

Softly and tenderly

By Dean Merrill

What would you or I have done had we been in Solomon's seat the day the two prostitutes came, arguing about whose baby was still alive? (See 1 Kings 3:16-28.)

We might have growled about the absurdity of this case, how it would take up valuable court time when the docket was already full. We might have questioned whether either woman could tell the truth on even the smallest detail. We might have lectured this pair about getting out of their immoral line of work and finding honorable employment. Then they wouldn't be bringing children into the world under such pitiful conditions and provoking dilemmas such as this. Next they would probably be applying for welfare and food stamps.

Solomon did none of that. Instead, he looked into the eyes of two human beings and saw the personal tragedy. Beneath the snarling and snapping, he saw two wounded women trying

to eke out an existence in an ugly world.

He knew their self-respect was nil.

He knew they probably

hated what they felt they had to do each night but couldn't come up with an alternative. Now, they had given birth to wondrous, innocent babies — the only products of beauty for which they could claim credit. And then ... one had been snatched away in death.

What Solomon saw before his bench was not an abstract social problem, but rather two emotional moms pleading for help. He found a way to give it to them. "When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God" (1 Kings 3:28, NIV).

Do we care about the *feelings* of sinners or only about *categories* of sinners? Can we see the human need in the most sexually disobedient individual?

Sins of the flesh are serious. Prostitution, fornication, adultery and homosexuality are as wrong today as always. But when they occur, then what? How should a Christian react?

Richard J. Mouw makes this observation in his book, *Uncommon Decency*: "The whole point of the biblical perspective is to promote a sexuality that is kind and reverent. So it's important that we present the biblical viewpoint kindly and reverently to those with whom we disagree about sexual standards. Not to do so is to undermine our own message."

Eugene H. Peterson, writer and Bible translator, tells about taking his wife and three children to visit Yellowstone National Park. Having grown up in nearby Montana, Eugene has a fervent love for nature, the open sky, the wide world God made.

On this particular day, walking through a mountain meadow, the family spotted a little boy of only 4

or 5 years picking fringed gentians. He kept snatching the exquisite alpine flowers, one after another, filling his chubby little fist. This was not only destructive, but also against the law.

The boy was 30 yards away. Eugene was outraged. He cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed, "Hey! Stop that! Don't pick the flowers! It's illegal!"

The child shuddered as his head snapped up to see where this booming voice was coming from. He stood wide-eyed for a second, then broke into tears. Dropping his handful of flowers, he ran for cover.

Eugene writes: "You can imagine what happened next. My wife and children — my children especially — were all over me. 'Daddy. You scared him. He was just picking a few flowers, and you terrified him. He's probably going to have to go for counseling when he's 40 years old.'" A vigorous family discussion ensued about what should or should not have been done in this case.

But the great wisdom emerged later as Eugene reflected on the incident. The truth to be learned from the interchange in the meadow, he realized, was this: You cannot shout people into holiness. You may win a momentary stoppage of whatever evil you were attacking, but the result will not last.

Sexual purity is God's will — no doubt about that. But when people stray from the road, a gentle hand on the elbow guiding them back is more effective than a yell in the eardrum. ■

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