Respect, judgment, and love

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A few years ago the birth of Lois' and my first child, Matthew, stimulated me to write a somewhat effusive article on love (*RJ*, Feb. 1976). The thoughts inspired by the recent birth of our second child, Emily, have been tempered by Matthew's development into that stage exasperated parents call "the terrible twos."

Perhaps that is why I find myself these days thinking as much about respect as love. Indeed, I even caught myself (as I was trying to discourage Matthew from further experimenting on the correlation between his squeezing and Emily's squawking) entertaining that old chestnut, "Wouldn't you really rather be respected than loved?"

We can overlook the woman who tartly answered "It all depends on the time of day" and still observe that experiences other than parenthood have elicited this question. In fact, Immanuel Kant (never a suitor, much less a parent) devotes a chapter to it in his *Lectures on Ethics*. Claiming that all persons have by nature two impulses—to be respected and to be loved—he does not hesitate to say which of the two a rational person would prefer. Consider the opposites, he argues, contempt and hate: "Both are unpleasant, but it hurts one more to be treated with contempt than to be hated." This is because a contemptible person is an object of disdain and, not being held in regard,

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loses even his own sense of worth. But to be hated is still to be recognized as a free and significant being, a state perfectly compatible with a sense of dignity and self-worth. So, Kant concludes, he would rather be respected than loved.

This view, while it clashes with Abraham Maslow's claim that love is a more basic need than respect, resonates with much of contemporary thinking. Philosophers such as John Rawls (in *A Theory of Justice*) elevate self-respect to the highest of social goods and, linking self-respect to the possessing of rights, claim that in the well-ordered society *rights* rather than *charity* are the proper channel for justly distributing the resources. Popular leaders demanding a more just society appeal to the rights of the have-nots rather than the benevolence of the haves. Thus we have movements for minorities' rights, women's rights, children's rights, handicapped persons' rights, nonsmokers' rights, and even animals' and trees' rights. This "rights mentality," which is swamping our increasingly litigious legal system, is fueled, I believe, by the recognition that to be the bearer of rights, even unfulfilled ones, legitimizes the demand for respect.

> "As to your love," the black girl went on, still with deliberate dignity, holding her head erect as if balancing something upon it and addressing the entire table in full consciousness of dominating, "we've had enough of your love. You've been loving us down in Georgia and Mississippi for hundreds of years. We've been loved to death, we now want to be respected" (John Updike, *Bech: A Book*, ch. 5).

Of course, one can wonder about the quality of that love in Mississippi, but even a perfectly benevolent dictator, as dictator, need not respect the objects of his benevolence, need not recognize them as persons with a worth that makes a moral demand on him and his gifts. In fact, such a recognition would change part of the benevolence into obligation, and the moral, if not legal, status of the entire relationship would be transformed.

Kant is not the only one to notice that this thinking rubs against a particular way of developing the *sola gratia* emphasis in Lutheran and Reformed theology. This current of theology, exhibited in hymns about God's loving "such a worm as I," sees God's mercy in his loving his utterly contemptible children. The mentality cultivated is that of denying one's own dignity and worth in order to praise God's lovingkindness. Apart from concern for the psychological effects of this thinking (see, for instance, *The Christian Looks at Himself*, by Anthony Hoekema) one can wonder about a theology that predicates God's sovereignty and grace on the worthlessness of his creatures.

Is God or his love less great if he saves beings "a little lower than the angels" rather than worms? If parenthood teaches us anything, it's that one person can be utterly dependent on another and still have the sort of moral status, the dignity and worth, that elicits respect as well as love. True humility consists in the recognition of one's dependence, the willingness to accept help where needed; it is an attitude sharply distinguished from, even incompatible with, the belief that one is worthless. (If I am truly worthless, rather than helpless, why should I trouble others for their help?)

Respect, like love, is a many-splendored thing, and the term is ambiguously used. Sometimes it is used to mean "fear," another ambiguous term: "By which you mean," Bech replies to the black woman quoted above, "you want to be feared." Now I confess a certain sympathy with this confusion (especially when the Matthew squeezing/Emily squawking episodes resist our attempts at behavioral engineering), but fear, useful though it be, is not what I mean by respect. However tempted I am to associate my children's respect for *me* with fear, my respect for *them* had better not be predicated on my fear of them. I suspect that this confusion between respect and fear is precisely what makes people sometimes think they must choose between being respected and being loved.

