

God's Judgement and Mercy

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Date: 06 August 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. The scripture reading for today is taken from Genesis 18 verses 16 through 33. Then the men set out from there, and they looked down towards Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.

Then the Lord said, 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. And if not, I will know.

So the men turned from there and went towards Sodom. But Abraham still stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near and said, 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?

[1 : 3 2] Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?

And the Lord said, If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake. Abraham answered and said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord.

I who am but dust and ashes, suppose five of fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five? And he said, I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.

Again he spoke to him and said, Suppose forty are found there. He answered, For the sake of forty, I will not do it. Then he said, Oh, let not the Lord be angry.

I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there. He answered, I will not do it if I find thirty there. He said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord.

[2 : 4 6] Suppose twenty are found there. He answered, For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it. Then he said, Oh, let not the Lord be angry. And I will speak again but once, but this once.

Suppose ten are found there. He answered, For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it. And the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham.

And Abraham returned to his place. Amen. Thank you very much, Joan. Well, last week we considered the wonderful account of the Lord's announcement to Abraham for the third time that he and Sarah were going to bear a child, even though she was ninety years old and far past childbearing.

And that was a glorious promise for us as well, because the Lord said to Sarah, Nothing is too hard for the Lord. And that helps us to remember that whatever our circumstances as we live life in this world, nothing is too hard for the Lord.

The account that we have come to this morning is a continuation of last week's account, but it is the most sobering account.

[4 : 11] As in the case of the flood, which we considered months ago in Genesis chapter 6, we have come to the account of God's announcement of judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah because, as he said, their sin was very grave.

But in this passage, not only do we see God's judgment, we also see God's mercy. And I think somehow our eyes are more wired to see the judgment of God than the mercy of God.

And I think when we consider this passage, two natural questions arise. The first one is, why does God judge sin? Why doesn't he just leave us alone, that we live our lives as we choose and we do our own thing?

Why doesn't he just leave us? Why does God judge sin? Why does God judge sin? And then the second is, why does God show mercy? Why does God, who judges sin, also show mercy?

And my goal this morning is to work through this passage and seek to answer these questions. But first, let's pause and pray. Father, we pray this morning that you would speak to our hearts from your word.

[5 : 37] We thank you, Lord, that you know each of us through and through. You know our full circumstances, Lord. And you know what we need to hear this morning. And so, Lord, would you speak to us, both collectively and individually.

And we pray, Lord, that you would use the preaching of your word this morning for the building up of this church and for the glory of your great name. It's in Christ's name we pray.

Amen. Here's what I pray that we will see this morning as we consider this section of Matthew of Genesis 18.

I pray that we would be able to see that it is God's unfettered right to execute judgment and to extend mercy to sinners.

It is his unfettered right to execute judgment against sin and to extend mercy to sinners. God is not controlled by anyone.

[6 : 43] He is not dictated to by anyone. And the judgment that he executes, the mercy that he extends, is not controlled or determined by anyone, by himself.

And when we understand this, we will never accuse God of being unjust or being unfair in anything that he does.

When we understand that it is his right to judge, it is his right to show mercy as he chooses to show mercy. When we understand that, we will never accuse God of being unfair in how he judges or how he shows mercy.

So I want us to consider this passage this morning under two headings. And the first is God's judgment. Again, we're encountering God's judgment in Genesis for the second time at this point.

The first one was in the flood. We saw how the Lord just destroyed the entire mass of humanity on the earth living at that time. And he saved eight persons. And he destroyed them because of sin.

[7 : 59] And now we come to the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. And we'll see. We won't see it this week. We'll see next week that God saves four persons. He rained fire and sulfur down on Sodom and Gomorrah.

And he saved four persons. Now, this passage is centered around a conversation between the Lord and Abraham.

And what is very interesting in this passage is Abraham addresses God by a title that many people don't know is one of the titles of God.

He addresses him as the judge of all the earth in verse 25. Notice it's capital J. So he's not just saying that God is a judge, but he's saying that God is the judge of all the earth.

And Abraham, in his revelation, understood that God was the judge of all the earth, capital J. And God judging all the earth means that he judges everyone and he judges everything.

[9 : 13] And the reason that God judges everyone and he judges everything is because he's the creator of everyone and of everything. And so his judging is rooted in the fact that he is creator.

That's his right to do because he is the creator. And what we see in this account is that the Lord not only came to Abraham to announce that Sarah was going to have a child in about a year's time, but he also came to tell Abraham that he was going to bring judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.

Notice in verses 17 to 19 that we have the thoughts of the Lord. These thoughts of the Lord concerning the judgment that he was planning against Sodom and Gomorrah.

