

The Perfect Judge

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much Fiona and thank you Alistair for reading such a long and difficult passage. So I have the great task of speaking on this passage for 30 minutes.

It will not be longer than that, do not worry. Thank you all for coming out tonight, it's great to see you. It would be really helpful if you had that passage open in front of you as we think about what God has to say to us through his word.

But let me just pause very quickly and pray before we begin again. Father as we come to your word we ask that you would give us soft hearts and open ears to hear what you have to say and that we would learn what your word has to say to us.

In Jesus name, Amen. So keep Genesis 18 and 19 open in front of you and I want to ask us a question as we begin. What does it take to be a judge?

And if you're a judge, what does it take to be the best judge in the world? Now there is no official best judge in the world award, but I think if there were, Frank Caprio would be in the first place.

[1 : 08] Now maybe you've heard of this judge. He is an 80 year old judge who is sitting in, he was a sitting judge in the city of Providence in Rhode Island in the United States.

Now maybe you've never heard of this judge. But he is famous all over social media because of some short videos that came out in 2016, which are filmed in his courtroom.

Now this judge is so popular because of his wittiness and because of his humour and his care for the people who come into his court. So for example, one short video shows the case of a father and a young son who come in and the father's been given a fine for a parking ticket.

And instead of the judge telling this five-year-old boy to sit down and be quiet because the court is in session, he says, come up. So the son gets up and goes up to the stand and the son gets to decide his father's fate.

Now you can imagine what the fate was. It was that he had to buy, his dad had to buy him breakfast. That was all the punishment that was required. But the judge also deals with some horrible cases.

[2 : 14] It's not all fun and games. Some people come in in terrible situations and the judge listens to their case and he is why their situation is so bad.

And often he will say to them, if their situation is terrible, you can go. No punishment is required. Life is hard enough as it is. Sometimes he is more humorous and he'll say, you can leave as long as you promise never to do it again.

Or you can leave if you promise to go to university one day. But if this judge was like this in every single case, he wouldn't be a very good judge, would he?

So whilst it's necessary for a judge to be gracious and forgiving, a judge must also do what his job title demands, mustn't he? If a judge always shows grace and never punishment, can he really be a good judge?

So whilst Judge Caprio is a very likable and popular judge, I don't think we can say that he's the perfect judge. But in the passage that was read to us earlier on by Alistair, we see God being described as the perfect judge.

[3 : 27] The judge, the rightful judge of all the earth, who is both abundant in grace and who also shows divine justice. And the key verse in these whole two chapters, which give us the right focus on this whole Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, is in 18 verse 25, where it says, Will not the judge of all the earth do right?

Will not the judge of all the earth do right? So let's look at this passage and see how God is the perfect judge. The first thing that we see is that God has abundant grace.

Chapters 18 verses 16 to 33, abundant grace. So at the beginning of chapter 18, Abraham's visited by three people, one of whom is described as the Lord.

And it's believed that these people are God and two angels. That's what the text seems to be saying. And in verse 16 and 17, we see the beginning of a very interesting conversation between Abraham and God.

In verses 17 to 19, God seems to be bringing Abraham into his decision of whether or not he should destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the outcry on account of their evil.

[4 : 48] Now, what do you think God's expecting at this point? Is God expecting Abraham to say, yes, God, destroy them? No. God is encouraging Abraham in these verses to plead for the people of Sodom.

God is challenging Abraham to act wisely and nobly for justice's sake. God says these things so that Abraham is invited to intercede to pray for the people of Sodom.

And God gives Abraham this opportunity because of who he is. Look at verse 19. Abraham is described as God's chosen one.

He is the one who will direct his children, teach them the way that they should live and direct them not to live in a certain way. Abraham will encourage his whole family to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and by doing what is just.

And so Abraham will be influential. And God says, pray for the people of Sodom. And Abraham accepts this invitation and he intercedes for them. And some of the stuff that he says is rather bold.

[5 : 58] So look at verses 23 to 25. Then Abraham approached him, that is God, and said, Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are 50 righteous people in this city?

Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing. To kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike.

Far be it from you. Will not the judge of all the earth do what is right? That's some pretty bold stuff to say to the God of the universe, isn't it?

And maybe you remember the times when you were a kid and your teacher or your parent told you that something was going to happen and you sat down and took it because you were frightened of the consequences.

You wouldn't dare answer back. Well, not Abraham. See, he intercedes for the people of Sodom. Abraham can be bold because he knows who he is speaking to.

[7 : 00] This is the God who chose him. The God who singled him out to receive the amazing promises of a people, of a land, and that he would be a blessing to the whole world.

God has chosen him and made a covenant with him. God has seen Abraham's ups and his downs. Abraham has been faithful and obedient, but God has also seen Abraham's doubts and failings.

