

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 13: MORAL CLARITY

Genesis 19:1-38 (NASB)

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If the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah means anything, it means that our God is a God of moral clarity. In the midst of mass wanton perversity and violence, God looked down from above and said in the clearest terms: DO NOT WANT. It is impossible to properly describe the fiery destruction God rained down from heaven. Perhaps the only events on earth which approach the nature of this judgment are nuclear blasts. The incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah has become an object lesson about the moral structure of reality. It also trumpets that our God has a crystalline clarity in his judgment against immorality.

Many Christians today have backed away from this picture of God, preferring to adopt the soft heresy of modalism or perhaps tritheism, thinking: *Well, the Father is like that but Jesus is all about love, or God used to be like that in the old days but now he is more friendly.* There has been a call for the church to stop speaking so stridently against the sin of homosexual practice. That the church is losing moral clarity on immorality in general is revealed by the sheer number of Christian young adults who live together before marriage. What is happening to our Bible study methodology that we could ever misunderstand Jesus' words: **"For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished"** (Matthew 5:18)? In one stroke the entire moral law in the Bible is affirmed as the moral reality of the world until the end of time. And so we learn that moral clarity is indispensable to Christ and therefore essential for his church.

Perhaps now more than ever, the world is a morass of moral ambiguity, and it is affecting Christ's church. In this study we will use the example of a righteous man who, according to Scripture, was caused grief by the immoral environment in which he lived. We will also see ten specific ways to dispel moral ambiguity. That man was the nephew of Abraham, and we pick up the background of his story as he and Abraham first settled in the Promised Land: **"Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land. So Abram said to Lot, 'Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left.' Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere-- this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah-- like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other"** (Genesis 13:5-11).

CHOOSE THE GOOD OF OTHERS OVER OURSELVES

The first of ten ways to dispel moral ambiguity is that we should choose the good of others over our own selfish desires. Let us not forget that Abraham was the head of his extended family, owner of

the wealth of his tribe, a nomadic prince, manager of tribal enterprises, and commander of its fighting men. So for Lot to be given the chance to choose his own land was a grand act of magnanimity on Abraham's part and a chance for Lot to display his quality. In that pregnant moment Lot looked around, identified the land with the good soil, and simply took it with no obvious regard for his uncle's stature or well-being.

I can tell you by personal experience that it is easy, when we are being treated like a king or queen, to feel that this is right and our due. *Everyone should treat me like this*, we instinctively think. But this is a selfish and therefore immoral way to think and act. Paul wrote the following words as he meditated on the example of Christ: "**Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others**" (Philippians 2:3-4). And if this is both what Christ did as our perfect example and what he commanded us to do (see Matthew 5:38-48), then to fail to do it is wrong. Lot displayed his moral ambiguity by failing to consider the honor of Abraham in the choosing of land, with the result that Abraham got vastly inferior land.

CHOOSE GOOD COMPANY

Moral ambiguity was also displayed in the way in which Lot did not flinch at the prospect of moving in with the most immoral people of his place and time. The Bible says he was distressed by their behavior but he chose the personal prosperity of the better soil over the negative moral effect upon him and his family. What happens if you gain the whole world but lose your soul? Lot came very close to that outcome. The second thing we learn is that, when possible, we should choose good company for ourselves and our families. As Paul told the wayward Corinthians: "**Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals'**" (1 Corinthians 15:33). This is not automatic, but the natural outcome of a relentless corrupting influence. Moral clarity of thought says: "If I want to walk with the Lord and be holy then I need to be with people who want the same thing."

SHOW HOSPITALITY

Time and several Bible chapters elapse to bring us to the situation in chapter nineteen. The previous chapter tells the story of how the Lord sent three angels to see if Sodom and Gomorrah should be destroyed. After spending time with Abraham in the inferior land, two of them went to see Lot over on the better soil: "**Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. And he said, 'Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way.' They said however, 'No, but we shall spend the night in the square.' Yet he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he prepared a feast for them, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate**" (Genesis 19:1-3).

We get our third concept of moral clarity from Lot's good example, which is that hospitality is a virtue which is the explicit command of the Lord: "**Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it**" (Hebrews 13:2). It is a requirement of elders in the church. It is simply an application of the general principle of looking out for the good of others. And it goes far beyond food and shelter to include protection from harm to life and limb as

revealed by Lot's protection of the angels from the onslaught of an evil mob: **"Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them.' But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, 'Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly'"** (Genesis 19:4-7). We credit Lot with slamming the door and making a verbal appeal to the mob to leave them alone. The words did not help in this case, but it is wise to assert what is right in the chance that the consciences of some may awaken.

