

# Explore: Where wickedness rules

October 23, 2015

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Nov. 8 focuses on Genesis 18:20-25; 19:12-26.*

The theology standing at the forefront of this lesson is one of the most difficult to understand intellectually. The age-old question will remain long after we all have studied and taught these passages: What is the connection between God's justice and God's grace? I hope, in some small way, to help your theological construct as you prepare for this lesson.

## **God is just**

The righteousness of God means, simply, God always does what is right, correct or just. God isn't merely just; he is perfectly just. His decisions are perfectly right. The attributes God possesses, he possesses in absolute perfection. God doesn't merely love; he loves perfectly. God isn't merely wise; he is perfectly wise. So, when God dispenses his justice, he does it with absolute perfection.

But our limited view of God's justice can taint our view. A 15-year-old girl died in our community a few weeks ago. She appeared to be a healthy young woman. She died of a brain aneurism. Her parents lost their only child. From a human perspective, we all ask, "Why?" Just a teenager, she had so much to look forward to. And what about her parents? We all want to scream out in these circumstances, "This isn't fair!" We question why a just God could allow such a thing to happen. Our view is limited by our humanity.

In these moments, I try to remind people, "We see this situation with

tainted, sinful eyes.” In our own properly selfish ways, we yearn to have our loved one back. We grieve for those family members left behind in the deep heartaches of death. And that’s OK. God can handle our big questions. But God’s ways are not our ways. God’s plans are not our plans. We only see today, where God sees all of eternity past, present and future. Here is the bottom line: No matter how we feel about a situation, no matter how our feeble minds can’t understand a situation, God is perfectly just.

Our righteous God must act justly. Our righteous God is the standard for what is just. Even when something looks terribly unjust in our world—and to be sure, often things that happen in our world are unjust—our God is just. In fact, the only way we can appreciate fully what justice looks like is to look at our God. People only mess up justice.

Here is a simple little phrase I used as a tagline for a sermon once: We can trust God is just.

### **God is gracious**

God isn’t just gracious; he is perfectly gracious. When he dispenses his grace to human beings, he does it with perfection. God always distributes his grace to the perfect glory of his own name.

I think the term “grace” is greatly misunderstood. Let me illustrate. Grace is being given something you don’t deserve. It’s like a gift. On Christmas morning, you are likely given a gift. You didn’t do anything to deserve that gift. Rather, it is given out of love. That’s grace, often called “unmerited favor.” Grace is a gift given out of a relational component. So, even though we are rightly guilty as sinners before God, he offers the gift of grace to all who will believe in him, trust in his name and surrender their lives to his ways.

### **The intersection of justice and grace**

The justice and grace of God might appear to contradict one another. Many times, I have heard people say, “In this situation, God didn’t have to show his grace because he lowered his standard for justice.” Or conversely, “God showed so much justice in this situation, but not grace.” Neither statement is *ever* true. There is no competition between God’s justice and grace. God always shows both justice and grace in perfection in dealing with humankind. This is exactly what we find in the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative.

God had to display his justice, his judgment, on both cities. Yet in his grace, some are spared. That pretty much sums it up—justice and grace simultaneously displayed in perfection.

In thinking about the New Testament age we live in, we know God’s justice, his righteous anger, still burns against sin. God will punish it. It is holy and right for God to punish sin.

Yet his grace, the gift of Jesus Christ, makes it possible for some to receive his grace and mercy, his ultimate forgiveness. More perfectly stated, his justice, his wrath, was poured out on Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, and it killed him. But in amazing grace, the Son of God was raised from the dead, to defeat sin, death, hell and the grave forever.

God never is more just than gracious. He never is more gracious than just. He manages these two tensions perfectly. In fact, it’s never even a tension for him, just a tension for us to understand these deep truths.

### **And for eternity**

For eternity, God will remain just. He will justly send and keep those who are not Christians in hell for eternity. This action is justified and gracious. They were given an opportunity to respond to his gospel, and they didn’t. And for those who spend eternity in heaven, God will be demonstrating his grace and justice simultaneously. His grace will be seen in anyone stepping

foot into his heaven. His justice will be seen each time we see Jesus, his Son, and those nail-scarred hands and feet.

God is perfectly just. God is perfectly gracious. He is so simultaneously, to all people, for all time. ... and I hope this helps, because my brain hurts!

**Questions for your Bible study group:**

1. In what situations have you questioned God's justice? In what situation in life have you questioned God's grace?
2. How do we see God's perfect justice and perfect grace displayed simultaneously in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?