

RELATIVE JUDGMENT

A Devotional Meditation on Vayera (And He Appeared)

Genesis 18:1-22:24; 2 Kings 4:1-37; Ezekiel 16:48-52;

John 18:37-38; 1 Corinthians 2:14-16

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I used to fall into the trap of thinking that some people are smarter than others. Now I realize it's actually a matter of how people are smart. My brother, for example, is an electrical engineer. He understands subjects I have trouble grasping, such as physics and electromagnetic theory, yet he doesn't know history as well as I do. Each of us is brilliant in his own way. Our different learning styles and intellectual abilities are complementary, which means we need each other so that, together, we have a more complete understanding of our world and our Creator.



Photo by Daryl Cheng, March 6, 2008, [via Flickr](#).

This puts a different perspective on terms like smart, and dumb. We use these terms to label people, but those labels are relative. Culture and language play roles as well. We may ridicule Poles, Mexicans, or Koreans because of their halting English, but we become subject to the same ridicule if we try to express ourselves in their languages. That's when we become ignorant, and they become brilliant simply because our frame of reference for intelligence is relative according to our perspective.

The way around this problem is to define an Absolute Intelligence that knows everything in every possible subject, cultural context, and manner of expression. But how do we define God? He is the only Absolute Intelligence. The root of our human troubles is our unwillingness to accept that truth.

This is where we get to the dilemma of truth. If our definitions of intelligence are relative, then so are our definitions of truth if they exclude the Creator. He is the Absolute Truth, but for at least 2,000 years, people have been questioning whether such a thing as absolute truth exists. That's what we understand from the conversation between Messiah Yeshua and Pontius Pilate:

So Pilate said to Him, "Are you a king, then?"

Yeshua answered, "You say that I am a king. For this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, so that I might testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" After he said this, he went out again to the Judean leaders. He said to them, "I find no case against Him.

John 18:37-38 TLV

If we take Yeshua at His word, then Pilate was not of the truth, and therefore didn't hear Yeshua's voice. Pilate confirmed that when he condemned Yeshua to death even though he found no case against Him. Why would he do that? Perhaps because, to him,

truth was relative, depending on the circumstances. His own personal truth, which coincided with Roman law when it was prudent, testified to Yeshua's innocence. However, the circumstances challenged that truth: the Judean leaders were upset, there was about to be a riot and perhaps an insurrection, and Caesar would not appreciate that. Therefore, the higher truth, according to Pilate, was self-preservation. He had to choose between upholding justice in the name of some objective truth he wasn't sure existed, or sacrificing the life of one Jew to preserve both the peace and his own career.

We should be asking many difficult questions about Pilate's dilemma. His dilemma is our own, because we live in a world where good and evil, right and wrong, and truth itself are relative. In our natural state, we don't like the idea of absolutes. When we have no concept of absolute truth, we also have no concept of absolute good and absolute evil. That's how we end up collaborating with mass murderers, excusing their evil by pointing out the good things they do in other areas. After all, Hitler put Germans back to work, and made the trains run on time. What's the problem if some undesirable portions of society were eliminated in the process? That's how moral relativism works.

Here's another example. We can agree that life is precious, but unless we accept that every life has an absolute intrinsic value, then life itself becomes relative, and we justify eliminating whatever life we deem worthless. The unborn baby and the serial killer may each be eliminated because their value to society is questionable. Ultimately, the only value that matters is the value assigned by those who have power to set and enforce society's standards. That's an arbitrary standard, of course, and it can change in an instant.

There is biblical precedent for this. It comes in the context of the moral relativism of ancient Israel. Ezekiel records the harsh terms God uses to describe their depravity:

"As I live"—it is a declaration of *ADONAI*—"your sister Sodom with her daughters have not done as you have done, you and your daughters. Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, gluttony, and careless ease—so had she and her daughters—and she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. So they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I removed them when I saw it."

Ezekiel 16:48-50 TLV

Sodom is as problematic for us today as it was for our Hebrew ancestors. They also would be quick to condemn Sodom for the sexual sins blatantly displayed in the Genesis account of God's judgment on the city. That, however, was a symptom of the root problem. The Sodomite culture had rejected all standards of truth and morality. They saw themselves as superior to all others – both as a civilization and as individuals. That led to justification of a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption, and of the rapacious measures they took to maintain that lifestyle. The poor and needy became objects of exploitation rather than neighbors in need of help, and strangers fared even worse.

This is the kind of society God says is beyond redemption. That's why He destroyed Sodom even though Abraham did his best to invoke God's mercy for it. That mercy revolved around the presence of a certain number of righteous persons in the city, not the presence of innocent children or noncombatants. Without a righteous influence – as in, enough people who believed in Absolute Truth and lived by it – any innocent children had

no chance of remaining innocent. Before long, they would become both victims and victimizers, perpetuating the relativistic society of their parents. Such a society has no noncombatants, because even those who choose to remain uninvolved choose by their silence to let evil remain in power.

We don't like that story. We may become self-righteous and say the homosexuals who tried to assault God's messengers and Abraham's nephew, Lot, deserved what happened to them. It's easy to point fingers at the wickedness of others while deflecting attention from the less obvious, or even culturally acceptable, wickedness in our own hearts. Still, we grow uncomfortable because we realize that the judgment on Sodom is the kind of judgment God will impose on the entire world one day, and we're not sure how we might come through it. We're saved by grace, but are we living the Absolute Truth of God, or is grace simply a cover for our own moral relativism?

This is the dilemma we must resolve in our own hearts if we are to be effective instruments of God's peace and ministers of reconciliation. And we better be quick about it because time is running out.