

Bargaining with God

by

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Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”² He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.³ Give us each day our daily bread.⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;’⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will

give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Genesis 18:20-32

²⁰Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.” ²²So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

²³Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” ²⁷Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” ²⁹Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” ³⁰Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” ³¹He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” ³²Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”

The storm caught him by surprise. In the hot July summer of the year 1505, a twenty-one-year-old Martin Luther was walking back to the town of Erfurt in Germany, where he was studying law. He must not have felt his Apple watch vibrate on his wrist warning him with a weather alert.

Or maybe he was so distracted in his thoughts, that he paid no mind to the dark clouds approaching. In any event, he cannot outrun it once it comes.

The heavens seemed to rip open right above his head. In the midst of terrible lighting, deafening thunder, and a torrent of rain, young Luther suspected he was going to die right there. In fact, he wonders if God has not sent the thunderstorm directly to kill him.

The lightning strikes so close to his own shoes that the mere force of it knocks him off his feet. The next thing he knows he's in a ravine alongside the road; the roar of the storm beating down on him.

So he offers up a last ditch "Hail Mary" prayer of sorts. He prays to Mary's mother, St. Anne, the patron saint of housewives, cabinet-makers, and miners. He pleads with her to protect him and makes a deal in the process. "Help me, St. Anne, and I'll become a monk!"

He couldn't remember if he screamed it aloud or said it only in his head. Not that he could have even heard it over the sound of the wind; but the back of his throat burned like he had just swallowed a hot coal. Why did he make that promise? He didn't know.

All he knew was that he made a bargain with the heavens, and after the storm let up, he kept his end of it. Luther became a monk, and ten years after that, he created his own storm, with the advent of the Protestant Reformation.

We have long made a habit of trying to make deals with God.

They are often made, of course, out of moments of deep desperation. “O God, if you will give me this, I will give you that.” A kind of divine quid pro quo. Much of it comes out of the anguish of our own hearts.

I’ve heard folks at hospital bedsides plead for the health of their sick child, “O God, if you heal him, I will stop drinking.” “Lord, if you deliver her, I promise to get right with you.”

Of course I’ve also heard prayers of this sort, yet lacking the kind of sincerity that warrant them. “Jesus, if I you help me win the lottery, I promise to give half of it back to the church.” Now a fifty percent return on investments isn’t bad, so as the pastor for stewardship I wish Jesus would play the odds a little more.

Which begs the question: is it right? Is it theologically appropriate to wheel and deal with God? What do the scriptures say about that? Does God even work that way? Are we permitted to plead our case or not?

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Abraham had just been told that his wife, Sarah, even in her old age, would bring forth a son, an heir, through whom a great people would be born. A few chapters before that, the Lord God took Abraham outside his tent and they looked up at the night sky. God said, count the stars, if you can, so shall the number of your descendants be. And then God made a covenant with old Abraham, promising to be his God and for Abraham’s people to be God’s own.

So after such good news, it must have felt like a punch in the gut for him when he heard the plan.

Here they were, God and Abraham looking out over the city of Sodom when God blurts out, ‘There’s just too much sin down there. Too

much brokenness. I can hear it from here. I've got to wipe the city off the map."

What would you do? Honestly, what would you do if you knew someone was about to commit an act of mass violence? Would you say nothing? Would you not try to stop him? Try to talk some common sense into him. Appeal to his reason or his rationality, or even his heart.

So v. 22 says, "but Abraham remained standing in front of the Lord." What does that mean? A good study Bible will have a footnote indicating an alternate translation in certain manuscripts, where it flips the characters, reading instead, "but the Lord remained standing in front of Abraham." It's a face-off; perhaps by divine intention. And that's when Abraham speaks.

"It's not like you to do this," Abraham says. "Killing the innocent with the guilty as if there were no difference. It's not like you! Will the judge of all the earth not act justly? Suppose I can scrounge up fifty worthy folks? Would you still destroy it all?"

It takes a lot of guts to speak like that. You wouldn't speak like that in the chambers of the US Supreme Court, even if you wanted to. You aren't supposed to talk like that to God. This is the God of all creation, and yet here is this little old man trying to make a case for why God shouldn't do the very thing God just said he was going to do. St. Paul says in Romans that Abraham was reckoned right by God, but maybe Paul didn't read this part. You don't argue with the Big Guy.

