

Ministry in Mercy and Truth

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We are living in a time when people are trying to decide whether we are to walk according to grace or are we to walk according to the law.

They act as if it is an either or situation. And yet, God at times seems to embrace both grace and law or mercy and truth. Jesus Himself was full of grace and full of truth.

A. God can appear to have two sides to His personality.

Wherever you are reading in the Bible you may get the impression that there are two different Gods presented to us—a good and gracious God and a mean and spiteful God. This is easy to do because you can go to various passages of the Bible and see God in action. Sometimes those actions seem to be almost vengeful. At other times those actions seem to be abundantly gracious.

B. Certain elements of God’s nature at times conflict with His interaction with mankind.

The truth is that:

1. God is love but He is also holy (I John 4:8; I Pet. 1:15-16).
2. God loves righteousness but He hates iniquity (Ps. 11:7; 45:7; Pro. 6:16-19; Ps. 5:5).
3. God is a God who loves mercy, but He also is a God who loves truth (Gen. 24:27).
4. God is a God who forgives but He is also a God who brings judgment upon the unrepentant (Ex. 34:6-7).

When God showed Himself to Moses and revealed His person, He highlighted the blending of His nature that combines both mercy and grace with goodness and truth. He revealed a nature that involved forgiving thousands but at the same time bringing judgment on thousands of others.

And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.” Exodus 34:6-7

C. There are many verses that demonstrate this apparent conflict. The following are just a few:

Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed. Psalm 85:10

Do not withhold Your tender mercies from me, O LORD; let Your lovingkindness and Your truth continually preserve me. Psalm 40:11

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; mercy and truth go before Your face. Psalm 89:14

He shall abide before God forever. Oh, prepare mercy and truth, which may preserve him!
Psalm 61:7

Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.
Romans 11:22

D. Jesus demonstrated this apparent conflict—full of grace and truth (Ps. 45:7; John 1:14).

Jesus was full of grace and truth. That is, He was filled fully with grace, but, at the same time, He was filled fully with truth.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

1. Jesus was a minister of MERCY (Acts 10:38; Luke 4:17-21; Is. 61:1-2).

Most people think of Jesus as the minister of God’s mercy who went about relieving suffering, healing the sick, reaching out in compassion and spreading kindness wherever He went. This is the image that we see when we look at most of the nice pictures of Jesus that hang on people’s walls.

This is a very important view of Jesus that was highlighted by the apostles in their preaching and teaching (Acts 10:38).

This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. Acts 10:36-38, NLT

This is a very important aspect of Jesus ministry that even Jesus highlighted when he read from Isaiah to announce His ministry (Luke 4:18-19, Compare Isaiah 61:1-2).

The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, for He has anointed Me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.” He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at Him intently. Then He began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!”

Luke 4:17-21, NLT

After reading from this portion of Scripture, we see Jesus embarking on this mission. The world had never seen such a ministry of love, kindness and grace. Some of the scenes that we are given from Jesus' life and ministry are very touching and very challenging at the same time.

a. He ministered to the leper (Mark 1:40-44).

Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. Mark 1:40-42

b. He ministered to the bereaved (Luke 7:12-16).

And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother. Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen up among us"; and, "God has visited His people." Luke 7:12-16

c. He ministered to sinners (Mark 12:13-17; John 8:10-11).

Even though Jesus knew the law and fulfilled it in His own personal life, He also understood the heart of God that stood behind the law. As a result when He applied the law He did it in a way that was tempered by mercy. Jesus had a way of seeing into the hearts of the people whom He encountered and He related to them more on the basis of what was on the inside of them rather than on what could be observed on the outside.

In John 8 we see the religious leaders coming to Jesus and presenting Him with a woman who caught in an adulterous act. They brought her to Jesus because they were once again trying to test Him and put Him on the spot (Compare: Mark 12:13-17). Their motives were not necessarily the purest.

In this case they stood the woman in front of Jesus and they reminded Jesus that the Law of Moses required that this woman be put to death (See: Leviticus 20:10). Then they turned to Jesus and asked Him, "But what do you say?" In doing so they were testing Him hoping to bring some sort of accusation against Jesus because that seemed to be their primary mission in life.

