

SIN CITY

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Romans 5:18-19, Genesis 18:16-33

If I were to ask you to name a place in this country that is known for being rife with sin, a place where anything goes, what would you say? Las Vegas, Key West, New Orleans, Times Square in New York City in the '70s. Havana, Cuba, in the '20s. My daughter, the college student, suggested Daytona Beach at Spring Break. These are all good answers, but there is one place that surpasses them all (it makes the rest look like amateurs), and it is in Alabama—Phenix City, Alabama—a place once regarded as “the wickedest city in America.”

Phenix City is a small town on the Alabama-Georgia border. The state line, at that point, is defined by the Chattahoochee River. Across the river from Phenix City—in Georgia—is the larger city of Columbus.

In the 1920s, Phenix City was essentially a bedroom community for low-income families who worked in the cotton and textile mills in Columbus. Because the city had no significant tax base, it was hit especially hard by the Great Depression. In 1932, the city couldn't even afford to pay its teachers. Desperate for cash, when Prohibition was lifted in 1933, city leaders decided that they should sell beer and liquor licenses to raise revenue.

This decision opened a doorway which led to all manner of vice and corruption. Organized crime quickly moved in and through bribery and extortion began exerting influence over city hall and law enforcement. Phenix City transformed from Mayberry to become the capital of vice with liquor, drugs, gambling, prostitution, and more. There was even a school where aspiring safe-crackers could learn the trade.

Most people would not care if a sleepy town in Alabama had morphed into sin city. Phenix City, however, posed a threat to national security. Phenix City, as I mentioned, is just across the river from Columbus, Georgia, and Columbus is the location of Fort Benning. Benning was the army's the primary infantry training center. By the time of World War II, over 100,000 men received basic training at Fort Benning. The army unwillingly provided Phenix City's vice industry with an endless supply of clients, patsies, chumps, suckers, and victims.

Imagine all those young soldiers just a short ride from every vice imaginable (and some they had never imagined). Most lost their money gambling (or were just robbed); many picked up a disease or three, and too many were killed and their bodies dumped in the river. In 1940, General George Patton was stationed at Fort Benning. Because of the trouble Phenix City was causing the men in his command, Patton threatened to take his tanks across the river and “mash Phenix City flat.”

Our reading for today from Genesis focuses on another wicked city that was threatened with destruction. This time it is the ancient city of Sodom. As a quick note, many argue that the sin of Sodom was homosexuality. It wasn't. The sin of Sodom was violence, inhospitality, and more. It was a wicked place. But that is not our discussion for today. Our reading centers on Abraham. As you recall, Abraham and his wife Sarah were called by God to enter into a covenantal relation with God. The agreement was that they would worship God and that God would supply them with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

In this reading from Genesis, we find Abraham at a place called Mamre where he has established camp. One day, Abraham is seated in the shade of his tent when he spots three men approaching. Abraham is well aware of the laws of hospitality that demand that he must welcome these traveling strangers. He calls out to Sarah to get some grub ready and he sets out to meet the men. Abraham invites them into his camp and provides them a meal. During the meal, the men inform Abraham that within the year his wife Sarah will bear a son. In an awkward moment, the men hear Sarah inside the tent laughing hysterically. She obviously past past her child-bearing years. What the men are saying is ludicrous.

After noshing with Abraham, the three men (who we know to be angels) set out on the road toward the city of Sodom. Abraham accompanies them for a ways. As they travel, the men have a conversation with God which Abraham can overhear. The Lord is calling for the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The men continue on and Abraham turns back.

Abraham has figured out that the Lord intends to destroy Sodom because of its all-consuming wickedness. Now, remember, Abraham does not know God very well. We have had thousands of years to become acquainted with God and to better understand God's actions. Abraham, on the other hand, has only known God for a brief time. He is still not sure what motivates this divine being.

So Abraham poses a particular question to God. Abraham knows of God's intention to destroy Sodom, and he asks God, *Will you indeed sweep away the righteous along with the wicked?* It sounds as if Abraham is concerned about collateral damage—the good being swept away with the bad. But I don't believe that is what is going on here. The question Abraham is trying to solve is how many righteous people are required to save a city? Where is the balance point of justice?

Abraham then initiates this fascinating conversation with the Lord. Abraham begins with this proposition: Suppose that there are fifty righteous people in Sodom. What if I could find fifty righteous people there? Would you still destroy the city even though it contained fifty righteous people? Abraham goes on to say, You, O Lord, are *the Judge of the earth*. Would you do that? And God replies saying, show me fifty righteous in the city and I will spare it. Abraham has made his point. Fifty

righteous people is all that is needed. But he does not leave it there. He starts haggling.