God knows Abraham and Abraham knows God. And this is the setting of the courtroom style discussion that we see in the following verses. Abraham is presenting his case before the judge of all the earth.

It's like a scene from the movie Twelve Angry Men. Maybe you've seen it. If you haven't, it's a good movie to go and watch. It shows a murder trial where 11 out of 12 jurors convict an accused teenager of murder.

But one juror, juror number eight, says no. And he votes not guilty. Because he says that they haven't reviewed the evidence enough.

[8 : 08] And so the movie clearly lays out this courtroom discussion where evidence is brought before the jurors so that they can make an informed finding of guilty or not guilty.

Abraham is pleading with God, saying, Far be it from you, God, to destroy a whole city if some of your people live there. Far be it from you.

Won't the judge of all the earth do what is right? And the answer is yes. The judge of all the earth will do what is right. And so Abraham begins with his list of questions.

What if you find 50 righteous people in this city? Now, a righteous person is someone who's walking in line with God, someone who is in a right relationship with God.

If you find 50 people, God, surely you won't destroy Sodom. And God answers in verse 26 and says, If I find 50 people in that city, I will not destroy it for their sake.

[9 : 08] Do you see God's abundant grace? God listens to Abraham's case and he communicates with a fallen, corrupt human being. God doesn't have to have this discussion.

God didn't need to listen to Abraham's intercession, but he does. Abraham knows that he is absolutely nothing in comparison to God. All of these lists, these questions that he asks are all coming from a position of self-recognition in verse 27.

Abraham knows that he is dust before God. And from this place of self-awareness, he pleads for the other people who were but dust in Sodom and Gomorrah.

And so Abraham goes from 50 righteous people all the way down to 10. What is the constant refrain we hear from God? Verse 26, 27, 29, 30, 31 and 32.

If you find that many people in the city, then surely I will not destroy it. So whilst this conversation highlights the abundant grace and mercy of a loving God, it also highlights the depravity of Sodom.

[10:23] There aren't even 10 righteous people living there. And yet Abraham intercedes for them, even though he doesn't know them, because he cares and fears for their souls.

Abraham knows that the whole world is sinful and naturally deserving of God's wrath. Yet God encourages him to pray. And that's what he does. Now, what does this whole conversation mean for us?

Does it have any bearing on our lives? Well, friends, I would definitely say that it does. Because the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is to serve as a reminder to Abraham and all of his descendants, just how serious sin and rebellion against God are.

So Abraham is to instruct his children and his whole household to keep the way of the Lord. And the destruction of Sodom is to be a practical reminder to him and to us of the seriousness of sin, because we are descendants of Abraham through God's covenant and God's promises.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah should remind us of the seriousness of sin and the serious spiritual condition of the people around us.

[11:38] The New Testament explains that this destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of what will happen to those who do not trust in the judge of all the earth.

So let me ask us a difficult question this evening. How many times do we consider the eternal consequences of the sins of our loved ones?

Our desire should be to warn them, to tell them the good news that forgiveness for their sins is possible and to do as Abraham did and intercede for them before the living God.

We have a gospel to proclaim. But for us to do that, we need to have a deep care and love for the lost people of this world. Charles Spurgeon, a well-known pastor, once said, If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies.

And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped around their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let nobody go unwarned and nobody go unprayed for.

[12:55] We need to start on our knees before God. We need to be praying for people, praying that they would see the seriousness of their rebellion against God and ask that God would open their eyes and give us opportunities to speak to them about Jesus.

Today, so many people become Christians because they have contact with a friend or a family member who's been praying for them for years.

Our temptation would be to give up and stop praying or maybe to pray less regularly when we see no fruit. But Genesis 18 should give us the encouragement to keep on praying regardless of how we feel.

Maybe you've been praying for a friend, a sibling, a parent or a son or a daughter for many years and you haven't seen any fruit from those prayers.

Do not be discouraged. And do not ever stop praying for them. When you feel discouraged and feel down, please speak to brothers and sisters here and get them to pray with you.

[14:04] Bring these people before God in prayer together. Bring them before the perfect judge with abundant grace that he might open their eyes and hearts.

Don't let your feelings of disappointment stop you from doing the most important thing you can do for people. Pray. Our feelings don't matter.

People's eternal state before God does. We need to pray for a burden for the people around us.

Pray that God would help us look over the city that we live in and weep because there are people who are lost without God and who are on a path which will lead them to destruction.

Let us keep praying to the perfect judge of all the earth because he will do what is right. And let's be thankful that we have been shown abundant grace.

The grace which allows us an unholy, sinful people to come and pray to a holy and pure God. That is abundant grace from the perfect judge.

[15:13] But for God to be the perfect judge, justice also needs to be done. And so not only do we see abundant grace, but we see divine justice.

Chapters 19 verses 1 to 29. Divine justice. So the two angels arrive in Sodom and as they approach the city, they see Lot and he begs them to come and spend the night in his house.

