

# YOU CANNOT SERVE TWO MASTERS

## *SERIES: SEEKING FIRST THINGS FIRST*

Steve Zeisler

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Mark Twain's book, *The Prince and the Pauper*, tells the story of two boys—one the son of a king; the other a street urchin. They met by chance and discovered that, when they switched clothing, they so closely resembled one another that people couldn't tell them apart, and for a time they traded lives. The pauper's experience being prince was half the tale, of course, but the most interesting side of this story was the prince's experience in the pauper's world, interacting with commoners who did not realize they were in the presence of royalty. Scripture tells us that God often visits us without our awareness of his guise. Jesus told a parable about a homeowner who left stewards in charge of his property. When he returned unexpectedly, he asked for an accounting of their stewardship. The old TV show *Candid Camera* used the slogan, "people caught in the act of being themselves," and that is often what it is like when God visits unexpectedly. We become aware that, without any effort to be able to prepare for the royal visit, we are on display as we really are.

We are examining, in parallel, the lives of Abram (who is re-named Abraham in Genesis 17) and Lot. They journeyed together from Mesopotamia to the promised land. They went to Egypt faithlessly, learned a hard lesson there, and returned. In Genesis 13 we read the story of their parting from one another. Lot evaluated life based on his own belief that he could choose for himself what was best, and he headed for the cities of the plain to pitch his tents near Sodom. Abram let God choose for him, and he ended up in a place that was much healthier. In the last message ([Discovery Paper #4627](#)), we discussed the difference between the narrow road that leads to life and the broad road that leads to destruction, and the choice between them that was evident in Genesis 13.

Now we are going to compare the same two men in Genesis 18 and 19, and we will see what kind of life has resulted from the choices they made in chapter 13. We will learn from an unexpected royal visit, a surprise examination by God. Heavenly visitors will engage each man as he really is without time to prepare or make things look right.

Let me briefly summarize chapters 14 through 17. Little is written about Lot, but three significant things happened to Abram. In chapters 13 and 14, we read that marauding kings came through the region, seizing goods and people, including Lot. Abram went after them, fought a battle, and won Lot and the other innocent abductees back again. At the end of that account, Abram worshiped God, paid a tithe to the mysterious Melchizedek, and refused the riches of Sodom. Abram recognized that God's presence and power made possible the winning of the battle.

In chapter 15, Abram was alone with God on a hilltop. God's covenant with Abram was re-established, and Abram believed the words of the covenant. The great phrase in the New Testament that is so important to Christian theology says that Abram believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, James 2:23).

Chapters 16 and 17 tell the hard story of Abram's refusal to trust God. Abram had grown tired of waiting. God's promise had not yet been fulfilled. Abram was too old to father children, and Sarai (re-named Sarah in chapter 17) was too old to bear them. Certain that God had forgotten them, Abram and Sarai conspired together to have a child by Hagar, and the boy Ishmael was born. All of the tension in the middle east in every generation since that time can be traced back to the choice that led to the fathering of Ishmael. At the end of that story, however, we find Abram acknowledging his failure, drawing near to the Lord, choosing to circumcise himself and entire household as an act of obedience.

So what happened after Abram chose the narrow road by trusting God with his future? He was not a perfect man, but at every point in these intervening years, we find Abram's story centered on his relationship with God. He was a man who, time and again, turned back toward the face of his Lord. At the end of the day, he was the servant of God. In the final analysis, he was God's man.

What about Lot? Though we don't hear much of his story, we can surmise some things. In chapter 13, he pitched his tent near Sodom. By chapter 14 he was living in Sodom, and by chapter 19, he was sitting in the gates of Sodom, occupying a place of importance and significance. Lot was not an unbeliever, but he was a double-minded man. He was successful in dancing the tune of the culture of Sodom, and he had his own religious practice in his home where it needn't get in the way of his public image. He was what Jesus said you cannot be: a servant of two masters. But soon visitors from heaven would come and call for an accounting.

