



Even though I am your pastor, many of you do not know my testimony. I was raised in a church-going, non-Christian family. I heard the basic Bible stories growing up, but I never heard the gospel until I was in high school. My best friend was a Christian and his family would take me to church and share the gospel with me. I never wrote down the exact date, but one Sunday in early August of 1980, when the altar call was given, I rushed to the front of the church as fast I could, given that tears were streaming down my cheeks, and I was radically saved by Christ that morning. I didn't understand the gospel to the degree that I do today, but I knew that I was a sinner, I knew that I needed Christ and I knew he was calling me. It's hard to believe that I will be passing the 30th anniversary of my conversion this year. Unfortunately, I never had the joy of witnessing my parent's salvation. My mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer's when she was 49 and died fourteen years later in 1993. My dad suffered a four year battle with leukemia and died in 1998. They were good people and if I think really hard, I can see some glimpses of faith in their lives, but I have no real assurance of their salvation.

What do I do with this? How do I handle the knowledge that my parents earthly suffering is miniscule compared to the possibility of suffering in hell? How do *you* handle it? Some people, like eminent pastor and theologian John Stott, hold to a belief in annihilationism—after unbelievers are judged at the final judgment, they are annihilated and cease to exist altogether. This is a rare belief that has no Biblical warrant, in my opinion. Others go even further and deny the very existence of hell. But if you think about it, this is really no different than annihilationism, because if no one is *in* hell, then it is not really *necessary*, is it? I hope that you reject both of these beliefs because of the utter clarity of Scripture—there is a hell, people actually go there and it is everlasting. It is a difficult doctrine, but we must not toy with rejecting it any more than we would reject the deity of Christ. We can accept the belief on an intellectual level, but how do we accept it on an emotional, gut level? A common reaction is to ignore this topic completely and pretend that it is not a problem. However, that is dangerous because if you believe in the doctrine of everlasting punishment and you stuff your thoughts and emotions on the subject, it will eat you alive from the inside out.

The answer to this very important question is found in the second half of Genesis 18.

¹⁶ When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. ¹⁷ Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? 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?”

Let me stop there and offer some comments. First, if you recall, we are picking up the story where we left off two weeks ago when these three visitors suddenly showed up at Abraham’s tent. Abraham, Sarai and the servants rushed around preparing a special meal for them. I shared my opinion that I did not think that Abraham realized that one of the visitors was the Lord himself. After the message two weeks ago someone told me that they did think Abraham knew this was the Lord because he bowed low to the ground before him and treated him with such immense respect. That is not my conclusion, but the text leaves it open as a possibility. Regardless, there is no question that by verse 20 Abraham knew that this was the Lord.

Then the LORD (Yahweh) 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.” By this point, Abraham knew it was the Lord, especially as evidenced by the way he began pleading with the Lord to spare the two towns. Whatever you do, don’t think that the Lord is not all-knowing by the phrase in verse twenty one. On the surface it would appear that a rumor about Sodom and Gomorrah floated up to heaven and God came down in order to substantiate or disprove the rumor. If that were the case, God indeed would not be omniscient and therefore, imperfect. God was using what we call the language of accommodation. In other words, he was saying this for our benefit, not his. He knew that their sin was grievous and he knew that judgment was imminent, but he used this language to demonstrate the process and certainty of judgment. It was a way of communicating to Abraham, somewhat similar to when God describes himself in anthropomorphic language. For example, when the Bible says that God has wings or hands or arms or like In Genesis three where he walked in the garden in the cool of the day, we automatically know that God does not have actual, physical arms, legs and hands. These are figures of speech given to us so that we can better understand the Lord and how he works in the world. In the same way, verse twenty one was a type of figure of speech.

We know that the judgment was certain because the Lord declared this in verse seventeen. *Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?* This is a fascinating section for two reasons. First, it is interesting that God would stop and have this little discussion with the two angels. Once again, this is a type of figure of speech that does not imply that God needed wise advice from his angels in order to make a decision. You and I absolutely need to do this. This past week I leaned heavily on my elders to help in a difficult decision. I knew that I could

depend upon them for sound advice and they quickly responded and gave me great help. You and I need to constantly seek good counsel from Godly people, but God did not need to do this.

The other interesting thing is that when the Lord answered his own question in verses 18-19, it seemed to have nothing to do with the impending judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah but was all about his own covenant with Abraham. It may seem like a divine soliloquy on a different subject, but I think it has everything to do with the impending judgment. Let's read those two verses again.

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."

