

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – July 24, 2016
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Genesis 18:20-32 (NIV)

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) ... He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

Dear children of our Father in heaven:

I'm sure most of you have had the opportunity to observe a persistent child shopping with their parents. "Can I have this please, ple...ase?" "No," is the reply. If you follow the family into the next aisle, the child spies something else and asks. "Can I have this ple...ase, ple...ase?" It's exasperating to watch and even more exasperating for the parent who is compelled to deal with the persistent begging of their child. It's not something that pleases the parent at all and sooner or later the child will find that out in no uncertain terms.

Although persistent requests by children may often frustrate their parents, God is pleased when his children present their persistent prayers to him. Our OT lesson for today provides an excellent example of pleasing persistent prayer.

Persistent Prayer is Pleasing Prayer

As we examine this text, we'll see **1) that the Lord makes himself accessible, 2) that the Lord listens patiently, and 3) that the Lord responds graciously.**

It was a normal hot afternoon and Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent when he looked up and saw three men standing nearby. Abraham greeted them and showered his hospitality on them. In the conversation that took place following the feast Abraham prepared for his guests it becomes clear to us that one of these guests was the Lord himself. He had come to share some important information with Abraham. He had good news and bad news. First, the good news...a year from now Abraham would be a father. His wife Sarah was going to have a son. Abraham would become a great and powerful nation and all nations on the earth would be blessed through him. And then after sharing this message of grace with Abraham, the Lord shared the bad news with Abraham – a message of judgment.

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."

What was the outcry that had reached the Lord's ears? Was it the earnest pleas of travelers who had passed through the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? Had Abraham himself expressed his concern over the sins of those cities? Or is the all-knowing God simply using human terms to describe the fact that he was aware of the stench of sin that had risen to the highest heavens from these godless cesspools of immorality. Indeed God doesn't need to come down to this earth to see what is going on here – he knows all things and understands everything that goes on in his creation. He saw the homosexuality that was prevalent in these cities and called it a grievous sin!

God also has heard the outcry in our country -- which has resulted in the legalization of gay marriages -- giving them the same status as the marriage of a man and a woman and it is grievous to his ears. He hears the cries of those who clamor for the acceptance of other perverse life styles. Society may call them alternate life styles but God's unchanging word calls them sins. Homosexual behavior is clearly forbidden in God's word together with a host of other sexual sins such as enjoying sexual relationships outside of marriage that are considered acceptable and normal in our culture. These words of the Lord put those sins and all sins into perspective. Sin calls for punishment from the Lord -- God shares his plan to destroy these cities with Abraham.

Abraham was aware of the reputation of these cities since he was a resident of the area. He had relatives living in the area. Perhaps it was concern for his family that led him to take advantage of the fact that the Lord had shared his plans with him. He pleaded with the Lord persistently in prayer. As a God-fearing person, Abraham is not second-guessing God's plan. He's not denying that reputation of the city is evil and sinful. He would not want this culture of wickedness to grow and flourish. However, Abraham does have a love for souls and in his prayer to the Lord, he appeals to the Lord's justice, patience and mercy to spare those whose behavior didn't warrant immediate destruction.

The Lord made himself accessible to Abraham and the Lord has made himself accessible to us. Sadly, we often take access to the Lord for granted. The Lord denies access to his throne to those who do evil. He told his rebellious people at the time of Isaiah: (Isaiah 1:15 NIV) **When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.** And Peter reminds us: (1 Peter 3:12 NIV) **the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."**

Prayer is a privilege given to us by Christ who washed away our sins with his blood. Our prayers are heard and are acceptable to God for Christ's sake. Only through faith in him are our persistent prayers pleasing prayers.

Through faith, Abraham was righteous in God's sight and the Lord patiently listened to his prayers as we hear in our text. **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."**

Abraham pleaded for the lives of the righteous who might be found in these cities. He appeals to the Lord's sense of justice, to his grace, compassion, and willingness to forgive sins for his name's sake.

