

## **200-Level 2010 Writing Contest Winner: Literary Analysis**

### The Misconception of Justice and Mercy

By Sara Gilbert

(Written for Dr. Lowe's English 210 Course)

Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* portrays God as a being who is just but yet who is also capable of incredible mercy. God the Father, the embodiment of justice, and the Son, the essence of mercy, discuss man's forthcoming disobedience and the curse of death that must fall on them in order to satisfy God's justice. The Son then offers to endure man's punishment so that if man places their faith in him they can be saved from spiritual death, thus God can show both justice and mercy to mankind. Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* tells the story of a brilliant doctor who sells his soul to the Devil for the sake of pleasure and knowledge. Faustus attempts to repent several times throughout the play, but cannot do so and also constantly attempts to be cleansed through means besides Christ because he has forgotten what is stated in *Paradise Lost*, "Atonement for himself or offering meet, / Indebted and undone, [he] hath none to bring" (Book 3, 234-5). Because Faustus dwells incessantly on divine justice, he cannot understand God's simultaneously just and merciful nature that is revealed in *Paradise Lost*, and thus he is unable to repent. Book 3 of *Paradise Lost* helps us to understand why Faustus is unable to repent from his sin and accept God's merciful sacrifice and gain eternal life.

Book 3 of *Paradise Lost* perfectly illustrates the dichotomy of God's nature, which Faustus is unable to comprehend. God, as the embodiment of justice, declares that once man disobeys him, it is necessary that "Die [man] or justice must" (3.210). If man is not punished through death, God's perfect justice will cease to exist. However, God then adds that his "mercy first and last shall brightest shine." (3.134) The Son's face brightens with love and compassion for mankind when he hears these words, and he says that it would "far be from [the Father]... who art judge / Of all things made, and judgest only right" to condemn man without extending any grace to him (3.154-5). The Father agrees and reveals that justice can indeed be satisfied in such a way that man will not have to suffer under death's regime forever. Man can be saved if "for him / Some other able, and as willing, pay / The rigid satisfaction, death for death." (3.210-12). God asks all of heaven if anyone has enough love for mankind to fulfill the merciful side of God's nature by suffering death in their place. All of the heavenly beings remain silent until Jesus says, "life for life / I offer, on me let thine anger fall" (3.236-7). The Son portrays both the merciful side of God's nature and appeases justice in this single act, thus "end[ing] the strife / Of mercy and justice" (3.406-7). Because Jesus and the Father are one, both their actions complete the portrayal of God's disparate nature, which is not complete without the expression of both justice and mercy.

Faustus has an incomplete understanding of God's character, and thus he cannot repent from his sin. As he reasons against his studies in divinity, He quotes the first half of Romans 6:23, which says, "For the wages of sin is death." He realizes that because man is sinful, God must satisfy justice by allowing death (both eternal and spiritual) to punish him. However, Faustus does not remember the second half of the verse, which says, "but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." While

Faustus understands God's justice, he does not grasp his mercy, which is shown through Christ's sacrifice. He has completely ignored the fact that God can remain just while showing mercy because through Christ he faced death in man's place, appeasing his just wrath.

Instead, Faustus believes that God is an "Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile" deity (1.109) who "loves [him] not" (5.10). Because Faustus does not realize God's great love for him, which caused him to send his Son to die for him, he cannot accept the great mercy that springs from that love. He says, "Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven, / But fearful echoes thunders in mine ears, / "Faustus, thou are damned" (5.195-7). Because he does not realize that God loves him, he thinks that God does not want him to repent. However, even though Faustus persistently resists this great mercy, the deepest part of his conscience will not let him completely ignore the hope of grace. His conscience continually provokes him to call on Christ to save him, thus, the promise is fulfilled which God made in *Paradise Lost*: "I will place with in [man] as a guide / My umpire conscience, whom if they will hear, / Light after light well used they shall attain" (3.194-6). His conscience first causes him to appeal to God after Mephistophilis shows him black magic books that have illustrations of the heavens in them. This sight reminds him of his separation from God and smites his conscience, causing him to cry out, "Ah Christ my Savior! seek to save / Distressed Faustus' soul!" (5.256-7). However, Lucifer instantly comes to cloud his brief moment of insight with lies about God's justice, saying, "Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just." (5.258) Lucifer blatantly renames Christ as justice when in reality he is the personification of mercy. Faustus has completely forgotten that it was Christ who enabled God to show mercy to man while at the same time satisfying justice. The fact that Lucifer and his right-hand come so quickly to fight against the truth spoken by Faustus' conscience should show him that Lucifer is fully aware that God's mercy is able to defeat the infernal contract, but Faustus is so blinded towards mercy that he instantly believes Lucifer's deception.

Even towards the end of the play, Faustus continues to deny the merciful side of God's character. When the old man comes and reminds him of Christ "Whose blood alone must wash away [his] guilt" (12.37), he does not even pay attention to these words, but narrows in on the reminder of "[his] most vile and loathsome filthiness, / The stench whereof corrupts the inward soul" (12.32-3). Once again, Faustus can only see God's justice. The old man once again attempts to point out God's mercy, saying that he "see[s] an angel hover[ing] o'er [Faustus'] head / And with a vial full of precious grace / Offers to pour the same into [his] soul!" (Scene 12, 44-6) This truth "comfort[s] [Faustus'] distressed soul" (12.49) for a moment, but he fails to fully embrace this truth and after the old man leaves, asks himself, "Accursed Faustus, where is mercy now?" (12.53) He has once again fallen back into his belief in God's irrevocable justice, and is unable to repent, not seeing that God's very act of reminding is a sure sign of his mercy.

Because he cannot believe that repentance and trust in Christ will save him, he attempts to satisfy the demands of God's justice without the help of Christ's sacrifice, which is the only thing that can both appease justice and grant mercy. He seeks every possible way to purify himself except Christ's blood. When he begins to call on Christ, he is filled with fear of Lucifer and pleads, "Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ; /... --

O spare me Lucifer!”(13.72-3) He cannot fully believe that God is merciful enough to save him, so he turns back to Satan and then falls back into ruminating on “the heavy wrath of God” (13.77) which “Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows!” (13.75) He begs the stars to purify him by lifting him up into the clouds “That when [the clouds] vomit forth into the air / [His] limbs may issue from [their] smoky mouths, / So that [his] soul may but ascend to heaven.” (13.85-7) Then at the very end he screams to God that he will “burn [his books]”, but then he cries, “ah Mephistophilis!” (13.113) He never accepts that Jesus has already enabled him to be cleansed by offering his “life for [Faustus’] life”, and in the very end, his refusal to accept the merciful side of God’s character condemns him to justice (3.236). Faustus fate is in accordance with what God says in *Paradise Lost*: “This my long sufferance and my day of grace / They who neglect and scorn, shall never taste” (3.198-9). To the very end Faustus is one of those “who neglect[s] and scorn[s]” God’s mercy. His conscience and the people around him repeatedly remind him of the hope found in Christ, but he persistently ignores the hope of eternal life and refuses to trust in Christ’s mercy. Instead he strives to satisfy the demands of justice by himself, but he cannot do this because only Christ’s mercy can save him from the Father’s justice.

#### Works Cited

- Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature 8<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Ed. Greenblatt, Stephen. New York: Norton, 2006. 461-493. Print.
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