God was drawing a direct comparison between the grievous sin of Sodom and Gomorrah and the righteousness of his own people. On the one hand, God was "on his way," so to speak, to judge a wicked people. On the other hand, God was abiding and enjoying fellowship with the righteous man, Abraham and his family. What was the drastic difference between these two sets of people? The difference was that the Lord had chosen Abraham. The Hebrew word here is *yada*, which is often translated as "to know." Sometimes it is mere knowledge of a fact—I know that Sarah is in the tent baking bread. Many times it has a more intimate meaning. It is often used as a euphemism for intimacy between a man and wife. But when the Lord is said to know a person, it means that he intimately knows him. He doesn't merely know facts about him, he personally knows him.

We see this meaning in Matthew 25 in the parable of the virgins. *The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'* We also see it in Matthew 7. *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* The Lord either knows us or he doesn't know us. There is no middle ground. The KJV translates this word as "know" but the sense of this word is so strong that every other translation has "chosen." I have chosen Abraham means that the Lord has given him grace and mercy. Indeed, it is a restatement of God's covenant, saving relationship with Abraham, and this relationship was to bring about righteousness and justice in Abraham's family. God was drawing a distinction between his chosen, covenant people and the wickedness of the other nations.

But even in the midst of judgment, Abraham appealed to God on the basis of mercy.

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?"*

Verse 25 is the second "crescendo" of chapter eighteen—*Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"* Do you remember the first crescendo from two weeks ago? It came at verse 14—*Is*

anything too hard for the Lord? The first crescendo was a statement of God's omnipotence and this second crescendo is a statement of God's benevolence. These are the two loud crescendos of this chapter, the first from the mouth of the Lord spoken to Abraham and Sarah and the second from the mouth of Abraham spoken to the Lord. God is all powerful and God is perfectly good. Nothing is too hard for him and he will always do right. Not only are these two attributes of God testified and taught all throughout Scripture, logically speaking, they must always hang together as one.

For example, what if God is omnipotent but not benevolent? This would be the most frightening of all possibilities. If nothing was too hard for the Lord but at the same time he was not benevolent and loving, we would be in sorry shape. This just happens to be what the god of most other religions looks like. Allah, the god of Islam is said to be all-powerful. We would be in total agreement on this point with Muslims, but Allah is not a loving or personal god. He does whatever he wants and no one can thwart his ways, but he does not act out of love and mercy. Everything a Muslim person does is an attempt to earn Allah's favor and avoid his wrath, and like a good Jehovah's Witness or Mormon, they are never sure if they have done enough. But this is the opposite of Christianity, for how do we earn the Lord's favor and avoid his wrath? The short answer is that we cannot. This can only happen when we are in Christ. Christ bore the wrath of the Father, which is called what? Propitiation. And only in Christ can we earn God's favor, which is called what? The imputation of Christ's righteousness. (see sermon from February 21, 2010) A god that is omnipotent but not benevolent is the most frightening possible god.

However, what if God is benevolent but not omnipotent? This would be the most pathetic of all possible gods. This god would be all heart and no muscle. He would always have good intentions but would possess no power to carry out his good intentions. He would be kind, but weak; nice but anemic; sympathetic, but a sissy.

But a God who is both omnipotent and benevolent is best of all possible gods, and this is exactly how the Lord is described all throughout Scripture. Is anything too hard for the Lord? No! Will not the judge of all the earth do right? Yes! More than anything else, these two rhetorical questions scream out from the words of this chapter. God is strong and God is good. Do you realize that these two attributes answers the so-called "problem of evil"? The age old question is this: If God were all-powerful and perfectly good, there would be no evil in the world. But since there is evil in the world, such people argue that either God lacks the power to do away with evil or else he lacks the goodness to do away with evil. For many people the problem of evil is the thing that drives them away from God. Personally, I think it is just another type of excuse for doing whatever they want and not being held accountable to God, but it is a question that deserves a good answer.

All by itself, this chapter answers the problem of evil. Nothing is too hard for the lord and the judge of all the earth will always do right. Have you ever noticed that people who call into question God's goodness or his power never like the notion of God's judgment? On the one hand they claim that God doesn't possess the power to do away with evil, but if you point to this judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, they don't like it when God rains down burning sulphur and destroys two cities. Have you noticed this inconsistency as well? God does have the power to

destroy evil as evidenced by stories like this, but because he is also perfectly good, his mercy delays his judgment. His mercy was not only shown in the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, which we will see in a minute, but furthermore, his mercy delays his final judgment. The fact that we are all still here is evidence of his great mercy. The fact that he doesn't immediately destroy the ones who raise this question about the problem of evil is evidence that he is just and merciful.

