



A New Way of Understanding Mercy

By Alvin Erickson
© 2024 Adults Saving Kids

There is a word in the New Testament that can be very helpful if we come to understand it. It is found in Philippians 4:5. It is the Greek word (epieikeia). Translators have a hard time coming up with a word in English to bring out its meaning. Here is the verse with some various words used in different translations as to its meaning. “Let your (moderation, gentleness, patient mind, forbearing spirit, modesty) be known to everyone.” So, we might ask why translators are having a hard time finding just the right English word to bring out what it is saying?

William Barclay in his commentary on Philippians helps us grasp what this word is seeking to convey. It is a word about justice. Let us hear what he says. His question is when do we apply the strict letter of the law? He starts out with two students who take a test. One student gets 80% and another student gets 50%. Is this really the final word? Well, we need to look a little deeper into this grading. The 80% student lives in a home where he has plenty of opportunity and time to study. He is free to prepare well. On the other hand, the 50% student comes from a poor home with inadequate equipment or has been sick or has come through a time of sorrow. Realizing this, which student actually did better? True justice is not always that obvious.

Barclay continues. When the woman caught in adultery in John, chapter 8, is brought to Jesus by some men, what do they want? They want Jesus to apply the law that this woman should be stoned to death. What does Jesus do? He tells them the one who has not himself sinned should cast the first stone. Hearing this, one by one each man departs and the woman is left alone with Jesus. Jesus then asks the woman, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you, go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

There are all kinds of people in our world who are like this woman. They have been broken down. They have been put down. They have sinned. They have been used. They have found themselves in a deep hole. They are stuck in a life that has no hope. We think of the criminal hanging next to Jesus on a cross, soon to die. He is looking back at his life and realizing he deserves punishment for the way he has lived. Now he is getting what the law requires—an agonizing death. But wait! Here is Jesus hanging next to him who has done nothing wrong. What word would Jesus have for him? So, he says,



Adults Saving Kids

“Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus gives him the final and lasting promise, “Today, you shall be with me in paradise.”

Adults Saving Kids would bring a special word into the world we live in. It is “large heartedness”. It is the word we use of Hudson Taylor who after years of returning from his missionary labors in China was confronted by a new great need. A great plague had broken out in China where people desperately needed medical attention. Hudson’s wife was one who could bring that to them. But was Hudson going to send his precious wife back to China perhaps never to see her again? Yet, losing her to a greater cause, he forfeited her presence for the sake of the hurting Chinese people. She left him and went back to China. This is what we call “large heartedness”.

It is for the sake of all the families and youth who have or will experience grief and suffering, that we at Adults Saving Kids have sought to supply what is needed for families and youth to remain whole. May God give us grace to relate to all people with an (epieikeia) spirit. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Matt. 5:7.

Now we turn to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1942 he looked back over what had happened in Germany in a treatise entitled After Ten Years. What he had witnessed was that most people, including Christians, submitted to Hitler, to the Nazis, to the idea of a superior race leading to the Holocaust and to war. He could see there were many reasons the German people could be excused for what happened. People do not deal with new challenges well. They don’t take precautions in advance because they think it will never happen to them. If people are not approaching disaster themselves, they will not be sensitive to the suffering of others. Besides, no one can deal with all the possible injustices taking place in the world. So, it would not be hard to make a case for the laxness in the German people and for how they couldn’t be held accountable for the tragedies they perpetuated and eventually faced themselves.

Then Bonhoeffer goes on to say all these excuses do not really cover it for the Christian. The Christian has been exposed to “large heartedness”. Christ did not take himself off the hook for what was going on. Rather he bore the sufferings of humanity as if they were his own. We cannot do what Jesus did. However, we can be the instruments in the hands of the Lord of history and share in the sufferings of others (Here we think of our children and grandchildren and their friends) to a limited degree. “If we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ’s large heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real sympathy that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer.”

What we parents need to understand what makes Bonhoeffer’s words particularly relevant is this: As the German people did not intervene to protect the Jews from the Holocaust, we parents in America are now in the same position as they once were. If we do not intervene to protect our children, if we are not large-hearted enough to interrupt the subtle destruction going on in so many ways with the children of this country, then who is responsible? We are the ones responsible, and we must get this across to our pastors and church leaders. They must equip us rather than excusing us and overlooking us. We are the ones who must demand and work fervently that the wall of safety for our children be reconstructed starting with us.