Chapters 18 and 19 begin in much the same manner, and you remember our purpose in these series of studies is to compare these two men. Much about them is apparently similar, but they are so significantly different at the core that the comparison is worthwhile. Genesis 18 begins with these words:

**The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.**

It was just an ordinary day. Abraham was sitting in the cool shade of a tree with no expectation that anything was about to happen. Verse 2:

**Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.**

Genesis 19 begins with an ordinary evening, one with no significance attached to it:

**The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground.**

In both instances, visitors came in the guise of men, without fanfare or armies, but they carried about them an extraordinary authority. Abraham received three visitors, one of whom was certainly the Lord Jesus borrowing human guise from a future time when he would be born on earth as a man. With him are two angels, also in human form. After a time, the Lord stayed with Abraham, and the two angels went to Sodom to interact with Lot.

Now let's look at the differences between these two stories, beginning with Abraham's experience in chapter 18. I would highlight three things from this heavenly visit. First of all, he had the opportunity to show hospitality to the Lord. This great experience occurs several times in the Bible. Mary and Martha had the privilege of making a meal for the Lord in the days just before he died. Zacchaeus' whole life was changed when Jesus said, "I must stay at your house today" (Luke 19:5). Zacchaeus had been a hard-hearted thief, but he became a soft-hearted disciple and gave back all that he had stolen because of Jesus' willingness to have a meal with him. Abraham experienced this same blessing of having the Lord sit at his table.

Think about what the Lord has done for you. Think about the price your Savior paid for you—the humiliation he experienced to become human, the lifetime of misunderstanding and rejection that Jesus suffered when he deserved to be worshipped, the final horror of the cross—all for the forgiveness of your sins. Wouldn't you count it a privilege to show some of your gratitude by fixing him a meal? There's an intimacy about table fellowship that's not like many other things, and clearly Abraham and

Sarah recognized it for the honor it was.

Verses 16-18 of chapter 18 deserve our attention as well. They contain the second point to note about Abraham's experience of being caught in the act of being himself.

**When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him."**

As the two angels began to leave for Sodom, the Lord, almost as if he were thinking out loud, said, "This friend of mine, this Abraham who is going to be a source of blessing to the whole world, shouldn't he know my plans? Shouldn't he know my intention?" Now that's an extraordinary thing, that God feels his relationship with Abraham to be of such a quality that he ought to tell him his plans. Though the title "friend" is not used in Genesis, Isaiah, quoting the Lord, calls Abraham "my friend" (Isaiah 41:8). In the New Testament, James tells us that Abraham has been known by the glorious title "the friend of God" (James 2:23 NASB). God indicated that the quality of their relationship is such that he felt constrained to tell Abraham what he was going to do because friends act that way.

The latter half of chapter 18 further shows what kind of man Abraham was. The third point I would highlight is the extraordinary interchange between the Lord God, in human guise, and Abraham. God said, "I'm going to destroy the city. It is wicked and deserves destruction." Abraham began to wonder, "Isn't there some other way?" He asked, "Lord, if fifty righteous were found, would you save the city for the fifty?" Now look carefully at what he said. He did not say, "Lord, will you save the fifty out of the city?" God eventually did save a handful of righteous people by taking them out of the city before it was destroyed. But that wasn't what Abraham asked for. He said, "Lord, would you save the city-the wicked, the degenerate, the stiff-necked, the godless-won't you save them for the sake of the righteous?" Abraham longed for some way for the rebels who were populating Sodom to somehow have their hard hearts broken and to receive life. In speaking of his compassion for the lost, we discover that Abraham was like his Lord. The friend of God had the heart of God. He had learned to care because he knew what it was like to fail, and so he prayed for the Lord not the judge the wicked of Sodom.

