



We often have a difficult time resolving the relationship between justice and mercy. We can even see the two as mutually exclusive, that justice is receiving the punishment we deserve and mercy is not receiving what we deserve. If they are in conflict, then how do we know whether to answer with justice or mercy in a particular situation. Fortunately they aren't in conflict when they both serve God's purposes of drawing people to himself. In Nineveh's story the threat of justice makes possible the experience of God's mercy. And by implication, Jonah's initial unwillingness to go to Nineveh and call out injustice gets in the way of God's mercy.

We see a similar attitude in Jesus' disciples in Luke 9:51-56 as they pass through Samaria. Since most Jews saw Samaritans as unclean, Jews and Samaritans typically did not associate. So when Jesus and his band look for a place to stay in a Samaritan village, they are refused hospitality. In response, James and John turn to Jesus and ask him "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" That may sound extreme, but in their passion for Jesus they are drawing on biblical precedent. In 1 Kings 1 the prophet Elijah does that very thing to two bands of soldiers sent by King Ahaziah.

Despite Elijah's precedent, Jesus rebukes James and John. Luke doesn't provide the reason, but the surrounding stories explain a lot. In Luke 8:36-39 the people of the Gerasenes ask Jesus to leave and he does so without incident, but he leaves the healed demoniac as a witness to them of the gospel. In Luke 9:5 Jesus tells the disciples that when they are rejected they should "shake the dust off [their] feet when [they] leave their town, as a testimony against them." Jesus elaborates on this theme in Luke 10:8-16 when he talks about the judgment people can expect when they reject the gospel and its messengers.

These stories highlight the priority of God's mission and the proper exercise of authority within that mission. Just like Jonah, the disciples aren't sent to judge the people, but to provide warning of judgment. God will judge them for their response. And just like with Jonah, Jesus isn't going to let his messengers show favoritism. Despite being rejected elsewhere, the disciples only ask to destroy the Samaritans. The Samaritans should receive the same mercy as the Jews who repeatedly reject Jesus.

Elijah calling down fire from heaven follows the same principles. The difference is that Elijah is sent with God's judgment against the king's rebellion in order to draw the people of Israel to himself and offer them mercy. The example of destruction leads the third captain to acknowledge Elijah as a prophet of God and plead for his life and the life of his men. God acts the same toward the Israelites, the Ninevites, the Samaritans, and us today. And even as he sent Jonah and the disciples, he sends us with the same mission of justice and mercy.

Discussion Questions

How can our sense of justice often turn into a subtle form of favoritism towards the familiar or people we prefer? How can a focus on God's mission rather than our own sense of right and wrong correct favoritism?

God's commission of Elijah and Jesus' commission to the disciples show that we have the authority to judge under limited circumstances. What are some of those circumstances, and how can the exercise of that authority bring mercy and contribute to spiritual transformation?

If living justly requires knowing and loving people, who do you need to get to know better in order to live more justly and mercifully?