

I grew up in an era when teachers used some very creative means for classroom management, many of which would probably be soundly rejected today. One such approach played off of the “group guilt” mentality that punished the innocent alongside the guilty. If the teacher could not determine who was the transgressor and if we students sat back silently, then all of us were punished by remaining after school or some other measure. I found that to be particularly unfair because in some cases, I too did not know whom was to blame. But the only thing that I knew is that it was not I! So why should I be punished?

In one of his Wednesday Audiences in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI spoke extensively about our passage from Genesis, shedding light upon its rich theology of forgiveness. Quickly understanding the gravity of the planned destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and with tremendous courage Abraham “confronts God with the need to avoid a perfunctory form of justice.”¹ The Pope continues: “it would be unjust to punish all the inhabitants indiscriminately. If there are innocent people in the city, they must not be treated as the guilty. God, who is a just judge, cannot act in this way, Abraham says rightly to God.”² Abraham takes on the role of intercessor.

But upon careful reading, the intercessor goes even a step farther. By appealing to God’s justice, asking about the potential remnant of fifty righteous people, Abraham boldly asks for more. Not content with forgiving a few, he asks for forgiveness for the whole city. He does so by appealing to God’s sense of justice:

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 18 May 2011.

² Ibid.

In this way he brings a new idea of justice into play: not the one that is limited to punishing the guilty, as men do, but a different, divine justice that seeks goodness and creates it through forgiveness that transforms the sinner, converts and saves him.³

The teachers and nuns at my grade school did a great job and kept remarkable order. But even then, a few of their methods caused me to ponder the virtue of justice, even as I admit that at times I myself was amongst the guilty. But in most cases, it just felt wrong to be blamed *en masse* for what others did, just because the teacher could not figure out who was the culprit. Notice that Abraham, upon receiving a favorable reply, began to press the issue- if 50 would not be enough, what about 45...30... and so on all the way down to 10.

I can relate on a very personal level. Once when trying to purchase a block of 24 airline tickets for a pilgrimage to Rome, I was frustrated that the group rate was significantly higher than what I could find online for a single seat. I understood the game, realizing that a block purchase is unique, but in my frustration, I called the airline and proceeded to see if I could purchase the tickets individually.

I figured that at least I might purchase the maximum allotment of six tickets at a lower rate, and then then buy the others at the group rate. But just before being transferred to the group desk for the remaining 18 tickets, I had a hunch. “Do you think you could try and see if six more tickets are available at that price?” “I could try sir, but the computer catches on to multiple requests and automatically changes the fare.” “Let’s try anyway.”

Sure enough, six more came through at the lower price. “Once more,” I said! In fact, the entire 24-person itinerary was purchased

³ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 18 May 2011.

at the lowest possible fare, saving the group over \$5000 and my head swelled with pride. I had gamed the system! The ticketing agent replied that in all her twenty years at the airlines, she had never seen that before. God smiled favorably!

But here is the difference. Abraham was not “gaming” the system; instead, he was appealing in a most creative way to show forth his understanding of God’s mercy. Pope Benedict XVI concluded: “For through intercession, the prayer to God for the salvation of others, the desire for salvation which God nourishes for sinful man is demonstrated and expressed.” The smaller that the number of righteous people becomes, the greater God’s mercy is shown to be.

He patiently listens to the prayer, repeating at each supplication: “I will spare... I will not destroy... I will not do it” (cf. Genesis 18: vv. 26,28, 29, 30, 31, 32). The dialogue with Abraham is a prolonged and unequivocal demonstration of God’s merciful love.

We learn from this wonderful exchange of mercy that God desires not to punish, but to save. He wants to work with us. God is not watching us to trip us up—rather, he loves us so much, he cannot take His eyes off of us. Our lives are not to be led merely by avoiding punishment, but far more positively, by seeking to bring others to a fullness of life in Christ.