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Genesis 18:20-23, 32 (20) NIV
Title: OUR Sins

Introduction: Our topic for your consideration is, OUR sin, with a focus on one verse Genesis 18:20

18:20 Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!

1st- GOD HEARS THE CRIES OF THE PEOPLE!

Sometimes when we look around us and we see all that is happening across the world, in our nation, in this state, this City and our own families...Sometimes it FEELS like God is nowhere around. That God does not HEAR us when we pray, or CARE about what we are going through. But I am a living witness, that GOD STILL HEARS, that GOD STILL CARES about everything that we are going through no matter how great or how small, whether painful or joyful, devastating or hopeful.

And there are times that we just can't articulate the words, frame the thoughts in our heads and our mouths to even ask God for what we need. So, the beauty of this passage is that we are reminded that GOD hears the CRIES of his people. And not only hears us, but GOD FEELS our pain and hears every word we utter, understands every grunt, every groan, and every tear that we shed.

ILLUSTRATION:

This has been a challenging week as we learned about the death of a mentor, friend, colleague and spiritual warrior, Rev. Dr. T. Anthony Spearman who was found dead on Tuesday and even more challenging as the stories around his death begin to surface. And it is painful to hear the accusations against someone I have experienced as a bright light in the AMEZ church and the Kingdom of God in general. And there have been moments throughout the week where I just could not find the words to say, could not express my thoughts, all I could do was grunt and groan and weep. Because the loss of T. Anthony Spearman is such a loss to humankind and to justice movements across the nation.

And YET, through it all, I am crystal clear that GOD hears me, that God feels my pain. Because just when I think I cannot take anymore, GOD always sends a bright light, a person who has no clue how much my conversation with them gives me hope and how GOD is using them unknowingly to minister to me. And just like God hears me, God hears you and God heard the cries of the people in Sodom and Gomorrah AND God felt their pain.

2ND GOD KNOWS THE DEPTH OF OUR SINS

What IS sin anyway? As followers of Jesus we hear and use the word **SIN** a great deal, and my first training as a preacher from my Father in the Ministry, the late Rev Frederick L Gordon, we were always told that our preaching should be understood by a 12 year old child. So, Rev.

Gordon used to tell us, “STOP preaching to the Giraffes and make it plain so even a child can understand.”

So to make it PLAIN and put it simply, SIN is anything we do or SAY or THINK about too long that is against the will of God. And for those of us who had evangelical or fundamentalist beginnings, we have heard sin discussed, taught and preached about A LOT. But my experience in how sin was framed, was that it was primarily related to sex or the sexuality of OTHER people, particularly people with limited social equity like woman and girls, people living in poverty and LGBTQ+ folks.

And yet, nothing was said about the SIN of the pastor or the priest, or the choir director or the Deacon or the Trustee and others in power in our churches who were sexually molesting girls and boys or committing adultery with women in the congregation. Yes! In the same church that condemned the “OTHERS,” but their sins did not and do not seem to bother us. THOSE sins we overlook especially when they are evident in spiritual leadership. And it was no different in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, thousands of years ago, when he says, “But in the prophets [the preachers, pastors] of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery [cheat on God] and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil; Jeremiah 23:14a In other words, because people are seeing such evil come from the leaders no one changes from their own sin.

So it seems as though we have developed an appetite for what WE deem as sexually immoral sins and THEN we have WEAPONIZED the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to make our case. And I can imagine the stories that many of you have been told, but what does the bible actually say the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was? We have certainly heard a lot of things, from a lot of people, but what does God say? What does the scripture say about Sodom and Gomorrah's sin?

Now Genesis 19:24 tells us Sodom was destroyed by "sulfur and fire" because of their wickedness. So, then we have to ask ourselves, "What was their wickedness?" And this has been a burning question many of you have had, and I have had for years, because what I was hearing and what was widely adopted was narrowly focused on homosexuality. But it just did not add up, it would not quite settle in my body.

As I searched the scriptures I read the condemnation in the Levitical laws, I read Paul's warnings EARLY in his ministry in Romans 1 around the 23rd verse. There are multiple references to Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old and New Testament, but you never heard JESUS teaching or preaching about it. And you would think that if this issue of one's sexuality was that concerning to GOD, then SURELY Jesus would have said **something**.

