

JUDGMENT & GRACE

Reinhold Niebuhr lived in an age of dizzying transformation. At his birth in 1892, telephones were a novelty, cars were playthings for the wealthy, and the first plane flight at Kitty Hawk was a decade away. By his death, televisions were commonplace, highways crisscrossed the nation, and astronauts had walked the surface of the moon. Yet these changes exacted a steep cost. The same technological prowess that vastly improved human life also unleashed the carnage of world war and birthed weapons capable of ending human civilization. Many thinkers saw the advancements of the 20th century as evidence that human beings had outgrown their need for God. For Niebuhr, they illustrated the judgment and grace of God in particularly vivid fashion.

History as Niebuhr understood it is no mere sequence of events. Rather, it's a drama. And in this drama, the dynamics of sin and redemption at work in human life play out in the sight of God. God's righteousness cannot tolerate evil; therefore God pronounces judgment on human sin. God's love refuses to let evil have the final say; therefore God's grace heals sin-scarred humanity. Divine judgment and divine grace thus hover over every moment of history. To grasp the deeper meaning of human events, we must be attentive to how judgment and grace are simultaneously at work in them. Only then can we understand these events in terms that do justice to both the glory and misery of the human experience. And if any time period can lay claim to revealing the astonishing heights of human greatness and the harrowing depths of human despair, it was the century that brought us both the moon landing and the atomic bomb.

Questions to consider:

In what ways have you experienced judgment in your own life?

In what ways have you experienced grace?

How do you see judgment and grace at work in society around you?

What are some ways that we can extend grace toward one another?

-- The Serenity Prayer --

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things that should be changed,
and the wisdom to know the one from the other*

It is one of the most recognized prayers ever written. It adorns everything from pendants to coffee cups. It sustained countless soldiers who found it in the prayer books distributed to them during World War II, and it is a mainstay of twelve-step programs around the world. Niebuhr wrote the *Serenity Prayer* at the height of the Great Depression in the early 1930s. It was one of various prayers he composed to conclude his sermons. He doesn't appear to have given it any more consideration than his other sermon prayers, all of which were beautifully written and spiritually edifying. But this one was destined to become a classic.

Questions to consider:

What do you see as the central message of this prayer?

Why do you think it resonates so deeply with so many people?

Why has it taken on special meaning for people in crisis situations, such as soldiers in the midst of war or those struggling with addiction?

Exercise:

Ask members of the audience to recite the prayer from memory. Chances are that they will recite several different versions. This can set up a conversation about these differences and their significance (*For instance, audience members may not know that the original mentions “grace”.*)

Transcript for clip -- “*Judgment & Grace: The Serenity Prayer*” :

Elisabeth Sifton:

He was grateful for it -- I feel very strongly about this, so I must try to be articulate on this point as I can be...He did not wish to make a big deal of authorship of a prayer, a prayer is not something you copyright, say is mine -- a prayer is written on a completely different register and a completely different attitude between the praying person and the public who hears it. So he was grateful and pleased, but he didn't want to make a big deal of it again. What he knew about was that it was used in a pamphlet prepared for the army of worship features that the federal council of churches put together for the army and it was included in that pamphlet in 1943 and that was okay by him and then AA took it over -- wished to take it over and asked him -- and he said sure. I don't think he ever knew that they added other stuff onto it so that long version of the *Serenity Prayer* used in AA is not Niebuhr -- only the very beginning is the Niebuhr tri-partite prayer at the beginning. Any rate, he had no objection to that and he did not know its appropriation by Germans, falsely attributed to a German pastor -- he didn't know about that, that came later.

Interviewer: “All these questions as to the origins only adds to the myth -- these are some of the most famous lines in American writing..”

I would hope it's wide dissemination would also accompanied by a wide appreciation of the fact that prayers are a particularly strong and expressive example of what literary scholars called the “oral tradition” -- prayers are usually spoken before they're written down they get changed they get used in different contexts in different churches -- so over the lifetime of a prayer before it's published, before it's on a page, there may be all kinds of versions and types of it and people borrow material they hear in a church and use it for themselves.

Further Reading:

Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (2005)

-- Pastors--

For all that Niebuhr wrote on weighty theological subjects and political issues, one of his most perennially popular works is *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, a series of reflections from a diary he kept during his pastorate in Detroit. Niebuhr is disarmingly candid in these entries as he catalogues the triumphs, challenges, and shortcomings of his life as a minister. Many a practicing pastor has found comfort, assurance, and humor in Niebuhr's words. This book is of value to anyone interested in viewing the world through the lens of an especially astute observer of the human scene.

Niebuhr Quotes:

Having both entered and left the parish ministry against my inclinations, I pay tribute to the calling, firm in my conviction that it offers greater opportunities for both moral adventure and social usefulness than any other calling if it is entered with open eyes and a consciousness of the hazards to virtue which lurk in it I make no apology for being critical of what I love. No one wants a love based upon illusions, and there is not reason why we should not love a profession and yet be critical of it. -*Leaves* (MW, 7)

It is no easy task to build up the faith of one generation and not destroy the supports of the religion in the other. -*Leaves* (MW 30)

If you set the message of the gospel of love against a society enmeshed in hatreds and bigotries and engulfed in greed, you have a real but not necessarily futile conflict on your hands. There is enough natural grace in the human heart to respond to the challenge of the real message in the gospel—and enough original sin in human nature to create opposition to it. -*Leaves* (MW 33)

[Effective ministry] requires the knowledge of the social scientist and the insight and imagination of a poet, the executive talents of a businessman and the mental discipline of a philosopher. Of course none of us meets all the demands made upon us. It is not easy to be all things to all men. Perhaps that is why people are so critical of us. Our task is not specific enough to make a high degree of skill possible or to result in tangible and easily measured results. -*Leaves* (MW 119-20)

