

“God Is Both Gracious and Just”

Text: Genesis 18-19

By Pastor Rand Lankheet, at New Horizon URC, First sermon, on April 8, 2018

Introduction: God is love. We read that in 1 John, chapter 4: God is love. Along with that loving character of God, the Bible teaches that God is also filled with compassion (同情心) ; He is merciful; He shows grace. So a lot of people emphasize the love of God. And they ignore Bible verses which explain that God is also just (公正的) . That is, God is fair, He treats people fairly, according to His perfect standard of justice (公义) .

In Genesis 18 and 19, we see BOTH of these aspects in the character of God:

God is loving and gracious; but GOD IS ALSO JUST—He treats people FAIRLY.

1. First, let’s consider the love of God: God showing His loving and gracious nature.

God displays his love and grace to the man, Abraham. We have learned of this often, in previous chapters of Genesis. Now in Genesis 18 we find another example of God’s grace to Abraham. Three men visit Abraham. We later learn they are three angels. The word “angel” means “a messenger.” (信使) God sent these angels to Abraham to give Ab. a special message.

These angels inform Abraham that about the same time next year his wife Sarah will give birth to a son. That would be the promised son, to be named “Isaac.” When Abraham had been given that news earlier, he laughed. Evidently his laughter was the laughter of joy (喜乐) , sheer joy at the good news of having a son. So God told Abraham that the name of his son would be “laughter.” Isaac, or Yitzak, means “laughter” or “may he laugh.” Laughing with joy.

In Genesis 18, we read that Sarah had been listening to the message brought by the angels, the message of a son. And in verse 13 we read that Sarah laughed. But in contrast to the earlier laughter of Abraham, the laughter of Sarah seems to be laughter of disbelief.

She is unwilling to believe this news: “shall I bear a child, at my old age?” Sarah was 90 years old. Too old, normally, to give birth to a child. So Sarah was laughing was out of disbelief and doubt.

But do you see how God is gracious, once again, to Abraham? He’s not only repeating his promise. Now He gives a timeline. Within the next year, Abraham and Sarah would be parents of this special son.

-We find another indication of God’s love, his mercy, in what we read in vs. 17. [Read vs. 17.

You see, God had a plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And God views Abraham as his covenant (盟约) partner. God had entered into that loving relationship with Abraham. So God does not want to keep his plan hidden from Abraham.

Illustration (比喻) : That’s something about good human relationships, friendships, or marriages.

In these relationships, people usually don’t have secrets. Or, they don’t have many secrets. People confide in their friends, especially if they know their friends are good friends, and can keep confidence (信心) .

Interestingly, in the Bible Abraham is described as “friend of God.” A “FRIEND of God.”!

[See 2 Chron. 20:7; Is. 41:8.] No one else in the Bible is described in that way, as a “friend of God.”

As a friend, God wants to share with Abraham what He is planning to do.

Because God’s plan is also going to affect Abraham’s nephew, Lot.

Remember Lot? Back in Genesis 13, we read that Lot decided to separate himself from his uncle Abraham. Lot became focused mainly on making money, becoming rich. The danger, we noted, was that the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were close to the land that Lot had chosen.

Eventually, Lot moved into the city of Sodom.

God is now telling his friend, Abraham, that he is going to destroy those wicked cities.

How does Abraham respond? Does he say, “well, alright, whatever you want to do, O God, is fine with me?” No, he doesn’t. Abraham seems to be motivated out of concern for his nephew, Lot. If God destroyed Sodom, Lot and his family would die.

So Abraham starts to bargain with God. He says: “Out of the thousands of wicked people in the city of Sodom, O Lord, what if there are 50 righteous people (义人) ?” Abraham appeals to God’s sense of fairness (公平) , His sense of being a just and righteous God. [Read vs. 25.

Indeed, if God is truly God, then He must be perfectly fair. He must show perfect justice.

It wouldn’t be fair for God to destroy good people along with wicked people.

And, wonderfully, God accepts this argument.

For the sake of 50 righteous people, he will not destroy the city of Sodom.

And Abraham dares to continue. It’s amazing when you read it, that Abraham dares to bargain (讨价还价) with God! But good friends will talk this way to each other also, won’t they?

They go back and forth. Especially with men, I find. With guys. They might even sound a bit confrontational (对抗的) with each other. Pushing each other verbally...going back-and-forth.

“If not for 50, then what about for 45?” says Abraham to the Lord. As God agrees, Abraham goes lower: “What about for 40? What about for 30? What about for 20? What about for 10? Would God destroy the city of Sodom if just 10 righteous men could be found in it?”

You see, Abraham is a kind of intercessor (代求者) .

He is asking, even begging, for mercy, on behalf of his nephew Lot.

-Abraham is again pointing us forward to his descendant, Jesus. Jesus, our Great intercessor.

The friend of sinners. Jesus interceding with the Father, on our behalf.

Of course, Jesus is a much BETTER INTERCESSOR than Abraham. Because Jesus ultimately offers himself, as a sacrifice (祭物) for wicked people. Jesus offers himself as the Sacrificial Lamb. Jesus will be destroyed on the cross, Jesus will be cut off (被剪除) , so that sinners can be let go. They will be spared (宽恕) . As we trust in Jesus, God the Father accepts Jesus to pay the price. For us.

And, even now, in heaven, we read that Jesus continues to intercede for us. Read Hebrews chapters 7-8. In Hebrews 7:25 we read, for example, that Jesus “ever lives, to make intercession (代求) for us.” To bring our needs to His Father. We don’t deserve a hearing from God. But, God promises to give us what we need because of His Son, Jesus. Our intercessor.