FOLLOW MORAL ABSOLUTES OVER CULTURE

Things began to unravel rapidly from there: **"Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof.' But they said, 'Stand aside.' Furthermore, they said, 'This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them.' So they pressed hard against Lot and came near to break the door. But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. They struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway"** (Genesis 19:8-11).

There is not much hope in an attempt to reason with a mob. What Lot did next is hard for Westerners like us to understand. The mob was after the male visitors, and Lot offered them his virgin daughters to abuse. Let us list several mitigating factors about this seemingly outrageous offer. First, this was a life and death situation. Abuse for a few, even very bad abuse, is better than death for all. Secondly, there is, even today, among Pashtun tribes people in western Pakistan, a powerful cultural belief that once visitors come under your roof you are responsible for their lives. So it was not completely absurd and heinous by cultural standards for Lot to offer his daughters.

But it was heinous by God's standards! This fourth lesson about moral clarity we learn by reversing what Lot did, that we must elevate the moral absolutes of God over every cultural practice. This takes some serious backbone because we may end up worse off--in the earthly sense--than if we compromise. It may not have turned out well for Lot and his family if he had avoided such a heartless offer, but he should have entrusted their lives to the Lord, prayed for a miracle, and defended his family to the last. Fortunately for them all, Abraham had prayed for them (cf. :29), and the Lord delivered them from this attack by striking the mob with blindness. So a miracle did happen! There will always be cultural and social pressures to compromise the moral absolutes of God, and we must refuse to do so and trust the Lord to deliver us.

SPEAK WITH MORAL AUTHORITY

The next part of the story tells us that even if we have moral clarity ourselves that we must learn to speak with moral authority for the good of those around us. Lot seems not to have done this: **"Then the two men said to Lot, 'Whom else have you here? A son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whomever you have in the city, bring them out of the place; for we are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the LORD that the LORD has**

sent us to destroy it.' Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, and said, 'Up, get out of this place, for the LORD will destroy the city.' But he appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting'" (Genesis 19:12-14). In Lot's defense, we may say that anyone would have trouble accepting this call to evacuate at face value. But the response of the sons-in-law gives no indication of their wrestling with the idea that their father-in-law's words were always weighty and morally compelling. They instinctively laughed him off and paid for that behavior with their lives.

In short, Lot was unable to speak with the moral authority necessary to compel his sons-in-law to leave the evil city in the face of divine judgment. These family members must have been accustomed to hearing moral ambiguity out of Lot's mouth to the point that he was not believed when he spoke with moral clarity. We have a responsibility to God and the people around us to speak clearly about moral absolutes, both in the church and in the world.

TEACH YOURSELF TO FOLLOW GOD'S MORAL JUDGMENT INSTINCTIVELY

Furthermore, if true is true, right is right, and wrong is wrong then we should teach ourselves to follow God and his moral absolutes instinctively. Lot failed this test along with every member of his family: **"When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.' But he hesitated. So the men seized his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his two daughters, for the compassion of the LORD was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city"** (Genesis 19:15-16).

When it was time to flee, Lot hesitated. He and his family had to be dragged to safety by the angels! Lot was apparently accustomed to temporizing in the face of moral imperatives. If God says "Jump!" we should have trained ourselves to respond so faithfully that we do not hesitate. It may save our lives at some point, and even our souls. Parents can give their children a great gift by training into them this kind of deep respect for the judgments of God.

CHOOSE MORAL PURITY OVER LIFESTYLE PREFERENCES

Even at this point Lot refused to simply obey the uncompromising commands of God's messengers: **"When they had brought them outside, one said, 'Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, or you will be swept away.' But Lot said to them, 'Oh no, my lords! Now behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have magnified your lovingkindness, which you have shown me by saving my life; but I cannot escape to the mountains, for the disaster will overtake me and I will die; now behold, this town is near enough to flee to, and it is small. Please, let me escape there (is it not small?) that my life may be saved.' He said to him, 'Behold, I grant you this request also, not to overthrow the town of which you have spoken. Hurry, escape there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there.' Therefore the name of the town was called Zoar"** (Genesis 19:17-22).

Whenever I read this I think: *My goodness, Lot! Are you ever just going to do what the Lord is telling you?* Whenever I see people who are not passionate about the clear leading of the Lord, I ask the question: What are they passionate about? Surely the instruction of the angels for Lot to flee to the mountains would have worked. Their purpose at this point was to save him. But Lot would have lost

the prosperity of the most fertile soil in the region. He wanted the angels to spare a little city so he could move there and live the life he preferred. And Lot cast his argument as a plea for his life. That's pathetic. Every one of us has a choice to make about whether we think God's blessing or our earthly prosperity is sweeter. There is no contest! We need to choose moral purity even if it makes life more challenging.

CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE OF MORAL CLARITY IN THE HOME

The next sad verses reveal that Lot failed to create an atmosphere of moral clarity in his marriage and home: **"The sun had risen over the earth when Lot came to Zoar. Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt"** (Genesis 19:23-26). When the time comes to leave something behind which God hates, what will you do? You will act in the manner to which you have become accustomed. Lot's whole family seems to have been accustomed to moral wavering. So when the sulfur and flames fell at last, Lot's wife did what she always did and paid the highest price for it. We need to create an environment of moral clarity in our homes so that the entire family will find it natural to follow the Lord without wavering.

LOOK TO OUR MORAL LEADERS

Abraham looked down on this entire scenario: **"Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the LORD; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace. Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived"** (Genesis 19:27-29). Although Abraham had some moral confusion of his own from time to time, in the main he was a man of moral clarity. One reason Lot was spared was that Abraham had previously pled with the Lord in prayer on the basis of God's own righteousness: **"Abraham came near and said, 'Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?'"** (Genesis 18:23-24). In spite of Abraham's flaws, he towered over Lot from the standpoint of moral clarity. Lot would have done well to learn from him, and we will do well to learn from the moral leaders around us.

CHOOSE MORAL INTEGRITY OVER PLEASURE

Now comes one of the sorriest moments in a sorry tale: **"Lot went up from Zoar, and stayed in the mountains, and his two daughters with him; for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; and he stayed in a cave, he and his two daughters. Then the firstborn said to the younger, 'Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him that we may preserve our family through our father.' So they made their father drink wine that night, and the firstborn went in and lay with her father; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. On the following day, the firstborn said to the younger, 'Behold, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve our family through our father.' So**

they made their father drink wine that night also, and the younger arose and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father" (Genesis 19:30-36).

The Bible calls Lot a righteous man, and no doubt he was, at least in relative human terms. It would be hard not to be more righteous than the Sodomites. But there is no trace of that righteousness here, where we see Lot choosing immediate pleasure over moral integrity. Listen to your pastor very carefully here: Nobody can make you drink wine, or to get drunk. You do it because you want to. For whatever reason, Lot agreed to get plastered at the urging of his daughters.

And then it got worse. Through their scheming, he became the father of both daughters' children, giving rise to the people groups known as the Moabites and the Ammonites. They would come to plague the nation of Israel for centuries. I say also that no one fathers children by his own daughters without some knowledge of what he is doing. If Lot was sober enough to perform the act, he should have been sober enough to say no. And even if I am wrong about that evaluation, drunks are held legally accountable in every nation for what they say and do while drunk. Rather than removing moral responsibility from the intoxicated person, it increases it.

Lot chose immediate pleasures instead of moral integrity. Yes, he lost many things in this judgment from the Lord, but his integrity was not one of them. He threw that away by his own choice. No one can take your moral integrity from you. You can only discard it yourself.

To conclude, moral clarity is an integral part of an essential church because it is an integral part of God. What does it gain a church? Moral clarity, rather than making us the judge of other sinners makes us see their need of a Savior. It drives evangelism. Moral clarity also enables us to love God because Scripture says that love for God is shown by obedience to his commandments. Most personally, moral clarity signals us when we ourselves need to confess sin and repent. Moral clarity also teaches us the nature of God because he has absolute moral clarity. Finally, moral clarity rescues us from existential despair which comes from living with an inward moral vacuum. The giving of the law is an act of grace from God's hand to keep us from imploding.

Let the edges of God's law cut us and make us bleed. He will heal those wounds. It is the surgery which saves our souls. Let us experience the loss of enjoyable lifestyles and immediate pleasures. The knowledge of God is a sweetness which dwarfs them all. And we will only gain those things through moral clarity, the same moral clarity which caused a holy God to sacrifice his only Son to satisfy righteousness so that we could come to know him.

Have you been cut to the quick by the word of the Lord today? Is there a moral burden on your soul which you have been carrying around for no reason? I advise you to lay it down today by confessing it to the Lord and determining to leave it behind. Perhaps you have realized that your soul is in a precarious position because you have failed the moral law of God. Ask the Lord Jesus Christ to wash away your sins, and he will do so.

And may we all see that because moral clarity is indispensable to God and Christ that it is essential to the church. May God deliver us from moral ambiguity during these days of increasing spiritual darkness!