

The Unjust Judge, or Why You Should Stop Saying, “I Don’t Care”

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I don’t know if many of you have met my brother Brian. Brian and I are quite similar in that we’re both slowly but surely turning into our father, but we’re also quite different. Yes, I’m older; Brian’s taller. Yes, he can grow a decent beard while I must shave. But I think the real difference is that he *cares*, cares in ways that I haven’t or don’t. Perhaps, I sell myself short, but his care has always impressed me.

When I was in high school or back home from college for a time, I would often look up from a book or my steady diet of premium cable to realize that I hadn’t seen Brian since dinner. He would almost invariably be found in the schoolyard next door throwing a lacrosse ball against a wall, catching it, and launching it back again, over and over and over, until 10 PM or later. They say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. But as any athlete, musician, or, indeed, any performer knows, doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results has another name: *practice*. That practice, that discipline, that care is the reason that my brother is a state champion lacrosse player, and most of us are not. Yes, it still bothers me that my siblings are state champion athletes, and I am not.

Today, Jesus tells his disciples a parable to encourage them in prayer and persistence. He speaks of a widow before an unjust judge, who cares nothing for God or neighbor but eventually relents to her pleas for vindication. Jesus then reveals the moral of his parable: if even an unjust judge can be convinced to grant justice, we can surely count on a God who truly does care for us. Jesus, whom the author significantly calls “the Lord,” then challenges his people: What kind of faith will the Son of Man find upon his return? Jesus implies: Will the Son of Man find persistent widows? Or unjust judges? You might ask: what’s the difference? Put simply: the widows *care*.

And so it is that there’s a particular phrase we can never really say as Christians—and I need you to stop saying it right now. And that phrase is this: I don’t care.

As Jesus says, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.” Because I hear his voice in our own.

The unjust judge has regard for neither God nor neighbor and, moreover, admits as much. He barely has the energy for his job, the only thing that defines him in our story. Judges, well, judge. They adjudicate disputes, they resolve conflicts, they judge. This judge refuses to get involved in the case of this widow. He is not even an unjust judge, for he refuses to judge at all. The widow could continue coming to his court or not; she could live or die on the judge’s watch. He doesn’t care.

“But Kevin,” you say, “of course, *we* care!” Do we though? Do we really?

Because I hear “I don’t care” a lot, though I don’t think we quite understand what we’re saying when we do.

How about this: *I don’t care who you sleep with*. This is said usually as an aside before saying something else about one’s relative tolerance (or intolerance) around sexuality. “I mean, I don’t care who you sleep with... it’s just...” or “I mean, I don’t care who anyone sleeps with...” or, more obscurely, “You know I don’t care about this sort of thing, but...” Except that you do care. Don’t you care? Shouldn’t you care?

A friend once said to me about another acquaintance, “I don’t care who he sleeps with—”

“I do,” I interrupted.

“Wait, what?”

“Well, yeah, I mean, if he’s gay, then I know some people who would love to make his acquaintance. And if he’s not, well, then I’d be giving people a one-way ticket to Thanks-but-no-thanks-ville and wasting everybody’s time. It matters.”

In a Church that purports to be welcoming, I don’t think it’s enough to say, “I don’t care.” Are we really saying we’re welcoming because we keep the doors unlocked and don’t kick people out? Is that really welcoming? Is an open-door policy the extent of our advocacy for victims of bullying and discrimination? Is the work of inclusion and ministry of reconciliation finished because we’ve got gay clergy and staff? Because we’re paying someone to be welcoming for us? You think churches are inclusive because they wave a rainbow flag? You might as well say a church is patriotic because we fly an American flag.

That’s just a terribly low bar, when the truth is we do care. We care about exclusive, mutually fulfilling, and, above all, loving relationships, and we celebrate and bless them here. This church cares who you sleep with. And we should stop pretending to some cosmopolitan permissiveness that puts us on the right side of history by saying otherwise.

How about these?

I don’t what color you are.

I don’t care how much money you have.

I don’t care what side of the aisle you’re on.

I don’t care who you are.

No!

We do care about your race, your social status, your finances, your politics, your past, and the rest of it, too—not because we’re going to weaponize that information against you, but because that stuff’s part of what makes you who you are. It’s who you are and what you’re dealing with, and we cannot ignore that. Jesus called us to love you, all of you, not just the parts we’re familiar and comfortable with. We care. Full stop.

And Jesus cared, too. Our feigned indifference becomes doubly dangerous when we then attribute our own disinterest to God.

How many of you have ever caught yourself saying this?

God doesn’t care if you come to church on Sunday.

God doesn’t care if you screw up.

God doesn’t care what religion you are.

We have to be very careful. We say these things to reassure ourselves and others, but we must be careful. Maybe God does care about that stuff, again not because God or the Church is going to weaponize a lack of attendance against you or send you to hell, but because God and we want a relationship with you. God wants a life of justice and peace, of meaning and significance for you, even if it’s not the way we grew up with or enjoy now. And God wants you to find that, so, yeah, God cares what you do on a Sunday morning. And that might just mean rushing to church just to fit it in on a Sunday. It might mean skipping something else. It might mean finding a church while on vacation. God may not necessarily care that the choir missed a note, that the priest flipped a prayer, or that an acolyte dropped something, though I think God cares more than we think about such things, but I am certain that God wants you off that hamster wheel you’ve been running all week.

I think God does care. I think God wants more for you. I think we should want more for each other, and we should stop saying otherwise, however casually or well-intentioned. Because an entire generation doesn't think being here in this place, doesn't think being faithful in any way is important. Because we told them we didn't care. Because we told them God didn't care.

And when you say God doesn't care, you're saying that there's no reason for Jesus. If God doesn't care, then why would God send Jesus? Why would God intervene in human life at all?

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It's time we banished that indifference, however casual or well-intentioned, from our vocabulary and our hearts.

I think the unjust judges of the world are indifferent because indifference is easier. Caring is hard. The way of love is hard. It is easier to make decisions, even the right decisions, because we're tired, because our hands are tied, because we're afraid. It's harder to wake in the morning and, confident despite all evidence to the contrary, face the unjust judges of this world and demand justice. And it's still harder to wake in the morning and do it all over again. The world calls that insanity. Athletes call it practice. We call it hope. It's just what you do when you care.

If you're having a hard time walking the way, of meeting the challenge of caring today, Jesus encourages us in prayer and in endurance. He told this parable to reassure us that God will answer, indeed is answering us. Do not be afraid to care. As you go about your days, listen for when you and others say, "I don't care." Stop beginning conversations by saying what you don't care about. Start with what you do care about and fight for it. Don't wash your hands of the matter; don't throw your hands up. Have the awkward conversation. Make a scene. Deal with the drama. And do it again. It's what Jesus would do. It's what Jesus did.

Care, indeed love, is what makes you my brother, my sister, my sibling in Jesus Christ. It is in care that we gather. It is in care that we worship. It is in care that we serve. And it is in that holiest of care that we will conquer on the last day, when God will finally put right all that is wrong with this world. And I will receive the spiritual equivalent of a state championship, whatever that is. Until that day comes, we will look up from our books and our TVs and our phones, and find the strength to care. Because doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is what athletes call practice and what Christians call hope.

Call me crazy. I don't care.