

Playing The Sympathy Card

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God's word endorses mercy, as Jesus said, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy*" (**Matthew 5:7**). The prophet Hosea wrote that God desires "*mercy, and not sacrifice*" (**Hosea 6:6**), which Jesus echoed (**Matthew 12:7**). The Lord wants mercy more than rituals performed by worshipers. James warns us that "*judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment*" (**James 2:13**). God demands that his people be merciful. He practices mercy, compassion, kindness, and all their synonyms and teaches them as attitudes and actions for everyday Christian living. Sometimes though, as with all good things, the Adversary works at twisting sympathy to his advantage. Thus Christians are always to be careful not to be manipulated when wickedness is packaged with a wrapper calling for pity.

The first time the Serpent played the sympathy card was in the Garden, **Genesis 3:1ff** when he feigned sympathy for the human pair in the Garden. Pretending to sympathize with an absurd fiction of divine denial, suggesting that God was holding them back and denying their best future, the Serpent effectively manipulated the Woman to steal what God had withheld in the midst of abundance sufficient to every need and adequate to satisfy every good appetite. The pretense of sympathy facilitated deception, which led to a disastrous loss of life and liberty. A pretense of sympathy continues to be a tool of deception to gain power over people.

Sometimes the sympathy card is played deceptively in another way, appealing to kind people to be compassionate when resolve is called for. When Moses gave his farewell speeches to Israel in their fortieth year of travel out of Egypt, he specifically commanded the people who were going into Canaan to utterly destroy and "*show no mercy*" to seven nations God had marked for destruction (**Deuteronomy 7:2**). Israel had been warned from the beginning of their journey toward Canaan that they must not compromise in any way with the nations God was dispossessing in their behalf, because compromise would certainly lead to Israel's corruption (see **Exodus 23:32**, for example). God commanded his people to show no mercy because the evil acts of those specific cultures could only subvert their neighbors, spreading perversion and oppression. They needed to be eradicated, not just for land, but for the future of humanity. The character of the nations of Canaan in that era is demonstrated by the pillaging slave raids of the Amalekites when Israel seemed vulnerable as they exited Egypt (**Exodus 17:8ff**) and the similar raids of the Canaanites when Israel was in their final preparation to enter the land (**Numbers 21:1**). Cynics willfully overlook the predatory and utterly selfish foundations of the pagan cultures of Canaan that God marked for destruction. If the Israelites sympathized with the Canaanites in their wickedness, the outcome would inevitably be Israelites becoming just like Canaanites, heartless and selfish and abusing the powerless.

The account of Rahab at Jericho (**Joshua 2** and **Joshua 6**) demonstrates that God's "show no mercy" policy for Canaan was specifically oriented toward those who refused to submit (**Hebrews 11:31**). A turn toward God presented an opportunity to show mercy. The horrific wickedness of the Canaanite nations was not to be sympathetically spared in misguided mercy, but anyone who turned from that wickedness toward righteous behavior could be saved. That, indeed, is an appropriate expression of mercy, following God's will to bring about changed hearts and lives.

As God told Israel to show no mercy to the disobedient nations of Canaan, he also told his people to have no pity for the prophet or teacher who seduced others into the immoral idolatries favored by other

nations. **Deuteronomy 13:8** forbade Israel from having pity even toward a family member who attempted to mislead anyone into the excesses of idolatry. Some things cannot be tolerated, and leading others into sin is one. A compassion that leads to compromise and acceptance of sin is misguided and can only result in greater tragedy than the potential difficulties of honestly identifying sin as sin. The devil knows very well how to play the sympathy card to promote acceptance of rebellion against God, whether it is the pretense of sympathy to win hearts or the misdirection of sympathy to tolerate continued sin.

Christians are not called to dispossess nations and occupy Canaan like Israel coming out of Egypt. Christians are called to preach Christ to the nations, and the weapons of this world will not accomplish that goal. Christians are called to battle “*arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God,*” in order to “*take every thought captive to obey Christ*” (**2 Corinthians 10:4**). Misdirected sympathy prompted by people who promote feelings over truth, and urge misguided compassion over obedience to God and his created order, only perpetuates destructive behaviors and enables sin to flourish and ensnare more and more.

Paul in Romans **1:17-32** presents a veritable laundry list of rebellious decisions pursued by people who reject our Creator, a list worthy of thoughtful attention. It concludes with condemnation not only of everyone who chooses rebellion against the Creator, but also those who “*give approval to those who practice them*” (**Romans 1:32**). God absolutely wants people, certainly Christians, to be merciful, but disaster follows when the sympathy card is played to shame good-hearted people into accepting sin and pretending sinners don’t need to change.

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh (Jude 1:20-23).