Transcript for clip -- “Judgment & Grace: Pastors” :

Gary Dorrien:

He's also struggling with the theological inheritance, he's aware he's preaching different kinds of sermons than his father gave. He's got a different theology by virtue of having been educated in the social gospel and being some kind of liberal. And feeling that he's kind of needing to make it up as he goes. He has that wonderful passage in *Leaves*, he says Well now that I've been preaching for a while, I find that I keep preaching the same sermon over and over. Each text just becomes a pretext for a sermon that I've already given. Well pastors have been reading that passage ever since, and it's a moment where you laugh in self-recognition there because we all do it. I mean the lectionary is there to try and keep us out of that. The lectionary makes you deal with more of the scripture than almost any of us would take on if we were just left to our own devices. Because we all gerrymander, we all have our own sort of cannon within the cannon that we work with, that sort of lends itself to the way we understand Christianity and what we want to do with it. And so, um, there's this sort of natural tendency to sort of fall into a sort of rut. And he talks about it so vividly, and with such self-awareness. It's a part of *Leaves* that people have read forever more.

Healan Gaston:

I think his personality played a crucial role in his ability to grow the Bethel church, however the other really key thing was that he recognized that he would feel stagnant if he tried to only be the pastor of that church. And so he started to develop his talents and move outward as much as possible from the job at Bethel. And

so I think as with Reinhold in almost every case, every context that he was in, he was a speaker that people found fascinating and electrifying. He was very charismatic and I think that helped him in that context. But it was also true that at that point he was writing a lot on the side to supplement his income and began to really develop a national reputation. He started writing for *The Christian Century* and made contacts with Charles Clayton Morrison, Sherwood Eddy was trying to draw him off to *The World Tomorrow* to work for that organization. And at the same time he was taking on a leadership position within the Evangelical synod and so every person that came in contact with Niebuhr could see that he was remarkably intelligent and they wanted to sign him up for whatever it was that they were doing. And this allowed him to take some of his energies outward and develop his skills. So he was becoming a really great writer during this period. He was becoming an accomplished speaker, he was becoming a political activist. He was doing all these things at the same time that he was writing "*Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*" and being the pastor of this congregation.

-- Mercy --

Niebuhr Quotes:

We thank you, God, for your judgments which are sterner than the judgments of man. Help us to remember them when moral men speak well of us. We thank you for your mercy which is kinder than the goodness of men. Help us to discern this when we are overcome by the confusion of life, and despair about our own sin. Grant us, O Lord, always to worship you in all our doings in the greatness of your creativity and the wonder of your judgment and your mercy.
–“The Wheat and the Tares,” MW 886-87

In every life there must at least be times and seasons when the good is felt as a present possession and not as a far-off goal. The sinner must feel himself “justified,” that is, he must feel that his imperfections are understood and sympathetically appreciated as well as challenged. Whenever he finds himself in a circle of love where he is “completely known and all forgiven” something of the mercy of God is revealed to him and he catches a glimpse of the very perfection which has eluded him. –*Reflections on the End of an Era*, 285

While the gospel which we preach reveals a world which in its ground and fulfillment transcends human history, it does not abstract us from this present history with all of its conflicts and tragic disappointments and arrogant hopes. We are in the world, and God’s Will, His Judgment and His Mercy impinge upon our daily actions and historic problems. We must bring forth fruits meet for repentance. What can those fruits be but the fruits of “love, joy, peace?”
–“The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 1937 (MW 736)

The Christian faith finds the final clue to the meaning of life and history in the Christ whose goodness is at once the virtue which man ought, but does not, achieve in history, and the revelation of a divine mercy which understands and resolves the perpetual contradictions in which history is involved, even on the highest reaches of human achievement. From the standpoint of such a faith it is possible to deal with the ultimate social problem of human history: the creation of community in world dimensions. –*Children of Light Children of Darkness* (MW 458)

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense of any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness. –*Irony of American History* (MW 510).

Transcript for clip -- "*Judgment & Grace: Mercy*" :

Andrew Finstuen: But if you try to make an argument that we are basically good, well that moves into some are good, some are better, some are better, some are better. But he's saying especially underneath the divine judgment and mercy no one is better than another. So now we have a chance at making some social relations that could be approach the kingdom of god here on earth. And that's what he's really interested in and it translates into his global view. Yes, he is a critic of communism and Marxism but he also sees wisdom in some of what Karl Marx wrote and some of how that expresses itself.

Overall yes, he denies it as another scheme of meaning that we have to be wary of. But original sin helps him say but we can also repeat, America can repeat some of the same errors of our very foes. And often we take on the characteristics of our foes. And if we can't understand that about ourselves we're just going to continue to repeat historical injustice. So there's that level. And finally for him it's a doctrine of comfort. What a relief to be know as someone who is known to be good and bad in every act, as he might say.

Andrew Finstuen:

Well Niebuhr's a brilliant extemporaneous speaker and you can hear in some of his audio recordings where he senses a moment and tells a little story or makes a little quip that gets his audience laughing. It happens. At least somewhat regularly in his, in his delivery. And he happens to write an essay about it. He writes an essay, a sermonica as he calls it, humor in faith. And for him humor is important as a leveling aspect in human relations, as thinking of ourselves as becoming humble before God. And what we pretend to offer up to God or not. and everything from the petty foibles that happen in our lives to more profound mistakes. But that laughter has a, as he says, an element of judgment and mercy. We're laughing because we know a mistake has happened. But we're also forgiving that mistake in our laughter and so he does this really nice discussion of how that he's not trying to equate it to how God might view human beings but that sort of play of what it means to be human and how we all have our issues and problems and if we can laugh at ourselves, that's even more important because that gives us a sense that we can't take ourselves too seriously.