

Bargaining with God

Psalms 85; Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

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July 24, 2022

Everyone loves a bargain.

The springing up of “outlet malls” all over the country in the 1980s and 90s gives testimony to that. Probably all of us can think of some great bargains we got over the years.

There was a time some years ago that Jan would go to every household sale and auction she could find – she loved the give and take of it – it was her weekend entertainment. I usually didn’t go because I was a pushover, always starting too high and offering too much. And Jan did get some great bargains! Okay, I’ll admit there were a few ringers in there too, but the bargains that come to mind include a set of four wooden upholstered dinette chairs for which she paid \$7.00 each in about 1985. We are still using them today when we have more dinner guests than we have dining room chairs. Now, THAT was a bargain! We have gotten our \$28.00 worth of use out of them many times over.

It’s probably occurred to you that “bargain” is one of those words in English that can be used as either a noun or a verb. You could say “I bargained with that merchant, but I don’t think I got a bargain.” Today, we will be focusing more on the verb usage of the word, and especially, on the idea of bargaining with God.

Sometimes, we believers try to do that – to bargain with God: “If you do this, God, I’ll do that.” It’s the spiritual version of the *quid pro quo* we heard so much about in news coverage in recent years.

I can think of instances growing up Catholic and going to Catholic schools in the 1950s and 60s where a friend or schoolmate, or maybe yours truly, would promise God to become a priest or a nun if only God would do “X,” or maybe not let “Y” happen. Had all those promises been kept, there would have been an over-supply of nuns and priests the past 30 or 40 years.

But we bargain with God over life’s serious matters too: If you heal me, God—or maybe someone dear to me—I’ll be in church every week...or, I’ll read the Bible every day. Help me with this area of sin or inappropriate behavior in my life and I’ll be faithful in my daily prayers and devotions.

Religious thinkers universally advise against it.

- Billy Graham said: “God is not a bargaining God. You cannot barter with him. You must do business with him on his own terms.”
- And from Mahatma Gandhi: “A man of faith does not bargain or stipulate with God.”
- And then, there is this short, straightforward Jewish proverb: “Don’t bargain with God.”

But we do find stories in the Bible where people did just that.

In Genesis 32 Jacob wrestles all night with an angel and then negotiates a deal. He refuses to release the angel until the angel blesses him.

A tragic, and troubling, example of bargaining with God is found in Judges chapter 11. A man named Jephthah vowed that if the Lord allowed him to defeat the Ammonites, he would sacrifice as a burnt offering "whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph." The "whatever comes out of the door" turned out to be his daughter, who was his only child. When he saw his daughter, he tore his clothes and cried out, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated.

I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break." After a two-month period in which he allowed her to mourn, he sacrificed his own daughter to God as a burnt offering. How foolish. How awful.

This is a troubling and difficult story. I have always thought of it as the single most difficult story in the Bible. The first time I read it I went back and read it again to see if maybe I had missed something or misunderstood and, hoped that I had. God provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice in place of his son, Isaac. Where was the ram in this case? Why did God allow this to happen? Why did Jephthah make such a foolish vow? Did he not know that a person from his household would greet him? Why did he sacrifice his only child in violation of the law of Moses?

Jephthah was not actually bound by his vow since human sacrifice was strictly forbidden by the law. But instead of consulting with the high priest or seeking advice, he killed and sacrificed his daughter, his only child, as a burnt offering.

If there is a lesson for us in Jephthah's story it would be to avoid making foolish or impulsive vows to God.

But let's consider another account of bargaining -- the story from Genesis 18 that we heard today in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. This is probably the best-known Bible story about bargaining with God.

God tells Abraham the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grave that he must destroy them. What was their sin?

For years it was presumed to involve men seeking to "know" other men, in the Biblical sense, and was often preached about and taught in that way. The word "sodomy" has its roots in that idea. But Ezekiel Chapter 16 tells us "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." So, it was pride and arrogance and, perhaps, gluttony, and a refusal to help the poor that brought God's wrath upon Sodom.

Abraham asks God, "will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Far be it from you to do such a thing." Suppose there are 50 righteous there? God says, if I find 50 righteous, I'll forgive the whole place. Abraham says, what about 40 and God say, "I'll save it for 40"...then what about 30...20, and finally 10 righteous ones? And God replies, for the sake of 10, I will not destroy it.

On its face Abraham seems to be haggling with God as one of might at a yard sale over a lamp. The way he approaches God seems unwise and ill advised, doesn't it? It certainly contradicts what Billy Graham, Mahatma Gandhi and a Jewish proverb I quoted earlier had to say about bargaining with God. Basically: Don't Do It!

So, what is the lesson for us in this story? What is it about God that we can learn from this account in Genesis?

It is **MERCY**.

God's mercy is great and Abraham, in his haggling, bargaining way is asking, praying, and trusting God to be merciful. Abraham says to God "shall not the judge of the earth do what is right?" – far be it from you to be unjust, far be that from you!"

Abraham is called the "friend" of God from 2 Chronicles and Isaiah to the book of James. I would say he had come to know his friend well. Mercy, not bargaining, is at the heart of this reading, our other readings, and this message, today.

Psalms 85 reminds us that the Lord will give us what is good and asks God to show us his steadfast love. The Psalmist says: "You did forgive the iniquity of your people; you did pardon all their sin. You did withdraw all your wrath; you did turn from your anger."

The reading from Chapter 11 of Luke's Gospel starts with the Lord's Prayer and then encourages us to be persistent in prayer. Finally, we are assured, as we were by Psalm 85, that God will give us what is good. Jesus asks. "Who among you if your child asks for a fish will give a snake instead, or if the child asks for an egg will give a scorpion?" If we know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more, Jesus asks, will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

So, let's follow the advice of Billy Graham and Gandhi and avoid bargaining with God. Let's strive to pray without the need to try to control the outcome with a vow or by haggling with God. We want our prayers to have an attitude of "Thy Will Be Done." Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer in our reading from Luke, but more than that, assures us that:

- God hears.
- God provides.
- God forgives.
- God protects.
- God expects us to be generous to one another.

The Good News today is that God is merciful, forgives us as we forgive others, and gives us what is good.

Like Abraham, let's put our trust in God's mercy and forgiveness, so we can say with the Psalmist: "Oh, give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his mercy endures forever."

Let's pray together:

Almighty and merciful God, as we receive your mercies new every morning, help us to bless others we encounter with mercy too. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.