All of this, again, is another example of God’s great love and mercy. God allows his friend\

Abraham, to intercede for the wicked people of Sodom. God even allows Abraham to bargain with him. So that Lot and Lot’s family, might be spared.

And how often doesn’t the Lord God show you His love, His mercy, His grace?

Think of it: we who know better, we who have already been saved, continue to sin against our God.

We sin daily before him. Yet, for the sake of Jesus, God continues to forgive us. God continues to show us mercy.

And God shows mercy also toward our unbelieving world. Think of how merciful God is, in a general way, to unbelievers. He allows people to live, to continue breathing. He sends them rain and sunshine. Even towards people who reject Him, who refuse to trust in Him, God gives them loving family and friends. He gives many of them enough money. To many here in Canada, God even gives great luxuries (奢侈品) . Think of how many people live so high, with so many luxuries. But most people refuse to acknowledge God as the Giver of these gifts.

You see, in the end, if people continue in unbelief...finally, they will have no excuse, standing

before God's judgement throne. He has given many people so much. Yet, they refuse to know Him, to trust Him. They refuse to put their faith in God's Son, Jesus, as Saviour.

2. So we turn to consider the JUSTICE of God. The justice, or fairness, of God.

Abraham had said: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Yes, He will.

2.A. Now it is obvious from Genesis 18 and 19, that one of the sins of people of Sodom and

Gomorrah was the sin of sexual immorality (不道德). Not merely in desires... but in behaviours. And a kind of twisted behaviour that involves violence. In chapter 19, the men surround the house of Lot, to take by violence the two male visitors, those two angels. In Eastern culture, a visitor always must be treated with hospitality (热情好客). With food, shelter, protection. Even in the modern day, among Arabic peoples, even your enemy has to be protected when he stayed in your home. So, the sin of Sodom is a double, or triple sin. Sin upon sin.

But before make ourselves superior to those people, listen to what God says about His people, in Jerusalem. [Read Ezek 16:48-51. Jesus says something similar, in the New Testament. What would God say about His church on earth today? How much pride is there in our midst, today? How much idleness (无所事事), and refusing to help the poor and needy? How many Pharisees (法利赛人) are found in the church of Jesus today? Perhaps God's judgment should fall even more severely on the church today... even more than on ancient Sodom!

God had given the people of Sodom time to repent. And Lot evidently tried to be an influence in that city. We see how he later tries to convince his future sons-in-law to flee—to run, before the city is destroyed. Though he was comprised, Lot still was a believer.

But, as we learn in Romans 1, unbelievers suppress (压制) the natural knowledge of a Creator God. And God gives them up, to increasing immorality, and to worsening lusts (私欲) of the flesh. But, finally, God can hold back no longer. Yes, God is patient, he is long-suffering against sin and sinners. But, finally, his cup of wrath (忿怒) is filled up. His patience comes to an end. Abraham had earlier asked him: "Should not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Yes, as Judge, God must do right.

Illustration: Think of a judge in a court of law, today. Someone has robbed his neighbour.

The evidence is clear and convincing (有说服力的). The robber is convicted of (被宣判有罪) his crime. And it isn't his first offense (违法). He has been a repeat offender. Now, imagine, that the judge in the courtroom says to that robber: "You will not have to pay a fine (罚金), you will not have to go to jail, you will not have to do anything. You are free to go." We would say, rightly: "That judge is not a good judge. That judge is not a fair judge. That judge refused to punish the criminal."

So, you see, God must be a fair judge. He must be a righteous judge. He must punish sinners.

People who have repeatedly sinned against him, and against people. Again and again.

We read later in chapter 19 that "the Lord rained brimstone (硫磺) and fire" fell from the sky, upon those cities. Modern translations word it this way: "...". The result was that the cities were completely destroyed and burned up. In vs. 28 we read that the smoke from those cities was like the smoke of a furnace (火炉), an old-fashioned, wood-burning, furnace.

Yes, God is loving and merciful and gracious. God is compassionate and patient.

But, God is also just. He is fair. He is a proper Judge, judging with perfect justice.

-Lot also suffers the consequences. Though he is warned by those angels to run away, Lot ends up losing his wife. He also loses his two sons-in-law, those pledged to be married to his two daughters. He had tried to convince them to leave, but they refused.

How hard it is to think of God's punishment falling on those we love! How hard that is, even

today, with family and friends. Those we love...those that have either left the faith, or have never come to faith in Christ. In heaven, someday, our memories will be cleansed from that pain, that grief. We will be filled with perfect joy in the Lord. But here on earth, it can hurt us. And there are more consequences for Lot. In the end his two daughters get him drunk, they end up pregnant by him. The descendants of Lot became the wicked peoples known as the Moabites and the Ammonites. They opposed the people of Israel, later in history. Yes, Lot was a righteous man.

But he suffered many consequences of his sin, his lack of godliness (敬虔) . Oh, if only he would have found refuge (庇护) with his uncle, Abraham, the man of faith. Faith in God. Faith as an Intercessor. If only Lot would have lived closely to the Great Intercessor, Jesus. And if only his children and grand-children would have been part of God's covenant of grace.

Brothers and sisters, let us know the love of God, the grace of God in Jesus our Saviour.

And may we always stay in that covenant of grace (恩典之约) , and not become covenant breakers. Because we know that when Jesus returns, that will be the end.

The earth will be burned up with fire. And those outside of Jesus, shall be destroyed.

Yes, God is loving. But He is also just. He must do what is right. LET US PRAY.