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8-9-2017

# Overwhelming Justice and Mercy

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## Recommended Citation

Zuidema, Leah A., "Overwhelming Justice and Mercy" (2017). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. 762.  
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# Overwhelming Justice and Mercy

## **Abstract**

"God is good—always, good. But, he is not simple, nor simply 'safe.'"

Posting about God's compassion from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/overwhelming-justice-and-mercy/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, lectionary, justice, mercy, good and evil

## **Disciplines**

Christianity

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# Overwhelming Justice and Mercy

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 [inallthings.org/overwhelming-justice-and-mercy/](https://allthings.org/overwhelming-justice-and-mercy/)

August 9,  
2017

Leah Zuidema

## Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 78:1-8, 17-29](#)

[Exodus 16:2-15, 31-35](#)

[Matthew 15:32-39](#)

When my daughters were small, one of our favorite picture books to read together was [That's Good! That's Bad!](#) by Margery Cuyler (illustrated by David Catrow). If you [read along](#) for just a few pages, you'll quickly pick up the rhythm of the story. A little boy at the zoo gets a shiny balloon that lifts him high into the sky. "That's good!" No—that's bad. His balloon drifts to the jungle and pops, so that he falls into the jungle. "That's bad!" No, that's good. Back and forth, the story goes. With each turn of events, we see-saw back and forth between *that's good* and *no, that's bad*. *That's bad; no, that's good*.

I am reminded of this book as I read the lectionary passages, especially the sections from [Psalm 78](#) (the central passage that holds today's three passages together).

"Give ear, oh my people, to my teaching...." (vs. 1). *That's good*.

"...I will utter dark sayings from of old...." (vs. 2b). *No, that's bad*.

"We will not hide them from their children" (vs. 4). *That's bad?*

*No, that's good:*

"We will tell . . . the glorious deeds of the LORD...

That the next generation might know them

the children yet unborn,

and rise up and tell them to their children,

so that they should set their hope in God,

and not forget the works of God,

but keep his commandments..." (vs. 4-8).

*Oh, that's VERY good!*

*No, that's bad:*

"and that they should not be like their ancestors,

a stubborn and rebellious generation,

a generation whose heart was not steadfast,

whose spirit was not faithful to God" (vs. 8).

*Very bad, indeed:* The people sinned, they tested God, they spoke against him. He was full of rage, a fire was kindled, his anger mounted (vs. 17-22).

*Yet God was good:* He opened heaven, rained down manna, gave them bread of angels, sent them food in abundance... (vs. 23-28).

“And they ate and were well filled,  
for he gave them what they craved” (vs. 29).

This sounds very good—and it’s a lovely place to close the reading for the day. But, read on! As you continue past the lectionary verses into the rest of [Psalm 78](#), verses 33-67 speak of God’s wrath and Israel’s ongoing failure to learn. That’s definitely bad. Except that it is followed by an account of God’s mercy to Judah, whom God provides with his shepherd. The psalm ends gently: “With upright heart he tended them, and guided them with skillful hand” (vs. 72).

Back and forth, back and forth. As I read this Psalm and today’s verses from Exodus and Matthew, I wonder what to think. What kind of stories are these? Should I read them as cautions against inciting God’s wrath? Or as testimonies to God’s mercy?

Perhaps that is the point. God is good—always, good. But, he is not simple, nor simply “safe.” He is just. He is merciful. Both are overwhelming: his justice and his mercy. His anger rises when his people “do not trust his saving power” (Psalm 78:21-22), but by correcting our path he causes us to repent and seek him earnestly (vs. 34), and he is compassionate and forgiving (vs. 38). The final portrait in today’s lectionary passages is from [Matthew 15:32-39](#), where Jesus has compassion on the crowd and feeds them. After feeding them, he turns to leave. Will they follow him? Will we?

**Prayer** (based on [Belgic Confession article 20](#)): God, you are perfectly merciful and also just. Thank you for sending your Son to bear the punishment for our sin through his bitter death. You have poured out goodness and mercy on us who are guilty, giving your Son to die by a most perfect love. You raised him to life for us, that we might have eternal life. Work in our hearts, LORD, to follow you and worship you.