The aspect of respect that I wish to consider is, I believe, one that reveals something of the link between respect and love. This aspect is that of judgment. Respect, whether for oneself or for another, entails the willingness to make judgments, critical judgments, of the one respected.

Judgment is involved in all of five types of respect worth distinguishing. First, human beings as persons are beings who share in common a set of properties that make them worthy of respect or *regard* in spite of what they do or have. These properties are relational (children of God) as well as intrinsic (autonomous possessors of a rational will), and they elicit judgments about personal worth and dignity. These common properties are distinct from incidental characteristics such as race, caste, sex, or nationality which, in a different sense, define what (or, more precisely, where) persons are.

These latter properties often elicit a second sort of respect, akin to *partiality*, which unfortunately looms larger than the regard due humans as persons. This is the favoritism of which Peter is disabused when he is perplexed to discover that "God is not a respecter of persons" but accepts anyone, such as the non-Jewish Cornelius, who worships him and "does what is right" (Acts 10:34).

The latter quotation brings out a third kind of respect, sometimes called *admiration*, elicited by what persons do. This is a biblically sanctioned type of respect. It is not to be confused with either the first type or with a fourth type based on what persons have or consume.

This fourth type of respect, akin to *deference*, unfortunately competes with partiality as the main sort of respect people give and seek. It is the sort of discrimination James castigates when he insists that there be no difference in seating arrangements between the man with gold rings and fine clothes, on the one hand, and the man with shabby clothes, on the other (2:1-4).

A fifth type of respect is based not on what a person is or has done, but on what he or she *can* do or become. This attention to the possibility in a person is, I argued in my earlier article, nurtured by love. When we love our neighbors in the way that we love ourselves we cease judging them solely by what they *have* done and been (and ourselves solely by what we *can* do and become). Rather, we judge the future possibilities as well as the past actualities in everyone.

I admit that some of these five types of respect are distinguished less by the character of the attitudes and more by their objects, and that there is a thin line between what persons do and what they are. But these possible confusions are less important than those caused by not distinguishing the above five phenomena. For example, the respect for persons' merits (instrumental value), which is elicited by what they achieve, varies quite properly from one individual to another; but the regard elicited by their personhood (intrinsic worth) ought always to be the same. Even a negative judgment about achievement or failure presupposes that the individual judged is an autonomous person who is a child of God. If Kant made any contribution to ethics it is his insistence that the *price* we place on what persons can do is not to be confused with the priceless *dignity* they possess by virtue of their status as ends-in-themselves.

It is this point that refutes all arguments for slave or caste systems based on morally irrelevant features of persons; it is also the element of truth in the claim that all persons are created equal. And this point is as important for respecting oneself as it is for respecting others. No sadder confusion occurs than when people allow their self-respect as persons to be conditioned by the legitimate but variable respect dependent on their achievements, or worse, on the illegitimate and variable partiality and deference based on race, caste, or possessions. The good news of the gospel is that God does not respect persons according to what they have or where they are, and that while he does judge them according to what they do, he assuredly does not confuse this with his judgment of what they are and can be.

The Bible's story too often is wrongly interpreted as one of God's mercy toward contemptible worms; it ought to be seen as a story about judgment on responsible and significant persons. Of course no one will plead that God judge us, and thereby respect us, *rather than* love us, for none of us can afford getting from God what we deserve. It is true that respect refuses to avoid honest judgments about shortcomings, but fatherly judgment is compatible with loving forgiveness as long as the latter is not confused with mere grandfatherly indulgence. I wish now to explore further the falsity of any dichotomy between respect and love or mercy. By reflecting on a central episode in John's gospel (a writing in which judgment is the organizing theme), I hope to show not only that respect and love can be combined but that a proper understanding of the judgmental aspect of respect reveals that love can and ought to be an ingredient in it.

John uses the concept of judgment so frequently (31 times) that he sometimes seems to have Jesus say contradictory things about it. In 9:32 Jesus says, "For judgment I came into this world . . . ," while in 12:47, using the same Greek stem, he says, "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world." This assertion and denial of what might look like the same claim is enlightening because it reveals some of the complexities involved in making judgments.

