

THE COMPASS

Mercy vs. Judgment

Untidy Christianity, Part 7

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My mother tends to be a nervous passenger in any automobile.

This is not to put her down; I think she would tell you this herself.

It was interesting, as my brother and I were growing up, to see how this phenomenon manifested itself.

There was kind of a sliding scale of alarm, whenever Mom thought there might be an accident of some kind.

If she perceived a slight potential hazard, she would say “Oh!”

If the potential hazard was slightly greater, she might say “Oh dear!”

If it was even more serious than that, she would say “Oh dear Lord!”

If it was really alarming, she’d say “Oh dear Lord Jesus!”

And if it was the worst possible hazard, she would say the whole prayer: “Oh dear Lord Jesus have mercy!”

When we’re in the most serious situations, where trouble just pulls out in front of us and we’re about to crash into it, we can’t pray for better skills or more prevention or better luck or even a miracle — it’s too late for all that.

All we can do is ask for mercy.

When we get ourselves into trouble, when we’ve made a stupid call or done something completely dishonorable and now it’s Consequences Time, all we can do is hope for mercy.

When we’re misunderstood — we’ve been good, but somebody thinks we’ve been bad, and there’s no convincing them otherwise — all we can pray for is mercy.

But mercy is not just something we need to receive. It is also something we need to give.

As often as I need mercy — as often as I hope for mercy — I am just as often in a position to bestow mercy on someone else.

And here’s what I’ve found:

It’s way, way easier to receive mercy than to give it.

In my work, if somebody goofs up in some way that inconveniences me, I am quick to hammer them. I am Mr. Judgment!

But if I goof up in some way that inconveniences somebody else, I want mercy! Cut me some slack!

We know it’s healthy to show mercy — it’s a key part of God’s design for us.

In **Zechariah 7:9**, **This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘...Show mercy and compassion to one another.’**

Jesus says very clearly in the Beatitudes:

Matthew 5:7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

If I hope to receive it, I’ve got to give it.

So it's good for us to review the life of David in the Old Testament, because he was pretty good at exemplifying mercy.

In the lowest, most terrible days of David's life, when King Saul was hunting him like an animal, David had two incredible opportunities to put a stop to it — two amazing face-to-face encounters where he could have killed Saul, and it would have been all over.

But in both instances, David exercised mercy instead of judgment.

Now most of us in this room will rarely, if ever, become a murder target.

And even less likely is a situation where we have a chance to kill the guy before he kills us.

But if we study these scenes from the life of David, extreme as they are, we can apply the same principles to our own lives — where the stakes are not nearly so high, thank God.

For example, let's say we both work for the same company. You make a mistake on your project, and if I play my cards right with the boss, I can get a chunk of your budget for my project. Ooh, baby! Do I go for it? Hmmm....

Or let's say we're both heading for the same space in the parking lot at Desert Ridge, or the same lane on the 101. Is there a certain finger available to you on one of my hands, or perhaps a certain expletive which could be aimed in your direction?

Or let's say you just get annoyed with me and decide not to answer my emails for a while, and I get miffed about it. Who do I tell, and how do I tell them?

Here's the way the question of mercy vs. judgment crops up most often in my life:

Let's say you promise to do something for me, or we're working on something together, and then you drop the ball.

Chances are, I will pretty soon cross the path of someone who knows both of us, and I'll have an opportunity to skewer you by telling that person what a failure you were. Do I go for it? Probably.

So as we look at David and Saul this evening, when David has a chance to take Saul's life, let's just translate it, in our own minds, to Doug taking someone's reputation ... or taking someone's dignity ... or taking someone's peace of mind ... because they did something wrong to you, or made a mistake, or whatever.

* * *

Now the historical accounts of these encounters between David and Saul are found in your Bible in 1 Samuel chapters 24 and 26, with follow-up material in 2 Samuel chapters 1 and 4.

But there's so much detail that if I read it all aloud to you, it would take 20 solid minutes just to get through the Scripture.

So please allow me to paraphrase this true story for you.

King Saul gets a hot tip as to David's whereabouts, so he takes 3,000 soldiers and sets out to look for David near a place known as the "Crag of the Wild Goats."

This is NOT a tourist location. In fact, there are no portable toilets, so Saul has to go into a cave to relieve himself. (The Old Testament is not a very polite document.)

But what Saul doesn't know is that David and his men are already in the cave; it's a deep cavern, and they're hiding out all the way in the back. You might expect them to feel penned in, with the enemy coming in through the entrance, except that Saul doesn't know they're in there — and, come to think of it, he's not exactly in a threatening position at the moment; he's occupied with other matters.

So David's men say, Hey, opportunity knocks. Let's kill him. In fact, they try to convince him that it's God's will for David to exercise judgment and kill him.

