

February 11, 2007

Mercy For Me But Judgment For Others?

II Corinthians 1:3-7 / I John 3:16-18 / Job 24:1-25

Today we find Job voicing his desire for something I believe we have probably all desired at one time or another — set, fixed, regular, scheduled and periodic dates set aside for judgment. Times when God would judge evildoers.

But by the word “judgment,” Job doesn’t simply mean times when the wicked or sinful would be judged for their evil or sin (though that is the direction he heads with this chapter). He also means times of judgment when the upright or innocent could be vindicated of the charges unfairly brought against them — which is exactly what he has been pleading for in the last few chapters — a time to present the case of his innocence before God that he might be exonerated of the charges his friends are continually leveling against him.

There’s just something about having justice doled out on a regular basis that would make it seem so much fairer, and not only fairer, but so much more effective as a deterrent to crime, or an incentive to doing good.

Maybe Job knew what common sense makes plain, and recent studies in criminology have revealed — that it is not the SEVERITY of the punishment that deters crime, but the SWIFTNESS with which sentence is carried out. They even reveal that lesser punishments carried out swiftly, are better deterrents than more severe punishments that aren’t carried out until years down the road.

And the same principle is true in terms of reward. Immediate, tangible, lesser rewards handed out frequently and promptly to those who have worked for them, are much more effective in spurring people on to do their best, than massive rewards promised years down the road. In fact, I once jokingly told a group of evangelical pastors lamenting the fact that their people didn’t do evangelism: “That’s the one mistake God made. He didn’t add a “price per head” incentive when He commissioned us to do evangelism! Had He just offered \$5 for each person witnessed to, and \$100 for each person that ended up being converted, you wouldn’t be able to stop the stampede of Christians racing out their doors in a mad rush to witness to every person they could find!”

And, yes, I did say it in a joking fashion. But even today I still believe there is a grain of truth to it. God’s offer of the unspeakably precious Crown of Righteousness, or the offer of His priceless

words of divine affirmation, “Well done my good and faithful servant,” given on the future day of resurrection and judgment, doesn’t seem to be as effective in getting people to evangelize, as a regular monthly incentive check would be, mailed directly to their home address!

It’s true: We do tend to prefer immediate recompense, whether it be reward for obedience, exoneration from false charges leveled against us, or the punishment of those who do evil. We don’t like waiting and waiting and waiting...

Yet of those set, scheduled, regular, annual or semi-annual “days” of judgment, Job says, “Why must those who know Him look in vain for such days?” And notice he does not say “look in vain for such a day (singular),” since, as we have already seen, Job seems to know there will be such a “Day” off in the future — the final Day of Judgment spoken of so frequently in Scripture.

No. His gripe is NOT that there won’t be such a day way off in the future. His gripe is that it’s so far, far off, and that he will have to wait so darn long for it to actually come — that as far as he knows, never have his name will never be cleared of all the false charges people are leveling against him.

Everyone thinks he has done something terribly wrong, and he wants the truth to be known, and his name to be cleared NOW — NOT on that far away Day of Judgment, but right now!

His desire, then, is that in ADDITION to that one great Day of Judgment way off in the future, there might be set, regularly scheduled, ongoing, “days” of judgment” in this life, when wrongs could be righted, evils addressed, and innocent people exonerated of all false charges unjustly brought against them.

“Do it now Lord,” is Job’s cry! “Clear my name now, not on some day way off in the eternal future!”

Yet it’s not just his INNOCENCE that he wants God to make known in the present by set, scheduled days of judgment. It’s also the GUILT of others who are viewed in society upstanding successful citizens, yet are getting away with evil on the sly:

like those who increase their real estate holdings by moving boundary stones (v. 2), or get richer by increasing their flocks with stolen sheep (v. 2b).

It’s the successful businessman who (at least in part) has gotten rich and prospered because he has no heart — taking the widow’s ox in pledge (v. 3), and forcing the poor off their land and into hiding (v. 4) (obviously so that he can get his hands on it to plant on it or sell it).