And here again, we are reminded of God's sovereign choice. He chose Abraham and now he is talking to Abraham. He's saying, should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?

God chose Abraham to be the father of all who would ever believe, to be the father of faith. He promised that he would bless the nations through Abraham, through his offspring, whose scripture unfolds to be the Lord Jesus Christ.

[10 : 42] That all who believe from every nation and tongue and tribe and kindred and group of people, Abraham would be the means to which the blessing of salvation would come to them.

So we see in verses 20 and 21 that the Lord discloses his plan to judge Sodom and Gomorrah. Look again at what he says. Then the Lord said, 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.

And if not, I will know. Now the language of these two verses on their face, it gives the impression that God really isn't too sure about things.

He's not so sure about the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah and he needs to kind of be a little tentative about his judgment.

He's not sure whether he is going to judge them, whether they deserve judgment or not. But I think most of us know that God knows everything. The Bible tells us that he is the Alpha and the Omega.

[12 : 05] It tells us that he is omniscient. He knows a matter from the beginning to the end. He knew all things before the foundation of the world. And so clearly what is being presented to us here is this account from a human vantage point to help us to understand that God is a just judge, that God is a righteous judge.

And so he's approaching the situation in an investigative kind of manner rather than a conclusive manner.

And that's for our benefit. That's no reflection on who God is, that God needs to figure some things out. This is God condescending to us, the way we would go to a little child, that we would break things down so that child could understand.

And so this is presented in this human way for us to have an appreciation of the fact that God is a righteous judge.

God is not just going to blow off the top and bring judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. He is going to do this in a way that shows due process. And so what we see in this passage is we see the two angels going before into Sodom.

[13 : 22] And they're going as investigators, as it were. They're going as witnesses that would support the judgment that would come in the end, one way or the other.

So it's presented in a way that we don't know the outcome. So it says, and the Lord says in the end, and if not, I will know. But again, we know that God knows everything.

So this is really being presented for our benefit so that we would understand that God is just and God is righteous.

And he does things the right way. He's investigating the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah. So exactly what is this outcry, this great and grave outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah?

And what is their grave sin? There are many people who say that the grave sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was the sin of homosexuality. And while it is true that homosexuality was pervasive and widespread in Sodom and Gomorrah, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not limited to homosexuality.

[14 : 33] In his commentary on these verses, Kent Hughes shares something very insightful that I think would benefit us this morning, talking about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And this is what he writes. He writes, If we imagine the sins of these cities only in sexual terms, we miss the depth of their depravity.

The Hebrew word for outcry is used in the scripture to describe the cries of the oppressed and the brutalized. It is used for the cry of the oppressed widow or orphan, the cry of the oppressed servant, and the cries of the Israelites in Egypt.

Jeremiah uses it to refer to the scream of terror by an individual or city when it is attacked. Such an outcry, he writes, is the miserable will of the oppressed and brutalized.

So in addition to widespread homosexuality being practiced in Sodom and Gomorrah, there was also oppression and there was brutality that were the order of the day in those cities.

[16 : 01] The book of Ezekiel, the Lord spoke to the prophet Ezekiel as he was rebuking the nation of Israel, and he was telling them how terrible their sins were, and even actually told them their sins were worse than the sins of Sodom.

This is thousands of years later, after the Lord would have judged Sodom and Gomorrah. And here's what he says to the children of Israel, through his prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 16, 49-50.

He says to them, Behold, this was the guilt of your sister, Sodom. And Sodom obviously is referring to Sodom and Gomorrah. He says, This is the guilt of your sister, Sodom.

She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.

They were haughty and did an abomination before me, so I removed them when I saw it. And so, brothers and sisters, the sin of homosexuality was not the only sin that riled up the wrath of God and brought judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.

[17 : 22] And see, it is so easy for us to latch onto that, because that was certainly a pervasive sin, and say it was that. If we do that, then we kind of get off scot-free if that is not an issue for us.

If we're not practicing homosexuality, and we say, well, the reason God destroyed them is because of homosexuality, then what we are likely to do is we're likely to overlook our own sins.

That were among the sins that the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for. Their pride, their indifference, their selfishness, their oppression of the weak and the needy.

And so, let us not do that this morning. Let us not narrow down the issue in Sodom and Gomorrah to just one particular thing.

And so, God, being the judge of the whole earth, has to judge sin. And he has to judge sin because he's a righteous judge.

[18 : 32] If God were to overlook sin, if God were to say, don't worry about it, if God were to turn a blind eye to sin, then he himself would not be righteous.