He would be justified; Saul is clearly operating outside of God's design. But David understands something about mercy that we need to understand:

Mercy is God's will.

In extraordinary situations God may specifically call on me to exercise judgment, but that is not going to be the norm.

The end of the little book of Jude, toward the back of your Bible, calls us to be merciful even with people who doubt God, merciful to people who are playing with fire spiritually speaking, merciful to people who are corrupt, merciful even to people who do stuff we hate.

Certainly when we're in leadership positions especially, we may be obligated to exercise judgment, representing God to those under our supervision.

But that's a burden, not a benefit.

When somebody recommends that I opt for judgment over mercy in a situation, and they suggest that this is what God wants, I need to be very suspicious.

When in doubt, I need to go with mercy — because I am way more inclined to exercise judgment in error than I am to exercise mercy in error.

* * *

But David didn't just walk away. He sneaked in and cut a corner off of Saul's robe.

This was not just a clever idea. The king's robe was a symbol of his authority, and cutting off the corner of it was the equivalent of saying, You're no king.

It was a slap in the face.

And the moment David did it, he felt a pang of conscience, and he told his guys, You know what? That was wrong.

1 Samuel 24:6 He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord."

It's surprising that David speaks in these glowing terms about the guy who's trying to kill him, but here's something else David understands, that we need to understand:

Mercy recognizes the value of the other guy.

I may think of you as the bad guy in a situation, but mercy reminds me that God is working in you, God is working through you, God is working for you.

Just because I have a problem with you doesn't make you worthless.

God values you. Jesus died for you.

God has a purpose for you. He is working in me through you.

God isn't finished blessing you. Maybe I'm called to be the source of God's provision in your life.

That's what happened with David and Saul. Maybe it could happen between you and me.

* * *

But even now, David doesn't just sneak away. He waits till Saul gets a safe distance away, and then he calls out to him. He waves the little piece of the royal robe and tells Saul the whole story. In 1 Samuel 24 he says:

1 Samuel 24:

10 ...The Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the Lord's anointed.'

11 See, my father [he's not just being poetic here; remember, Saul is his father-in-law], look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. Now understand and recognize that I am not guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life.

I love what David demonstrates here.

Mercy does not ignore the problem; nor does mercy try to solve the problem through third parties.

Mercy addresses the wrongdoer.

If you do me wrong, I can say to you, lovingly, "Hey, I think you did me wrong." I am not called by God to pretend that you didn't do me wrong. The ancient theological term for that is *lying*.

And I am not called by God to go jabber to other people about my problem with you. That's what I call "triangulation," and it has brought down countless relationships and countless churches and countless families.

* * *

Actually, David took this opportunity to preach quite a little sermon to Saul.

He goes on and on.

And here's how he winds up:

1 Samuel 24:15 May the Lord be our judge and decide between us. May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand."

David says this is God's problem. He's going to sort it out.

Here's what David clearly understands, and this is crucial for us to get too:

Mercy is my business; judgment is God's business.

If God needs me to exercise judgment in somebody's life, he is going to make that overwhelmingly clear to me.

But until he does, I need to be exercising mercy.

In fact, even when God calls on me to exercise judgment in somebody's life — like let's say I'm your boss, and you're incompetent, and I've got to fire you — I can strive to do it in as merciful a way as possible.

God is not going to call me to torture you.

If he uses me in a judgment role at all, he knows that he's using a mercy guy to do a

judgment job — in a way, I'm out of my depth — so I'm going to exercise judgment in as quick and painless a way as possible.
 I'm going to exercise judgment in a way that facilitates the most productive possible outcome. So that the greatest possible healing can begin as soon as possible.
 David doesn't say, "I hope God knows I'm right and you're wrong, and I hope you die."
 All he asks is for God to vindicate him by delivering him from Saul's hand: the smallest measure possible.

* * *

Well, Saul feels badly about it.
 He acknowledges that David did a wonderful thing, exercising such mercy in such a situation.
 He acknowledges that David is God's guy, and someday he's going to be king.
 He tells David he hopes God will really, really bless him.
 But he doesn't exactly promise he won't keep trying to kill him.

So when Saul heads home, David doesn't just trot along behind him.
 1 Samuel 24:22 says David and his men headed up to their "stronghold."
 Mercy is not stupid. David understood this:
Mercy can still be wary.
 I can show you mercy and still keep an eye on you.
 God does not call me to lead with my chin.
 I can be quiet and careful, and still please God in my relationship to you.

* * *

Which is a good thing, because
Mercy doesn't reform the other person.
 Before very long in the historical record we find Saul getting another hot tip about where David and his guys were hiding, and Saul can't resist.
 He saddles up his 3,000 soldiers again, and heads down to the Desert of Ziph. (Now it's sound like of like a Dr. Seuss book, isn't it?)
 Just because I show you mercy doesn't mean I should expect you to act any differently.
 Maybe you will, but maybe you won't.
 Your response to my mercy isn't my responsibility.
 My responsibility is the MERCY part. The rest is between God and you.
 Mercy is not contingent on your promising to be better.
 Mercy just is.

