

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?

-- 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.