

# JUSTICE AND MERCY

By

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The plea of the publican, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” is seldom heard in the land today because of the breakdown in man’s concept of justice. (Luke 18:13.)

The publican’s plea for mercy was based upon his realization of God’s justice, which made him an out-and-out sinner. He deserved nothing from God but punishment. Knowing this, and humbly recognizing the fact, his plea for mercy was honest and indicative of a penitent heart. Therefore, he received the mercy for which he begged.

The Pharisee sought no mercy because he failed to recognize the justice of God and thus did not acknowledge his desolate condition. Jesus said that the publican went home justified. Meaning that he had obtained justice by God’s mercy.

Modern man comes to God, not asking for mercy, but rather saying “Give me happiness — give me fulfillment — come in and make my life meaningful.” The problem of twentieth century man is that he is already high and exalted: he was God on an equal footing. Convinced that he has evolved to next to the last notch, he is about as good as God, and needs no mercy. He makes a “decision” in favor of God, and now God is obligated to do His thing for man. He “lets Jesus come into his heart” and Jesus had better be grateful for the privilege!

The Bible presents Jesus, saying “Deny yourself — come unto me — learn of me.” But popular evangelism says to Jesus, “You come to me. I invite you into my heart.” Christ demands that we repent, humble ourselves, coming to Him asking for mercy. Modern evangelism gives man the initiative, inviting Christ to humbly come unto him.

This upside down view of God is partly a result of humanism and its influence upon the weak and insipid church of our day and it is partly due to the kind of so-called evangelism that presents an unbalanced God, a God who is love and little more — not holiness or absolute righteousness and inexorable justice — only love. The cross is seen as merely a token of love, not the essence of justice and mercy. Christ is said to have died to show His love, not to meet the demands of a just God. The result is that instead of seeking God’s mercy, men seek their own satisfaction. Multitudes of people visit churches week after week, shopping for a church “which meets their needs.” But what is the standard by which they decide upon their needs? How can a sinner, ignorant of God’s purpose and work, accustomed to living for the satisfaction of his appetite that is untrained in godliness, how can he possibly decide his needs?

On a recent television interview, Bob Schuler said that his success was due to his giving people what they need. I believe he had misunderstood the reason for his success. I would say that his success in attracting such great audiences is due to his giving people what they want. Of course, they also think they need what they want. When Jesus gave His audience what they wanted He attracted multitudes. But when He began to tell them what they really needed and what was essential for their lives they turned their backs on Him (John 6:44–65). Men do not ordinarily think they are in such a bad plight that they need to come to God begging for mercy. Help, yes, But mercy? No., things are not that bad, yet.

JUSTICE. One of the most abused words in our language is the word “justice”. The word simply means “that which is right,” and only God can define that which is right. Justice therefore, is absolute, as God is absolute. It cannot be altered, slanted and adjusted to meet man’s self-styled needs. Neither can it be rearranged according to man’s race, social or economic status. God is not respecter of persons. His eternal purpose is the same for all, that we be in His image — holy and perfect before Him in love (Eph. 1:4).

The slightest reflection will cause any honest person to see immediately that he comes so far short of the image (the glory) of God that he wants to fall down wherever he may be to plead for mercy, or to give thanks for having obtained it (Rom. 3:23). The reality of God’s love and mercy can be realized only in the light of His absolute justice, justice which stands in the face of all the rebellion and opposition of man in his effort to tear it down. God’s justice demands punishment for every sin and ultimately the final punishment of death to all whose sins are unaccounted for by forgiveness. It is because God Himself is just, that His justice must be met according to His absolute terms; that is, death for sin. It is upon these terms that Christ went to the cross and met justice for those who put their faith in Him. Therefore, God’s love is revealed in His justice, unlike the sentimentality of all those of our day who think they show love by laying justice aside. When men today speak of justice they usually temper it by adding the word “social” so that it becomes “social justice” instead of God’s justice. Generally it has to do with false claims to material benefits, such as destroying the wealthy, out of envy, in order that we may all obtain a portion of their wealth. This they call social justice. Thus the term justice has been twisted to meet man’s desires rather than to meet God’s purpose.