He himself would not be holy. Because God is righteous, because God is holy, he cannot overlook even the smallest sin. He, brothers and sisters, is the perfect, righteous judge of all the earth.

And he cannot do otherwise than judge sin. And he will judge all sin. So why did God decide to judge Sodom and Gomorrah, though?

Certainly they were not the only wicked people on the earth and in that region at that time. After Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, the sins for which they were destroyed did not end with them.

Those sins continued so much so that we see in Ezekiel 16, the Lord is addressing the nation of Israel thousands of years later and he says to them, your sins are worse than the sins of Sodom.

[19 : 47] So why did God decide to judge Sodom and Gomorrah? Well, we'll see the answer to that question next week when we come to chapter 21.

But I think what we need to do this morning is we need to reflect upon this outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah because of the injustice, because of the oppression, because of the sin, because of the rebellion in Sodom and Gomorrah.

And if we're halfway aware of what's happening in our world, we would agree that these same sins and rebellion and oppression and injustices are in our world.

And brothers and sisters, if we're halfway present and alert in our own society, these are sins among us. these are sins in our own nation.

God took notice of these sins in Sodom and Gomorrah. And we should not think that he is not going to take notice of them in our land and indeed in all the nations of the earth.

[21 : 09] There is no sin. There is no oppression. There is no injustice. There is no injustice. There is no wrong that God will overlook.

None of it escapes his gaze because he's the all-knowing, he's the all-seeing God, and he is just, and he is holy.

He's the judge of the whole earth. And as Abraham said to him, will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right, do what is just? He is just, and so he must judge sin.

He must judge all sin. But God is a patient judge. He's not only a righteous judge, but he's also a patient judge.

The judge of all the earth is a patient judge, not just a righteous judge. And this is why the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah grew to what it was. This is why, indeed, sin among us, sin in the nations, has come to what it is because the righteous judge is also a patient judge.

[22 : 29] And sometimes we draw false conclusions from God's patience. Some think, well, God doesn't know or God doesn't see or God doesn't care. And some think, well, we're special.

I think that's one of the ways we think in this country because we're religious and because we cast the God over on a lot of things because we have God on our lips, even though he may be far from our hearts.

We think that we are special and God will overlook this and that and God will give us special treatment. But brothers and sisters, there is no partiality with the Lord. He is simply a patient judge as much as he is a righteous judge.

We're told in verse 22 that the men went towards Sodom, but Abraham continued to stand before the Lord.

And although we have in verses 17 to 21 these thoughts of the Lord, seeming like he's thinking about them, obviously at some point these thoughts of the Lord were shared with Abraham because we see that Abraham begins to intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah before the Lord.

[23 : 56] So somehow what seems to have been just God's thoughts had to have been disclosed to Abraham and brings him to a point of intercession.

And this brings me to my second and final point, God's mercy. Abraham begins his intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah by asking a question in verse 23.

Notice his question. His question is, will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Now, Abraham's question is certainly based on a conviction that he had. He believed that there were some righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah.

And so he comes to the Lord and says, Lord, will you sweep away the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah with the wicked? Are you going to give both of them the same fate when you bring judgment?

[25 : 00] And clearly in Abraham's mind he sees one option. The option he sees is, Lord, if there are righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah, then you need to spare the whole city.

Look again at what he says in verse 24. He says, suppose there are 50 righteous within the city. Will you sweep away the place and not spare it for the 50 righteous who are in it?

So Abraham is interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah to be spared for God to withhold his judgment if there are 50 righteous people in the place.

And he emphasizes his point, the point that he's trying to make to the Lord again in verse 25. He says, far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fear as the wicked, far be that from you, shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just.

And Abraham is right. Abraham is right that it is wrong to punish the wicked and the righteous together so that they have the same outcome.

[26 : 28] They fear the same. In other words, the righteous versus the wicked, it's no different because you experience the same judgment.

He says, God, that isn't right if you were to do that. Now, does this mean that unbelievers and believers, the righteous and the wicked, do not sometimes die together?

Sometimes they do. Sometimes natural disasters come, sometimes calamities come, and those who belong to Christ and those who do not belong to Christ, they perish together.

We saw that in Dorian. We see it in many other disasters and calamities that happen from time to time. There are accounts of people being in churches, worshipping the Lord, and some disaster happens, and they perish.

But that's not what Abraham is talking about. He's talking about the judgment of God, and he's saying, God, you should not judge the righteous and the wicked in exactly the same way.

[27 : 48] Look at the Lord's answer to his question about 50 righteous in verse 26. The Lord says to him, if I find at Sodom 50 righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.