A man who seizes the children of single mother's, and the infants of the poor, as payment for some financial debt they owe (v. 9) (and it means to be sold and raised as slaves or household servants in the houses of the rich). Men who exploit the poor as cheap laborers who carry armloads of food, yet go hungry, or tread the winepresses full of wine, yet suffer thirst (vv. 10-11).

Such men are often honored by society as "successful businessmen," yet their wealth has been gained, and their success is sustained, by their exploitation of the poor, and the widow — the vulnerable people of society — like the orphan, the fatherless, or the single mom who has no husband to protect her, pay off her debts, or provide for her and her children.

You see, Job's lament is that things aren't always what they appear. Some who are honored for their success should be jailed as criminals, and some who are condemned as criminals should be honored as the heroes of society!

That's what bothers Job. He feels it's a travesty of justice that such things will not be revealed until the far off future Day of Judgment. The FALSE PERCEPTIONS people hold to in this world will continue to prevail, and the REAL TRUTH will not be known until some future day way off in the eternal future.

And Job, for one, wishes that it were not so — he is innocent yet treated as guilty, while all around him murderers get away with their murder (v. 14), adulterers get away with their adultery (v. 15), and thieves get away with their stealing (v. 16).

One day the REAL STORY will be made known — "God," says Job, "may let such people rest in a feeling of security (and he means now in the present), but His eyes are on their ways. For a little while they are exalted (society does hail them) but soon they are gone, gathered up like all others..." (vv. 23-24) Gathered up to do what? To WAIT in the grave for that future Day of Judgment when the REAL TRUTH will be revealed. As Hebrews 9:27 states: "It is appointed unto man once to die and after that, to face the judgment."

In that sense Job is both orthodox in what he believes, honest and discerning in what he points out, and very human in what he desires — for what person that is INNOCENT does not want their innocence made known?

And what person who knows of SECRET EVILS and HYPOCRISY committed by the rich and respected members of society, does not want that evil and hypocrisy exposed — NOT way off in eternity, but right now in this present life?

In that sense, probably all of us can relate very well to Job in this passage. Yet, in another way, there's probably also a sense in which we're kind of glad that God DOESN'T make all the truth known on a regular basis! Because although we may not be guilty of being mean to the widow and orphan / or taking advantage of single mothers and fatherless children / or exploiting the poor in order to get rich — we know that if God did have regular times when He laid bare the secrets of men's hearts, and made known to all the real truth about every aspect of our lives, we'd probably ALL be rather embarrassed on occasion. And though Job doesn't seem to see it, that would include him as well.

That's the problem. Job is "blameless and upright" (which as Psalm 19 points out, means "Innocent of willful (premeditated) sins, or great transgression"). But it doesn't mean sinless — for no one but Jesus was sinless. No one but Jesus could be exposed to regular, set times of judgment and be cleared of every accusation, on every occasion.

The rest of us would probably be pretty red-faced on a regular basis, dreading, rather than desiring, such annual or semi-annual times of judgment. Job (like us) may be innocent of any really "big" sins, but he's NOT by any means innocent of ALL sins — meaning that as much as he would like his name cleared in one sense, if he really thought about what he's asking for, he may NOT be so eager to have everything about him exposed.

Yet you can't have it both ways! You can't have justice served for SOME and not OTHERS, or justice served for the BIG sins of others and not for what we consider our own LESSER sins. If you want justice to be served, it has to be served to every-one, for everything, or else it's NOT true justice! Its injustice, or partiality! And as II Chron. 19:7 tells us, "with he LORD our God there is no injustice or partiality."

If we want justice it must be justice in the present for ALL (including ourselves), or justice for none — you can't have mercy for ME and justice for OTHERS, though that is what we often desire! Which leaves us in a very odd position in relation to this text! Because on the one hand we've all been where Job is — wanting God to expose the truth and exonerate us of false charges leveled against us when we're innocent. But being kind of thankful that we're given a second chance, and that God DOESN'T expose the depths of our guilt when we're the ones who have sinned. We even rightly see such times as expressions of His grace giving us the opportunity to repent and make things right.

