

## The Justice and Mercy of the Lord

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Old Testament reading. **The Lord said to Abraham, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”** Here ends our text.

What would our world be like if there were no justice and no righteousness? Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a land where everyone was free to break the law and there were no consequences? Evil men could walk into your home and take all your possessions. You’d call the police, but when they showed up, instead of investigating the crime, they’d violate your wife at gunpoint. If you sought justice from a judge, he’d simply laugh at you. If you complained to the governing authorities, they’d threaten the life of you and your children. What a terrible world it would be if there were no just men nor judgment on their wicked acts. But just as bad, what would our world be like if there were no mercy and no patience. Imagine if you made one mistake, one fib, one smart aleck remark, and you were hauled off to prison. You were hungry and stole a loaf of bread and were stood before a firing squad. One strike and you’re out. It might be just, but what a frightful and despairing world this would be if there was no mercy, no forgiveness. But fortunately for us, our God is both just and righteous while at the same time being merciful and gracious. God is just and merciful in Jesus Christ.

Our Old Testament reading today tells a portion of the story of God’s judgment on the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But it also tells of his deliverance of Abraham’s nephew Lot, a righteous man. If you remember, God had blessed Abraham and Lot so abundantly, and their flocks and herds were so great that they had to split up. Abraham deferred to Lot who chose the well watered plain of the lower Jordan River. It was lush like the Garden of Eden. Abraham dwelt in the hill country, and Lot pitched his tents near Sodom.

But the men of Sodom were wicked. They sinned greatly against the Lord. Besides being godless, they had no regard for their fellow man. They not only stole possessions and slandered others, but they violated a person’s body by murder and sexual perversions of all kinds. They’d sooner rape a man as a woman. And this wasn’t done in a corner by a few miscreants. It was done publically throughout the whole society. The governing authorities and ruling men of the city not only ignored these crimes, but they gave their approval and often joined in. They paraded their sin. Sodom was a cesspool of wickedness and villainy without justice.

In many ways our country today is similar to Sodom. Babies are murdered in the womb and acts of sodomy are committed among men and women. And these evil acts aren’t rare but widespread. Some of our government officials not only approve and protect this wickedness by Law, but also openly join in and celebrate it. They say abortion should be defended and protected as a right. Marriage, which was instituted by God between a man and a woman, is now being redefined to satisfy the lusts of men.

God saw the wickedness of Sodom, and you’d think in his justice and righteousness that he’d immediately send down his judgment. It’d been only 500 years since God destroyed the earth by a flood because every intention of man’s heart was only evil all the time. And now this same evil is replicated in Sodom. But just like in the days of Noah, so in the days of Abraham, the Lord had patience and mercy upon the wicked. He didn’t want anyone to perish, so he gave them a warning and time to repent.

God allowed the neighboring kingdoms to defeat Sodom and Gomorrah in battle and carry off their people and possessions. Lot and his family were carried off as well. But the Lord was gracious. He sent Abraham and his household of hundreds of men to save Lot and deliver the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham wanted nothing in return for his heroic deed. He returned all the people and their possessions to their cities. Melchizedek, the priest of God, came out and blessed Abraham with bread and wine. He prophesied the Word of the Lord. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah saw the deliverance of the Lord through his servant Abraham and heard his priest Melchizedek. They were grateful for a time. But they didn’t repent and soon returned to their wickedness. Their grace period was over. They had their chance, and they muffed it.

So in our text today, the Lord tells Abraham, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me.” Of course, Abraham knows what the Lord will find, and his judgment will fall upon them. But Abraham too is merciful. Yes, these are wicked people, but these were people he saved with the hope that they might repent and believe. Abraham also knows that his righteous nephew Lot and his family are among them. The wicked men of Sodom certainly deserve God’s punishment, so Abraham doesn’t appeal to the Lord’s mercy for them. Rather Abraham appeals to God’s justice for the righteous. It wouldn’t be just to punish the righteous with the wicked. So Abraham says to the Lord, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” Abraham intercedes, not for the godless wicked, but for the godly righteous, those, like Lot, who are righteous through faith in God’s promises. But also in so doing, he’s asking God to spare the unbelievers for the sake of the

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - July 24, 2022

believers. The Lord agrees to Abraham's prayer. He says, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." The Lord is just, but he's also patient and merciful.