As was expected, Jesus did the unexpected. Forget the fact that this scene was a total set up. Forget the fact that if this woman were caught in an adulterous act there should have been a man to bring to judgment as well. Forget the fact that the religious leaders were not interested in justice or the honor of God but in their personal agenda. Forget the fact

that they cared little for this woman and more about bringing Jesus down. Jesus first response was to ignore them.

For Jesus this incident was about more than just the woman, who surely had her issues. It was about the religious leaders of the day. It was about what these leaders had become in relation to the people and the application of the law. They were very strong in their attention to details in the law but Jesus was to later accuse them of neglecting the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy and faith (Mt. 23:23). Jesus knew the hearts of these leaders and that they were total hypocrites (See: Matthew 23:1-39). Jesus was not going to play their little game.

And so, Jesus went straight to the heart of the matter. He never said that the woman did not deserve to be stoned. What He said was meant to penetrate the heart of every person standing in the crowd. The reality is that under the Old Testament laws you could be put to death for many things even less severe than adultery.

Here are only a few laws that they could have easily violated, all requiring the death penalty:

- Murder (Ex. 21:12; Lev. 24:17)
- Adultery (Lev. 19:20; 20:10-16)
- Striking a parent (Ex. 21:15)
- Cursing a parent (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9)
- Profaning the Sabbath (Ex. 31:14)
- Blaspheming the name of the Lord (Lev. 24:10-16)
- Unauthorized people touching priestly functions (Num. 1:51; 3:10, 38; 18:7)

Had the Mosaic laws been applied as written, it is likely that nearly everyone in the crowd was under a death sentence under the Law of Moses. So when Jesus said to those who stood by, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first,” He turned this conversation back on the leaders and the people to examine their own hearts and their own relationship to God.

In point of fact, under those terms, Jesus was the only one present Who qualified to enforce the Law of Moses. Even though this woman was under a death sentence, Jesus saw the injustice of the situation, He saw the hearts of her accusers and He saw her as a pawn in the hands of these hypocritical leaders. Jesus would not be in support of such arbitrary justice.

As Jesus expected, one by one people walked away. When Jesus was finally left alone with the woman He addressed the woman (John 8:10-11).

When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

Jesus did not condemn her. When He said that He did not condemn her, it most likely meant that He had no authority to sit in judgment of her. The people who had the power to act on this matter would have been the actual witnesses and the magistrates, but these people were gone. Jesus acted mercifully toward the woman, but He also gave her a clear challenge—go and sin no more!

This woman represented the type of people that Jesus came to save. He came to seek and save that which was lost. He came to the world of sinful man to call them into a new relationship with God. He came to demonstrate the love of God.

d. Jesus ministered to the hungry (Mt. 15:32).

Jesus did not only care about the spiritual needs of people. He also showed genuine concern for the natural needs of people (Mt. 15:32).

Now Jesus called His disciples to Himself and said, "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And I do not want to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way."

Matthew 15:32

In this instance He did what needed to be done to take care of the natural needs of the people once again demonstrating that kind, compassionate, dispenser of mercy.

2. Jesus was a minister of TRUTH (Luke 17:13; Mt. 11:20-24).

However it is important for us to see that Jesus also had another side to Him. While He was a kind, compassionate, dispenser of mercy, on other occasions He exemplified a rebuking, correcting and cleansing minister of justice (Luke 17:3).

*Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, **rebuke him**; and if he repents, forgive him.* Luke 17:3

As you read all of the passages from Jesus' life and ministry you will find that there were times when He rebuked entire cities and villages (Mt. 11:20-24).

Next Jesus let fly on the cities where he had worked the hardest but whose people had responded the least, shrugging their shoulders and going their own way. "Doom to you, Chorazin! Doom, Bethsaida! If Tyre and Sidon had seen half of the powerful miracles you have seen, they would have been on their knees in a minute. At Judgment Day they'll get off easy compared to you. And Capernaum! With all your peacock strutting, you are going to end up in the abyss. If the people of Sodom had had your chances, the city would still be around. At Judgment Day they'll get off easy compared to you." –Msg

It should be noted that there is literally no one living in these places today!

