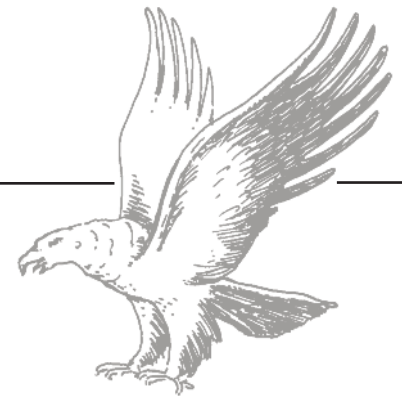


# Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”  
Isaiah 40:31*



November 1, 2015

## Justice and Mercy

These two virtues are often linked in the Scriptures. But in practice, they co-exist in a delicate balance that can easily be disrupted by those who fail to see the nature of their relationship.

*“So you, by the help of your God, return; observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually” (Hos. 12:6).*

*“O Lord . . . in wrath remember mercy” (Hab. 3:2)*



Hosea’s plea to “observe mercy and justice” reflects a pairing that is found often in Scripture (Psa. 101:1; Zech. 7:9; Matt. 23:23; etc.). But if we take the time to understand what these two words mean, we’re confronted with a problem. *Justice* is the demand for fairness, for impartiality, for each person receiving what is due him. Mercy, on the other hand, is an act of clemency by which a guilty party does *not* get what he deserves. So for mercy to be extended, justice must be waived; and for strict justice to be achieved, no mercy can be shown to the guilty. How can these two attributes be reconciled? Or can they?

The truth is that mercy and justice co-exist in a delicate balance in the life of the believer. If either is emphasized at the expense of the other, the balance is upset and harm results.

For example, when someone’s every flaw, every mistake, every stumble is held up for rebuke by those who see themselves as moral superiors, it doesn’t take long for one’s spirit to wither under the weight of guilt. Those who demand strict justice above all else are intolerable to live with (not to mention, they *always* display at least a little hypocrisy in their own imperfect lives).

But the balance can be disrupted in the opposite direction, too. An open-ended mercy that makes no demand for justice is a false compassion that ends up hurting more than it helps. Parents who raise their children by that standard end up with little monsters who have no concept of self-discipline. People need to feel the painful consequence of their wrong-doing in order to learn how to improve. Justice, impartially applied, accomplishes that purpose.

So justice must be tempered by compassion or it becomes a crushing burden; and mercy is meaningless outside the context of a just law. How can we practice both virtues in such a way that they complement and support each

other, rather than dominate each other to the ruin of everyone involved?

There are two simple tests that can be applied to determine the right blend of justice and mercy that should be administered in any given situation.

First, what is the *intent* of the offender? There is a huge difference between a deliberate act of rebellion and an honest mistake. The wise critic will seek to discern that motive.

Second, what role does *repentance* play in the aftermath of the offense? Is the offender genuinely sorry for his infraction, making an effort to correct the wrong and change his ways? Or is he resorting to denial, blame-shifting, and similar ruses to escape responsibility?

When God warned Habakkuk that His wayward people would be punished by a Babylonian invasion, the prophet pleaded, “in wrath remember mercy.” Justice had to be done, but there was room for mercy. Indeed, God showed it in allowing His chastened people to return from exile. We, too, must learn how to balance the demands of justice and mercy in our dealings with others.

– David King