

WHY MERCY BECOMES SOFT, AND JUSTICE BECOMES HARSH

Sometimes what some people call grace is not very amazing at all. Similarly, what others call setting boundaries feels like nothing short of harsh insensitivity. Indeed, what some people call being merciful is no more than yellow-bellied cowardice or moral laziness. Avid boundary setters can be no more than bullies hiding behind their institutionalised authority. Both types can be producers of major false-guilt. And of course, it can all be done in the name of love, Jesus' love.

Yet people hunger for the real thing. Books about grace and boundaries have sold as best sellers in the Christian world. Sermons are preached on both topics. Bible studies are held. Seminars, workshops and bestseller speaking tours abound. The need for a deepening understanding of justice and mercy seems to be well recognised, and Christian leaders seem to be trying to preach, teach and publish to this acknowledged interest.

Why then are people still unable to tell the difference between mercy and leniency, and righteousness and legalism? Why do Christians continue to hurt each other in their ineffective attempts to live according to the balanced life required by their Creator? This paper will explore these issues by reflecting on three passages of Scripture – Genesis 3:1-7, Micah 6:6-8, and Matthew 23.

The Events in Eden

At the start of Genesis 3, the balance was just right. Adam and Eve knew what the basis for right and wrong was, because God had personally, directly and in unhindered relationship taught them. They knew what they should eat, and what they should not. On this basis, trusting the God who spoke truth (as in Genesis 1), they could enjoy perfectly safe, open and fruitful relationships. Relationships became the mode for knowing truth in the Garden, because God walked with them and they with each other.

Care and compassion were fully expressed. Adam and Eve's every need was intimately known, and each could respond to it. There was no fear, shame or awkwardness in this vulnerability of being fully known, because God's order was in place. Righteousness was also fully expressed. God was faithful to his Word in every way. Adam and Eve were content to live within it.

But then came the relationally charged challenge to truth. The Father of Lies encouraged Eve and Adam that each could define right and wrong for herself and himself. Each could not resist the lure of forbidden fruit. It was a new type of experience – one of self-focussed sensuality and gratification. It came from the man and woman calling the shots for themselves – fully, individually and with apparent ease. Yes, they knew what it meant to feel like God, because they had acted like God.

So, did God's mercy finish here? Was order to be no more? No, a reading of the rest Genesis (particularly Genesis 4 and 11) shows the following:

- Despite humankind believing that they were the centre of defining right and wrong ('I will kill my fancied brother');

‘We will build a tower-fort to keep God away’), God reasserted that His order was still the basis of life and relationships. This right order (righteousness) does not go away because we disagree with it. But there are consequences when we ignore it, or try to replace it.

· Despite humankind believing that their needs were overwhelming (‘My punishment is too great to bear’; We will be nothing if we are scattered’), God’s plan was to keep His relationship offer open. He even helped the mother and father of humankind deal with their new found uncertainty with each other, by providing clothes to cover their nakedness.

The Struggle Ever Since

So God’s order and mercy was maintained and expressed consistently in the story of the genesis of the human race. Why therefore do we struggle to maintain its balance today?

The difficulty comes from our inability to walk within the justice and mercy of God, because we continue to define right and wrong for ourselves, by being self-focussed. Just like Adam and Eve, we place our own desires and disappointments at the centre of the universe. This makes everyone else (including God) a competitor to us.

This is why the third part of the Micah 6:8 triadic formulation, after to ‘act justly’ and ‘love mercy’, is to ‘walk humbly with your God’ – just like in Genesis 2, rather than the inability to walk with Him in Genesis 3. We can only walk humbly with God if we recognise Him for who He is, and are therefore keen (hungry) to live His way, thus enjoying His merciful provision of good for us.

Jesus used this understanding in the face of the rampant individualistic legalism of some of the Jewish leaders of His day. He saw these religious teachers knit-picking over fine details, yet swallowing a pack of lies as big as a camel. So He said to them that they should practise justice, mercy and faithfulness. In this context of Matthew’s story of Christ, faithfulness is well explained at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. A person is a solid life builder if he or she hears Jesus’ words and puts them into practise. This is the same as the Old Testament call to submit to God’s Word, because as John reminded us, Jesus is the creative Word of Truth and Life, and we are only friends of this Word if we obey Him.

Only One Thing keeps it together – Grace

The urge to focus on our individual needs alone can become relationally chaotic emotionalism. Yet without care and compassion (mercy) we only have the ‘law of the jungle’ – the strongest survive and do better, in a materialistic sense, through control and oppression.

The urge to right living can become harsh and narrowing legalism. Yet without order (righteousness), we only have the ‘squeaky wheel’ mode of relationships – the emotional politics of parties promoting their needs over others’ needs.

What is God’s response to this Self Interested Nature that exchanges truth for lies? He invites us to keep the conversation going. Despite our re-defining truth into self-focussed lies, He does whatever it takes to invite us to stay in open relationship with Him.

We can see it in how He came to keep walking with Adam and Eve after they made themselves competitors with Him and each other. He could have wiped them out, but He didn't. God likewise came to their son, Cain, and asked him a question so that he could own up to his self-focussed lying and action, but just like his parents, Cain tried to cover up.

Most of all, we see it in the Word becoming humanly personified, in order to dialogue with all of those with ears to hear. Even when this Word of invitation was mocked, flogged and subject to human death, He didn't stop. The Word then sent His Spirit to help those with responsive hearts. He became their guide back to Truth. Put simply, this is Grace – it is God acting to keep the life conversation alive when we don't deserve to have Him bother with us.

So What for Us?

We can easily become legalistic. We can easily play on people's emotions. Scary though it is, we can do both simultaneously. Or can we be grace bearers.

It is explained simply and well in a compare and contrast way in a very old letter (Ephesians 4):

Choice 1 – believe the lie that you can be the moral centre of the universe (which the author says is dumb, or futile, thinking). If you follow the logic of this lie, then you will, despite some attempts at civility and politeness, be increasingly into something sensuous in order to 'feel good'. This is because you are made for other-person-centred intimacy, and when that is not present, you and I and the entire human race look for substitutes. It could be some physical habit, some emotional control thing, or some escape thing (including religion and family). The result will be the same. You will want more of this sensuality, if you do not give up on life all together, or turn to a path of some form of conscious spiritual searching. As you get more of the sensuous activity, your relational life will shrink (see Ephesians 4:17-19);

Choice 2 – believe that the Word is the real basis for life, and place Him in His rightful place. Then you can be free to live for good, and enjoy real intimacy, because once again you can take the risk of being truly vulnerable by being other-person-centred (see Ephesians 4:20-24 and 5:21).

So the next time you see someone being legalistic, or playing on people's emotions (and it could be that you are seeing yourself), think about what to do. If you desire to be a grace-bearer, then perhaps you need to invite this person into a truth conversation, by demonstrating that you can be other-person-centred for them.

The other and final hint is the easiest to say and the hardest to do. To help the Word be spoken into any of these situations, you have to do one thing well. To not do this is relationally fatal at any level. So here it is – go forth and do it, often and deeply. Go into your world and *listen*. God does, so why in His name shouldn't we?

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