And then Abraham makes five more appeals to the Lord. In verse 28, he says, suppose five of the 50 righteous are lacking.

Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five? And he said, I will not destroy it if I find 45 there. And again in verse 29, he appeals, suppose 40 are there.

He answered, for the sake of 40, I will not do it. He again appeals in verse 30. Suppose 30 are there. He answered, I will not do it if I find 30 there.

And Abraham again appeals in verse 31. Suppose 20 are found there. He answered, for the sake of 20, I will not destroy it. And Abraham again appeals in verse 32.

[28 : 59] Suppose 10 are there. He answered, for the sake of 10, I will not do it. now what are we to make of Abraham's intercession before God for Sodom and Gomorrah?

On the account of righteous people in it, what do we make of his intercession before God to spare the entire city? I think the first thing that we should see is that Abraham was a merciful man.

He was a merciful man. Judgment was not coming to him. Judgment was coming to other people and we see him interceding and he's not just interceding for the righteous, he's interceding for the wicked as well.

Abraham would have no doubt been concerned about his nephew Lot, no doubt concerned about Lot's family, but Abraham would have had the knowledge that God had the ability to spare Lot and his family the same way he spared Noah and his family.

In the flood, he could have certainly spared them in the judgment that he was going to bring against Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham would have known that.

[30 : 21] But Abraham had a concern not just for Lot and his family. As a matter of fact, they don't even feature in his words. He is concerned about the whole city, that God would preserve the whole city.

He wanted them to be spared on the account of any righteous people who were in the city. And here's what's really, really profound about this.

The sin of Sodom, being as grave as it was, the reputation of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the wickedness in the city, the disregard for life and for humanity, Abraham would have known.

What was happening in Sodom was not in a corner somewhere tucked away where nobody knew except God. No, the outcry was so great. And here we have Abraham pleading with the Lord, Lord, spare the place.

Lord, spare the people. If you find ten righteous people there, Lord, just spare them. Brothers and sisters, that is being merciful.

[31 : 42] That is being merciful. And I think we could see the mercy in that if we just think about ourselves and how sometimes we don't want to extend the same kind of mercy to other people.

And if we were in a position to plead for some people we wouldn't plead for them in that particular way. But as we would recall when we reflect back so far on what we've seen about Abraham, he got a lot of mercy.

God gave Abraham a lot of mercy. Remember his very bad treatment of his wife Sarah, how he allowed her to be in Pharaoh's household, exposed to being sexually violated, God was merciful to him.

And here's one of the things that we can always know whenever we see mercy being exhibited by any human being. Those who show mercy have received mercy.

Mercy is not something that is innate to any of us. Mercy is not something that any of us naturally inclines to. mercy. When you see mercy, you're seeing God's mercy.

[32 : 58] When you see a person who is extending mercy to someone else, that's someone who's had an encounter with God and God has touched their heart. And Abraham is able to be merciful to people who are very much unlike him, very unrighteous, and quite the opposite of him, but he pleads before God for them.

Now think about that. Do you think that Abraham is more merciful towards Sodom and Gomorrah than God himself? Do you think the reality really is that this man is pleading with God, oh God, have mercy on them, and he has more mercy in his heart than God has towards these people?

Abraham was really a reflection of God, a reflection of God's mercy that was working through him. Because separate and apart from the Lord, Abraham would have no mercy for anyone.

But more important than Abraham's mercy in his six-time appeal to the Lord, we need to see God's mercy in his six-time response to Abraham.

to every appeal that Abraham made to the Lord, the Lord said yes. To every appeal. This is the all-knowing God.

[34 : 32] This is the God who knew what he was going to do with Sodom and Gomorrah. And when Abraham appeals to him, he says yes every time. He could have simply said, no at 50, not even with 50, I'm going to destroy them, I'm going to judge them.

But we see God's mercy coming through as Abraham interceded again and again. He said yes, yes, yes. God is a merciful God.

The reason this account is given to us in this way again is it is a humanized account. It is to teach us about God and his mercy. It is to teach us that God is a merciful God.

Again, he knows everything perfectly. But the account is laid out for us in this way to display that the God who judges is also the God who extends mercy.

In the end, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. God is God is But let us not miss the larger and the more important point that God is merciful and he was extending mercy each time that Abraham appealed to him.

[35 : 57] God does judge. And he must judge because he is the judge of all the earth. But you know that judgment does not define God. Judgment is what God does, but judgment is not who God is.

The Bible tells us that God is love. And God's mercy is an expression of his love. He is that. He does judge.

He will judge. He cannot help but judge. But he is not defined by judgment. He is defined by his love. He is defined by mercy.

