



Justice or Mercy?

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

What should we look for in an American President? Should the scales be balanced toward justice or mercy? “I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.” These are the words of Abraham Lincoln. He was a man known for his mercy—so much so that a biography of him was subtitled “The Merciful President.”

Lincoln was particularly known for his mercy in commuting the death sentence of soldiers. When a poor woman came to his office pleading for pardon for her condemned son, he granted her petition. Turning to an acquaintance, he said, “Perhaps I have done wrong, but at all events I have made that poor woman happy.”

Lincoln reportedly confided in a congressman: “Some of our generals complain that I impair discipline and subordination in the army by my pardons and respites, but it makes me rested, after a hard day’s work, if I can find some good excuse for saving a man’s life, and I go to bed happy as I think how joyous the signing of my name will make him and his family and his friends.”

A friend of Lincoln’s told the story of the President signing a pardon for a young man who fell asleep at his post as a sentinel. He was sentenced to death by firing squad.

“I could not think of going into eternity with the blood of this poor young man on my skirts,” he said, supposing the boy, raised on a farm, was simply in the habit of sleeping in the dark and rising at dawn for chores.

Spared, the young man went back to the front lines only to be killed on the battlefield at Fredericksburg. He was said to have had in his pocket a photograph of the man who spared him. On the back of the photo were the words, “God bless President Lincoln.”

Those who objected to Lincoln’s mercy feared he was compromising the authority of his military officers. One such general told how two dozen soldiers during the first week of his command had been sentenced to death for desertion. Lincoln refused to sign the orders.

When the general challenged him, he responded: “There are already too many weeping widows in the United States. For God’s sake don’t ask me to add to the number, for I won’t do it.”

Lincoln’s mercy, however, had its limits—or perhaps better said, it had its proper focus. Less than nine months after he had taken office, Nathaniel Gordon, the captain of a slave-trading ship had been captured. The offense was a capital crime. But the law had been so long ignored that most people insisted “they dare not hang him.”

Lincoln scrutinized the evidence and acknowledged many good people were pleading for a pardon. But he held firm. He defended his position in a letter:

My friend, this appeal is very touching to my feelings, and no one knows my weakness better than you.

I am, if possible to be, too easily moved by appeals for mercy; and I must say that if this man had been guilty of the foulest murder that the arm of man could perpetrate, I might forgive him on such an appeal.

But the man who could go to Africa, and rob her of her children, and then sell them into interminable bondage, with no other motive than that which is furnished by dollars and cents, is so much worse than the most depraved murderer that he can never receive pardon at my hand.

In many instances he wept as he read appeals for compassion. In this case, Lincoln’s tears and tender mercies fell like rain on African soil robbed of her children. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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