do you see how radically beautiful this is? Consider this: there are two ways to look at God- as we see Paul say in Galatians 4. You can look at him like a slavemaster or your Father. Many people might call God "Father," but really they view him as a slavemaster. You have to earn your slavemaster's approval. If your slave master allows something painful to happen to you, that probably means he's punishing you. If you don't do well, your slavemaster will likely drop you. If you do well, or at least better than the other slaves, then that means the slavemaster will like you more, but you can never really know if you've done enough to appease the slavemaster- they aren't known for their affirmation. But what if God were your Father?

That means a few things. That means that just as a father allows his children to endure difficult things, not as a punishment, but a discipline that although they may not understand at the time, will strengthen and equip them, so your Father does for you. That means just like a father may have to shove horrible tasting medicine down the throat of his young child, and the child may scream in horror and say it tastes terrible, but the Father knows that it will save his child, so your Father may send you things that taste terrible and you may think of it as something awful but in the end it may be good for you. That means that in the same way children learn, sometimes after a while, to trust their father even when his discipline and decisions don't sit right and they can't understand them, we also learn to trust our Father when his decisions and his discipline don't sit right and we don't understand. And just like a good Father will listen patiently to his children, and loves to hear them, and loves it when his children express trust in him, so your Father loves to hear from you and loves it when you hold him to his promises and say, "Father, you promised this! Do it!" And just like a good father only give good gifts to his children, and gives them bread even when they ask for a stone, and gives them fish when they ask for a snake because he actually knows what they need better than they do sometimes, so our Father knows exactly what we

need before we even ask and will give it to us every time because we are his perfect, blood-bought, beloved children. That's what you're saying when you say, "Our Father." Amen.