Who were the righteous that Abraham prayed for? In one sense, there is no one who deserves deliverance from God's anger. The apostle Paul was recalling what the Lord had said in the Psalms when he wrote: (Romans 3:10 NIV) **"There is no one righteous, not even one..."**

While it could be that Abraham was pleading for those who had not personally been involved in the homosexual practices that were so prevalent in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; it appears more likely that Abraham was referring to those who were righteous through faith in the Lord's promises of a Savior. When all was said and done, there were not even 10 righteous people found among the thousands of inhabitants of these cities. There may have been some relatively moral, upstanding citizens who may have even spoken out against the sins of their townsfolk but they were not righteous in the Lord's eyes...they were still unbelievers. Because the Scriptures frequently describe the believers as being righteous in God's sight through faith, it is likely that Abraham had believers in mind as he prayed his persistent prayer.

His prayer is a model of humility and boldness as well as persistence. Six times Abraham appealed to the Lord's grace. As we hear Abraham's prayer we almost get the sense that he may have felt he was pushing things a bit to the edge: He prays, **"May the Lord not be angry," "Now that I have been so bold to speak to the Lord," Let me speak just once more."** In his prayer, Abraham was certainly submissive to the will of God and approached him with a proper humility showing his appreciation for the privilege the Lord had given to him. His prayer also showed a confident and persistent trust that the Lord would dispense his blessings according to his perfect will. With those thoughts in mind, listen again to the pleasing persistent prayer of Abraham.

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The Lord listened patiently to Abraham and the Lord is willing to listen patiently to our requests and prayers as well. He wants us to call upon him as loving children call upon their fathers. He invites us to call upon him in the day of trouble, to pray, praise, give thanks, to make intercessions for all men, to be bold, to be persistent, to pray continually. What a privilege it is to carry everything to the Lord in prayer with the confidence that whatever we ask for in Jesus' 'name it will be done for us!

Just what does it mean to pray in Jesus' name? Praying in Jesus name means that 1) our prayers are acts of faith in Jesus, 2) that our requests are based not our personal worthiness but on the worthiness that Christ has given to us, and 3) that they are in agreement with his will. In this regard, it is obvious that only Christians can offer prayers that are truly pleasing and acceptable in the Lord's sight.

The Lord will listen patiently to each and every one of our prayers and he will respond graciously to them as he did to Abraham. We took a careful look at the persistent prayers of Abraham. Now let's take a look at the Lord's gracious responses to those prayers.

The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ... "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." ... He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." ... He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." ... He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

Truly, we can see the Lord's willingness not to just patiently listen but to respond graciously to the prayers of the righteous. In spite of the great sins of those cities if there had been even ten believers in them the Lord would have spared them.

In spite of the sins of our country, the Lord hears the prayers of the faithful and showers his blessings on our land. From the example of Abraham, we can see the truth of the Apostle James' words: **The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.** (James 5:16 NIV)

Although the Lord did not even find ten believers in Sodom and Gomorrah – yet he spared the life of Lot and his family (with the exception of Lot’s wife who deliberately disobeyed him) while he carried out his just judgment on those who refused to set aside their sins with his help and seek the Lord’s forgiveness. He delivered the righteous and he glorified his name working all things for the good of his people.

And the Lord will respond in his grace to our prayers. I have no doubt that I could ask any one of you to think of prayer that the Lord has answered for you and you could rattle off a fairly long list of prayers that have received a gracious response – often including blessings that were even better than what you had prayed for.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah came about only because of the unbelief that was evident in their disdain of God’s moral law and the willful perversion of his creation.

The sins of which the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty are not unforgivable. Our Savior suffered, died, and rose again to forgive all sins. It is possible that believers will fall into sexual sins as a result of weakness. In faith and repentance, the believer will seek the mercy and forgiveness of God through Christ. The proper response whenever we fall into sin is not to seek to justify and defend our actions but to express our sorrow and our repentance to the Lord confident that with his help we can overcome the temptation to return to those sins. Such struggling believers are considered righteous in the Lord’s eyes for Christ’s sake.

So we pray to the Lord appealing to his grace, asking that his Law and Gospel would effectively change the hearts of those who sin against him. That is but one of the many prayers that we can persistently pray with the confidence that it will be a pleasing prayer to the God who made himself accessible by sending his Son to us, who listens patiently and responds graciously to our prayers.

While it may be true that children sometimes get on the nerves of their parents with their constant requests and continued desire to have the attention of their parents – it is also true that for Jesus’ sake Persistent Prayer is Pleasing Prayer as far as our heavenly Father is concerned.

That means that we can pray, pray, pray and pray some more and some more and some more and some more and our heavenly Father will never grow tired of hearing from us. He’ll patiently listen and graciously respond for Jesus sake. Amen.