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The Logic of Love

Chapter 15: It's Just Not Fair

Mercy for me

Justice for you

I get a second chance

But you get the screw

When the game isn't fair

Don't bother to deal

A pair of double standards

Make God seem unreal

Human history is filled with stories of atrocity that bring the goodness of God into question. But who needs history? A good dose of the evening news is all it takes. We watch as deranged high school students gun down classmates by the score or as political unrest unleashes the large-scale horrors of war, and the next thing you know people are proclaiming, "There is no God!" This bespeaks an emotional conflict, not a philosophical one. The heartfelt sentiment is certainly praiseworthy, but the conclusion is unreasoned.

It is not surprising that atrocities are seen as a contradiction to the existence of a loving God because such occurrences beg us to identify with the oppressed. This identification heralds a call for justice. If there is no justice, there is no God. On the other hand, love also admonishes us to temper justice with mercy. The experience of parenting brings this issue to light more clearly than does anything else. As parents, we are called upon to teach and administer the values of justice/fairness and mercy/generosity.⁽¹⁾ Additionally, we are called upon to make decisions about when it is appropriate to intervene in conflicts that our children have with each other and with other people's children.

First, we will examine the tension between justice and mercy. Then we will take on the far more difficult issue of intervention.

And Justice For All

See Moe.

See Moe's brother, Larry.

See Moe and Larry beaming with broad smiles. That's because even though Moe and Larry only have one joystick between them, they have learned to share.

How could that have possibly happened?

Well, they learned it from their Mommy!

"You each get to have a turn for ten minutes," says Mommy. "Then switch."

"I get to go first because I'm smarter, older, stronger, better lookin' than him, and you love me more. Isn't that right Mommy?" implores Moe.

"Now where would you ever get an idea like that," asks Mommy. "You know I love you both the same. We'll toss a coin. Call it in the air, Moe!"

And that's how Moe and Larry learned to share.

Here comes cousin Curly.

See the sun sparkle on his bald little head as he approaches Moe and Larry's house.

Cousin Curly does not have a broad beaming smile. He has a big sad frown because he

doesn't have a joystick at his house.

"Let's let cousin Curly play with the joystick for the first half hour because he doesn't get to play as much as you two lucky guys," suggests Mommy.

"But Mommy," screams Moe, "that's not fair! It's our game. Why should Curly get better treatment than your own children? You don't believe in fairness at all. You're just an old wrinkled hag!"

Fairness is easy to teach and hard to argue with. In contrast, mercy is hard to teach and easy to argue with. Moe's harsh words to Mommy demonstrate the common disposition that people have not only for reverting to fairness when the value of applying mercy is not shared, but also for heaping disdain onto those who wish to forsake fairness and manifest mercy. Children must learn justice before they can be taught mercy, and they must learn it through experience. They are hardly sophisticated enough to get the lesson as an intellectual exercise.

When justice isn't present, the natural inclination is to blame the one who is in charge of administering justice. Whether it is Mommy or God, if the administration of justice would make our lives better, it becomes easy to criticize whoever is in charge for being inadequate. Justice is easier to understand than mercy. Justice tends toward being precise, predictable, and socially sanctioned. In contrast, the characteristics of mercy are creativity, imprecision, and individualized expression. We reach out with mercy; we fall back on justice.

Children must learn the value of justice before they can benefit from experiences that teach the value of mercy. Yet as children develop an appreciation for justice, it becomes necessary to extend mercy because mercy helps them develop the nobility of character that manifests as self-correction and tenderness of heart. Tempering justice with mercy is part of the art of living; it cannot be reduced to a formula. All it takes is having more than one child to appreciate that redress for a victim is not more or less important than redeeming an oppressor. When the oppressed and the oppressor, the advantaged and disadvantaged, are both part of the same family, love more easily finds a healthy balance between justice and mercy.

Rather than a blessing, mercy becomes a curse when it is applied before children develop an appreciation for the value of justice. (This is no less true for adults, but addressing the issue becomes a lot more complicated in the absence of a parental authority.) Infants enter the world too unsophisticated to appreciate justice, let alone the attenuation of justice by mercy. In order to instill the value of fairness and the worldly wisdom that "actions have consequences," parents discipline their children; they administer justice. For the purpose of teaching children to have a tender heart regarding the unfairness and imperfections in life and to allow an opportunity for self-correction to occur, parents temper their administration of justice with mercy. The extension of mercy is wise when based on the recognition that there is a reasonable chance that an attitude of self-correction might develop.

