

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

In 2004 the Los Angeles Lakers offered Mike Krzyzewski, the famed coach of Duke University, a \$40 million contract to replace Phil Jackson as their head coach. Andrew Humphries, a 19 year-old student at Duke, felt he had to do something about this. So he wrote Coach K an email. He told the coach how he had always dreamed of playing for him and how he felt part of the team just being one of the fans. He ended his impassioned plea with the request, "Please still be my coach." When Coach K announced his decision to reject the Lakers' offer, he noted how this email moved him to tears and reminded him of the special bond he felt with the Duke players and students. While certainly not the only reason, Coach K turned down a \$40 million offer to stay at Duke, influenced by the petition of a student he didn't really know.

I am sure that there were moments when Andrew Humphries wondered if his plea to Coach K was really going to make any difference. I am sure that if he asked his friends what they thought there were those who encouraged him not to do it because it wasn't going to matter anyway. Do feel that same way about praying to God? What does it matter if I pray, God's going to do what he wants anyway? Why would God listen to little, old me? What kind of influence could I possibly have with the almighty God? God already knows what he is going to do, why would what I say matter? God answers these questions for us in his word today. Through the account of Abraham that I am about to read for you, God gives us insight into the power of prayer and what prayer is all about. Wonder of wonders, God allows himself to be influenced by our prayers. As C.S. Lewis once said, "In prayer, God gives us the dignity of causality." Today God gives us the confidence that **Prayer Makes a Difference.**

Genesis 18:20-32 *Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹that 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." ²²The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. ²³Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴What 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? ²⁵Far 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?" ²⁶The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ²⁷Then 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, ²⁸what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." ²⁹Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." ³⁰Then 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." ³¹Abraham 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." ³²Then 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."*

As we first hear Abraham's prayer we might be astonished by how bold he was in pressing God. By human standards, he almost seemed bothersome. You could read this from the standpoint of a child who just won't accept the answer that he/she receives from the parent so they just keep pressing. Yet God doesn't get mad and upset with Abraham the way a parent would with an arguing child. Why? How could Abraham be so bold and God be accepting of it?

We can understand better when we know the situation and the perspective that Abraham was coming from. The Lord had appeared with two angels to Abraham and Sarah and confirmed that within a year they would give birth to the son that he had promised them 24 years ago. As the Lord set out to leave, he chose to reveal to Abraham his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah. He did this as a lesson for Abraham and his descendants. He wanted to show them that he hates unbelief and wickedness and will punish it, but also that he will carry out his judgments in a way that they serve the deliverance of the elect. Surely Abraham was aware of what was happening. These cities were wicked. The inhabitants of those cities were sexual deviants engaged in immoral activity that went against what God had created for marriage. They lived lives that were rebellious against God. Our text tells us, "*The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹that 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.*" This was simply God's way of saying, I know what is going on there and the time for my judgment has come. But I do not go about my judgment flying off the handle or reacting quickly. When I destroy these cities and bring my judgment upon them, I am acting with knowledge and intent. My judgment is greatly deserved by these people.

In his talking with God, Abraham was not excusing the sin of these people nor was he accusing God of acting unjustly. He was not saying that he was better than these people. He did not try to promote himself as the reason God might want to consider his request. He knew that he had no right to demand anything from God. The same sinful heart that beat inside the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah beat within him. He was a sinful being who dared to make a request of the holy God, judge of all the earth. He had nothing in his possession to use to bargain with God. He wasn't bargaining with God promising God if that God did this for him, he would do something for God.

Notice where Abraham's heart was focused: on the righteous. He was focused on more than just his nephew, Lot, and his family. Certainly they were included, but if Abraham were to be selfish in his prayer and be thinking only of them, surely he would have just asked God to save them. Abraham's heart was focused the same as God's—on what is best for the righteous, that is for

those who called on God for their salvation. While God's judgment would punish the wicked, it would also deliver the righteous from the temptation of the wickedness around them. However, Abraham's concern was that the righteous would also be killed in the judgment brought on the wicked. At the same time, withholding judgment would give the wicked more time of grace to repent of their sin. So Abraham, with bold confidence in God's fairness and grace, humbly petitioned on behalf of the righteous.

