

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you noticed that there is a right way and a wrong way to talk to people? It's essential to know who they are and what your relationship to them is. Children ought to speak to their parents with respect. On occasion, I'll catch one of my kids and say, "Is that any way to talk to your mother?" It's true: there is a right way and a wrong way to talk to your mother. There's a right way and a wrong way to talk to a judge when you're in the courtroom. There is a right way and a wrong way to talk to your spouse. What about when we talk to God? (We usually call that prayer, don't we?) Is there a right way and a wrong way to talk to God in prayer? Absolutely! And of all the relationships in your life, your ability to talk to God correctly has by far the biggest impact. It's the difference between God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth listening carefully to what you say... and God Almighty refusing to listen to you because you're not talking to him the right way.

So today we discuss this vitally important topic: **How to talk to God**. So that we may learn how to talk to God we will look at a man of great faith that lived over 4,000 years ago: Abraham. We're about to read from Genesis 18, beginning at the 20th verse. There we hear Abraham talk to God. And from him, we will learn how to talk to God.

First a little bit of background so we understand what's happening here. Abraham was born in Ur... a town located in what is now Iraq, south of Bagdad. His father moved the family to Haran, which is in southern Turkey. After Abraham's father died, God spoke to Abraham. He made great promises: That Abraham would be the **father of a great nation**. (He was... the Jews.) And that his **name would be great**. (It is to this day.) And that he would be a **blessing to all people on earth**. (He was... since the promised Savior of all people was a direct descendent of Abraham.) We have the benefit of hindsight. Abraham only had promises. But he believed God and he set out for the land God showed him... Canaan.

With Abraham was his nephew, Lot. God blessed both Abraham and Lot so richly that there was not enough pasture land for their flocks. Abraham decided it was time for them to part ways. He let Lot decide where he would settle. Lot decided to settle near a couple of prosperous towns on a fertile plain near the south east side of the Dead Sea.

Well, that turned out to be a very poor choice on Lot's part. First of all, he got caught up in a war in that area. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah were defeated and the cities were plundered. Lot and his family were captured and taken into captivity. Abraham, trusting in God launched a daring rescue mission and God gave him an amazing victory. Lot was rescued and the two cities were returned to the original inhabitants.

Unfortunately, their troubles weren't over. The cities were wicked. Among other things, the inhabitants of those cities were sexual deviants in many ways... more than we should go into right now. God saw their great wickedness and decided the cities must be destroyed. God revealed his plan to Abraham. Abraham's heart went out to the people of that city, especially since Lot and his family lived there. So what we are about to read is Abraham's prayer... his prayer to God on behalf of the people of this city. Abraham is talking with God. And as we observe the way he talked with God, we will come to understand how we must talk with God... how we must pray. Let's listen to the story:

Genesis 18:20-32 **Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as**

the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.” Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?” He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.” Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.” Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

These cities were wicked. The people lived rebellious lives and they didn't care what God had to say about it. God decided their time of grace was up. Now, God didn't really need to make a special visit to the cities to see if things were as bad as he heard. God is simply communicating to Abraham that he know what is happening in these cities. He is acting with intent and with knowledge. God is not frivolous or haphazard in his judgments. His righteous judgment would come down on them hard, and it would be totally deserved.

What I find interesting, though, is that God decides to let Abraham in on his plans. God tells Abraham what he's going to do. He didn't owe that to Abraham. What an honor! We ought to consider it no less an honor every time we open our Bibles and read. God is revealing things to us that he is not obliged to reveal. That he does so is an honor and privilege we ought never take for granted! So... knowing what God intends, Abraham dares to talk to God and bring his requests to him. As I looked over the way Abraham talked with God, I found **seven** things we can learn from Abraham when we talk to God.

1) Pray knowing your God. Before you talk to God, know God. When a newsperson interviews a guest on TV, they actually do quite a bit of research before the interview. If the guest wrote a book and is coming on the show to talk about it, usually the host has read the book ahead of time... or at least has become familiar with the content. Unless you know the person you're talking to, you can't speak intelligently.

Abraham knew God. This influenced the *way* he talked to him, and the words he chose. What did Abraham know about God? In his prayer, Abraham knows that God is righteous and he appeals to that characteristic when he prays. He is confident that the “Judge of all the earth” will do what is right. He also must know God's love and mercy, or he never would bother asking in the first place. He *knows* the God to whom he prays.