Parents have cause to celebrate when their children begin to recognize, admit, and correct their own mistakes. When children begin to develop this level of maturity, the whole tenor of parenting can take on new dimensions. The focus of child rearing evolves from setting healthy boundaries to teaching children how to make wise and creative decisions. As children master fundamental social boundaries, family life can enjoy the ripened fruits of peace, happiness, and accomplishment that are the rewards of successful parenting.

When parents unwisely administer justice or mercy, then everyone in the family suffers for it. Generally speaking, the "spoiled brat" syndrome reflects the over-application of mercy. Children become spoiled when they are sheltered from facing life's worthwhile struggles or from appropriate consequences for inappropriate actions. In contrast, an untrusting and unspirited character often indicates that justice was not sufficiently tempered with mercy. The consequences resulting from the misapplication of justice and mercy manifest in the same way whether the community is the family or the world and whether the stakes are high or low.

When the victim is our own dead child murdered by a stranger, we can easily lose sight of the value of mercy. Questioning the existence of God under such circumstances is natural. Extremes are challenging, but not theologically insurmountable. Notwithstanding that a greater degree of atrocity calls for a greater attenuation of mercy, so also does a heightened ability to rehabilitate an oppressor *and* compensate a victim justify a greater extension of mercy. When considering the redeeming and redressing abilities of God, extreme ministrations of mercy are justifiable. This is especially true given the limitations on divine intervention necessitated by the Freewill Love Factor.

The Mercy of Nonintervention

If there is a God, he has methodologies for teaching justice and mercy that are completely unacceptable for earthly parents to employ. The appropriateness of divine intervention operates on such a different level than it does for earthly parents that it is easy to lose sight of how the same principles are in operation.

Today is a special day. It's Christmas!

See Moe and Larry playing with the only toy they found under the Christmas tree this year. It's a brand new GI Joe!

Moe wants to dress up GI Joe in sand-colored fatigues. He wants to re-create the Desert Storm operation. All the burning oil wells looked so spectacular on television.

Larry wants to dress up GI Joe in camouflage fatigues and pretend to invade Serbia with an infantry division. Ground conflicts seem a lot more exciting than just dropping a bunch of bombs.

See Moe and Larry argue. See them get oh-so-frustrated!

"Let's let Mommy decide," suggests Moe, as he reflects on his imagined most-favored-child status.

"Okay," says Larry, thinking that his interest in current events will carry the day.

"You know, Moe, Desert Storm really is yesterday's news," Mommy says authoritatively. "Focusing on Europe will help you more at school with your current events class. And besides, all that chemical weapons exposure will take the fun out of it."

See Moe and Larry still not getting along. See Moe and Larry go back to Mommy five minutes later with another problem.

"Mommy, Larry keeps talking in a French accent because he doesn't know what Serbs sound like. Please make him stop. It's ruining the whole ambiance!"

"Moe's right, Larry," says Mommy. "At least try to use the right accent. Listen to the news if you have to. A French accent is no substitute for a Serbian accent. You'll confuse the troops! Now run along and play. Mommy's got work to do."

See Moe and Larry still not getting along. See Moe and Larry come back again in just two minutes. They have learned to bring all their problems to Mommy so that she can sort out each and every conflict that arises between them.

Today is a special day. It's Christmas, again.

Moe and Larry got two new toys for Christmas this year and they're even better than action figures. But the toys are not all that is new at their house. The family is also enjoying a new lesson that they got last year from playing with GI Joe.

"From now on," says Mommy, "you boys work out your own problems. I tried my best last year to teach you how to play nicely together. This year I want you to help Mommy stay out of the psych ward by solving your own problems. Okay? Now open your present and see what Mommy got you for Christmas this year."

See Moe and Larry ripping through the wrapping paper. See Moe and Larry pull out a slingshot and a brand new pump-action pellet gun. What fun!

"I get to play with the pellet gun first," asserts Moe. Watch Moe load up the gun with pellets and give it a few extra pumps beyond the manufacturer's recommendation.

"Hey, don't be pointing that thing at me," demands Larry.

"Don't be such a baby," snaps Moe. "It's not like I shot you."

"Then I suppose you won't mind if a few rocks go whizzing past your ear. As long as they don't hit you, there's no damage done. Right?" retorts Larry.

See Mommy take the boys to the hospital. See Mommy reconsider the issue of intervention. It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye.