But this isn't just the casual invite that you used to give your friends when you were a kid. Fancy having a sleepover at mine? No. He is urging them, insisting them very strongly that they should come and stay with him.

They wanted to stay in the city square, but Lot knew that that wasn't a good idea. How did he know this? Well, he'd lived in Sodom for a while now. He knew what happened to strangers who slept in the square when they visited Sodom at night.

And he didn't want the same fate to happen to these two people. So they go to Lot's house. Now notice some contrasts if you have your Bible open there at chapter 19 between Lot and Abraham.

[16:27] So in the beginning of chapter 18, Abraham is sitting at the shade of his tent. He sees three people. He rushes to them, bows down, begs them to stay for a meal, and they go and eat together.

And now in chapter 19, Lot is sitting at the city gate. He no longer lives in a tent. But he rushes to the angels, begs them to stay, and has a meal with them. The author is bringing out these similarities between Lot and Abraham to show us that Lot has not turned his back on God.

Lot is definitely more righteous than the inhabitants of Sodom. And the writer wants us to see that even though Lot is amongst wicked people, he himself has not turned against God.

Now when Lot first moved to Sodom in chapter 13, he lived in tents, as Abraham and his forefathers. But he's now forsaken that lifestyle for a more comfortable lifestyle in the city.

He seems to have married a local Sodomite woman as well. Life is comfortable in Sodom. But he obviously isn't happy with the lifestyle of some of the people in the city.

[17:39] Now Lot is by no means a perfect man, and we'll see that as we get further in the chapter. But the writer wants us to see that he hasn't completely abandoned God.

And so these men come and stay with Lot and his fears come true. The men of Sodom come and they knock on Lot's door and demand these two visitors be handed over so that they can have sex with them.

Now at this point, I would like to say that the pending judgment which will befall Sodom and Gomorrah is not a direct result of this particular sin. But this situation is being used to show the general sinfulness which is part of normal life in Sodom.

So Lot goes out and tries to calm down this angry mob. And in verse 8, he offers them a horrifying, horrifying alternative. Lot is more concerned with these travelers, with his reputation, by not letting these travelers being harmed than he is with the welfare of his own daughters.

So even though Lot is not as openly rebellious as the people of Sodom, he is by no means perfect. So even in God's judgment, can you see God's grace?

[18:58] God sent these angels to save Lot and his family even though Lot was not living righteously. Even though his witness among the people in Sodom is not what we would expect.

Why does God save Lot? Well, the only explanation we see in the text is in verse 16 that God is merciful. Apart from that, we don't know.

Just like we don't know why God chose Abraham to be the father of a great nation. We don't know why God saves Lot, but even in God's judgment, we see God saving grace.

So Lot runs and tells his sons-in-law of the coming destruction of Sodom. And here we see a little taster of how weakened Lot's witnesses by his stay in Sodom.

What do his sons-in-law do when they hear of the coming judgment? They laugh. They think it's a joke. Lot and his family receive the invitation of salvation and they respond.

[20:05] Lot's sons-in-law receive the invitation and they think it's a joke. Lot and his family accept the invitation and leave, but not right away.

The angels literally have to take him and his family by the hands and take them out. And in verses 23 to 26, we see the severity of God's judgment.

The whole plane is destroyed. All of its inhabitants have perished because of their sinfulness and disobedience. Even all the vegetation and plants are destroyed.

God's judgment is all-encompassing. Lot's wife turns around to see the fate of her hometown and she disobeys the angel's command and she suffers the same judgment and dies.

Her longing for her home pulled her attention away from God's grace and protection. She focused on the things of this world and not the protection of the creator of this world.

[21 : 09] Now this judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah is often upheld and used to argue that God is a dictator. Someone who punishes and destroys all those who don't agree with him and do things the way he wants.

But the truth is that even in God's judgment, grace is woven throughout. See, the decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah did not happen overnight. But God has been patiently waiting and listening to the immense outcry against these cities.

God didn't judge in a rash, angry manner, but he was patiently waiting. And even since the beginning of our studies in the life of Abraham, clues have come up again and again of the sinfulness of Sodom.

God's justice is right. The judge of all the earth has done what is right. Doesn't that make sense? If God didn't, if God doesn't punish, does God really care?

And if God doesn't care, then can we really say that he is a loving God? We know that God's attributes work in harmony.

[22 : 23] And yet in our minds, the idea of justice and love often appear in conflict. This is the result of seeing these attributes and defining them in isolation from one another.

So in other words, in order to understand God's justice, we need to understand God's grace and God's love. In order to understand God's love and grace, we need to understand God's justice.

justice. In our culture today, divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive doctrines.

People don't like the idea of a loving God bringing judgment.

But without judgment, we would have no gospel to proclaim at all. So what should our reaction be after seeing such a severe act of divine justice?