The other thing you can say to a person who trumpets the problem of evil is to ask them if it would be OK if God came down and destroyed them. If they at least admit that they occasionally do evil and sin, then they should be crying out to God for their own destruction. But since they obviously don't want that it proves that what they seek is selective judgment. They may want to do away with world hunger but they also want to satisfy their sinful appetites. People may not want a hailstorm of burning sulphur, but they do want targeted "smart bombs" of judgment against their enemies. It's OK if their sinful neighbor gets hit as long as they escape unharmed.

Abraham was so confident of God's mercy that he had the audacity to question him about it. *Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?* Let's read the remainder of the chapter.

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.*

I love how the chapter comes to a close. *When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.* I have heard people say that Abraham closed this conversation because he was afraid to suggest a number less than ten. While it's true that Abraham showed great boldness in continuing to move the numbers lower and lower, the Lord was the one who ended the discussion. *When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left.* That was it. It was over. This conversation reminds me a little of what it is like to barter for goods in countries like Mexico where bartering is the way things are bought and sold. Some times when I have bartered, either I walk away because the price is still too high or else the seller stops the bartering because he is not willing to go any lower. I will never forget when I bought a blanket in

Guatemala. I must have given something away because almost as soon as we started bartering, the seller began to take it off of the rack it was hanging on and proceeded to fold it neatly while we bartered back and forth. I thought I got a good price, but he must have known that I really wanted that blanket.

In contrast to that kind of bartering, there was no real bartering going on here. Abraham was able to drop the number of righteous people from fifty down to ten, but he was not in charge. Abraham tends to get all of the credit for his mercy and intercession. I think it is fair to say that Abraham was interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. He knew that his nephew Lot and his family lived there. Lot is not mentioned in this conversation but he is surely assumed to be an important part. This is a good model for us, that we might intercede for others, that we would appeal to God's mercy for our neighbors, friends, family—even our enemies. Abraham deserves credit for his faith, but God is the one who should receive the glory, because as faithful as Abraham was, he was appealing to God's justice and mercy. He was testing God's benevolence by asking for greater mercy. Abraham could not possibly make God more merciful than he already was, he was merely boldly asking God to show his mercy.

If you recall from two weeks ago, we said that to have faith was a matter of testing God's faithfulness. If I walk across the platform it does not show my faith but rather the inherent faithfulness of the platform. A strong platform like this one possesses the faithfulness and trustworthiness which allows me to walk on it. In the same way, our faith does not come from within us but is a matter of testing God's inherent faithfulness. His faithfulness should be so evident that obeying should not be more difficult than walking across this platform.

In the same way that we can test God's faithfulness we can also test God's mercy. God's possesses the inherent quality of benevolence and is worthy of our trust. Kind of a backwards way of seeing this is in the book of Jonah. Do you know why Jonah ran away? The short answer is that he was being disobedient, but he was disobedient because he knew that if he preached the message of repentance to the Ninevites, God would show them mercy. Jonah hated the Ninevites and he didn't want God to show them mercy, so he ran away. After the entire city of Nineveh did repent, we see Jonah's reaction.

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:1-3)

This is an amazingly ironic Scripture. Jonah made a beautiful confession, that God is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." This is such a powerful confession that it could have come from the lips of King David himself in one of his many Psalms, but instead, it came from a man who was absolutely certain about the Lord's benevolence...and he hated it.

The lesson for you and I is to be just as certain about the Lord's benevolence, to know that he is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." We are to be certain of this, but unlike Jonah, we are to love his

benevolence. We are to rest in his benevolence. Do you see—this is the answer to our original question. How can we handle knowing that our unsaved loved ones may not be spending eternity with us in heaven? We deal with this by testing God's mercy and justice. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? Yes, he will, especially in regard to something as important as an individual's eternal destiny. God cannot possibly be unfair or unjust with anyone. Anyone who goes to heaven or hell has been dealt with according to divine benevolence, justice and mercy. So what do you do with the emotional, gut-level feelings about your loved ones? You put God's mercy to the test. God's inherent characteristic is benevolence and you put this to the test by placing your loved ones into the hands of the Lord. I don't know where my mom is and if I dwelt on it all of the time, I would go insane, but I do know that the judge of all the earth will always do right. I don't know if I will see my dad in heaven or not, but I do know that judge of all the earth cannot act in any way other than perfect justice and mercy. This is my only hope, the only thing that gives me peace. I don't know what will happen, but I do know the one who does and that he always acts with perfect faithfulness and justice. And I can't think of a better way to apply his mercy than to the eternal destiny of my own mother and father.

Do you realize how justice is seen in the cross? Romans 3:26 says, *He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* The propitiatory, atoning sacrifice of Jesus satisfied the penalty for sin. Justice demanded that we be condemned but mercy showed itself in that Jesus was condemned for us. You cannot look at the cross and ever say that God is not fair. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Praise be to God, the answer is NO. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? Always.

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