

GOD IS...JUST AND MERCIFUL

Exodus 34:1-9

Early in Exodus, God delivered a message to Israel through Moses that announced His intention to reveal Himself to the nation (*Exodus 6:2-8*). While His self-revelation certainly included dramatic and focused announcements (*cf. Exodus 34:5-7*), God primarily revealed Himself to Israel through His interactions with them. The story of God's interactions with Israel reveals an important pair of balanced characteristics essential to understanding God – He is just and merciful. We will therefore consider the narrative of the golden calf to help us better understand those characteristics and their meaning for our lives.

Generous mercy and non-negotiable justice

Exodus chapter nineteen narrates Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai, a dramatic moment in which God announced His intentions for the nation and invited them to enter into a covenant relationship with Him. Our familiarity with that scene might lead us to miss the surprise it would have held for Israel – the God of their nation's forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had revealed His unique sovereignty by devastating Egypt and, at Mount Sinai invited the Israelites into a covenant relationship with Him in which He would be their king and they would be His kingdom (*cf. Exodus 19:1-6*), a relationship in which God willingly obligated Himself to Israel if they submitted to His rule (*Exodus 19:5-6*).

Meeting God on Mount Sinai and seeing Him descend onto the mountain would have certainly surprised Israel yet His invitation to join Him in a covenant relationship would have been equally – if not more – surprising to them because the gods of their world did not condescend to such relationships. Yet God called out to Israel, initiating an unheard-of relationship with them and Israel answered “with one voice, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do””¹ (*Exodus 24:1-3*).

Even though Israel announced their desire to covenant with God, the first recorded actions of the nation following their covenant ceremony with God focus on how they quickly and willfully violated the opening terms of that relationship (*Exodus 20:3-6, 22-23; 22:20; 23:13, 23-25; 32:1-6*). That background helps us appreciate the material in Exodus 32-34, in which we find evidence of God's justice and mercy. Consider:

- Even though God instructed Israel that disobedience to their covenant with Him carried the threat of a severe penalty (*cf. Exodus 20:4-6*), He “relented” from applying it to the nation as a whole (*Exodus 32:11-14*).
- Although He “relented” from His initial, nation-wide plan, God still punished Israel.

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- God ordered the death of any Israelite who refused to submit to Him (*Exodus 32:25-35*).
- After God removed from Israel's camp those who refused to submit to His rule, He "sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf" (*Exodus 32:35*).
- God followed His punishment of Israel with a dire announcement – "I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people" (*Exodus 33:1-3*).
- That situation prompted Moses to seek from God some indication that He was not done with Israel (*Exodus 33:12-16*), which led to God's decision to allow Moses to see His "goodness" and to hear Him proclaim His name "the LORD" (*Exodus 33:17-23*).
- Exodus chapter thirty-four records God's revelation of Himself to Moses and offers a few insights into God's character. For example:
 - God announced His character, one marked by justice and mercy in a specific balance (*Exodus 34:5-7; cf. 20:4-6*).
 - God displayed His merciful character by renewing His covenant with Israel (*Exodus 34:10-28*).
 - God further revealed His merciful character by permitting Moses to reflect His identity to Israel (*Exodus 34:29-35*).

Applications

- God *is* merciful, but His mercy cannot be separated from His justice.
- God's mercy gives us a confidence before Him while His justice reminds us of expectations attending His mercy (*cf. John 8:1-11*).
- Jesus perfectly embodies the mercy and justice that defines God (*John 3:16-21*).
- Misunderstanding the balance between God's mercy and justice creates imbalances in our relationships with the people around us (*cf. Matthew 9:10-13; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13*); misunderstanding that balance results in us *not* acting like God.

For the coming week:

To help extend the lesson and to encourage you to make it personal, take time during the coming week to consider the following material:

Read, reflect, and pray

Read Exodus 32-34 this week and consider how the story of Israel breaking of their covenant with God and of God renewing that covenant reveals God's mercy and justice. Reflect on the ways you believe you have experienced God's mercy and justice in your life and offer prayers of thanks to Him for His good identity.

Apply

Consider how you can show mercy and justice to the people in your life in ways that reflect God's own mercy and justice. Identify one way you can better display those qualities and commit to doing them. Consider sharing your commitment with someone who can lovingly hold you accountable to your commitment.