THE PROBLEM AND POWER OF PAIN
WEEK 5 • DAILY BRIEFING 5 • MERCY TO THE GUILTY

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

Ecclesiastes 8:11

Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

This week follows Sunday's sermon, "Restrain or Pain." You can watch or listen to the sermon at 1mso.church or on the One Missoula app.

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, forgive me for the times I have called it compassion when I was really just avoiding a hard conversation or tough love. Give me courage to protect the people who are being hurt from the pain brought by a selfish fool. Thank You that at the cross You showed mercy without ignoring justice. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

TODAY'S TEACHING

On Sunday we said that civil governments that delay justice multiply victims, and the application was "Protect victims, not villains." Today we are taking that principle out of the courtroom and into everyday life. In 1759 the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith wrote that "mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the innocent." That is true in a nation, and it is true in a family or a workplace.

The manager who keeps excusing the employee who bullies everyone else is not being kind. He is choosing one person's comfort over the whole team's well-being and performance. The parent who keeps rescuing an adult child from the consequences of drinking is not being loving either, because his next car wreck may involve someone else's kid. When we call that "compassion," we are usually just avoiding a hard conversation.

Today's passage tells a story about Ahab (Israel's negligent king), who reigned more than 800 years before Jesus and is remembered as one of Israel's worst kings. Ben-hadad (the king of Israel's enemy, Syria) brought a huge army against Ahab's capital city of Samaria (1 Kings 20:1). God gave Ahab two unlikely victories over that army so that he would "know that I am the LORD" (20:13, 28). After the second defeat, Ben-hadad hid in a city, and his servants came up with a plan. In that culture, men who wore sackcloth and ropes were signaling surrender and begging for their lives.

After Ahab let Ben-hadad go, God sent a prophet disguised as a wounded soldier. The prophet told Ahab a made-up story about a prisoner he had been ordered to guard and had let escape, and Ahab declared that the soldier deserved his punishment for his negligence. Then the prophet revealed who he really was and delivered God's verdict against Ahab's dereliction of duty (20:35–41).

God never told Ahab in advance to execute Ben-hadad, but He didn't need to. God had promised twice to give the Syrian army into Ahab's hand, and the second promise came after the Syrians mocked the LORD as "a god of the hills but he is not a god of the valleys" (20:28). In verse 42, God calls Ben-hadad "the man whom I had devoted to destruction." Israel used that language for enemies God had handed over for judgment (Deuteronomy 7:2). Ben-hadad was God's prisoner, not Ahab's bargaining chip.

READ & MEDITATE

1 Kings 20:31–34

And his servants said to him, "Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings. Let us put sackcloth around our waists and ropes on our heads and go out to the king of Israel.

Perhaps he will spare your life.” [32]So they tied sackcloth around their waists and put ropes on their heads and went to the king of Israel and said, “Your servant Ben-hadad says, ‘Please, let me live.’” And he said, “Does he still live? He is my brother.” [33]Now the men were watching for a sign, and they quickly took it up from him and said, “Yes, your brother Ben-hadad.” Then he said, “Go and bring him.” Then Ben-hadad came out to him, and he caused him to come up into the chariot. [34]And Ben-hadad said to him, “The cities that my father took from your father I will restore, and you may establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.” And Ahab said, “I will let you go on these terms.” So he made a covenant with him and let him go.

1 Kings 20:42

And he said to him, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people.’”

As you read, remember that “the king of Israel” is Ahab and “his servants” are the people who work for Ben-hadad. Notice what Ahab calls Ben-hadad and what Ahab gets out of letting him go.

REFLECT

Answer these honestly. This is between you and God, and nobody else needs to see what you write.

Ben-hadad’s servants knew something about the kings of Israel.

1. Fill in the blank from 1 Kings 20:31: “we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are _____ kings.”

How did Ben-hadad’s servants plan to use that reputation?

They were counting on Ahab’s mercy to get a guilty man off the hook. People who do evil often know exactly which leaders and parents will let them slide.

Ahab’s response to the defeated king is surprising.

2. What did Ahab call Ben-hadad in verse 32, and what did Ahab get out of the deal in verse 34?

Ahab called the enemy who had just tried to destroy the people God had called Ahab to protect “my brother,” and then he cut a trade deal with him. What looked like compassion was really politics and profit.

Verse 42 is God's verdict on Ahab's decision.

3. According to verse 42, who would pay for Ahab's decision?

What does that tell you about how God views mercy shown to the guilty at the expense of the innocent?

Three years later Ahab died fighting the Syrians, struck by an arrow shot "at random" (1 Kings 22:1, 34–35). Later still, a Syrian king named Ben-hadad laid siege to Samaria, and the famine was so severe that a mother ate her own son (2 Kings 6:24–29). Ahab's "mercy" cost him little at first, and it cost his people everything later.

Proverbs says, "A man of great wrath will pay the penalty, for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again" (Proverbs 19:19).

4. Why does rescuing someone from the consequences of their sin usually make the problem worse?

False compassion fails everyone, including the guilty person, because it removes the pain that might have led him to change. Real mercy never ignores justice. At the cross, God did not pretend our sin was fine. He paid for it Himself, so that He could be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

Many of us have someone we keep rescuing from the consequences of their sin or folly.

5. Whose consequences have you been shielding, and who else is paying for it?

MY "I WILL" STATEMENT

This week we looked at what happens when people with authority refuse to restrain evil. Every one of us has some degree of authority, and every one of us has someone we can protect.

Write one sentence that begins with the words "I will." Make it something you can actually do in the next seven days, name the day you will do it, and tie it to what you wrote in question 5.

Example: I will stop covering for my coworker's missed deadlines, and I will talk with him directly about it by Wednesday.

PRAYER

Bring what you just wrote to God. Write your prayer or pray out loud.

MEMORY VERSE

Write or recite Ecclesiastes 8:11 from memory.