* * *

This time, however, David isn't caught off-guard.
 He gets wind of Saul's movements, he sends spies to confirm his location, and then he takes his pal Abishai with him, and they sneak into Saul's camp in the middle of the night.
 Now you have to picture this: This is not Saul by himself using a cave as a toilet.
 This is the entire camp, 3,000 guys, and there in the middle of them is Saul, asleep, 1 Samuel 26:7 says, with his spear stuck in the ground near his head, and Abner, the general over the whole army, right next to him.
 So Abishai says to David, Dude, it happened again! This is a God thing, obviously!

“Let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of my spear,” he says; “I won’t strike him twice.”

But David says no. Judgment is God’s job.

“The Lord himself will strike him,” he says; “either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed.”

Then he says to Abishai: **Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let’s go.”**

What? He’s just walking away from a second opportunity to solve his problem?

Yep.

Mercy is as relentless as the wrongdoing it’s responding to.

How often have I said, “That does it! I’ve had it with this situation. I’m going to let such-and-such-a-third-party hear about this!”

Usually this comes after about the second go-round with a problem person.

But David had spears thrown at him twice; he was hunted all over the wilderness month after month; he had TWO opportunities to kill Saul himself — and he still took the high road, the mercy road.

* * *

Now David and Abishai slip out of the camp, they get a reasonable distance away on top of a hill, and David starts yelling for Abner and Saul to wake up.

He does have a little fun with Abner — he says, basically, Buddy, you oughta be fired; you’re not doing your job. Look, I sneaked in there and got the king’s spear and his water jug!

Then, once again, David asks Saul what in the world he is doing.

Addressing him with the utmost respect — calling him “my lord the king” — he says:

1 Samuel 26:18 ...Why is my lord pursuing his servant? What have I done, and what wrong am I guilty of?

And then David offers two possible answers to his own question:

1 Samuel 26:19 Now let my lord the king listen to his servant’s words. If the Lord has incited you against me, then may he accept an offering. If, however, men have done it, may they be cursed before the Lord!

David is not clear on the causes of this situation. He is not sure where Saul’s animosity comes from.

But he demonstrates a crucial truth:

Mercy doesn’t have to understand the causes.

I’ve heard people say, “If I could just understand why he did what he did to me, then maybe I could forgive him.”

Or they tell all the bad stuff that somebody did to them, and then they finish up by saying, “I am still trying to work this through.”

But the damage is done. They’ve already driven the spear through the king’s reputation. That’s not mercy. Mercy doesn’t have to understand the causes. Mercy just is.

* * *

Finally, after David has pleaded with Saul for a while, the king responds.

He appears to repent, and he makes a major promise:

1 Samuel 26:21 Then Saul said, “I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have erred greatly.”

And David’s response is not “You got that right, bub!”

It’s not “Well, see that ya don’t; you’re not getting a third chance, that’s for sure!”

Instead, David’s response constitutes one of the bedrock truths of God’s design:

1 Samuel 26:

23 The Lord rewards every man for his righteousness and faithfulness.

[Then he goes on to say:] **The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed.**

24 As surely as I valued your life today, so may the Lord value my life and deliver me from all trouble.”

Three times in this brief statement, David specifies WHOM this is all about.

It’s the Lord who rewards. It’s the Lord who set up the situation. It’s the Lord who will decide whether or not to deliver David from his troubles.

Mercy recognizes that it’s God’s call.

I can be hurting, I can be the unfairly injured party, I can appear totally justified in striking back — but I am still in God’s hands, in God’s control, and living in the promise of God’s love and provision for me.

This is not about my innocence. This is not about how badly I want something. This is not about how hard I’m working on the situation.

God is going to allow me to experience trials, or triumphs, according to his perfectly designed plan for me.

This is why the apostle Paul says, in Romans 9:14-16:

Romans 9:

14 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!

15 For he says ... “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

16 It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.

* * *

Finally, you can almost hear Saul heaving a heavy sigh.

1 Samuel 26:25 Then Saul said to David, “May you be blessed, my son David; you will do great things and surely triumph.”

Saul knows what’s up. The old prophet Samuel has told him to his face that he’s done.

In earlier encounters, Saul has said as much himself.

Maybe he is coming to this conclusion even before David does.

It’s the bottom line of every mercy vs. judgment confrontation:

Mercy ultimately pays off.

In the very next line, the Scripture tells us, **David went on his way, and Saul returned home.**

It’s symbolic, I think.

The merciful one goes forward; the wrongdoer goes backward.

