

Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD.
(Ezekiel 18:32)

Mercy triumphs over judgment!
(James 2:13)

Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?
(Romans 2:4)

When “They” are Hurting **(or, The Divinity Lesson of an Atheist)**

Christopher Hitchens has cancer, so reports the Associated Press.

You may or may not have heard of him; Mr. Hitchens an avowed atheist who is, perhaps, more outspoken about his beliefs than most believers are. He's written several books about it, such as *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and made several public appearances debating the matter with a believer (who happens to be a good friend of his). He was preparing to do a book tour of his memoirs when he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, for which he is undergoing chemotherapy. Generally, this form of cancer has a low survival rate.

Interviewed by the AP, Mr. Hitchens says there are three types of reactions he is getting from people to his situation; those who are happy at his suffering, those who are trying to use it to get him to convert, and those who are actively praying that God would heal him, the latter group apparently setting no preconditions for Divine intervention.

Upon reading this, one of my first thoughts (after offering a prayer of my own for the man... in the latter category... for which I hope Mr. Hitchens will pardon me), was to marvel at his categorization of the reactions he is receiving.

To put it simply, how come only one-third of believers seem to have the right motivation in this case?

Whether Mr. Hitchens realizes it or not, he is offering believers an object lesson in the love of God. Genuine concern, expressed not over perceived slights or insults, nor a cause to be defended but in humble sympathy for a man who is hurting – whether one agrees with him or not on a key issue – and the desire not to see him hurt any longer. And while Mr. Hitchens might find this the height of irony, the lesson he offers is very much like one the Lord Jesus Himself taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10).

To condense the story, a Jewish traveler is mugged and robbed on his way to Jericho. A priest and a Levite each pass the victim by on the road, doing nothing to help him. A Samaritan then comes on the scene and takes pity on the victim, treating his wounds, putting him on the Samaritan's own donkey, taking him to the nearest inn and paying the innkeeper to care for him, even offering to recompense him for any additional expenses incurred.

Most believers only stay at face value in this parable: Who is truly the neighbor to the traveler who was attacked? The one who had mercy on him – and to drive home the

point, Jesus concludes the lesson with “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10: 37). But if you look into the history of Israel and the times Jesus lived in while on Earth, rich layers to this story open up.

The priest and the Levite were experts in the Law of Moses, which stressed compassion on a fellow Israelite in trouble, and yet they did nothing to help the victim. The part on which Jesus’ story hinges is the Samaritan who does help him. In those days, Jews and Samaritans, even though both lived under the domination of the Romans, did not like each other. Samaritans were viewed by the Jews as “half-breeds,” worshipping God the wrong way. The very name “Samaritan” was used by the people of that day as an insult to others, even to Jesus. (“Aren’t we right in saying you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?” the crowd asks Jesus in John 8:48) and the Samaritans met their loathing, insult for insult, slight for slight. Jews went out of their way not to travel through Samaria, and when they did, Samaritans frequently refused them food, water and lodging. So when Jesus brings a Samaritan into the story, His hearers are expecting the “punch line,” as it were. An early version of an ethnic joke. Maybe spitting on the poor victim... or worse. Instead, the Samaritan is the hero of the story; clearly seeing the victim is Jewish, the Samaritan disregards all the issues between Jews and his own people and sees only a wounded man who he could help – and does. Can you imagine the absolute, dead *silence* the crowd goes into upon hearing Jesus turn their petty little prejudices on their collective heads? That the needs of a man’s life are far more important than who is “right?” And then telling them that if they want to be like the God they claim to worship, “go and do likewise?”

Well, in the case of Mr. Hitchens – and others just like him – now is our turn to “go and do likewise.” But if what he has been encountering is an accurate indication of the state of the Body of Christ, for the most part we’re not doing it. Here is a man who renounces God in a public, vocal way, freely acknowledging (as he did in the AP interview) that his own vices probably triggered his esophageal cancer, and still holds fast to his belief, declining even to participate in a day organized by people to pray for his healing. So, according to Mr. Hitchens, how do we as “believers” react? Let’s break it down:

