

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?

-- 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.