Judges sin. He judges sinners. But judgment does not define him. His love does.

His mercy does. And so what we see is even as judgment is going to be rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah, we see God being a merciful judge.

[37 : 07] God is now Genesis 18 and ends in suspense. In verse 33 it says and the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place.

It ends in suspense. Of course we know the outcome. We know what's going to happen. We know that God did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and sulfur that he rained down from heaven.

Now some people say oh the reason that Sodom and Gomorrah were judged is that Abraham did not press on enough. Abraham should have said well suppose only five are there.

And then God would have said okay for the sake of five I wouldn't destroy them. And then he should have gone on and said well what about three? And he said well if three are there I wouldn't destroy them.

What about one? If only one is there and then God would have said I wouldn't destroy them. And they think that because four persons were spared out of Sodom and Gomorrah Lot his wife and his two daughters because they were spared they think that if he had just gone down a little bit more then God would have spared the city.

[38 : 42] That's humanistic thinking brothers and sisters. And it also contradicts why God judged Sodom and Gomorrah in the end.

Here's the reality. There were no righteous people in Sodom. None. There were no righteous people in and of themselves in Sodom and Gomorrah.

And it's a very easy thing to see. We'll see this as we work our way through in Genesis 19. The Lord brings Lot, his wife, and his two daughters out.

And his wife is so attached back to Sodom, she turns around in disobedience and looks back, she turns into a pillar of salt. God did that. And then we see a short while later, very much like Noah and the deliverance that he and his sons experienced after they came through the flood, we found Noah laying naked in his tent, and we realized that Noah wasn't all that.

He found grace in the eyes of the Lord, but not because there was anything in and of himself. God gave him grace for one reason, he chose to give him grace. And we're going to find in Genesis 19 that Lot sleeps with two of his daughters, his two daughters.

[40 : 16] He gets drunk, they get him drunk, and he sleeps with his two daughters on consecutive nights and did not know it. and you come to the conclusion really, really fast, there were no righteous people in Sodom.

There were no righteous people in Sodom. I wonder if we think about our own situation, if there were a similar tribunal over us in this nation, that God would spare the nation because there are righteous people in it, how would we fear?

And I think what we tend to do is we tend to think about righteousness in degrees. We tend to think about righteousness in greater and lesser sins.

But brothers and sisters, God has one standard of righteousness, and he doesn't grade on a curve. His righteousness is perfect righteousness. righteousness. And so, when God looked at Sodom and Gomorrah, there were no righteous people in it.

And indeed, if God looks at our nation, there is no righteous person in and of him or herself in this nation. And the only reason that anyone is spared is because of the sheer mercy and grace of God.

[41 : 53] And because he is the judge of the whole earth, because he is the creator of all, he can give mercy to those who do not deserve mercy. And he can judge those who deserve judgment.

And no one can say to him, what have you done? And no one can accuse him of being unjust. And brothers and sisters, if we complain about that, we will then be complaining our own selves out of salvation.

Because we don't deserve it, we don't earn it, there's no righteousness in us, in and of ourselves, that causes us to merit it. It is all because of grace.

And so even if Abraham had Jewed the Lord down just to one person, there were no righteous people in Sodom.

brothers and sisters, he is the, the Lord is the righteous judge, he is the patient judge, but most of all he is the merciful judge.

[43 : 00] And thank God that he is. Thank God that he is. Thank God that he is a merciful judge who withholds judgment from people like you and me who deserve judgment.

judgment. But he doesn't do that in a vacuum. He doesn't do that just because he says, hey, don't worry about it, that's our secret, I'll let you slide.

No, he does that because he sent his son. He sent his son to live the perfect life that none of us could live. And to die the death that we deserve to die for our many sins.

And Jesus went to the cross and took our place as a substitute and paid the penalty for our sins so that God is able to justly forgive because Christ has paid the price.

And he does that because he is a merciful God. And that's good news this morning. That's good news to those of us who have put our trust in Jesus Christ.

[44 : 10] That is good news to those who are yet to put their trust in Jesus Christ. And if you are yet to put your trust in Christ, I call you this morning, I urge you this morning, turn to Jesus, turn from sin, and what you will find is a merciful God, quick to pardon all of your sins, doesn't matter what those sins are, doesn't matter what you've done.

He, the merciful God, will forgive and will reconcile all those who come to him.

And I pray that you do that this morning. Let's pray. Father, we are so grateful this morning that though you are the righteous judge, you are also a merciful judge.

And Lord, our only hope of rescue, our only hope of salvation, is because you are merciful. Not because we in and of ourselves are righteous, but because you are merciful, and you are merciful because of your Son.

who you