



# Taking Advantage

## Genesis 19:1-11

There is a difference between doing what is right and doing what is best for ourselves. At least, that is how we tend to think. The correct thing is to think about the needs of others. We define what is best for us as those things that tend to our needs and immediate pleasures. Others matter little to us in contrast to our own success. This success we measure in material, emotional, social, or physical means. Very rarely do we actually consider issues from a broader perspective, to say nothing of an eternal one. When we take advantage of another, is it possible that deep down we are actually hurting ourselves?

The two messengers of God arrived before Lot in Sodom. God had already alerted Abraham about plans to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but to Lot this was still news. Abraham had dialogued with God, seeking to reduce the possibility of justice upon the cities among which his nephew was living. What he found was that God was much more gracious than Abraham had thought. The messengers arrived as in the standard form of divine pronouncements of justice and punishment. They came, not with threats and fire, but hoping to give the inhabitants a chance to reveal the character of their righteousness and call for grace and clemency on God's part.

Much later in the story of the chosen people, in the account of the prophet Jonah arriving in Niniveh, Jonah pronounced a declaration of divine justice, indicating the inherent possibility that the people might respond in repentance. It was not what Jonah wanted to declare, but the population recognized this aspect of conditionality in the proclamation of divine justice. They saw in the act of pronouncing judgment that they had the choice to react such that God might change plans for destruction. In a similar way, these messengers placed the population of Sodom to a test. They prepared to spend the night on the street to measure the people's response to their presence. In the literature and mind of the ancients, one could expect the gods to act in such a manner. In our case, it was not a question so much of allowing Yahweh to know the level of the population's righteousness, but a way to indicate to the reader the divine justice in following through with the destruction of the cities according to God's arrangement with Abraham's bargaining. If five just men had been found, the city would have lived.

The men of Sodom acted according to what they saw as their best interests, ignoring the needs of these foreigners. They had their ideals and ideas of entertainment. They defined their desires and acted according to the same. We are used to taking their example to speak of unbridled sexual lusts, but on reflecting a little more seriously we might recognize that this is not so much a story about sexuality as the enjoyment of violence toward others. Their actions demonstrate an unbridled desire to enjoy violence against others, especially against those from outside, strangers to their own people.

Scholars today tell us that sexual crimes are not so much crimes of sexual passion, but crimes of violence. They extend from an enjoyment of feeling powerful by crushing another with lesser power, strength, or lacking the means of protection. Such violence does not make one more powerful, but may allow one to feel more powerful or brave through the experience of using force against another. For sure, it is also a way to respond to a feeling of impotence or inferiority in the eyes of others. So the crimes of the Sodomites were not so much questions of sexuality, but questions of the will to seek power over another and feel themselves owners of the world. Perhaps we would call them crimes of passion, but a passion to do violence to others, through whom they sought to think themselves more powerful and owners of the world around them.

The Sodomites were not so interested in sexual acts, but in the ability to wield power over another without fear or danger of recrimination. In a group like the one we find in the text, it is easy to wield power over a few without fearing consequences, even more when the victims were not citizens and seemed defenseless against the crowd.

Unfortunately, the men of Sodom did not see the whole reality. They did not recognize that they were not the maximum authority in their city, even if they acted as though they were. They saw the human situation in its immediate context, but did not heed the fact that there was another reality above their own. For the ancient world, an atheistic concept would have been unexpected. The peoples perceived the gods as enmeshed in the process of daily human living. At the same time, the actions of these men fought against the reality and recognition that there was a system of authority above their own and beyond their control. Wanting to make themselves stronger and to feel more powerful, they ignored that usurping power and authority that was not their own does not make one more powerful. It makes one need to give answer for themselves and their action to those with true power.

In the narrative of Sodom in Genesis, the men of the city come decrying power over these foreign visitors, but end up losing their sight. Perhaps in part this blindness is metaphorical. They come to Lot's door blindly seeking to wield power and authority, when suddenly they lose their way. They had truly lost their way a long time before. Only now do they confront their blindness and impotence to even find the door they seek.

Our impulse to seek power similarly makes us just as blind. We may see this in so many public personalities, whether politicians, actors, or athletes. The search for power, wealth, recognition, and fame makes us blind to our limits, distorting our perspective on reality, even our own personal reality. Our public personalities suffer from this same search for power and many in their path feel the trauma of their actions.

We also have been injured due to this quality of violence more personally this week with the death of one we hold dear. He went to seek answers to violence against his daughter and found himself also the victim of violence on the part of one who through the use of force sought to protect his own personal interests. This did not make him stronger and in this case close to us we can easily see the disaster occasioned by such a deed of unthinking violence. We can recognize other occasions in our lives in which violence has been used against us or our loved ones, but without good result. The more difficult thing is to see the violence we ourselves have caused.

Our economic and social culture tells us we should take advantage of others. It is part of the evil of our inclination to sin. We simply want to enjoy success, but we want to have more without caring what it may cost others. We are told we should take advantage of the weaker, for they do not deserve the same as ourselves. We are told that fortune, accomplishment, success, is for the strong, the powerful, the risk-takers, and that after all it is not personal, but simply the way of doing business. For the victim, however, it is always personal. For those involved in using power to abuse it is as difficult to find a way out as for the men of Sodom. Alerted to where their actions were taking them, they refused any change of direction. We can judge and condemn them easily. It is more difficult, however, to see where we act in a similar manner, taking advantage of others who are less powerful.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*