

Radical Prayers – Praying out of the Ordinary

Abraham – The Mercy Barterer

Dr. Glenn Robertson

Exodus 18:18-33

What we have seen thus far in our Radical Prayers Series is the Lord who told us to pray heaven to earth and Moses who interceded for his sinful people. Abraham gives us another unique view of prayer. Abraham, unlike Moses, does not offer to make atonement for the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot and his family live in Sodom. Other than them, there is no one who lives there that belongs to his people. Yet, Abraham seeks God's mercy on Sodom. He has concerned that God's judgment might destroy some who are not wicked. Yet, in fact, there were none who were righteous in the city. Abraham's concern for the cities is like our concern for the lost in the world. What is also amazing about the story is that Abraham talks with God face to face. Somehow the Lord is presented to Abraham as an angelic figure – perhaps a prefigure of Christ. He is identified as the Lord.

Genesis 18:18-33 NIVO

¹⁸ Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

²⁰ Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." ²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and

the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

²⁶ The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

³¹ Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." ³³ When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

1. Intercessors pray for the lost.

Abraham talked with God on behalf of the wicked cities. The people in Sodom and Gomorrah were wicked. They did not follow God. The reputation of the cities were so great that their grievous reputation came before the Lord. It is not much different than the reports we often received in the news about the horrible actions of ISIS in Syria. We heard reports of their taking of girls and making them sex slaves, of torture, and of destroying ancient works of civilization. Girls who escaped capture would tell of terrible acts of barbarism by the ISIS men.

The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were likely pagan, idol worshipers. Abraham knew of their practices and religion. He had rescued their people from foreign kings. Yet, Abraham speaks to God for their mercy. Abraham's conversation with God was a prayer for the lost.

We are reminded that the people of God are to pray for the lost. We are not just praying for the lost to be spared judgment. We are praying for the lost to be saved.

One of the nations I am praying for is Iran. Iran is the leader of unrest in the Middle East. Iran funds Hezbollah and Hamas and supplies them with weapons. It has attempted to start a proxy war with Saudi Arabia. I sends rockets to Gaza to war against Israel. Iran is a nation under the terrible rule of the Khomaniens. Yet, Iran is also a place where God is moving powerfully. Iran is the fastest growing church in the world, all of which is underground because Christianity is illegal in that country. You should be praying for Iran. You should be praying for Communist China to be saved. You should be praying for the lost in our cities. Many of our large cities are bastions of unbelief and champions of immorality.

Do you pray for them? Do you intercede for the lost? Abraham prayed for the lost. So should you.

2. Intercessors pray for God's mercy for the lost.

Abraham persevered with God for mercy for the lost. He seems to barter with God for hope that the cities could be spared. Abraham prays seven times for the cities. (General, 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10)

Abraham had gone to war to rescue the kings, the people and the goods of these cities. Abraham was not selfish. He took nothing of the goods of the cities for his effort to rescue them.

Now, again, Abraham is seeking to rescue them again. His repeated appeals are not merely a measure of seeking God's justice, it is an ancient way to barter for a purchase. When Abraham seeks to purchase a plot to bury his wife, he and the landowner seem to go back and forth in the negotiation. It seems here that Abraham is hoping for an opening of mercy to spare the Sodomites from destruction.

Mercy is a character of God. We find it in Jesus. Christians are not the only ones who are merciful. (Do you watch the Netflix show, *The Mandalorian*? The Mandalorian is a bounty hunter. He fetches baby Yoda for pay. Then, he rescues him from his captives. The bounty hunter has mercy on baby Yoda (heart-throb. He's so cute you have to have mercy on him. Besides, baby Yoda is innocent)). Yes, it is true that non-believers can show mercy on people and animals. Mercifulness does not make you a Christian, but if you are a Christian you should show mercy, because mercy is a character of God.