Then while I was in seminary in Old Testament studies with the infamous professor, we fondly called Dr. Dora, Who IF you made it through her class, you felt like you were a survivor, because she forced her students to confront everything we THOUGHT we knew about our God, Yahweh. And for many of my colleagues it was so unnerving, that people literally broke down and some even had panic attacks in her class before tests. But for me, it began to answer the questions I had been holding for years, and it was the first time I discovered this warning from the prophet Ezekiel who finally NAMED the SIN of Sodom as he warned the people of Jerusalem.

“Now THIS was the sin of your sister Sodom...She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. *Ezekiel 16:49-50.*

Boom! There it is! Ezekiel was NOT just referring to the sexual immorality that we have been CONSUMED with, but with the social and moral injustice of people in Jerusalem, which takes the focus off of THEM and put's it SQUARELY back on **OUR sin.**

Because God had laid out a series of Holiness Codes through Moses found in Leviticus 19, 23 and 25. And there are **way** too many to name them all, but these codes instructed Judah to do some really specific and easy things to help **take care** of those in need, like:

- Not gathering fruit or vegetables that had fallen to the ground or harvesting crops from the edges, so that those living in poverty or that were strangers who were hungry could eat. Which is why many of the apple growers in Henderson County to this day allow folks to glean their orchards every year.
- Not stealing or dealing deceptively or lying to one another in business transactions. So, do you mean it is not OKAY for the sake of making a profit to shrink our grocery packages and charge us more money, OR to raise the prices on GAS, because you CAN?
- Not taking an oath in God's name falsely. Like persons in Congress who swore an oath to God to uphold the constitution and then betrayed GOD and us by conspiring in the January 6th Insurrection. And as we speak are trying to return us to a time when it was illegal for not only people of the same gender to marry, but once again making it illegal for people of difference RACES to be married. It is clear that our legislators had no problem with their white ancestors AND some of them RAPING black women, forcing them to have babies just so they could also enslave them or sometimes sold during the Transatlantic and Domestic Slave Trade. It was okay to do that, you just cannot MARRY them. Hypocrites!
- Not oppressing or exploiting or robbing their neighbors. Like gentrification and Urban renewal which took the land of black folks, pushed them out so that developers and other opportunists could buy it cheap and sell it at huge amounts. Or taxing folks with less, MORE than you do the wealthy.
- Not withholding **pay** from those who worked for them. Like the working poor, immigrants and black folks who have worked over the centuries in this country and were either underpaid or not paid at all and then THREATENED to be deported or harmed if they dared to say anything about it OR tried to leave.

- Not harming those who are differently abled, like the refusal of so many businesses even now that find loopholes, so they don't have to make accommodations and make places accessible even with the legislation of the American with Disabilities Act.
- Not oppressing strangers but treating them as if they were born here. Like we do daily in this country and region toward our immigrant siblings who we keep telling to go back to their country, when in fact, if we are talking about our **Mexican** siblings...California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming WAS **THEIR** country before we stole it with brute military force and financed by our government.

So THESE and MORE were the SINS of Judah that caused their exile, **THESE** were the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah that led to their destruction and THESE are **OUR SINS**.

We spend so much time and energy in other people's bedrooms and totally ignore our own homes, our own lives and our own relationship with GOD. But, what about OUR sins? What about our lies and deceit, what about generations of thievery, what about our participation in the violence of poverty for generations, what about the harm we continue to do to our children by refusing to feed them, refusing to educate them and PROTECT them from sexual predators and what about our idolatry all of us of assimilating into whiteness rather than Godliness. What about that? Because we don't SEEM to believe that OUR sins are a problem. We don't seem to think that what

we DO as individuals has an impact on anyone BUT us. But we deceive ourselves if we think our actions don't affect those around us.