As adults who embrace love as the highest value, we want others to extend mercy to us so that we may have an opportunity to recognize our mistakes and correct them. Just as we strive to help children see and correct their mistakes, we expect this same consideration from others. Often the extension of mercy means that someone who has already suffered unjustly is being asked to endure further suffering for the sake of tempering justice with mercy. Balancing parental intervention with giving children an opportunity to learn to get along on their own is one of the great challenges of parenthood. Children can do physical harm to each other, and parents, when administering discipline, can do physical harm to their children. In either situation, the degree of harm marks the difference between child rearing and child abuse.(2)

Parents sometimes tolerate one child being abusive toward another. This is not because parents are

willing to sacrifice one child to another *just* for the sake of giving the offending one a chance to repent. While the oppressor is given a chance for self-correction, the oppressed child has an opportunity to develop a noble character. Adversity provides the necessary circumstances for learning to express increasingly excellent acts of love. Learning the value of mercy comes from having it extended to us and from extending it to others.

As parents, we suffer the injustice inflicted upon one child by another for the sake of teaching mercy to both. The wisdom of nonintervention is conditioned by the degree to which physical harm has occurred or might occur. The physical harm standard that is appropriate for measuring our parental wisdom, however, is not appropriate for trying to discern divine wisdom regarding nonintervention.

As parents, we are responsible for caring for our children until they become adults. Once children reach adulthood, if one hits the other, then it is the government's job to step in. The emancipation of children terminates the rights and responsibilities of parenthood. When children reach the governmentally prescribed age of adulthood, they attain a social status that is equal to that of their parents, even though on a personal level the parent-child dynamic may continue to exist.

In contrast, the progressive development of our relationship to a Divine Parent would have radically different characteristics than those associated with biological parents. With God, duration is not limited, equality of social status is never achieved, and (as many a martyr might tell us) the citadel of spiritual freewill is unassailable—one can enjoy inner peace even while enduring outward persecution.

As contrasted with the limitations of biological parents, God presumably can make everything work out in the end through the creation of an afterlife. The wise bestowal of mercy must take into account the time element needed for self-correction and also the harm done by the time lag of justice. Although balancing justice and mercy on a divine scale might look very different than when it is done on a human scale, the principles are the same.

The conditions that make mercy necessary are also the conditions that generate the possibility for such character traits as altruism, loyalty, and courage. The Freewill Love Factor necessitates some degree of suffering. The ministration of mercy means that suffering may increase and be prolonged. But the suffering that comes from human atrocities is a reflection on the character of the people who carry out such atrocities; it should not be permitted to taint the concept of God. If there is *the possibility* that with enough time and a good attitude on our part a God could help us become enriched from even the worst experiences, then to ask for more would be unreasonable. To ask for more would deteriorate the integrity of our freewill because it would produce a Selfish Sam type of experience.

The admonition to take responsibility for one's attitude when faced with terrible injustice does not reflect insensitivity to the plight of the oppressed; it is the rallying cry of spiritual freewill and it glorifies the value of mercy. What is truly insensitive to the human spirit is suggesting that some of us simply are not capable of meeting life's challenges with a positive attitude. This world is filled with plenty of stories about people unpredictably rising to the occasion. Sometimes the ones most surprised are the family and friends of the one plagued by adversity. Other times it is the unfortunate person, chenself, who is most surprised. When we take ownership of our attitude, we open ourselves to the inspiration that can come from anecdotes about how others have bravely met life's challenges. By identifying with the self-empowerment of others, we better realize the spiritual heights to which we can also ascend.

It is contradictory to believe in the existence of God and yet hold that human potential is too limited to *eventually* make the best out of all that comes our way. History is a wonderful thing because even though the events cannot be changed, our interpretation of them can be. By appreciating the necessities of the Freewill Love Factor and by continually upgrading our interpretation of past events, we enable ourselves to not only make peace with the past, but also to find new ways of being enriched by the past. Faith provides an opportunity to make peace with the past and have a positive attitude about the future.

Footnotes:

(1) Justice is to mercy what fairness is to generosity. Different contexts sometimes call for the use of one pairing of terms rather than the other. Justice and mercy come into play when things have gone wrong. Fairness and generosity are applied to keep things going right. When both of these facets are appropriate to the discussion, I will use the words *justice* and *mercy* for the sake of

simplicity.

(2) There are, of course, instances when parents should intervene even though physical harm is not at issue. But when it comes to considering whether this world is a contradiction to the existence of God, it's the sticks and stones far more than the names that people complain about. For this reason, the discussion will be limited to the material world, rather than psychological issues.

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