The future belongs to the one who bestows mercy in the face of wrongdoing.

David has more hard times ahead of him, yes. But ultimately, the crown is placed on his

head.

And along the way, he is healthy spiritually. He has the peace that Saul craves but can't get.

He has a life. He can get on with it. That's the beauty of mercy.

* * *

There's a P.S. to this story; and a P.P.S. They're in 2 Samuel 1 and 4.

It's some time later, and Saul and Jonathan and the Israelite army are battling the Philistines.

It's going badly, lots of guys are dying. Jonathan dies. Saul is up on Mount Gilboa, and the Philistine chariots and riders are bearing down on him.

These Philistines are some of the fiercest, most fear-inspiring warriors in the known world.

Saul knows he's about to be slaughtered, or worse. Captured? Tortured? Who knows?

During all of this, David is over in Ziklag. Suddenly a guy shows up — not an Israelite; he's an Amalekite — with his clothes torn and dust on his head.

He's carrying Saul's crown and his royal armband, and he gives them to David.

He reports that he was passing through the area and got caught in the middle of the battle.

He happened to be there as Saul was getting to the end of his rope.

The Amalekite tells David that Saul was already severely wounded, and leaning on his spear to commit suicide and put himself out of his misery.

“Stand over me and kill me!” Saul said to him. **“I am in the throes of death, but I'm still alive” (2 Samuel 1:9).**

So, the Amalekite says, I killed him, and I took his crown and his armband and brought them here to you.

And then he calls David “my lord.”

He's looking for a fat reward from the new boss.

But David doesn't give him a reward. He doesn't even give him a pat on the back.

Instead, he orders the man's execution, for killing the king.

It seems brutal to us. It seems backwards. But it was David's responsibility, as the one in authority, to exercise civil judgment under the law.

He was demonstrating a difficult truth:

Mercy is not weakness; it wages war on cruelty. Mercy says, “I will not participate with you in your unmercifulness.”

Let's translate this into our own lives.

If you're giving me a hard time, working against me, harming me in some way, and I take the high road with you — I remain silent, I don't bad-mouth you to your friends — that's to my benefit.

But then what if a friend of mine comes along, sees what you're up to, and happens to come across a way to hurt you?

What if this friend takes up my cause, goes around telling people what a creep you are, undermining your reputation, or maybe worse: hurting you in some way, undercutting you at work or whatever?

Do I like it? Does it please me?

When that friend comes to me and says, “Hey, what’s happening to you is wrong; I’m your friend; I’m setting it right with people,” I have to say, “Oh no you don’t. You’re not my friend.”

The hard truth is, in the next situation, a friend who will do that to my enemy may well do it to me.

Mercy calls it like it is.

Mercy says, “I will not participate with you in your unmercifulness.”

* * *

When I look at the end of this story, I find it both beautiful and puzzling.

2 Samuel 1 says when he hears the news about Saul’s death, David tears his clothes, in the ancient tradition of mourning.

He mourns and weeps and stops eating.

And then, as he does so often in emotional situations, he writes a song. A heartbroken, heartbreaking “lament.” And he orders the whole army to learn it and sing it.

You can read the whole song for yourself, in 2 Samuel 1.

I’ll read you a portion of it:

2 Samuel 1:

19 “Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights. How the mighty have fallen!

20 “Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad....

21 “O mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, nor fields that yield offerings of grain. For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul....

23 “Saul and Jonathan — in life they were loved and gracious, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, They were stronger than lions.

24 “O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.

What was David doing? He was manifesting mercy.

Mercy gives the benefit of the doubt.

Mercy recognizes the good even in the “bad guy.”

Mercy distinguishes between sin and sinner.

In a famous scene from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Portia says:

*The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,*

*It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice....*

Jesus put it way more simply, in

Luke 6:

35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

In reality, I don't have to look very far for a reason to be merciful.

I didn't deserve mercy, but God gave it to me.

You may not deserve mercy, but I can give it to you, because I already have, in hand, more mercy than I deserve.

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells the parable of a servant who owed his boss a bunch of money, and the boss forgives the entire debt.

But then the servant goes to another guy who owes HIM just a LITTLE bit of money, and he thrashes the guy.

The boss calls him back in, and here are the words that Jesus puts in the boss's mouth:

Matthew 18:33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

I shouldn't be looking for justice. I should be looking for mercy.

The apostle James lays it on the line in

James 2:13 ...Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

If we go back to *The Merchant of Venice* for a moment, Portia goes on to say:

*Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy....*

Thank God he didn't decide to be fair with us.

Ephesians 2 shows us what he decided to do instead — I'll edit it just a bit:

Ephesians 2:

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,

2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world....

3 All of us ... were by nature objects of wrath.

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,

5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.

Let's pray. Let's rejoice. Let's celebrate!