

Matthew 13:24-30

24 [Jesus] put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28 He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29 But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

---

**Though Tim and John at the Bible Project** don’t know me, I like to consider us partners. You know... they make videos. I’ve made a few videos. They pastor in the greater Portland area. I pastor in the greater Portland area. They’re guys. I’m a guy. You see the partnership. Right? More importantly, I really like the way they teach the themes of the Bible. And I think it’s important for us to see how the various themes and stories and characters in the Bible really fit together into the one big story of God’s partnership with humanity – from the very beginning to the new beginning in Christ that Tim and John described in that video about covenants.

That’s part of what **this springtime sermon series** is going to be about. Over the next ten weeks, we’re going to look at ten people in the Bible whose lives give us some of the most important Bible stories, represent some of the Bible’s most important themes, and teach us some of the Bible’s most important lessons. They were Biblical Game Changers, people whose lives changed the way other people see things, understand things, and do things. Like us, the ten people we’re going to look at aren’t perfect people. But, they were people whose relationship with God gave them the chance to have lasting influence on those who knew them and have learned about them since.

Have you noticed how interested our culture is in **influential people**? Every year, there are all kinds of books and magazines, podcasts and conferences dedicated to helping us know how the most influential people among us have become and remained so influential. Though we may have a love/hate relationship with the influencers of our time – whether they're celebrity icons or business successes or groundbreaking innovators – there's no denying that a lot of people are fascinated by them and interested in becoming more like them. Really, who wouldn't want to be Elon Musk?

I'm hoping by the end of this series, you'll have a greater appreciation for these **ten Biblical Game Changers**. They are Abraham, Ruth, Joseph, Moses, Mary, David, Peter, Daniel, Job and John. I'm hoping by the middle of June, when we're done with the series, that you'll have a greater desire to partner with God in some of the ways they partnered with God. And, this morning, we start with **Abraham**. If you recall, he was the second of God's partners mentioned in the Bible Project video about covenants.

As you likely know, Abraham is an incredibly important historical figure. He is considered the father of three religious people groups – Jews, Christians and Muslims. The Book of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible tells us he had a lot of qualities common to modern influencers. He was a person of great wealth. He commanded military and political strength. He was well-traveled. He was a divinely-appointed real estate mogul. And, because of the offspring he fathered late in life, he was kind of like the original Godfather, with a remarkable family and a remarkable family tree. His very name in Hebrew means something like exalted father of many.

And, in Genesis 12, **God appeared to Abraham** and gave him travel directions and promises of blessing. My smart phone gives me travel directions, but I'm not holding my breath for it to offer promises of blessing. Hebrew scholars translate one of the most famous of God's blessings to Abraham this way – "You will be an inspiration to the nations of the world who will want to be like you." In other words, God declared that Abraham would be an influencer – a major biblical game changer.

Well, this morning, I want to focus on one of Abraham's game-changing stories that should influence us to want to be more like him. It's the story of Abraham standing up for the wicked, sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. So, **if you have your Bible**, you can open it to Genesis 18 where I'll read starting at verse 16.

Here, Abraham and Sarah are being visited by three mysterious men whom the Bible describes as an appearance of the Lord. And, after confirming God's promise to Sarah that she will bear a son in her old age, the men turn their attention to Sodom and Gomorrah. We read: 16 Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. 17 The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

**20 Then the Lord said,** "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! 21 I 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." 22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. (Jumping down to verse 27 then, we read this important statement from Abraham.) 27 Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes."

Part of what made Abraham a Game Changer is that he knew his place in the game. He knew that God had chosen him to be part of God's team. He knew God chose him to be an example to the generations coming after him. He knew that he was called to keep the way of the Lord with justice and righteousness. And, he knew that, even though he was just dust and ashes before the God of the game, God wanted him in the game not just watching the game. And so, when Abraham saw his chance to speak up for the way of the Lord, rather than being a bystander, he took it upon himself to speak. Though the other men turned toward destruction, Abraham remained standing before the Lord to speak as an advocate for justice and righteousness.

We are called to do the same. **Game changers know our place in the game.** When faced with the Sodoms and Gomorrah's of the world, it can be awfully tempting to stand in the place of God to cast judgment or to desire their destruction. But, that's not our place. Judgment and vengeance belong to the Lord. Like Abraham, we are but dust and ashes before God, so we need to be humble as members of God's team called to keep the way of the Lord rather than doing things from sinful pride.

To the opposite extreme, it can also be tempting just to be bystanders in the face of injustice and evil – to turn away or sit back hoping and waiting for others to respond. But, that’s not our place either. We’re not supposed to sit back and expect others to do the work of service in the church or missions in the field or prayers for the hurting or evangelism in the community. Like Abraham, we are called to do righteous and just things in God’s name. Like Abraham, when others turn away or sit by in comfort or complacency, we need to say, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord.” We need to cry out for God’s justice and be a voice for God’s righteousness. We are people who pray for God’s guidance and intervention. And, when God directs us clearly to act, then we act in the ways the Lord calls us to act, remembering that God’s ways are higher than our ways and God’s thoughts higher than our thoughts. Amen?

This is the truth Jesus communicated in the parable Dale read for us earlier. When the servants of the master saw that an enemy had made destructive weeds grow up among the good wheat, the slaves asked the Master, ‘Shouldn’t we go and rip up the weeds?’ **But the Master replied,** ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers to collect the weeds for bundling and burning.’”