The hope of eternal life is based on justice. Christ was put to death (Capital punishment) when He assumed our sin. Suppose some weak-brained professors and do-gooders along with the ACLU had persuaded Pilate and the Jews to agree to sentence Jesus to prison rather than to crucify Him. The justice of God would not have been met in our behalf and we would still be in our sins with our lives forfeit because of God’s justice. It was because of God’s absolute justice that the total death of Jesus was exacted on the cross, and it is because of God’s infinite mercy that the benefit of this death is appropriated to us so that our sins may be completely forgiven. When the ungodly repent and obey the gospel, justice is met because they are completely cleansed from sin through the just act of death on the cross, and they are no longer ungodly, but righteous; that is, “just” in God’s sight. Thus God is both just and merciful to him that has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

Some sober-minded religious leaders of our day are disturbed over the fact that while there is obviously a revival of interest in things religious it seems to be making no significant impact in either the churches or the community. It is obvious that a church may be quite successful in raising its membership and in becoming a very large institution with “exciting” and attractive services and yet its members never reaching the ground level of salvation where they are justified in the eyes of God. If they do not know of or believe the absolute justice of God, then the basic issue of the Gospel, the death and resurrection of Jesus, must also be unknown, and if this is absent, then so is saving faith. One may have faith in experience, or faith in a better life, or faith that something has happened, but it is only **faith in the gospel** that saves. This may account for the many people who continue to be frustrated or depressed and continually in need of props for their faith even though they are active participants in a growing church organization.

Satan has the remarkable capacity to persuade men to turn everything around so that good is called evil and evil is called good. He has also managed to deceive multitudes into thinking that God is dependent upon men and not the other way around. The fact is, God's purpose is not dependent upon man's response, although man's salvation is. God's purpose is eternal; it is fixed. It will be done. The statement, "Thy will be done," is not necessarily a prayer, but a simple statement of fact. It is unthinkable that almighty God could fail in what He set out to do. The person who rejects God's purpose will still fulfill it, because God's purpose includes every person in all creation. The rebel fits into that purpose as one to be destroyed in the end just as the heavens and the earth are "stored up for fire" for the "destruction of ungodly men" (II Pet. 3:7). To reject God is only to confirm the fact that one deserves the destruction by fire. It in no way slows or alters the purpose of God. The heavy fact is that everyone deserves the fire, but God has mercy to save those that believe.

UNITY. The bond that unites believers is not an agreement on every teaching that governs our lives as Christians, but the fact that we are saved from sin by Christ and our obedience to the Gospel. But even here the different concepts of salvation have a divisive effect. Where justice is seen as relative, Christ's death is seen as a mere expression of God's loving kindness, and a conversion is simply a matter of recognizing God's love and trying to conform to it. This is a far cry from the person who sees himself like the apostle Paul, when he said, "Though I was before a blasphemer and persecutor, and injurious; howbeit I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly and in unbelief:...Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners: of whom I am chief: howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me as chief, might Jesus Christ show forth all his longsuffering, for an example of them that should thereafter, believe on him unto eternal life" (I Tim. 1:13-16). Ignorance was no excuse. He was a sinner before a just God. Paul's conversion was based solidly on the recognition of God's justice, and His mercy extended through Christ.

There is naturally a wide gulf between the person who professes Christian faith on the basis that God is love and the fellow who comes like the publican and like Paul, bowing beneath God's justice, and crying out "Have mercy on me, a sinner."

There is prevalent a shallow kind of unity among those who glibly talk about their experiences and join together for various efforts in their ambition for social justice. But there is another kind of unity that goes far beneath the surface and binds believers mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart. It's the bond that exists between those who have dwelt on death's row, and have received pardon. We have one thing in common: we are sinners who justly deserve to die but have obtained mercy through Christ's death. To return to a Godly concept of repentance and to the true joy of salvation we must first return to the truth of God's absolute justice. Then again may men pray "God be merciful to me, a sinner," and realize the full measure of justification.

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