

MERCY AND JUDGMENT

By

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“For judgment is without mercy to him that has showed no mercy: mercy glories against judgment” (James 2:13).

The immediate context of James’ statement teaches us to treat our neighbors with love and mercy, and reminds us that Jesus said that if we do not forgive those who sin against us, neither will The Father forgive us. But there is much more to be learned from the phrase: “mercy glories against judgment.”

In spite of the prominence given them in Scripture, mercy and judgment are subjects that have almost disappeared from the vocabulary. The present generation makes light of sins such as lust, lying, adultery and even murder. The educational system has taught that there is no absolute good or evil, and therefore there can be no sin nor need of judgment. Tolerance and permissiveness pave the way for mass lawlessness.

Although the Freudian idea that society, not the individual, is responsible for one’s character, modern man is still burdened down by a guilty conscience, even while denying the reality of sin. Tranquilizers and suicides demonstrate the desperation of our generation. Guilt, although it may not be discussed and admitted openly, seethes deep inside, and subconsciously is like a steel door that bars the way to peace and joy. One does not spontaneously lift his voice in thanks and praise to God; he knows not why, but the reason is this iceberg of guilt. One picks up the Bible, but before reading a dozen verses, lays it down again. The iron door closes, to keep him from hearing God’s voice through the Scriptures. Like Adam and Eve, hiding in the garden, guilt lurks in the heart and deadens any response to God’s mercy and grace.

The Psalms are filled with expressions concerning God’s mercy. When David sang of God’s mercy and justice he was displaying a true comprehension of what that mercy and judgment meant to him personally. It was not until his friend Nathan pointed out that David had committed a horrible crime worthy of death that he came to grips with his need for mercy, and sang, “My sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in they sight” (Psalm 51:3-4). Then he sang over and over of the mercy in which God had cleansed him of that sin.

How much of that awareness of the need for God’s mercy is reflected in the songs we hear in the worship assembly today? Not much, I dare suggest. The popular doctrines are tolerance, everyone is okay, judge not, and love yourself. Instead of crying for mercy, the modern generation begs for satisfaction and seeks a church that has “something for everyone,” where people don’t come for mercy, but for excitement.

David prayed, “According to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1). He saw God’s mercy as the very nature of God, timeless and

always available. His mercy has always been there, and is continuously extended to His creatures.

When one comes, after years of trampling under foot His commandments, shaming the good name of Jesus, and spreading evil, God does not say, “If you had come to me five years ago, or last month, I would have been merciful.” He does not say, “Come back in three weeks and I will show mercy.” No, His mercy is timeless. David said “My sin is ever before me,” but so is God’s mercy. It does not arrive at the beginning of day, nor end at evening, but pours forth all through the day and night from the infinite well of God’s grace.

But to obtain that mercy one has first to gasp the enormity of his sin. The Pharisee gave thanks that he was an upstanding example of a God-fearing man. The Publican bowed his head, and prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). He received mercy because he recognized the need of it. What tragedy that the religious leader, the one who stood as an example to all the people, was in great need of God’s mercy and knew it not, just as so many today – the celebrities, the rich and famous who are held up for our admiration – are idolized and honored, as though they are above the need of mercy.

No one appreciates God’s mercy until he has been humbled by the startling realization of his shameful sinfulness. It was not until he was called to a halt and blinded on the road to Damascus that Paul realized what evil he was committing by persecuting the Christians. We never read of Paul writing about being forgiven of his mistakes, shortcomings and failures, as we often hear in today’s public prayers. Rather, Paul wrote that he was the chief of sinners.

The woman of John Chapter 8 stood before Jesus after having been caught in the act of adultery. She was stripped of every thread of dignity and respect. Her shame in being exposed to public scrutiny was intense. She knew that according to the law she could be put to death by stoning. She could not have been debased any lower as she stood before Jesus, knowing the depth of her sin. But she also came to know the depth of his mercy when he said, “Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more.”

Mercy and judgment are met in the cross of Christ. The cross is the focus of the gospel because it was a *demonstration of sin*, where Jesus embraced all the sin of his people and, like the sacrificial lamb, unresistingly submitted to sin’s punishment, death.

“All have sinned,” wrote Paul, “and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). This covers a wider thought than first meets the eye. The glory of God is His perfection, His purity, His holiness, His profound and immense goodness. This is the image in which we were created, and it is the ultimate goal we are supposed to be reaching for, although many believers have never given that goal a thought. It is this glory which we have lost, or rather cast aside, by ignoring His commandments and thus committing sin.

What greater act of rebellion than this, to ignore the Creator’s instructions for the life and thus smash the image in which we are created? Such action would be called evil. Yet, how many of us would admit to ever being evil? “Yes, I know I have my faults. But, no one is perfect.” Interpretation: “I am not really a sinner. I’m a good guy, certainly not evil. I may need a little help, but why should I beg for mercy like that crooked Publican?”

So we partake of the bread and wine of the communion (showing forth the body and blood of Jesus in his death) and sing songs of praise about Jesus and the cross, then go forth to do business in the world in the popular way, cherishing our faults and defending our shortcomings with no more thought of the image of God which we defile. O God, have mercy.

The cross was a demonstration of judgment. The wages of sin is death. Jesus' who knew no sin he (God) made to be sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21). He 'bare our sins in his body on the tree,' and there suffered judgment for us (1 Pet. 2:24). As in the final judgment there will be no defense and no excuse, so Jesus, as a lamb before its shearers is dumb, opened not his mouth, but committed himself to Him that judges righteously (Isa. 53:7, 1 Pet. 2:21), and was "cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of (God's) people to whom the stroke was due" (Isa. 53:8). In the last day the judgment upon all the unrepentant will be death, a death that is final and everlasting.

This in itself will be an act of mercy, mercy in that the creation will not be infected with sin forever. Sin will be totally eliminated when all that is evil will be destroyed. Even death, John writes, will be cast into the lake of fire, a symbolic expression to indicate the final abolishing of death so that "death shall be no more" (Rev. 21:4).

The cross was a demonstration of mercy. There by the death of Jesus His son, out of love and by His grace, God was making a way of escape for every believer. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

It was because God was "rich in mercy" that He initiated reconciliation, that we might receive forgiveness, salvation from sin and death, and ultimately the resurrection to immortality and glory. "We know that if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Whatever a person may have in the abundance of material things, the Christian has more: the abundance of God's mercy.

Sometimes one's failure and guilt may press upon him as it did on David, when he wrote, "For my iniquities are gone over my head. As a heavy burden they are too heavy for me" (Psa. 38:4). Do not think that you can throw off this burden by your own will power. Only God can take away the sin, and in mercy He will do so through the cross of Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

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