As Jesus reminded us, God has not called us to be reapers. Game changers are called to be repairers of the breach. We are called to recognize the logs in our own eyes, be repentant in our own brokenness, and remember that Christ took the punishment due to all of us so that we could serve as ambassadors of reconciliation. It’s God’s kindness that leads people to repentance, not His wrath, and we are to keep the way of the Lord. To change the game, we’ve got to know our place in the game.

At verse 23, we hear Abraham’s words as he took it upon himself to speak to the Lord. **The text says this:** 23 Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose 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? 25 Far 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?”

Here, Abraham showed his knowledge of God's nature, and he appealed to God's heart and character. As we heard in Jesus' parable, God doesn't want the righteous to be swept away with the wicked. In fact, God's merciful heart desires that not even the wicked should perish but that all should repent and be saved. So, there is extra power and potency in our prayers when our words reflect God's desires and appeal to God's just and righteous nature.

So that's the next thing we learn from Abraham the Game Changer. **Game changers appeal to God's heart for the players.**

The good news for us is that God's heart for humanity is infinitely more loving and merciful and gracious than our hearts are for one another. Even the best of our love for the people we love the best fails to come close to the perfect love God has for those we'd consider least lovable. So, when we speak in partnership with the love of God's heart for those whom others write off as wicked, we change the game for the better.

**1 John 5:14 reminds us** that "this is the boldness we have in the Lord, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Remember, by ourselves, we're just dust and ashes. We have no reason on our own to be bold before the Lord. But, in partnership with God, we're not just valued advisors. We're heirs of God's kingdom. We're more than conquerors. We are game-changing players in the redeeming movement of God's kingdom. But, we need our will and appeals to align with God's will and God's heart.

Early in my training as a military officer, I was directed to learn my commander's intent. Each commanding officer publishes a statement of his or her priorities and objectives for the unit under their leadership. And, each officer under that commander's charge is expected to know those bullet points so that we can align our department's activities and briefs with our commander's intent. Ultimately, it shows dedication to the commanding officer and builds confidence that we're all working toward the same mission.

When you pray, do your prayers show a knowledge and embrace of God's will? Are the desires of your heart and the work of your hands aligned with God's priorities? Or are you just asking for what you want regardless of its connection to God's heart and God's mission?

When Abraham's story says that he came near to the Lord to appeal for the salvation of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, I think it means he drew near to the heart of God in his appeals. And, that's what Game Changers do. Game Changers appeal to God's heart for the players.

**The final portions** of this morning's story show start at verse 26, where we read this: 26 And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." 28 Abraham answered, "Suppose 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." 29 Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it."

**30 Then 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." 31 He 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."

**32 Then 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." 33 And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

It's kind of a strange story. Isn't it? Had the dialog continued in the same way, we might have gotten down to the heart of the matter. Abraham could eventually have gone from ten righteous to five righteous to one righteous person among all of Sodom's wickedness and sin. And, if he had, do you think God would still have agreed to forgive the whole city on account of the one? We don't have to guess at that answer. Do we? Because we've experienced the answer. It's the gospel we celebrate every Sunday in worship together.

**Paul wrote about it Romans 3**, where he said, "... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..." While we – the whole world – were still sinners, Christ died for us. And, for the sake of the one righteous one, the whole of Creation has been forgiven.

This is why **1 John 2 affirms** that, “...if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Jesus is the righteous advocate for the redemption of the world. Abraham was a Game Changer because he was an advocate for the redemption of Sodom. And, we are called to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice like him.

### **Game changers advocate for God’s redemption as the outcome.**

To me, one of the most interesting influencers of the past couple of weeks has been **Eric Nelson, the Chief Defense Attorney** for Former Police Officer Derek Chauvin. Chauvin has certainly been vilified because of his actions in the death of George Floyd. There are many who see Derek Chauvin as wicked and have put themselves on God’s judgment seat to demand vengeance against him. Maybe you’re among them. And, may the one of us who is without sin be the first to throw a stone. That’s certainly a popular stance to take right now, though only a few people are legitimately in the places of judge and jury over him.

And then, there’s Eric Nelson, standing next to the man just about everyone else has turned away from, defending him, receiving death threats on his behalf, advocating for justice, taking the position that many of us find unthinkable. Nelson is 46 years old – a great age to be speaking on behalf of justice, in my 46-year-old opinion. He’s a graduate of Eastern University, a private Christian university affiliated with the American Baptist Churches. I kind of see him as an Abraham in our time, defending the Sodom in our midst. In some small way, I kind of see him playing the role of Christ, who stood up for us to advocate for our justification and to bear the burden of our redemption.

Advocates like Jesus and Abraham and Eric Nelson don’t do what they do because they think wickedness is right. I think they do it because Game Changers are advocates for redemption. I think they have eyes to see that – mixed in with all of the yucky, wicked, violent, destructive, misguided brokenness of humanity – the image of God remains. As God has shown us, **there is a treasure within even the worst of us that is worth redeeming.**

That's why Jesus came. That's why Abraham fought for Sodom. That's what we do when we want to change the game in partnership with God. So, who is it in your life who needs you as an advocate? Who are the righteous ones we need to be proactive in defending? And, who are the wicked ones everyone else has turned away from whom you might stand next to – in partnership with God – with hope and trust that God can change their game from wickedness to righteousness by the blood of Christ?

Let's not chop the weeds out too soon. God knows how and when to bring in the reapers. And the harvest will come on the day the Lord declares. Until then, let's be like Abraham and change the game for redemption.