

SHARING SCRIPTURE

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Mercy and Justice in Psalms and Proverbs

For use: July 21 - 27

Texts: Psalm 9:7-9, 13-20; Psalm 82; Psalm 101; Psalm 146; Proverbs 10:4; Proverbs 13:23, 25; 30:7-9

Federal prosecutors on July 17 urged the jury that found Brendt Christensen guilty in the kidnapping and killing of Chinese scholar Yingying Zhang to hand down the death sentence. Zhang came to Illinois from China to pursue a doctoral degree. "The time has come. Justice must be done," U.S. Attorney James Nelson said in his closing statement. "Sentence Brendt Christensen to death." He argued that the death penalty is appropriate because of his obvious lack of remorse.

Defense attorney Elisabeth Pollock pled for mercy for her client: "Remember he is a whole person. This is not the worst thing he ever did." She countered the prosecutor's argument by stating that if they sentenced him to life without parole he will die in prison anyway. Pollock summarized her plea with the reminder, "The law gives each one of you the ability to temper justice with mercy." [1]

This week's lesson looks at the blend of justice and mercy within the broader concept of good versus evil, especially in cases where the wealthy and powerful oppress the poor and helpless. It seems to be a given characteristic of human nature that the powerful will, over time, increase their dominance by oppressing everyone else. God sent messages through the composers of the Psalms and Proverbs to remind Israel that they were to live by the Spirit instead of that human nature. While the surrounding nations accepted the arrangement of the rich lording themselves over the poor, Israel was to ensure that both the powerful and the powerless receive mercy and justice equally.

Almost everyone has some degree of influence and authority over someone else. The question for us is, how will we wield that clout? David knew both extremes of the powerless-to-powerful spectrum. After being oppressed by King Saul, he brought that perspective to his leadership style once he ascended to the throne. During his oppression he was surrounded by "all those who were in distress or in debt or discontented" (1 Samuel 22:2), so he had personal experience with leading the marginalized.

Though neither David, Solomon, nor the other writers of the Psalms and Proverbs always

practiced a balance of mercy and justice perfectly, their attempts to live by that standard set them above many of the other leaders in Judah and Israel. Their reminders of God's ideal for us can help us to stand for justice mixed with mercy. God's law indeed gives us the ability, and the mandate, to temper justice with mercy.

~Chuck Burkeen

[1] <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/criminal-justice/ct-brendt-christensen-death-penalty-trial-20190717-hv7g7vdiwbcpnhinmnh4hwy3hi-story.html>

For Reflection

Connecting: When it comes to disciplining deviant people (children, employees, etc.) what factors play into your actions? Do you always feel good about applying justice? Do you ever feel remorse for being too merciful? How much should feelings influence your disciplinary actions?

Sharing: God destroyed Sodom but gave mercy to the woman caught in adultery. Why did God prescribe the different outcomes of these two situations?

1. God was angrier during the Old Testament days, but mellowed out some by the time of Jesus
2. Sodom had committed the unpardonable sin, but the woman was still redeemable
3. The woman didn't choose that life, but was forced into it by a series of unfortunate circumstances and abusive relationships
4. God gave Sodom several chances to repent for mistreating the poor (Ezekiel 16:49), but they refused
5. God used these situations to illustrate that, even though heaven prefers mercy, justice is always on the table
6. Other:

Applying: Imagine your group is a jury, and you are deliberating the death penalty phase of a trial. Go around your circle and each one state one thing you would look for in the defendant that could sway you toward leniency.

Valuing: Balancing justice and mercy in real-life situations sometimes requires wisdom beyond human ability. If you are in such a situation currently, or if you know that one is coming your way, pray now for the discernment you need.

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