Surely, if Sodom is to be an example of what will happen to those who reject God, then our reaction should be to warn them. We should be taking every opportunity to tell people of their need for forgiveness, of their need to be made right with God.

[23 : 35] That's what you'd expect to see from Lot and his daughters, wouldn't you? They have seen, they have been recipients of God's abundant grace. They have seen God's justice.

They've just been saved from death. Surely, they will never be the same again. Last year, my wife Sabina was on jury duty in the high court and a teenager was being accused of a crime and the accusations altered his life from the moment he was first arrested.

His life would never be the same again. And so you can imagine this boy's relief when he heard the verdict, not guilty. It's highly emotional.

Him and his family were in tears of joy because the boy had been declared free. The decision was not in his hands and yet the declaration was that he was free to go home.

That boy will never be the same again because of that decision. Now we'd expect the same reaction from Lot and his daughters, wouldn't we? To never be the same again? You'd expect them to be on their knees thanking God every second that they're alive because of his grace.

[24 : 51] And you'd expect them to be in awe for the rest of their days of the God who is so powerful that he can destroy a city in seconds. But instead, what do we see?

Well, verses 30 to 38, we see that you can take the people out of Sodom, but you cannot take Sodom out of people. Even after being recipients of God's grace and seeing the severity of God's judgment, Lot and his daughters continue in terrible sin.

Lot's daughter devises a plan to sleep. Lot's daughters devise a plan to sleep with their father. They get him drunk and the children that are a fruit of this sin will become the Moabites and the Ammonites, the enemies of the people of Israel when they get to the promised land.

Isn't this shocking? Hasn't the goodness of God and the severity of sin left any lasting impression on these people? Well, I definitely think it did.

You can't walk away from seeing a sight like that and not be changed. But I think that they live in their sin because that is exactly who they are at heart.

[26 : 06] So while Sodom and Gomorrah was a sinful place, it was just a larger picture of the sinfulness of every single human heart. Lot and his daughters have seen the perfect judge.

They've been recipients of his grace and they've seen his divine justice. Haven't we seen the same? The very place where you see God's abundant grace and divine justice together is at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Abundant grace because the Son of God, God himself took the place of sinful people. He took our place so that the judgment would fall on him and not on us.

God chose to make it possible for the world to be reconciled to him by going to the cross and suffering his own judgment. That is true, undeniable, abundant grace.

And at the cross we see divine justice. A judgment that was so painful that Jesus asked in the Garden of Gethsemane for it to be removed from him. Yet not my will, he said, but yours be done.

[27 : 16] The judgment was so severe that Jesus feared being under it and yet by God's grace Jesus cried out on the cross it is finished.

The punishment for sins was complete. Jesus paid the price, he took the pain, he laid himself bare so that all those who call on his name could gain life and that they could be declared free.

So we've seen God's abundant grace. We have seen God's divine justice. What will we do in light of it? Will we ignore the immense sacrifice of Jesus?

Will we live as if the Son of God didn't offer himself as a sacrifice so that people can be forgiven? Or will we rejoice in being called righteous?

will we call on the name of Jesus and be thankful for the forgiveness of sins that he offers to the world and rejoice with the privilege of being called children of God?

[28 : 28] Now you might be thinking that surely I'm not as sinful as the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Surely I'm not deserving of such a severe punishment as they are.

Well in Romans chapter 3 this is this is what Romans 3 has to say about the spiritual state of humanity. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

All have sinned there is no exception. Each and every one of us has rebelled against God and each of us has Sodom in our hearts. In and of ourselves we are deserving of the same judgment that befell Sodom and Gomorrah.

every single person in this world is naturally in opposition to God but further on in Romans 3 we read and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. So the truth is that despite our sinfulness God in his sovereignty in his abundant grace gave up his son to his divine justice so that redemption is free to all those who call on his name.

[29 : 49] this is the perfect judge of all the earth. Are you trusting in this judge? We're going to close our service now by singing these words and I want you to really think about them.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.

can you sing these words and know that you are trusting in the judge? If you can't make them your prayer this evening. Ponder the abundant grace and divine justice of God.

The only perfect judge. Let's pray together. maybe you'd like to take just a few seconds to come before God in the silence of your own hearts.

Heavenly Father we thank you that we have the privilege of being able to come before you in prayer. Lord we pray that you would give us a burden for the world around us.

[31 : 17] Help us remember the seriousness of sin but also the abundance of your great grace.

Thank you that we have received your grace and help us as we leave this place to go out and share the good news of your son Jesus.

The one who took the divine judgment for all those who call on his name. thank you for your grace. Thank you that once we were lost but now we can say that we are found.

That we were blind but now we can see. Thank you that we are declared righteous and free through the sacrifice of your son Jesus.

And it is in his powerful and glorious name that we pray. Amen. Amen.