

One of the interesting things about traveling in foreign countries is shopping in the open markets. Here in America if the tag says \$19.95 you are going to pay \$19.95 plus tax. But, as you may have experienced, at many markets abroad the price tag, if there is one, is a mere suggestion for where to start the dickering, the bargaining. If you pay the asking price you are just a stupid tourist. We get some taste of this also here at flea markets and garage sales. It certainly adds an interesting, even enjoyable dimension to the shopping process. It becomes a kind of game where you leave either thinking you are a real winner, or kicking yourself for not trying to push harder to get the bargain....and always wondering if you might have done better. It's a game where both sides are on fairly level ground, each has something the other wants, and no one is without power.

Can you imagine trying to bargain with God? Talk about a tilted playing field! He surely holds all the cards. What have we got that He wants or needs? Of course, that doesn't stop many from trying..." *God, get me out of this jam...and I'll go back to church!*" This is like a crawling out on a limb, and then begging God not to let anyone saw it off.

Yet, surprisingly, the first instance of intercessory prayer in the Bible shows Abraham doing just that. Begging, bargaining.. *Will you back off, change your mind about Sodom, if there are 50 righteous? 30? 20? 10?* My mother always told me that's it's not mannerly to beg!

It does **seem rather brash and presumptuous**, doesn't it? Who does Abraham think he is? But if you look closely at the story, it's almost as if God invites and encourages him to do this. In previous verses, (as we heard last week) the Lord and two angelic companions have just dropped in on Abraham and Sarah for an unexpected meal. There he drops the bombshell of a promise that Sarah, even in her old age, will have a son. Sarah laughs. The idea is preposterous. But then He takes Abraham aside, " Hey, good buddy, friend, I have a tip for you." He gives Abraham advance information about his intention to destroy Sodom, the wicked city where his nephew Lot lived.

That **shouldn't have come as a great surprise**.. The stench of the wickedness of Sodom was well known. You couldn't argue that it was not deserved. But Abraham, being on the inside track, concerned about Lot and his family, starts the bidding, the bargaining..50? 30? God could not find even 10 righteous persons but we know that He did honor Abraham's prayer by rescuing Lot and his family before destroying the whole region, including the neighboring town of Gemorrah. It seems this begging, bargaining was worth it. Abraham came away with a bargain, a really good deal!

Now where do we step into this story? What can we learn from this rather remarkable incident?

The first thing that strikes me about this event is the **intimacy of the relationship between Abraham and the Lord**. What was it that moved God to share this horrific thing with Abraham? Thousands of people are about to be wiped off the face of the earth.(scholars suggest as many as 250,000) No one argues that they don't deserve it, but why would he reveal his plan? The Lord talks with his angelic companions..."*Shall I share this with Abraham?*

“ Answering his own question, he reminds himself that he has chosen Abraham as the recipient of the covenant promise. It is through Abraham that all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Abraham will raise his children in the ways of the Lord and pass on the promises. Abraham is his friend. He has invested himself with Abraham. He can't keep this kind of secret from Abraham. He reveals things to his friends.

Do we think of ourselves as God's friends? Do we experience God in an intimate, warm relationship? Has God invested Himself with you? You bet he has. The only thing he shared with Abraham at this point is that Sodom was on the way out.. sin will be punished. God is just. With you, with me, He has shared the whole rest of the story...the covenant promise fulfilled through Abraham's seed...through David's seed.. the prophetic word made sure in the gift of God's own Son to the world. Sarah laughed at the idea of bearing a son in her old age. Most of the world laughs at the idea of a Son born of a virgin. A Son born not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved! God has shared with you the secret plan of his justice and mercy for the entire human race. You and I are on the inside track with God. It's a good place to be. God reveals Himself to his friends!

And God is accessible to his friends. Abraham immediately senses this. He gets this word about impending judgement and destruction and he begins to beg for an exception. Surely you don't have to destroy everyone? He argues that it is not within God's character to destroy righteous people. *“will not the Judge of the earth do the right thing? What if there are 50 righteous? God says, Ok, I'm prepared to make exceptions. I want to do the right thing. I'll back away for the sake of 50...but the problem is there aren't 50 righteous... not even 40, or 30 or 20 or 10.* I find it fascinating that Abraham backs off his bargaining at 10. One would think that he would continue. He is on a roll! What about 9? 8? 7? Evidently he gets the message. The truth dawns for Abraham. **There aren't any righteous people in Sodom. Lot and his family are not righteous. He, Abraham is not righteous. There are none..anywhere!**

I trust that you and I have gotten this message! It's one of the fundamental things you learn when you are on this inside track, one of God's friends. Most of the world and the world's religions still haven't gotten this clear in their minds. They strive to keep enough rules to be defined as righteous, to escape the fire and brimstone because they sincerely tried real hard to keep the rules. But it's a lost cause! God's friends know better. *“There is none that doeth good, no ,not one!”*

But the **real point here is that Abraham feels close enough to the Lord to approach him with his concern, to beg for God's favor.** I particularly like his posture, *“Now that I am bold to speak to the Lord, though I am but dust and ashes.” Bold, but humble.* Confident, but never presumptuous. A lesson for us to internalize in our own prayers. Abraham never forgets that God is God but also knows that he is God's friend, God's own child, and can ask anything and everything. It is too often sadly true that we *“have not because we ask not.”*

Thou art coming to a King..Large petitions with thee bring.

For His grace and power are such...None can ever ask too much.” John Newton

Another thing that should be noted about Abraham's prayer is that it **is directed beyond himself, beyond his own personal concerns.** It is interesting that He never mentions Lot and

his family in his prayer. There is no mention of Lot in the whole chapter. Surely that was in the back of his mind, but he prays for the deliverance of the whole city! It is a prayer for the lost!

This is something to reflect upon as we examine our own prayer life. We are told that our **prayers are to be child-like. But that doesn't mean that we only pray the narrow-scope prayers of a three-year old...** *God bless Mommy, Daddy, Granny and baby brother..and Rover, the family dog.* We live in a world which exposes us to an endless stream of tragedies and crisis, a world that seems more Sodom-like every day. Do we listen to the news and just say, *"Ain't that a shame? The world is going to hell in a hand-basket. Hope all this doesn't come to my backyard."* Our prayers surely must reflect a deep concern for our fallen world...and a boldness to ask our gracious God to intervene, to be merciful even if undeserved.

This **little vignette of Abraham's bargaining with God** does give us a lot to think about, but, of course, it's **just part of the larger story**. We know that the larger story is one of mercy and grace. Lot and his family are delivered from the holocaust. And if you read on a couple chapters and review the details it becomes very clear that Lot and his family surely did not deserve to escape. And that is always the bottom line for you and me. *"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."* Like Lot, we are the beneficiaries of God's mercy. What friend we have in Jesus!

The **only real problem with this story of Abraham bargaining** with God is that it creates an image in which we stand with Abraham on a distant hill, looking down into the valley. We are somehow on the outside looking down at the fate of those wicked people in Sodom. Truth is, we live in Sodom. Truth is, the only difference between us and them is that we have been friended by God. Washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

May our prayers be filled with thanksgiving and praise...and an eagerness to come boldly, and humbly to pray for our fallen world. God be merciful to us. Amen.