As I've said before, and I'll say it again: If justice had been served for every infraction of the law that I committed in my teens and early twenties, I'd probably still be in jail. And maybe some of you could say the same. God's choosing NOT to have regular, set, scheduled, frequent times of judgment was actually an expression of His grace to me and you. It saved us from great embarrassment, shame, humiliation, fines, and even jail time.

In fact, there were times in my life where I would have been one of those people Job wishes God would judge — one who could have been judged, and should have been judged, but is extremely grateful that God didn't judge. That He judged Jesus in my place, and having punished Him in my place, chose to show me mercy — giving me a second chance instead of executing justice.

In that sense I think Job (in this passage), comes dangerously close to being somewhat pharisaical — desiring the condemnation of those who commit BIG SINS, and while assuming God should overlook his LESSER SINS. He seems a bit oblivious to the fact that although he is innocent of "GREAT transgression," he is still guilty of "LESSER transgressions," and that biblically speaking, "any sin, regardless of its size is worthy of infinite punishment, when committed against an infinitely holy God."

It's a thought that should keep Job's pride in check here, and ours as well, whenever we're tempted to want to see God execute "justice" on others!

It's a point that reminds me of something that happened shortly after my conversion. I was in the Dominican Republic where I worked with delinquent teenage youth sent there from the United States to the reform school at which I worked.

And on one occasion, as I was out in the yard teaching gym class (I don't even remember what sport it was) — but one boy (who had been sent to our program for possession of drugs, inciting a riot, and striking a police officer!) was being given him a hard time by a couple of the other boys (who had similar backgrounds).

And near the end of the class, full of frustration and anger over his perceived mistreatment, it came to a head! He fell down on his knees, cupped his face in his hands, and started weeping and cussing out the other boys under his breath. I dismissed everyone else, went over to him, knelt down, put my arm on his back, and started to talk to him.

He held it together for a few seconds until with a tone of anger that seethed with animosity toward the other boys, he blurted out: "I wish God would just kill all the filthy rotten sinners." And the very first thought that popped into my head was, "Run for it!! Take cover!!" Here I was leaning over a boy who just asked God to strike down all the sinners — and he meant right then and there! Like Job, he didn't seem to realize that if God did that would include HIM, and ME too!
And I personally would prefer mercy, rather than justice!

Yet this is my point: If I desire MERCY for me (in spite of my sins), can I legitimately desire HARSH JUSTICE for others (because of their sins)? Can I really desire MERCY for me, and JUSTICE for others, without being just a tad bit inconsistent, unjust and self-righteous?

Probably not. At least not as it pertains to God. And if it is true that our biggest complaint in life is that things just aren't fair, then are we not desiring the very unfairness we claim to hate when WE want the special treatment of God's favoritism and mercy for us, yet inwardly we desire harsh treatment or severe judgment for OTHERS?

Yes, we are! Which is one of the reasons the Bible condemns judging others. Because judging results from a blindness toward the guilt of our own sin. Jesus essentially says that when He tells his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not judge, or you will be judged... Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brothers eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?" Because what does a "plank" in one's eye do? Very simply, it blocks you from seeing things that should be perfectly clear to you!

So, where do we go with all this? How can, or does it apply to us?

(THREE quick ways.) **FIRST** it should assure us that Job, though blameless and upright, and a wonderful example to us, still had his flaws. He was not some super-human saint! But rather, like us, he was very, very human, and being very, very human, he was given to being inconsistent — just like all of us. And it is because we are inconsistent that we often rush into judgment and say things we shouldn't, or wouldn't, if we'd just give the issues a little more thought.

You see, one of the problems here is that Job is speaking in the heat of an argument where he is being accused of crimes he did not commit. And because he is, those accusations dominate his entire focus, and make him desire something, and say something he probably wouldn't have said had he just given a bit more thought to his own guilt in regard to the lesser sins for which he was culpable.

I could say the same about that boy in the Dominican Republic who in the heat of the moment, felt the unfairness of his present situation, and in response desired some-thing and said some-thing he probably wouldn't have said had he given just a little more honest thought to what he was saying!

And don't we do the same? Don't we sometimes wish OTHERS were punished for sins that WE committed and got away with? Don't we sometimes want harsh justice for others after we've received mercy in the same regard? Don't we often want the sins of others exposed while at the very same time we pray with all our heart that our own sins are NOT — at least by others or by our peers?

