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Will the Real Sodom and Gomorrah Please Stand Up?
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"The Big Easy is the modern day Sodom and Gomorrah."

Those are the words of a sign that was posted outside Woodland Hills Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina.

A group called Columbia Christians for Life espoused a similar position. They said that the destruction of various abortion clinics in the New Orleans area was evidence that God sent Hurricane Katrina to punish them for their sins. Other religious groups blamed Sept. 11 on America's acceptance of gays.

Though few are so bold as to plainly proclaim similar ideas as these groups, there are doubtlessly many around the country who echo such beliefs: God brought this disaster because those affected were dirty, rotten sinners. Beliefs such as these are common to all religions. It is the idea of "divine retribution," that is, God rewards the righteous but punishes the sinners. In other words, the people of New Orleans got what they deserved. They were immoral.

However, despite the certainty expressed by Woodland Hills and the others who believe God was punishing New Orleans, the Bible is not at all firm in any stance that would define what it means for God to punish the wicked and reward the righteous.

Here's an idea: What if our presumptuous conjectures about God and his relationship to this disaster really say more about us than they do about God?

It is true that in the Hebrew Bible, God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins. This cannot be denied. But before we are so quick as to assume for what sins God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, we should actually look at what the Bible says. Those who are so eager to equate New Orleans with Sodom and Gomorrah should read their Bibles more carefully. Flip a few books past Genesis, where the Sodom and Gomorrah story occurs, and you will find Ezekiel, who is unequivocal in describing God's reasons for what he did: Sodom and Gomorrah were caught up in pride; they had excess food and prosperous ease, and they did not aid the poor and needy. They lifted their heads up high and boasted of their achievements.

As has become strikingly clear in the last few months, it seems that those hardest hit in New Orleans were just the opposite of that description of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those most affected were precisely the poor and needy, those who already did not have enough food and could not even define what "prosperous ease" might be.

On the other hand, many of those in Texas who equated New Orleans with Sodom and Gomorrah, and many of us here in Wyoming, are well off; we have plenty of food, and in some cases prosperous ease. Being proud of our state's achievements is commonplace.

Before we can place the blame of Katrina upon God and his judgment of dirty, rotten sinners, perhaps we should look to ourselves and our own faults. Has our over-consumption of fuel (something of which we in Wyoming are no doubt guilty) contributed to a change in climate that was to inevitably lead to such a disaster? Did we not continue to use as much fuel as we desired, even when our president asked us to conserve? How do we answer for our own neglect of the poor in the New Orleans area? Twenty percent of the city lives (or at least used to live) below the poverty line and did not have the proper means and funds to flee the city when necessary.

Who is more to blame? The poor and needy in New Orleans, or those of us in the rest of the country who have the means to help the poor and needy, and yet refuse?

Thus, if we choose to use such biblical imagery as Sodom and Gomorrah to describe this disaster, and if we choose to label Katrina as an example of God's righteous judgment on sinners, let us be careful to take note of why God actually punished Sodom and Gomorrah. So, sorry Woodland Hills, Columbia Christians, and the countless others who blame this disaster on the immorality of New Orleans-it seems that you and I who live in the rest of the country stand in greater danger.

In the contest for who best deserves the title "Modern Day Sodom and Gomorrah," those of us whose biggest grudge with Katrina was a higher price at the gas pump stand a better chance of winning than the victims of New Orleans.

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