ILLUSTRATION

King David was a beloved Patriarch, who had direct lineage to Jesus, whom GOD claimed as a man after God's own heart and YET, when David saw the beautiful, black, Bathsheba bathing... his eyes lingered just a little too long, his brain began to plot some wickedness. He abused his power as the King of Judah, which resulted in the murder of Bathsheba's husband Uriah, who was on the frontlines fighting for David and Judah. But sin is like a cancer that continues to metastasize and so it spread throughout David's family, resulting in his son Ammon raping his sister and David's daughter Tamar, which triggered the murderous hate toward David from his other son Absalom who could not reconcile the fact that David did nothing to comfort or find justice for his own daughter. Absalom is then killed by David's right hand man, Joab, then the Lord let's David know that he and Bathsheba's child died because of his sin.

Sin has a way of moving beyond our hearts and minds. SIN is deceptive, it is like a cancer that you think is just in one spot, only to discover that it has metastasized and has SPREAD all over the body of Christ, and this nation and our churches when it goes un-checked, when it is not AGGRESSIVELY injected with doses of the TRUTH.

Conclusion: And the truth is, it is not “THEIR” sin that we need to focus on, it is not the sin of Sodom or Gomorrah, or Judah or gay people or our government, or this group or that group, but it is OUR sin. Governments are made up of people, churches are made up of people. And God continually invites each of us NOT to look at THEM, but to see ourselves and examine OUR sins and OUR relationship with Jesus the Christ. We, the church, are supposed to be the salt of the earth, the lamp on the hill. And the society that we see that we complain about is a REFLECTION of US, the church, and who we really are and what we have become.

When I learned just Friday, that a violent white nationalist group called the Aryan Freedom Network who began in Idaho, and supposedly crashed financially and many were put in jail has resurrected...that they hold this belief that “whiteness” is being threatened, that white people will be extinct because of people who look like me...Black and Brown folks, Immigrant folks, and LGBTQ+ folks and especially Jewish folks who they believe are financing it all...that they have added three new chapters in Arizona, Louisiana and South Carolina...that they are hosting a rally in Greenville S.C. AND members are showing up in Black churches in Greenville, Union and Spartanburg with firearms on their hips, and 2nd Amendment t-shirts on their backs

and just SITTING in congregations, I was deeply disturbed that this is a still a thing in 2022.

I met a young woman who told me that one white male with a weapon came to her church in Spartanburg, and sat in the balcony. That police are also there, the FBI has alerted local churches that this is happening and to be vigilant, but she was questioning why they would allow it in the first place. She was upset that the church leadership did not stand up and protest their presence. And her family members and many other black people are now AFRAID to go to CHURCH. One of the FEW places we have EVER found sanctuary, but that has been HISTORICALLY attacked by white supremacists.

But my suspicion is that they are AFRAID, even though South Carolina law says that “church officials or their governing body must give express permission” whether concealed or openly carried, to do so on church property. Of course, they are afraid! Black folks and black churches have had a long history of being burned out, bombed, dragged from the churches to lynching parties on Sunday morning. So I understand why they may not protest, but what I don’t understand is why their white siblings at neighboring churches are not speaking up.

When we learn of very public sins like racial hatred, like Urban Renewal, like the maltreatment of the hungry and homeless all around us, OUR Sin is being complicit and silent and doing NOTHING.

But we have also learned that when we show up and speak up, it matters. When City Council announced their Reparations Resolution in 2020 and sat on it, you showed up and spoke up and a Reparations Commission was established. When they did not listen to the counsel of the Reparations Commission who asked that money be dedicated annually in the budget to work toward Black reparations, you showed up and spoke up and the City of Asheville committed to \$500,000.00 annually. When the County Commissioners went silent, you showed up and spoke up and now they too have dedicated \$5000,000.00 for as long as it is needed. So, we know that showing up and speaking up against the sins of our society makes a difference, we just need the courage to do it. When we have the courage to show up and speak up about the sin of racism and urban renewal and gentrification and other sins, change will happen, transformation will come.

So Beloved, we don't need our focus to be on the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the sins of Judah or the sins of Israel, but we need to focus on OUR sins, repent of those sins, and through a personal relationship with Jesus the Christ who will forgive us, turn back to God.

In the name of the Father, in the name of the Son and in the name of the HOLY Ghost. AMEN!