1. **Those who are happy over his suffering:** While the odds of Mr. Hitchens’ ever reading this are infinitesimally small, I try to never say “never.” As such, I would remind Mr. Hitchens that while many claim to be Christian, to quote Gershwin, *it ain’t necessarily so*. And being happy over the suffering of those who oppose you is a dead giveaway that “it ain’t.” Any believer who knows anything about hell knows it’s a place you don’t want to go to. Ever. That’s why Jesus preached about it so much – more than anyone else in the Word of God; He was trying to tell His listeners, *Hey – don’t go there!* Hell is not a joke, nor a punch line; it is a spiritual place, but just as real as the physical world, and if a believer has even an ounce of the Holy Spirit of God in them, they would not wish such an eternal location on their worst enemy. In fact, God warns against rejoicing over the troubles of your enemy. (Proverbs 24:17, Matthew 5:44). The desire for seeing one’s opponent in distress is not Godly, but is a desire for justice on our terms, an expression of the Hindu concept of *kharma*. As defined by Wikipedia, *kharma* is a deed a person does which triggers a cycle of cause and effect, which *requires* God to implement

justice, the consequences of one's actions, whether good or evil. Karma is not a Biblical concept, because God (who cannot be dictated to) is motivated by mercy and love, to the point where He is pleased when people turn from their wrongdoings so they don't have to suffer punishment for their sins (refer to the passage from Ezekiel 18:32 referenced above). In God's view, mercy trumps judgment. Jesus' parable does not go into the motivations of the priest and the Levite, but we can take an educated guess at them. How many people have we seen who supposedly "know" God, take one look at the victim and say to themselves, *Dummy! You knew this was a high crime area, but did you go another way? Noooooooo – "It won't happen to me!" That's what you thought, didn't you? Now look at you!*

2. **Those who use the situation to score a "conversion:"** I know it's going to seem like I'm doing the same thing here, and I do beg your pardon for it, but my purpose is different. A rather infamous recent quote used in politics is to never let a crisis go to waste. And some believers take the same view in terms of being a witness of the faith to others. In this group, you find almost a mercenary mentality; remember when the sign at McDonald's used to keep track of how many people were served? Some believers take a similar view – their worth to the Kingdom of God is based on how many folks they can bring into the Kingdom, and nothing else. Don't get me wrong, God wants unbelievers saved, and He uses us to do it as His hands and His feet. But there's more to it than merely racking up numbers. It is letting the love of God be expressed through us. Coming alongside a person when they're hurting and simply being a friend can be far more effective than simply making a pitch like you're selling peanuts or soap. Paul's letter to the church at Rome (referenced above) is targeted at believers, not to unbelievers, reminding them that letting God's love work through us is what more often than not draws people to the Kingdom. People generally know when you're being real with them, and while using a person's suffering for your own goals may not be openly hostile, it is still crass and calculating and a turn-off to others. The Levite in Jesus' parable probably saw the mugging victim and immediately opened his database to the Law of Moses, referencing which parts applied and which did not. He was calculating when he should have been compassionate.
3. **Genuine Concern:** Love is the one thing that no one can really argue against, and even Mr. Hitchens regards it as a "nice gesture." Paul knew this; writing to the Galatians, he described the fruit of the Spirit – the evidence of God working in someone's life – as including love, peace, kindness, gentleness and goodness, noting that "against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:24). Furthermore, these are the qualities that are most like the God we claim to be serving. And in Romans (as referenced above), Paul adds that such qualities are used by God Himself to draw us to him. A conversion that is coerced or forced is no conversion at all; it's just acquiescing to the person who has the gun to your head in order to get the gun moved away from your head. Furthermore, God freely gave us His love without precondition, knowing that some would not accept it, and he demands the same from us: "Freely you have received, freely give," said Jesus in Matthew 10:8.

I don't know Mr. Hitchens personally, but I do know that cancer can be especially nasty, often accompanied by terrible suffering. Anyone who takes pleasure in someone suffering in this manner simply doesn't "get it" so far as what Jesus taught is concerned, which causes me to question whether they are saved at all. Sure, people are going to do things that upset us from time to time, perhaps even anger us, but we have to learn to see them as God sees us. We are called upon to be Jesus' hands and feet – not His judge's gavel. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged," Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:1); the only time Scripture suggests otherwise is in 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul writes of handling disputes *within* the church, and that we will one day (in the Millennial Kingdom of the Lord Jesus) judge not only the world, but the performance of angels. Everyone is to receive the same love of God that He showed us. It saddens me that so few people who call themselves believers seem to remember that love is supposed to be the chief distinguishing characteristic of Christians (read John 13:35... repeat as necessary). It is such basic truths as this that churches need to spend more time on, not how to be like the world and still call yourself a believer.

Pray for Christopher Hitchens and others like him, and not *like* you mean it – *mean it!* Get well soon, sir.

For the Glory of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ
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