Ah, but then we remember Jacob. He physically struggles with God at the River Jabbok and wrestles a blessing out of God. We recall the Syrophenician woman who argues with Jesus and he heals her for it. We reminisce about the Ethiopian Eunuch, who through curious persistence and resilience, is baptized into the church even though the scriptures were clear that eunuchs were not permitted in the assembly.

Turns out, the Bible is littered with stories of people who protest before the Lord; folks who stammer and stutter and argue and cajole, who flatter and sweet talk the very Creator of the Universe into seeing things from their point of view.

But what about the sovereignty of God? What about the immutability of God? I'm glad you asked. Can God change God's mind? If God does that, is God really the same yesterday, today, and forever? One theologian wrote that "an absolutely immutable, utterly changeless God would not be the living, triune God of Scripture but a dead God."¹

Which makes me wonder if we should describe God not as unchangeable but as constant, steadfast, faithful in character and purpose. And what is God's unchanging purpose, but to reveal God's vulnerable yet unconquerable love. What Abraham did in arguing with God—in doing his best to make a deal—is to bet on God's goodness and love as the arbiter for God's justice.

Abraham was taking his assumption about God's character all the way to the bank. He seems to be saying, "If you love us, and if you have any sense of what we are about, of how we are made, then you must know that we are not always all going to be righteous. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater."

Rabbinic literature reminds us that Abraham's demand is not that the guilty be punished and the innocent spared, but rather that the Lord forgive the entire city for the sake of the innocent who are in it. He is directly appealing to God's character.

It was Kierkegaard who said, "When it is a duty in loving to love the [people] one sees, it holds true that in loving actual individual

¹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). P.85.

[people] one does not slip in a fanciful idea about how one thinks or could wish this [person] should be.”²

Do you know what he’s saying? He’s saying the act of love is an honest one. We don’t love people for who we wish they would be, we love them for who they are. Warts and all.

Which stands to reason, that if God truly loves us, then Abraham trusts that God knows we are a rag tag group folks who sometimes are barely keeping it together; and other times we are, as my wife likes to say of our children “a hot mess.”

To be sure, Abraham haggles with God all the way down to ten. He just needs to find ten people who are righteous and God will spare the city. But we know from the story that he couldn’t even come up with that.

I don’t want to dismiss the confusion of trying to understand why God acted to burn down an entire city. If you would like a highly technical and theologically dense sermon series on the questionable acts of the Lord God throughout Scripture, I encourage you to send an email to the address agnesnorfleet@bmpc.org.

No, what I really wonder is if we might better imagine a God who can hold our fears, our anger, our sadness, our frustration, our questions, and our doubts. I wonder if this story from Genesis hints at the Divine nature as well.

If God really stood in front of Abraham, I have to wonder if God wasn’t baiting him into argument. If God isn’t saying, “I have planted a seed of wisdom in you, an awareness of justice...now fight for it.”

²Søren Kierkegaard et al., *Works of Love* (New York; Enfield: Perennial; Publishers Group UK, 2009). P. 161.

Perhaps following Jesus and listening to God's call is both the wrestling with, and the reassurance of, the notion that God cares.

Calvin wrote, "It would be cold and unfeeling to picture God as a temporary Creator, who completed his work and then left it."³ Madeleine L'Engle said it like this when she wrote, "I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. It is when things go wrong, when the good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, that God is most present. We do not need the sheltering wings when things go smoothly. We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly."⁴

She's right, you know. And so is Calvin, as he most often is. The God we worship is a God who is both comfort and challenge. Because we trust in God's goodness, we can run to God for safety in a thunderstorm or a sense of impending doom. And because we trust in God's faithful and steadfast character, we can rest in the assurance that we can question God's goodness without risking God's wrath.

The truth is, the Divine purpose isn't often ours to know. But we should ask anyway. We should pound on the doors of heaven itself if we must, trusting that there is a God who will answer us, in ways known and unknown.

For it seems there is a wideness in God's mercy. And God is just enough to call us to account; big enough to handle our questions and fears; and loving enough to wrestle goodness from us when we are nothing but a hot mess.

That's a deal we didn't even bargain for, but we get anyway.
Amen.

³ John Calvin, A. N. S. Lane, and Hilary Osborne, *The Institutes of Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), P. 69.

⁴ Sarah Bessey, *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*, (Convergent: 2021). P. 62.