It's a great and widespread foolishness to think that, if we are like those in the world, if we adopt its style and values, we can approach people on common ground and win them to faith. But the opposite is true. Abraham, because he refused to have two masters, actually loved the people of Sodom much more than Lot did. Lot didn't love them enough to warn them. Lot didn't love them enough to speak to them the truths of the living God. Lot had become so much like them that he couldn't love them. Abraham, because he was different, was compassionate and caring and longed for their salvation. If we are not distinguishable from the unbelieving people around us, we have very little to offer them. Because Abraham had only one master, and because he had the heart of God, he also had God's compassion for people who were going to die.

What about Lot, then? What is his experience? Look at the opening verses of chapter 19.

**The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning."**

**"No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square."**

**But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for**

**part of the city of Sodom-both young and old-surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."**

**Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof."**

**"Get out of our way," they replied. And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.**

**But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.**

**The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here-sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it."**

**So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.**

**With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them.**

The words of Jesus about masters are impossible to avoid. You cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). It is arrogant to think that you can keep God happy with an occasional private acknowledgement of him, then at the same time keep the world happy by playing the game its way.

Yet Lot tried to do just that. To the angels he said, "Stay here in the house. Have a nice meal. I'll deal with things outside." Then he went outside and offered his daughters to the wicked men of Sodom. "Don't harm my guests; you may rape my daughters instead." Lot tried to please both his angelic visitors and the men of the city. The words of Paul in Galatians 1:10 apply: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God?...If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." James says the double-minded man will not receive anything from the Lord (James 1:8). There is an either/or quality to having a master. You can only have one.

Double-mindedness doesn't make us sophisticated. It doesn't make us cool. Lot tried to play both sides and lost on both. The men of Sodom thought he was a chump. "If we don't rape the men of your house, we'll tear you up instead." His sons-in-law laughed at him. "What do you mean, 'something terrible is going to happen'? Why should we listen to you? You're a joke!" Lot tried to have two masters, and he ended up a nobody, a clown. Perhaps the saddest part of all is that the angels had to drag him out of the city because he'd become so addicted to what the world had to offer. How addictive the things of the world can be.

Lot tried to have two masters, and he'd emptied himself of everything that was worth being, worth having. When Lot spoke, nobody listened. Not the men of the city. Not his sons-in-law. Not even his own wife. Abraham was the friend of God who speaks on the most profound terms with the Lord of the universe. When Abraham spoke, God himself listened.

What conclusions should we draw from this? I would suggest three things. First of all, worldly sophistication is overrated. Being impressive, winning the approval of others, looking just like the world, is no real advantage. Jesus advocated childlike-ness for exactly that reason. We want to substitute sophistication for maturity, but they are not at all the same thing.

Secondly, we don't know the day of visitation. We don't know the day when the accounting is going to be called for. There's an old joke about computers: What's the best time to back up your computer? The day before it crashes. The problem is, we don't know the day before it crashes. We don't know when the divine visitors are going to come. We don't know when the heavenly inspection is going to be made. Abraham was sitting under a tree. It was an ordinary day. Lot was sitting in the gate. It was an ordinary day. They didn't know it was the fateful day. So the question is, who will we show ourselves to be when that day arrives? When God calls for an accounting, there will be no chance for a quick fix.

The last thing is this: the key to Abraham is not that he was everlastingly righteous. He lost his temper. He gave up on God. He got tired of waiting. He complained. Abraham was not perfect, but he was God-centered, and that should be our focus. We don't do very well trying to say "No" to the world. "I've read this message on Genesis 18 and 19, and I'm going to change my evil ways, and I'm going to give up all my worldly stuff, and I'm going to change this, and I'm going to say no to that, and I'm going to get rid of this." The changes we try to make to fix things are not always well-informed. The best choice for us is to make God larger in our experience, to love him more, to listen to him more, to act on truth that we know, to go to him when we fail, to appreciate him, to be grateful. The narrow road is not easy. It is often complicated. It involves choices to love people and yet not be like them. But what we must do is love the Lord more. We can give higher place and greater weight to what he says. We can turn toward him more often and listen more fully. And having done those things, we will become wise in where to make the judgment calls and where to draw the lines and how to become like Abraham and not like Lot, how to have one master and not two.

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Genesis 19:1-16

Second message

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