You also, dear Christian, know well the God to whom you pray. Appeal to his characteristics when you do pray. His love, mercy, forgiveness, justice... that he knows all things, has all power, is present everywhere... bring these things up when you pray! They are the reason you are confident to ask what you're asking. So... **when you talk to God, know God.** And consider this, if you know God poorly, your prayers *will* be inappropriate... and God will not give

us what we ask. We must know God, and that knowledge comes through study and meditation on God's Word.

2) **Pray with faith.** This one is closely related to the previous. But there is a difference between knowing and trusting. Rely fully upon God when you pray. **James 1:6-8 says, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."** Prayers addressed to "the man upstairs" are not prayers asked in faith. "God if you're out there... God if you're listening," is a sure way to get God to close his ears to what you're asking. Look at Abraham's prayer. He knew God could spare or destroy. He trusted his power. He trusted his mercy. He trusted God heard and would answer. Christian, pray the same way!

3) **Pray humbly.** Abraham knew that he had no inherent right to demand anything from God. He was a sinful human being and God is holy. He also knew that he had nothing in his possession that he could use to bargain with God. So he says, **"I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes..."** and **"May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak."**

We see none of: "God if you do this for me, I will do that for you." That's arrogance for us to think that we can barter with God. Can we really give God something that he *needs*? God lacks nothing. But we definitely do: Is. 59:2: **"But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."** If he will hear us and answer us, it's certainly not because of anything in us... it's because of his love, his forgiveness of all our sin, and mercy. Pray humbly.

4) **Pray with surrender.** By this I mean, when you talk to God, do so always yielding to his will. Understand when you pray that God is sovereign. That means that while God promises to hear and answer our prayers, finally God will do what God will do. Abraham understood this, didn't he? He kept asking, but he was also leaving the matter in the Lord's hands each time. We ought to do the same. Our comfort is this: **Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."** What peace we have in prayer! If we are asking with wrong motives, or we ask for something that God in his wisdom knows would ultimately be bad for us or others... he does what is good and right... not what we ask! Pray with surrender... knowing God's will *will* be done!

5) **Pray for others.** When you talk to God, it's not all about you. Abraham could have asked any number of things for himself. But he unselfishly intercedes for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Before you start your prayers, take a moment and think. As I talk to God, who do I know in need? Talk to God about others regularly in your prayers.

6) **Pray repeatedly.** Abraham was certainly persistent, wasn't he? It's almost like a reverse auction as he keeps lowering the number and asking God again and again. Does God get tired of us pestering him? Not at all. Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to teach his disciples to keep on asking. **"Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?"** And in Ephesians 6:18 we read: Ephesians 6:18 **"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."**

7) **Pray boldly.** Abraham was very bold, wasn't he? In our text we heard, **"Abraham remained standing before the LORD."** A sinful man who remains standing before the Lord! A sinful man who talks to God! A sinful man who speak boldly and repeatedly! How can this be? Make no mistake. A sinner has no place in the throne room of God. A sinner has no right to talk to God. So how can we pray boldly? How can we pray at all?!

Listen to this passage carefully. Ephesians 3:12: **“In [Christ Jesus our Lord] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”** In Christ, and in Christ alone, we do have freedom and confidence to enter the throne room of almighty God. In Christ and through faith in him, you possess Christ’s holiness. In Christ and through faith in him, your sin and guilt are atoned for and removed forever. Look no further than Christ hanging on the cross and you see everything that separates you from God... everything that makes God turn a deaf ear to you... you see all of it cast upon Jesus, God’s own Son. The Father didn’t listen to his Son’s cries on the cross. That’s what led him to say, “My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me!” The sin that separates us from God was carried by Jesus. He took it all. He died for you and for me. And on the third day he rose again! Our sins are forgiven. God is now pleased with us. When we approach him in and with his perfect Son, Christ Jesus, he gets this excited look on his face and listens eagerly and intently to everything we have to say.

In Christ we have the freedom and the confidence to approach our God and talk to him without fear.

“Hey, is that any way to be talking to God almighty?!” Yes, this is the way to talk to God almighty. Model the way Abraham prayed and you’ll know how to talk to God. Follow all seven things he taught us: **1) Pray knowing your God. 2) Pray with faith. 3) Pray humbly. 4) Pray with surrender. 5) Pray for others. 6) Pray repeatedly. 7) Pray boldly.**

Your God, the all-powerful and compassionate God, is listening. Pray, Christian, pray!
Amen.