Why might Jesus say both that he did and that he did not come to judge the world? Consider this in the context of the powerful drama John presents in chapter 9, the story of the Sabbath healing of a man born blind. Here we have an example of what John's prologue in chapter 1 warns us the entire book describes—two opposing reactions to light shining in darkness. After Jesus proclaims himself the light of the world and exemplifies it by giving light to the blind man, the Pharisees and the man given sight respond in opposite ways. The former choose to allow its being an extraordinary act of obvious goodness to be outweighed by the consideration that it violated one of their rules. Sight had been given to the blind but it

was done on the Sabbath. This legal technicality governed their negative reaction: while some were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner do such things?" the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

The division among the observers initiates a fascinating trial scene in which the Pharisees set themselves up as judges over the event and the participants. They call as witnesses the parents of the healed man, who testify that indeed their son had been born blind. Understandably impressed with Jesus, these parents still fear the church authorities, and so refuse to interpret the significance of the event. So the Pharisees recall the blind man and inform him what they, as doctors of the law of Moses and spokesmen for the church, think of Jesus and what he did. "Give God the praise," they say, "we know that this man is a sinner." The healed man refuses to be intimidated and sarcastically replies, "Whether he is a sinner or not I do not know, but I do know that once I was blind but now I see."

The judges resort to contrasting the safe certainty of being a disciple of Moses (as they interpreted him) with becoming a follower of this law-violating upstart. The blind man is simply amazed: "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. . . . If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." For that piece of unauthorized theology he is promptly excommunicated. And in response Jesus utters one of his darkest sayings: "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

We have a two-leveled theme of blindness and sight. Jesus gives sight to the blind—physical sight to the physically blind but also (which is the point of the story) spiritual sight to those willing to admit that they need it. The man born blind, who never denied the Pharisees' judgment on his spiritual needs—that he was "born in utter sin," the spiritual equivalent to being born blind—receives sight, and Jesus affirms that he came to give sight to those who need it. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were not born blind, neither physically nor (in their own view) spiritually. But in the confrontation, what they thought was their spiritual sight—elaborate Sabbath rule obedience—progressively blinds them to what the blind man progressively sees in Jesus.

By the end of the story all of the participants pass judgment on Jesus. But what does this judgment reflect? Jesus points out that it reflects more on the participants than on him. The Pharisees have confirmed themselves in their blindness. When they ask him, with an even deeper irony than they intend, "Are we also blind?" Jesus replies, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say 'we see,' your guilt remains." If they were humble enough to recognize their own need for spiritual sight, they would, surprisingly, see more than they do. But since they proudly think they have privileged access to spiritual light, their judgment on him is, in effect, their own judgment on their own guilt and blindness. The key to this double level of judgment emerges when Jesus specifies the judgment for which he did come into the world: "And this is the judgment, that the light came into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

Two important points emerge here. The first is a linguistic one about the Greek word for judgment—*krisis*—from which, significantly, our word "crisis" is derived. The primary meaning is that of "dividing" or "sifting," and the secondary meaning is that of "condemning." Jesus says he did not come in order to condemn the world—his positive purpose is to save it. But he did come to sift the world or, more precisely, to place persons in a *krisis* situation in which they sift themselves according to how they judge him and his works.

Here the second important point emerges, one about the phenomenon of judging: the basis on which persons judge Jesus is as much a function of their own deeds and lives as it is of his.

This second point touches on an ancient and deep debate about the nature of knowledge and belief, a debate in which Immanuel Kant joins with the Hebrew prophets against the Greek philosophers. To the Greeks, true knowledge is like passive seeing; in knowing something one acknowledges the essential properties of the thing-in-itself. Knower and known are necessarily related only in that the one contemplates the other. For the Hebrew, knowledge has, in addition to acknowledgment, a movement of will and even of emotion. Knowledge gained is a function of what one wants to know as much as of what is "out there." Therefore ignorance of important matters can involve guilt, because one's will obscures the truth. A person cannot be condemned for being dull-witted or for not having enough information, yet we find Jesus, in true Hebrew fashion, condemning persons for not

knowing him. Their fault was not in their brains but in their heart; what they did not want to see controlled what they could not see. They could not see that Jesus was the light of the world because of what they loved.