- a. He was harsh toward the hypocrites (John 8:43-44; Mt. 15:7; 23:13-33).

Jesus was particularly hard on religious leaders whom He perceived to be hypocrites. He rebuked the Pharisees with some of the most scathing language found in the Bible. He referred to them in very negative ways. Here are a few of the choice things that He called them.

- A wicked and adulterous generation (Mt. 12:38; 16:4)
- Sign-seekers (Mt. 12:38; 16:4)
- Brood of vipers (Mt. 12:34; 23:33)
- Evil men (Mt. 12:34)
- Murders of those sent by God (Mt. 21:34-45; 23:31, 34-39)
- Ignorant of the Scripture (Mt. 22:29)
- Hypocrites (Mt. 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; Mark 7:6; Luke 11:44)
- Sons of hell (Mt. 23:15)
- Blind guides (Mt. 23:16, 24)
- Fools and blind (Mt. 23:17, 19, 26; Luke 11:40)
- Full of extortion and self-indulgence (Mt. 23:25)
- Whitewashed tombs full of dead men's bones (Mt. 23:27)
- Serpents (Mt. 23:33)
- Lovers of money (Luke 16:14)

Whatever happened to holy Jesus, meek and mild? Some of Jesus' comments border on vulgarity.

Why can't you understand one word I say? Here's why: You can't handle it. You're from your father, the Devil, and all you want to do is please him. He was a killer from the very start. He couldn't stand the truth because there wasn't a shred of truth in him. When the Liar speaks, he makes it up out of his lying nature and fills the world with lies. John 8:43-44, Msg

- b. He was ruthless on extortioners (John 2:13-17; Luke 19:45-46).

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. 15 When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. 16 And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" 17 Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up."

John 2:13-17

The disciples watching this scene simply observe and remember the prophecy about the Messiah that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up." The holy child Jesus, meek and mild did not show up on this day.

- c. He was blunt with disciples (Mark 8:33; 16:14; Luke 24:25).

Jesus was compassionate to the crowds in need but He was often much more direct with His own disciples especially when their faith failed them. On one occasion He rebuked Peter right in front of the rest of the disciples (Mark 8:33).

But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Mark 8:33

On another occasion He called some skeptical followers "O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe" (Luke 24:25). He rebuked His disciples after his resurrection for their hardness of heart and unbelief (Mark 16:14).

Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.

Jesus even rebuked churches in the first three chapters of Revelation (Rev. 2:4-5; 2:14-16; 2:20-23; 3:1-3; 3:14-22).

E. We are to be like Jesus.

After looking at the "split personality" of Jesus we can understand in a whole new way what it means to be like Jesus. As believers we are to give an accurate picture to the world of Jesus. This means that we must be people of balance. We are loving and gracious to those honest seekers who are in need. But we are intolerant of certain things as well. Jesus had the most intolerance of hypocrisy among religious people. But He also had no tolerance for sin. He loved the sinner but hated the sin.

As followers of Christ we are called to "put a face on God" just as Jesus did. If we are to accurately reflect God we must function in perfect balance. We cannot be more merciful than God. In the same way, we cannot be more stern or severe than God. We want to present God just as He truly is.

F. The ministry of Paul reflects this balanced approach.

1. Paul approached believers differently based on their levels of maturity (I Cor. 3:1-3).

This balance is seen in the ministry of Paul to the Corinthians church and his treatment of the man who was living in sin. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian believers he had a rather large agenda because there were so many issues that the church was facing. Most of them were related to the fact that even though these church members had been believers for some time, they were still living below where they should have been living. In many ways they were still living like the unsaved.

Paul rebuked them for remaining babes in Christ and he accused them of being carnal (I Cor. 3:1-3).