There's a problem with the terms of the agreement though. Abraham realizes that there may not even be fifty righteous in this wicked city. So he comes back again and again to the Lord. "Well how about 45 righteous? What if there were only 40? How about 30? 20? Abraham bargains the Lord all the way down to 10. The Lord said, "For the sake of 10 righteous I will not destroy it."

But you know how the story ends. There weren't even ten righteous to be found. The two angels go down to Sodom. Lot is hospitable to them. He invites them into his home so they won't have to sleep in the city square. They'll be protected from these evil men. But all the men of the city, even the leaders, gather at his home. They want to rape the angels and murder Lot. Their wicked ways and unrepentant hearts are obvious. So in his justice, the Lord judges them. He rains down burning sulfur and fire from heaven upon the inhabitants of these cities. He rained down his wrath. Abraham got up the next morning and saw the smoke of the destruction going up like the smoke of a furnace. All the wicked perished. The Lord was just. But in his justice, the Lord also delivered the righteous. The righteous didn't die with the wicked. The Lord rescued Lot and his family. They may have lost all their possessions, but the Lord preserved their body and soul.

Now there are some who believe that God won't judge mankind. He won't judge them in this life or the next for their evil ways. They don't believe there's a hell where people suffer in burning fire. God wouldn't be so cruel. But for all those who doubt God's holy and perfect justice, they only need travel to the holy land. In that once lush and well watered plain of the Jordan that once looked like the Garden of Eden, there's now a 1000 foot deep hole in the ground about 40 miles long. It's called the Dead Sea, the former location of Sodom and Gomorrah and their surrounding cities. It's nothing but sulfur and salt and barren rock. Nothing grows there. For over 4,000 years now, it's been a memorial to God's justice and judgment on the wicked.

But not far from there, outside the city of Jerusalem, there's another memorial. It's a memorial to God's justice against sin but also a memorial of his grace and mercy to us. The Church of Jerusalem encompasses both the rock called Calvary and the empty tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just like God sent Abraham to deliver the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah from their enemies, so God sent his Son to deliver all wicked people, even us, from our enemies. Jesus rescued us from death and the devil. But in so doing, Jesus experienced God's justice for us. Upon the cross, Jesus felt the pain of hell as God the Father forsook him. God rained down his wrath upon Christ for our sin. He died in our place. The cross is the place where both God's justice against sin and his mercy toward us coincide. Through Jesus, God is both just and righteous while at the same time being gracious and merciful. So now is our time of grace. Now is our time of repentance to turn from our wicked ways and turn to God in faith for forgiveness. God is being patient with us that we might repent and live. The Word of the Lord is preached among us by his priests and prophets. We've been rescued by Jesus Christ. Let us not be like the men of Sodom who, after they were rescued, returned to their evil ways. Repent and receive the blessings of the Lord.

How do you receive these blessings? You could go to the Dead Sea and see the memorial to God's Justice. Or you could go to Calvary and the empty Tomb and see the memorial of God's grace toward us. But you won't receive those blessings there. Like the priest Melchizedek blessed Abraham with bread and wine, so in a greater way our high priest Jesus Christ blesses us with not only bread and wine but with his own body and blood. Today you come to this rail, not to see a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, but to receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation which Christ won for you.

Now the secular world today hates Christ's Church. They mock us and call us judgmental for condemning sin, upholding the Law of God, and preaching repentance. But if they only knew that God keeps this world going and stays his hand of judgment only for the sake of his Church. Like ten righteous people would have delayed the Lord's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, so God's righteous people who believe in Christ delay his judgment of our land and this earth. God spares the wicked for the sake of the righteous. He's patient, hoping that the presence of his Church in Word and deed may lead them to repentance. For God would have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

Christ is now risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. He now sits at the right hand of God. But he's not idle. Like Abraham interceded for righteous Lot, Jesus now intercedes for us. He intercedes for the righteous. As your priest, Christ intercedes for you who are righteous by faith. So when Christ comes again, he won't punish you. He won't punish the righteous with the wicked. As the apostle Peter writes, "If God did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; If he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man . . . if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment." On the Day of Judgment, the unbelieving and unrepentant will perish in the burning fires of hell. But Christ, who intercedes on your behalf, will rescue you as he rescued Lot. Your possessions may be burned up, but your body and soul will live with him forever in the new Paradise. Blessed be the Lord our God who is both just and merciful in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.