This brief sketch of the Hebrew view of knowledge is hardly a defense of it. One could argue, for example, that it seems a more accurate theory for the appreciation of value-laden aspects of persons than for the perception of many other things. But the only element in it that I wish to underscore is an element it shares with Kant's view of knowledge, distinguishing them both from the Greek view. This element I will call the "reflexivity of judgment." What Kant thought of as his Copernican Revolution in epistemology involved the claim that our judgments tell us more about our own cognitive faculties, about how we think, than they tell us about the things judged as they are in themselves. (In fact, Kant thought they tell us nothing about the latter, but that's another story.)

Kant assumes a broader notion of judgment than John uses, but I think that Kant's theory can help us understand the root notion of "sifting" that John uses for "judgment." When you sift something, such as sand through a screen, the sand that makes it through the screen is as much a function of the screen as of the sand. (Remember the fisherman who, using a net with two-inch holes, decided that there are no fish smaller than two inches in the ocean?)

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Analogously, when you sift or categorize persons and their deeds, the result will reflect as much on the categories you use as on those persons and deeds. It not only will reflect which categories are most important for you (Sabbath rules *vs.* acts of mercy) but, to the extent the categories are value-laden, it will reflect your own values. Therefore, since your values are correlated with the life you lead and the kind of person you are, your value judgment about others is, in effect, a judgment about your own character.

A good way, then, to find out what kind of person you are is to look to your judgments about others. You will be judged according to how you judge others, not just because of the reaction of some third party, but because in judging others you are, in effect, judging yourself. Jesus' message is that in judging him persons reveal their own character and, given that he is goodness personified, if they condemn him, they, in effect, condemn themselves.

This analysis helps us understand why so often a prophet is without honor in his own country. Prophets generally react against the values of their own societies, so the categories those societies use to judge them will often condemn them. If Jesus is right, those values and the resultant condemnation are a consequence of the loves and way of life of the members of that society. They misinterpret the prophet because of the direction of their hearts, not because of some purely intellectual failure. Thus this analysis shows the sense in which a society gets the heroes (and villains) it *deserves*, a sobering thought when one considers who are some of the heroes and villains in our society.

Let me be the first to admit—indeed, insist—that judgments about most persons and their deeds are and should be much more ambivalent than those portrayed in John's episode. In fact, an unambivalent response and judgment in a truly ambiguous situation is not one bit better than a wishy-washy response and judgment in a truly unambiguous situation. In either case, the inappropriate judgment reflects negatively on the judge. Moreover, the fact that in judging others we are, in effect, judging ourselves should not result in an inability to make honest, critical judgments about others. "Condemn not that ye be not condemned" is a warning against condemning others for the same thing of which you are guilty (in Matthew 7:1-5 it is part of the admonition to see the log in your own eye as well as the speck in your neighbor's); it is not a injunction against judging others as part of respecting them.

An inability to make honest judgments about others speaks volumes about you and the way you respect others. The essential point is that the content of our judgments about others, whether they be about Jesus, our friends, our enemies, or strangers, is derivatively a judgment about ourselves, since it is a product of what we are as well as what they are.

I began by asking whether parents and other beleaguered groups need choose between respect and love, noting that if a choice must be made, the current emphasis on rights and justice indicates a choice for respect. Distinguishing respect from fear, I then sketched five different ways in which persons can be respected, observing that judgment is an element in all of them.

I suggested that the judgment involved in at least

the three legitimate and biblically-sanctioned types of respect—those elicited by what persons are, what they can be, and even what they do—is quite compatible with loving them. (Those who like to distinguish between agape and eros will agree that this suggestion is sound especially when love is interpreted as agape. Even Kant's dichotomy between respect and love likely presupposed a notion of love other than agape.) Finally, using John's view of the dynamics of judging others, I tried to show that the relation between love and respect is stronger than mere compatibility. Love is an ingredient in proper respect because respecting others involves judging others and judging others is, in effect, judging oneself. Therefore if we love ourselves we will judge and respect others in a way that reflects a loving self-judgment; for ourselves and others we will not allow possessions or position to overshadow personhood, or failures to overshadow possibilities. Thus those with a healthy self-love need not, indeed cannot, choose between respecting others and loving them. This point is worth remembering at a time when social concern for rights and respect is thought by some to render charity old-fashioned, irrelevant, and even demeaning.