

# 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)