And God not only answered his prayer. He did more than Abraham asked. God promises here that if there were only 10 righteous, he would still spare the cities. We know that the destruction did come so there weren't even 10 believers in those cities. Yet God spared Lot and his family from the destruction he brought down on the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. God allowed himself to be influenced in his actions by Abraham. As James noted in our second lesson, the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. God listens to what the righteous have to say and takes that into account and consideration. The heart of the righteous is in line with the things of God and therefore asks God to be consistent and carry out his word for the sake of the elect as he has promised. This is a beautiful example of the prayer that God desires from his children. They are submissive to his will and recognize the role of the supplication in approaching the Creator and Master. At the same time, they are confidently persistent, trusting that the loving Father will dispense blessings according to his perfect will.

When we look at it from this perspective, we might be tempted to ask, "Why can't I pray like Abraham did?" Too often we lack the boldness and confidence that Abraham did. Too often our prayers are selfish prayers for ourselves rather than on behalf of others. Too often we fall into that "why bother, it isn't going to matter anyway" mentality. Perhaps we think, "I have some family members that are sick or struggling. Some don't believe in Jesus and are on the road to hell. I know I should pray for them, but they haven't listened before. Why bother, it isn't going to matter anyway." Or perhaps we have been praying and nothing seems to change. We are troubled and disturbed when we turn on the TV at night and we see disasters and shootings. People are murdered and goods stolen all around us. There is destruction caused by the greed of some and by the hatred of others. We see the moral decay around us. In fact, we sometimes wonder if our country is becoming the modern day Sodom and Gomorrah. Actions that are openly and clearly condemned in Scripture are being pushed and promoted as legitimate lifestyle choices. We fear for our children who have to grow up in a world that proclaims these things as normal as we ourselves become desensitized to them. We come across big obstacles in ministry like motivating people to give time or money toward projects that will expand ministry and the proclaiming of the Gospel. We see our society and know that we should be reaching out even more fervently but the attitudes of the unbelieving world around make us wonder what difference our prayers could make. We get into the mindset of "what does it matter, why bother, God's going to do what he wants anyway, why would he listen to me?"

You know what the problem with this type of thinking is? It puts the effectiveness on us. It looks at God answering our prayers based on who we are. Then we ought to be afraid. Don't we have to admit that if God were to talk about us, he'd have to say the same thing as in our text—the outcry of our sin is so great and grievous? Perhaps we haven't committed the same types of sins as the people in these cities—though perhaps some of us have—in God's eyes those white lies, misplaced priorities, hateful thoughts of vengeance, times when we look down on others in condescension, the times we fail to trust in God to get us over the obstacles before us, all of those are sins that deserve God's judgment. If the effectiveness of our prayers depended on who we are, we would be in bad shape.

Abraham didn't pray boldly because of who he was, but because of who God is. This God of righteous anger is also a God of mercy and love. His heart has always been focused on saving the sinner. That's why he sent his son into the world. The promise God made and kept to Abraham to give him a son was also a promise that through that son he would send the Savior into the world. God kept that promise 2000 years ago when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He went forward to do what his name said he would do—save his people from their sins. He lived the perfect life of righteousness we could not, he died what we deserved to pay for the wages of our sin, and he rose from the grave to conquer death. Then God brought all of the blessings of these actions to us through faith. We stand before him as righteous, perfect people not because of who we are, but because of who he made us in Jesus. We stand before him as righteous people because we are covered by the righteousness of Christ. Now our hearts have been brought in line with our God to be focused on those who are lost in our world and need to hear the grace and mercy of God. Now our hearts are not focused on building and furthering our kingdom but on building and furthering his kingdom.

Here's the wonderful news—our prayers matter because God allows himself to be influenced by the prayers of his people. While by nature we have no place in the throne room of God and no business asking God for anything, through faith he gives us the dignity of bringing our requests before him confident that he hears them and will answer them according to his good and gracious will and in the way that is best for the salvation of souls. Now we can pray boldly confident that God will do what God will do.

If a man like Coach K can be moved by the plea of a student he doesn't even know, God can be moved by the pleas of his children whom he has known since the creation of the world and whom he brought into his own family through the death of his son. Our prayers make a difference in our lives, in the lives of others and in this world. The mayor of Tampa may not welcome your input or take your advice into consideration as he governs Tampa. The President of the United States probably wouldn't welcome it either as he governs our country. But our God in heaven welcomes requests that come from his people because they are born out of his own heart which he gave to them through faith. Be bold but humble in your prayer. Be persistent and unselfish in your prayers. Be confident that God will hear your prayers, consider them and act according to his gracious will in the way that is best for his people. Know that before God, your prayers make a difference. Amen