

## **Judgment and Mercy, You Can't Have One without the Other**

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish  
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Very ironically, one of the things a lot of people criticize about the church is the fact that they feel criticized when they attend church functions. Or, to put it another way, one of the major judgments people make about the church is that they feel judged by the members. It's not that anyone actually says terribly rude things, but people do make odd comments from time to time, body language can *seem* to imply criticism, and of course there is sometimes an *expectation* of criticism based on how a person perceives the church or its members.

For example, a couple who are living together before marriage, knowing that the teachings of the church don't support that decision (although they do allow for it), may feel judged implicitly just by walking in the door. Again, a person who for whatever reason has just left a marriage, knowing that the church has strong teachings about the lifetime commitment of marriage, may actually avoid coming to church at the very time she needs it most because she "knows" people won't understand, won't agree with her decision, or won't be very friendly, let alone supportive.

But what does this person really know? And what does any of us really know about that person's circumstances? Usually very little, and almost NEVER the whole story. In fact, this is the ONE thing we ALL know if we really think about it, that is, *how little we know!*

Of course, in the history of churches, indeed in the history of every religion, judgment *in principle* has always been a major theme as groups and organizations very sincerely try to distinguish themselves from others according to their own particular understanding of what is genuinely good – *so that they can support one another in that good*. Naturally, then, when people disagree about this or make choices that are inconsistent with the group's convictions it's no wonder that separations occur, whether on positive or negative terms. After all, if someone were to come into a wedding celebration and start disrupting things you wouldn't expect him to be there for long. Then again, why would that person come at all if he didn't feel the wedding was important?

But here's the thing: true judgment always works together with justice – which is another word for fairness, goodness or mercy. In fact, true judgment is simply a revelation of the truth, but since goodness and mercy are the very soul of truth, anytime a judgment is called for, an equal measure of mercy is absolutely necessary.

The story of Abraham pleading for Sodom illustrates this principle. But to understand it properly we need to know that Abraham actually represents the Lord Himself as He contemplates the judgment that is looming for the people of Sodom, that is, all people who are in the states represented by Sodom, namely, states of self-love that lead to violence and abuse.

In the story Abraham does not question the general depravity of the situation, but he asks the question, "Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would you also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it?" (Gen. 18:23-24). Of course the answer is NO. Likewise the answer is no even if only 45, or 40, or 30 or 20 or even just 10 just people are found in it. So the Lord invokes the concept of justice or mercy as He contemplates the truth about what is going on for these people

in such terrible disorder. And of course each number listed corresponds to something in the spiritual sense:

- fifty who are just corresponds to a state full of good;
- forty-five to a state less full, that is, lacking a little;
- forty corresponds to a state of temptations, thus when a person has experienced temptations on account of some good love;
- thirty to a state where even a little temptation still exists, indicating that there is at least a little good still present;
- twenty corresponds to a state before any real temptation is possible because there isn't yet much knowledge but there are still remains of good from childhood;
- and finally ten corresponds to the minimum condition of spiritual life, that there be at least *some* remnants of good stored up in the interior memory despite an outwardly disorderly life: remnants that can be activated in the next life as receptive ground for the seeds of truth that the Lord never stops providing (AC #2266-2285).

But what does all this mean with respect to how we judge others?

Well, as you all know, we are not permitted to judge the internal states of any person – for the simple reason that we can't possibly know those states. We are, however, *encouraged* to judge their external states because unless we do this we will find ourselves in a world of chaos. We simply *have to* discern between good and evil as we see them according to the teachings of the Word, and so discerning we have to make decisions about what we will accept and tolerate or reject as unacceptable – on the level of outward actions.

At the same time, as you also know, we can and must be extremely careful not to jump to conclusions. For example going back to our earlier example, no matter how well we think we know somebody we can almost never know the real causes of marital strife. In fact probably *most* of the time the appearance and even the conversation about it is almost by definition misleading. Issues may relate to emotional or physical abuse, depression, drug or alcohol addiction, and a whole lot of other very common, painful issues, any one of which could be just cause for a separation, all of which are complicated by many other doctrinal and practical considerations.

This is enormously delicate AND challenging – which is why you see so much tender and in some ways tortured emotion in the story of Abraham and Sodom. It's a *bad scene* and yet the Lord Himself is agonizing over *any possible* redeeming value that can be found in it. So He teaches US that as challenging as it may be to work it out, true judgment always operates in conjunction with justice, in fact it is a *function* of justice, that is, mercy, to protect and defend any possible shred of good. So we read,

“...[I]t should be recognized that there are two things which constitute the order of the whole of heaven and are from there present in the universe, namely good and truth. Good is the essential element of order, and all aspects of it are forms of mercy. Truth is the secondary element of order, and all its aspects are truths. Divine Good adjudges all people to heaven, but Divine Truth condemns them all to hell. Consequently if the Lord's mercy, which is the very nature of Good, were not eternal, all people – however many these may be – would be condemned.... But the reason the evil are condemned to hell is not that Divine Good is separated

from Divine Truth, but that people separate themselves from Divine Good; for the Lord in no way casts anyone down to hell, but a person casts himself down... Also, seeing that the Divine Good is joined to Divine Truth, it should be recognized that unless the evil were separated from the good, the evil would do harm to the good and would be constantly endeavoring to destroy order. Thus the prevention of the good from suffering harm is an act of mercy. It is the same in earthly kingdoms” (AC #2258:2-3).