Aren't we in some ways just as inconsistent on occasion as Job appears to be in this passage, or that boy in the Dominican Republic made himself to be when he actually said what many of us have FELT but were wise enough NOT to SAY?! In fact, if we gave it just a little more thought, would we be a bit more humble, and merciful, and hesitant to judge others, remembering we too are sinners?

The **SECONDLY**, Job's words help us to see the need to truly know ourselves better than we do. And I even hesitate to encourage this point since in our society we've gone a little overboard with it. As one person put it, "We live in a society infatuated with the self," where the stated goal of life is to love oneself, be one's own best friend, and know oneself inside out. To have our focus so fixated on ourselves that we don't even see or notice the needs of others because our gaze is so fixed on us.

In our society (self-focused as we are) I find myself constantly having to remind people that there are **ONLY TWO GREAT COMMANDMENTS** and not three! Jesus says, "All the Law and Prophets hang on these **TWO** commandments." Not three, but two! It is NOT — love God, love yourself, and love your neighbor — which is how I've often heard it preached (and preached using that unbiblical sequence as well).

"The **FIRST** and greatest command," says Jesus, "is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength, and the **SECOND** is like it — Love your neighbor as yourself." God first, self and others simultaneously second. Yet because we've made it into three, and inverted the order of the last two, we've come to the point where people are so content loving themselves, that they never venture out to love their neighbors.

As one study interestingly points out that most Americans living in suburban neighborhoods, don't even know the neighbor living two houses away or 100 yards down the road. And some don't even know the one's living in the next house. An odd fact in light of Jesus command to love our neighbors!

You see, we've got the "love ourselves" thing pretty much down pat. But we're a little bit lacking in the "love our neighbor" category. Biblically speaking, they should never be separated — we are to do the one AS we do the other, not AFTER we learn to do the other!

Yet having said that (and realizing I'm guilty of that very thing myself) I can also say there IS a need in Christian circles for people to know themselves better. Scripture, as Calvin pointed out, wasn't given solely to help us know God, it was also given to help us know who we are, what makes us tick, and why we do the things we do.

It reveals the motivations of our heart. It is not only a book of theology, but anthropology as well. I've learned more accurate information about the inner workings of the soul from the Bible than I ever did by studying psychology.

And it's only when we know ourselves and who we are, and what makes us tick, and why we do the things we do or do the things we don't want to do (!), that we can avoid many of the blatant inconsistencies that arise from being ignorant of the inner workings of our own soul. Job obviously knows himself well, and he's also very aware of what goes on in the world around him — but on this occasion he displays a little misunderstanding of BOTH God, His mercy and justice, and his own culpability and sin.

The same is probably true for US on occasion. If we really knew ourselves better, and were more honest about what we find there it would surely humble us, lessen our tendency to judge others, make us more compassionate, and give us more of a desire to see people experience God's grace and pardon for their sins, rather than His justice and judgment for their sins.

And **LAST**, having done those things, we would probably have more of a tendency to want to alleviate the suffering and exploitation Job has seen, rather than merely talking about how unfortunate it is, or simply wishing people would be punished for it. We would find ourselves moved to do something about it.

You see, it isn't enough to see the suffering of others and lament it. It is necessary that we seek to alleviate it. As the Apostle John points out, just as Jesus laid down his life for us, so we should also lay down our lives for others:

“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words and tongue, but with actions and in truth.”

That's what I leave you with today — a call to action. Not just lamenting injustice and suffering, or wishing God would judge those who make others suffer (as Job does in this passage) but actually reaching out to help those who are suffering in real and tangible ways.

Because sometimes, like Job, we can get so caught up in our own pain, that we do very little for others who are also in pain — except say, feel and think it's wrong, but never actually do something about it — never open our homes to the widow and orphan, or feed and clothe the hungry and naked.

We can easily fall into that trap. In fact, we often do! The trap the Apostle John speaks about — of loving with words and feelings, but falling short of truest expression of love — agape — which expresses itself in sacrificial actions.