Of those fifty, let's say that five of them aren't as righteous as they seem. Would you still destroy the city over five backsliders?

The Lord says, no.

Abraham pushes on. What about forty? Is forty enough to appease you?

Yes, forty is enough.

Lord, don't get angry with me, but would you forgive the city if thirty righteous people are present?

Thirty would be fine.

Twenty?

Yes, twenty.

Last time: ten? Is ten enough to forgive Sodom?

Yes, ten will do.

And then Abraham and God part ways.

We all know how this story ends. Despite Abraham's skillful negotiation with God, Sodom was still destroyed. Abraham's nephew, Lot, lived in Sodom with his family. Lot was a good and righteous man. When the angels arrived in Sodom, they convinced Lot to take his family and leave. Presumably, with Lot gone, there were now no righteous people to save Sodom, and the Lord reigned down fire and sulfur on the cities destroying them completely. For a lack of a single, righteous individual, Sodom and Gomorrah were erased from the face of the earth. That is what happens when there are no righteous people present—judgement.

In Phenix City not everyone was corrupt. There were of course good people there, but the corruption ran deep. Elections were rigged, votes were bought, officials bribed. But even the wicked have the desire to project a veneer of righteousness. In Phenix City, the criminals were civic-minded. They would make donations to churches and schools and clubs. They paid off church mortgages. They gave turkeys at Christmas. They bought uniforms for the school band. That is how business was conducted.

What about your own city, your own community? How many righteous are here? Are there enough to meet God's threshold to overcome the wickedness of the city?

Could we find fifty? forty? ten? The answer is, no, we couldn't. There are not enough righteous people here to save you from God's judgement.

But back to Phenix City. Did God erase it from the face of the earth? Did General Patton bring in his tanks and flatten it? Did the army reign down fire from across the river as a training exercise? Did Phenix City crumble under the weight of its own sin? Nope. Phenix City exists today and is doing well. In 2006, Business Week magazine rated the city as the "Nation's Best Affordable Suburb." In 1999, a team from Phenix City won the Little League World Series. Today, Phenix City is a quiet American town.

Phenix City did not change course by accident. Its salvation is largely due to one man. In 1954, Albert Patterson, a local lawyer, ran for the position of State Attorney General. Phenix City was a state embarrassment and Patterson ran on the platform of reforming that city. Patterson won the Democratic Primary which in that day assured him of winning the general election. On Friday, June 18, 1954, not long after winning the primary, Patterson was working late at his law office in downtown Phenix City. He was preparing to testify before a grand jury in Birmingham that was investigating state voter fraud. As Patterson left his office, around 9:00 p.m., he was gunned down—shot three times. This cold-blooded murder created such a political storm that a month later the governor sent in the Alabama National Guard. The Guard replaced local law enforcement and began raiding gambling halls and other locations of illegal behavior. The tide turned and organized crime fled Phenix City.

So, who killed Albert Patterson? Was it gangsters, racketeers, bootleggers? No. Three men were indicted for the murder. They were the state's attorney general, the county's circuit solicitor, and the county's chief deputy sheriff. These supposedly righteous men wanted to keep Patterson from testifying to that grand jury. They knew they would be implicated for their crimes.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, we read, *one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all*. This one man is Jesus Christ who gave himself in an act of righteousness so that the rest of us may live. Paul also writes, *by the one man's obedience the many will made righteous* (Romans 5:18-19).

In our communities, there is not a single one of us good enough or righteous enough to warrant salvation. We are sinners, and salvation is a gift from God. We may not be as corrupt or wicked as Sodom or Phenix City, but we are far from being sinless. The only one good enough and righteous enough to be saved is God himself—God who came to us as the Son, who sacrificed his life so that we might live.

As a preacher, I have to remind you that we all live in Sodom, we live in Phenix City, we live in sin. We would be condemned to remain here forever if not for the life of Jesus Christ who died so that we might live. His life alone is the only life righteous enough to balance the scales in our favor. Abraham quit negotiating too soon. It doesn't take ten righteous people to save a city. It just takes one righteous person, and that person can save the entire world if that person is God. That is what we worship in this place today, that is why we lift our voices in prayer and song and thanksgiving. As the gospel of John reminds us, *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Amen.