And so again we recall Abraham’s pleading for Sodom: “Suppose there be fifty righteous...” Suppose there be 45, 40, 30, 20... or even just 10. There is of course NO WAY we in the church can accept or condone evil as we observe it *in ourselves or others*. But unlike the Lord in HIS judgments there is also NO WAY we can presume to know what is going on internally with people. So the big question is how we can reconcile these two facts in real life.

One thought that might be helpful is to assume that anyone who comes to church comes for one of two reasons, either to support someone else in the life and teaching of the church, or to receive support in that life and teaching. There may be other, possibly even sinister reasons, but why even go there? If we are clear in our innocent, friendly devotion to this life and teaching people will sort *themselves* out sooner or later. People who love the teachings will welcome help in applying them, people who sincerely question the teachings will rightly challenge us to help them understand, people who think we have it wrong will try to help us get it right, and people who don’t appreciate the teachings at all will simply move on. Meanwhile OUR responsibility will be to listen, listen again, and then listen some more! We will represent the teachings of the church best if we think of judgment not just as a revelation of the truth defending good, but as a revelation of the good showing how to *apply* the truth.

It’s easy enough to be critical of others for missing this point, but it’s hard for us to know when we ourselves are missing it, especially if we have become particularly focused on one aspect of a situation, or one way it appears. For example, recall the Lord’s parable of the separation of the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25. There the Lord blesses those who give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, who take in the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick or in prison, and He says those who *don’t* do these things will go away [note, He doesn’t *send* them, but He says they will go away] into everlasting punishment. All these conditions correspond to spiritual states, the hungry to those who long for good; the thirsty to those who long for truth, the stranger to those who want instruction, the naked to those who feel exposed in their ignorance, the sick to those who acknowledge their evils, and the prisoners to those who acknowledge their falsities. But what if we misjudge a person’s real need? In a way this is just the flip side of misjudging his or her intentions, which can cause all sorts of problems.

Sometimes all a person really wants is some real love and affection, but he may do such outrageous things in the process that he makes himself difficult to love. So we try to teach instead. Or we stay away, rather than going to visit. Sometimes a person really wants to understand but we think his questions are hurtful and that he’s just a bad influence, so again, we stay away, or perhaps try to impose rules to restrict his or her behavior. Helping people is a tricky business.

*And it works the other way around, too.* If we come into a group and feel judged, we should probably ask ourselves why this might be so. What precious thing, what sincere GOOD within the group seems to be threatened by our words, our actions or the way we present ourselves?

What can we do to address this so that we can support the good they truly may be offering us? What if the good they offer us is as little as the fifty in Sodom? What if it's as little as the 45, the 40, the 30 or the 20? Would we write them off if we only found the equivalent of 10? Remember Abraham's words: "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord [that is, Jehovah]: suppose there were five less than the fifty who are just; would You destroy all of the city for (the lack of) five?" The answer is in Psalm 145:9:

"The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works."

Life is messy – especially life on the natural plane. And it is complicated by all sorts of obvious *and secret* things. So while we all have a moral obligation to make judgments about the situations we can see and understand, we also have a spiritual obligation to recognize that like Abraham we also are mere dust and ashes, and we also must be looking for the good – the redeeming value – of the people, the groups, the organizations, indeed all the circumstances in which we find ourselves trying to do the *right* thing with mercy *for the right reasons*.

On one hand this means being "there" for people who need us, and trying earnestly to understand what their real needs may be. On the other hand it means being willing to give an organization *like the church* a chance to be helpful and supportive in ways that only it can be on account of its reliance on the Word, on the doctrine drawn from the Word, and on the sincere effort to apply that doctrine in practical ways for the health and welfare of the world. We may get it wrong; we almost certainly *will* get it wrong at least some of the time, but if we look for the good we will find it, and by associating ourselves with it we will have an opportunity to strengthen and to increase the influence of that good even as we struggle within ourselves to accept our *need* for the help and perspective it provides.

In the end Sodom *was* destroyed. But not before every last measure was taken to prevent it, and not before Abraham's brother, his wife and his two daughters – all representing the natural, external life of charity – were preserved by two angels and eventually ushered out of the city and told to go to a safe place in the mountains nearby. Of course Lot's wife didn't make it, but Lot himself did, and so we see the principle of charity as our one hope of salvation, lifting us up out of the gloom of selfish and worldly pre-occupations to a more loving, heavenly perspective.

As we noted last week, the church is – or should be – the Lord's heaven on earth. This is not because it is perfect; not even angels are perfect! *It is because the church has the Word, and doctrine, and life however haltingly drawn from the Word.* And so it is our best available spiritual and organizational means to connect with the Lord who alone can help us overcome the problems that plague us, and indeed, that plague the world.

Amen.

Lessons:      *Genesis* 18:16-33  
                   Children's Talk on Abraham pleading for Sodom

*Matthew* 7:1-5 and *John* 7:16-24  
*Arcana Caelestia* #2235:selections (adapted)