How about seeking God's mercy on those who are not innocent? That is the message of the gospel of Jesus. Jesus on the cross prays, "Father. Forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Ignorance is not innocence. Yet, Jesus, even in his suffering seeks God's mercy upon those who have abused him.

Jesus does not bring condemnation to the woman caught in adultery. She was not innocent. Jesus did not forgive her because she was innocent nor because she didn't know what she was doing. Jesus refused to condemn her because he did not come into the world to condemn the world. He came into the world to bring redemption for sin.

He refuses to condemn the woman at the well. The only real condemnation we hear from Jesus is when he speaks of the heartlessness of the religious leaders.

We need to ask God to have mercy upon the lost. We need to pray for God to have mercy on those who hurt and abuse us. Mercy does not claim their innocent. It asks for something else.

3. Intercessors pray for God to work repentance in the lost.

When Abraham asks God to not destroy the righteous along with the unrighteous, he is not asking God to cancel His judgment on the unrighteous. This is a key point. Abraham wants God to make sure the righteous and the unrighteous are not treated the same. Abraham is concerned for God's righteous character. His repeated bartering suggests he wants to see if mercy can come to the cities. However, we must note that at no time does Abraham ask God to turn away his judgment nor does he ask God to change his holy standards.

Abraham never sought to change God's holy standards. Abraham never says to the Lord, "Lord, why don't you just accept them the way they are?" "Their behavior is natural to them, maybe they were born that way? Why don't you just change your standard, Lord, and let it be?" We never hear that from Abraham. Our society says, "Preachers, you need to change your theology. You must stop saying that people who practice open sexuality are morally wrong. Stop the hate speech!" We preachers are human. We have no authority to change God's holy character. God will do what God wants to do by His own authority. Changing the rules here will not help anyone when they die and stand before God. Abraham did not ask God to change his holy standard. Abraham sought that God's standard would be upheld, yet he hoped there could be someone who is righteous.

Praying for mercy for the lost is praying for God to lead the lost to repentance. God's mercy is seen when the lost come to salvation. When we ask God to have mercy, we are asking for Him to send His Spirit into the lives of the lost and rescue them from their lost, destructive lives. The mercy prayer upholds the holy standard of God because it seeks repentance, not acceptance.

When we pray for the lost we are asking God to reveal Christ to them and lead them to repentance. We are not asking God to change His holy character. It is ungodly for liberal ministers to embrace open sexual lifestyles as normal. In so doing, such ministers assume that human standards determine God's standards, which is false. True godliness is praying for the lost to be saved out of their unholy state. The mercy prayer seeks repentance, not acceptance.

A few years ago, when ISIS was still a major force in Syria, I read of the salvation of one of its leaders. He had done wicked things thinking he was honoring God. He received a vision of Christ and confessed faith in Jesus. He did so because some Christians prayed for ISIS people to be saved.

The life that comes in Jesus to the believer empowers them to fulfill God's promise that Abraham would bring a blessing to the nations. All who are saved receive spiritual life in Jesus. It is this spiritual life that calls for us to offer mercy to our enemies. It is the Holy Spirit in us who calls us to pray for the lost. When we are changed, it changes our heart even toward those who have hurt us.

Louis Zamporini was tortured by Japanese guards when he was in prison in Japan during WWII. When the war was over, Louis was still tortured by their treatment of him, especially of the leader of the torture, a man he called The Bird. Zamporini tried to drown his memories in alcohol, but it did no good. When Zamporini got saved, he returned to Japan to share the message of Christ and forgiveness to the guards, who were then in prison. Some of them became believers. He offered his forgiveness to them, praying for his former captors to be saved. This was Louis' way out of anger and bitterness toward his enemies. All but The Bird were there. Somehow the Bird managed to evade capture. The Bird never received forgiveness and never sought repentance.

Mercy is a character of God as revealed in Abraham. It is not the same as acceptance of wrong. The mercy prayer seeks God to bring people to repentance and salvation and restoration.

Do you pray the mercy prayer?