*And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to **spiritual people** but as to carnal, as to **babes in Christ**. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; 3 for you are still **carnal**. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and **behaving like mere men**? I Corinthians 3:1-3*

In this passage Paul refers to three types of believers—spiritual people, babes in Christ and carnal Christians.

- a. Spiritual people are mature Christians (I Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Phil. 3:15; Heb. 5:14).

*Solid food is for those who are **mature**, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right. Hebrews 5:14*

This person is referred to in the Bible as the spiritual man (I Cor. 2:15). Mature or spiritual persons also have certain qualities about them. They walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), they walk as children of the light (Eph. 5:8) and they manifest the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (Gal. 5:22-24).

- b. Babes in Christ are those who have recently accepted Christ as their personal Savior and Lord.

These are those who have not fully separated themselves unto God and are still in a new birth process. Their actual state is similar to the carnal Christian but only because they have not been following the Lord long enough to fully understand the meaning of the Christian life. Their greatest need is discipleship and to know, understand and receive the sincere milk of the word of God.

- c. Carnal Christians are those who have accepted Christ and who consider themselves to be Christians but who continue to live their life like the natural man or the unregenerate (Heb. 5:12; I Cor. 3:3; Phil. 3:18-19).

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. Hebrews 5:12

Some of the churches to which Paul wrote were more or less populated with these kinds of Christians. When he wrote his letters to the churches, it was not uncommon for him to make references to sinful or immature behavior among those who claimed to be Christian. Some of these include the following:

- Disobedience (Rom. 6:1-2)
- Hypocrisy (Rom. 12:9-21)
- Strife (I Cor. 1:11; 3:3; II Cor. 12:20)
- Envy (I Cor. 3:3; II Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:26)
- Division or a Partisan Spirit (I Cor. 1:10; 3:3-4; Tit.3:11)

- Sexual Immorality (I Cor. 5:1; 6:9; II Cor. 12:21; Eph. 5:3)
- Drunkenness (I Cor. 5:11; 6:10; Eph. 5:18)
- Swindling (I Cor. 5:11, NLT; 6:10)
- Covetous (I Cor. 5:11)
- Reviling (I Cor. 5:11; 6:10)
- Evil Associations (I Cor. 15:33; II Cor. 6:11-18; Eph. 5:11)
- Outbursts of Anger (II Cor. 12:20)
- Selfish Ambition (II Cor. 12:20)
- Backstabbing, Whispering and Gossip (II Cor. 12:20; Eph. 4:29)
- Disorderly Behavior (II Cor. 12:20; II Th. 3:6)
- Lying (Eph. 4:25)
- Idleness (Eph. 4:28; II Th. 3:10-11)
- Filthiness (Jam. 1:21)
- Wickedness (Jam. 1:21)
- Works of the Flesh (Gal. 5:16-21)

Paul said that carnal Christians are believers who “behave like mere men” (I Cor. 3:3). They may even excuse their behavior by saying, “I am only human!” They claim to be Christians but they walk as enemies of the cross (Phil. 3:18-19).

For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame--who set their mind on earthly things.
Philippians 3:18-19

The truth is that we are not “mere men” or “only human.” If we are in Christ we have a new nature. We have in fact become partakers of the divine nature and we are to allow that nature to dominate our life (II Pet. 1:4).

And because of His glory and excellence, He has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share His divine nature and escape the world’s corruption caused by human desires. II Peter 1:4, NLT

2. Paul expressed intolerance for immorality among believers (I Cor. 5:1-13).

Because of the carnality of the Corinthian believers they seemed to have had a tolerance for members of the church who were living well below the standards of Christianity. Actually it appears that they were rather proud of their tolerance and wore their spirit of acceptance as a merit badge (I Cor. 5:2). One serious situation in the church involved a man who was living in immorality with his father’s wife (his step mother).

