**CONFUSING MERCY WITH JUSTICE**

The other Sunday, I was approached by one of the younger sisters at church.  She had a couple of questions.  They involved hypotheticals that many of us have encountered before.  What about the tribesman in the Amazon jungle who never gets to hear about the gospel?  What about the man who is on his way to be baptized when he gets in a car wreck and dies?

I gave her my usual answer about not letting hypotheticals and things that happen to somebody else distract us from what we should do, but she didn’t seem satisfied with that, so I promised her I’d consider the subject further.  True to my word, I gnawed on the questions until my subconscious bit off something.

Eventually, I saw that even though these two questions are aimed at different doctrinal positions (the necessity of the gospel versus the necessity of baptism), they both operate the same way.  Both are an appeal to our sense of fairness.  We intuit that if somebody dies without having heard the gospel and goes to hell as a result, it’s unfair.  If somebody sincerely intended to be baptized but dies before being able to and goes to hell as a result, it’s unfair.

The problem, though, is not with the doctrine in question.  It’s with our intuition.  “Fair”, after all, is a dressed-down synonym for “just”.  We feel that it is unjust for God to punish the sinner who never heard or to punish the penitent sinner who never managed to make it to the baptistery.  However, we need to be suspicious of that feeling.  Not only is it incorrect, it is ultimately fatal to the Christian system of faith.

Let me explain.  Neither in Hypothetical 1 nor Hypothetical 2 is a sinner being unjustly condemned.  God gave both of them the same things He gives all of us:  life, free will, ample evidence of His existence, and a sense of right and wrong.  Despite these gifts, the people in both hypotheticals chose to sin.

According to the first three chapters of Romans, such sin incurs the wrath of God, and it does so justly.  As Paul puts it in Romans 6:23, the wages of sin is death.  It is just for such people to spend eternity separated from Him, as it would be just for all of us to spend eternity separated from Him.  That is what we all deserve.

However, in the case of Christians, God has chosen to be merciful.  He showed us mercy in two ways:  in sending His Son to die in our place, and in giving us the opportunity to hear and obey the gospel.  None of us are entitled to His mercy.  It is utterly and completely undeserved.

As a result, neither of our sinners has any standing to complain that God has been unfair to them.  They don’t have any right to expect His mercy.  They are entitled to His justice, and God will be scrupulously fair to them as He is to everyone.  They could have chosen to do right, they had all the information they needed to make that choice, but they chose evil instead.  They will be judged accordingly.

If this is not true, if sin does not invite the just judgment of God, God does not have the right to judge any sinner.  Any attempt to preserve His right to judge anyone will devolve into a standard-less exercise in line-drawing.  If the one who never has heard is entitled to mercy, what about the one who heard an incompetent preacher?  If the one who dies on the way to the church house is entitled to mercy, what about the one who dies on the way to a Bible study that would have convicted him?  The more these questions unfold, the more obvious it becomes that our cheap sympathy for sinners (as opposed to Christ’s precious sacrifice) has overwhelmed God’s right to judge righteously.

There is no partiality with God.  This is my chief objection to Calvinism.  How can it be just for God to condemn an unbaptized infant who has done neither good nor evil, simply because of who their ultimate ancestor was?

However, God’s impartiality is a knife that cuts both ways.  If God is just in condemning sinners, He must be just in condemning all sinners.  Only the death of Christ and the faith of those who trust in Him allow God to do anything else.

--Matthew W. Bassford