I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you—something that even pagans don’t do. I am told that a man in your church is living in sin with his stepmother. You are so proud of yourselves, but you should be mourning in sorrow and shame. And you should remove this man from your fellowship.
I Corinthians 5:1-2, NLT

Paul did not need an angelic appearance or a prophetic revelation to know that something was wrong with this picture. As an apostle, church leader and the founder of this church Paul knew that this was not a healthy situation. The church is supposed to be a separated community. People who claim to be Christians should behave differently than people who do not have Christ at the center of their lives. He also knew that if open sin were to be tolerated and not judged it would spread, it would weaken the church and the church would compromise its testimony in the world.

Paul made it clear exactly what the church leadership needed to do. Please read the follow passage carefully noting highlighted phrases:

*Even though I am not with you in person, I am with you in the Spirit. And as though I were there, **I have already passed judgment** on this man **4** in the name of the Lord Jesus. You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. **5** Then you must **throw this man out** and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns. **6** Your boasting about this is terrible. Don't you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough? **7** **Get rid of the old "yeast"** by removing this wicked person from among you. Then you will be like a fresh batch of dough made without yeast, which is what you really are. Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. **8** So let us celebrate the festival, not with the old bread of wickedness and evil, but with the new bread of sincerity and truth. **9** When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. **10** But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. **11** I meant that **you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people.** Don't even eat with such people. **12** It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but **it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning.** **13** God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you." I Corinthians 5:3-13, NLT*

3. Paul was a minister of truth (I Cor. 5:1-13).

In the above passage Paul does not appear as the minister of grace, but the minister of truth. The truth is that believers are supposed to live separate from sin. The truth is that leaders in the church are responsible to confront sin and discipline members of the congregation who are claiming to be Christian but who are living in open sin. The truth is that sometimes you have to take drastic action such as throwing the man out, getting rid of the old yeast or removing this wicked person to deal with the problem. The truth is that sometimes love must be tough and the best thing that you can do with a sinning member is to cut them off from fellowship. The truth is sometimes you have to do what is in the best interest of the entire congregation and the rest of the family.

Notice that Paul makes a distinction between how we are to handle a person who is part of the church who is sinning (“*anyone who claims to be a believer*”) and a person outside of the believing community who is doing the same thing. As believers in Christ we are to continue to reach out to non-believers with the love of Christ and allow God to be their judge. But at the same time we are to exercise discipline in the believing community where God has placed judgment into our hands.

4. Paul was a minister of grace (II Cor. 2:4-11).

The Corinthian church seems to have received Paul’s exhortation and they did indeed judge the immoral man who was in the midst of the congregation. But there was a problem. Evidently the man who was disciplined actually responded to the discipline of the church, repented, changed his behavior and now wanted to be readmitted into the congregation of the saints.

However, as we are so prone to do, the Corinthian church swung from one extreme to the other. At first they were proud of their openness, acceptance and tolerance of sin and now they turned into a group of people who were unwilling to believe that people could change and were unwilling to give the man a second chance. That is not how it is supposed to work.

As a result Paul had to write a second letter to the Corinthian church this time rebuking them for their intolerance and unwillingness to accept or forgive the man who had previously sinned (II Cor. 2:4-11).

I wrote that letter in great anguish, with a troubled heart and many tears. I didn't want to grieve you, but I wanted to let you know how much love I have for you. 5 I am not overstating it when I say that the man who caused all the trouble hurt all of you more than he hurt me. 6 Most of you opposed him, and that was punishment enough. 7 Now, however, it is time to forgive and comfort him. Otherwise he may be overcome by discouragement. 8 So I urge you now to reaffirm your love for him. 9 I wrote to you as I did to test you and see if you would fully comply with my instructions. 10 When you forgive this man, I forgive him, too. And when I forgive whatever needs to be forgiven, I do so with Christ's authority for your benefit, 11 so that Satan will not outsmart us. For we are familiar with his evil schemes. II Corinthians 2:4-11

Reflecting the Heart of God

As I stated earlier, our challenge as believers is to be reflectors of God to the world. Our challenge as churches is being a community of grace that reflects God’s love for sinful man and is willing to lay its life down for those who are separated from God. At the same time the challenge is to be men and women of truth who reflect the light of Christ’s life to the world. We want to be like God—full of grace and truth.