Families Fighting Relativism – Pope Francis Style
Despereaux and Lester
Tolerance and Mercy
Apology, Forgiveness, Pride, Cowardice, and Mercy*

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The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him. (I Timothy 1:15-16)

The Tale of Despereaux
Let’s start with a story from Kate DiCamillo’s book The Tale of Despereaux. Here’s the background:

Despereaux Tilling is a mouse. He was caught violating the “prime directive” of the mouse world: never speak to a human.

His father, Lester, is a member of the “mouse council.” Lester called together the council, which sentenced his son to death. The sentence was carried out by throwing him to the rats – which would devour him.

But Despereaux survived. He escaped the rats. Now he has returned, and confronts the mouse council. The mouse council votes to deny that he exists. But his father asks for his forgiveness. The narrator relates:

“Despereaux looked at his father, at his grey-streaked fur and trembling whiskers and his front paws clasped together in front of his heart, and he felt suddenly as if his own heart would break in two. His father looked so small, so sad.

"Forgive me," said Lester again.

Forgiveness, reader, is, I think, something very much like hope and love – a powerful, wonderful thing.
And a ridiculous thing, too.

Isn't it ridiculous, after all, to think that a son could forgive his father for beating the drum that sent him to his death? Isn't it ridiculous to think that a mouse ever could forgive anyone for such perfidy? But still, here are the words Despereaux Tilling spoke to his father. He said, "I forgive you, Pa."

And he said those words because he sensed it was the only way to save his own heart, to stop it from breaking in two. Despereaux, reader, spoke those words to save himself."
— Kate DiCamillo, The Tale of Despereaux

I don’t know anything about the movie. But the book is full of wonderful insights into the human heart. This is just one of them.

LET ME SAY A WORD ABOUT TOLERANCE AND MERCY IN RELATION TO THAT STORY.

Tolerance and Mercy
Our culture promotes “tolerance.” Or at least it claims to. I don’t want to dispute the point, for now. I just want us to notice: With tolerance: 1) nothing is wrong and 2) no one needs to be forgiven.

Pope Francis, however, has been promoting mercy. With mercy: 1) something is wrong and 2) someone needs to be forgiven.

What’s my point? Only this: that all of us have been in the position of both Despereaux and Lester – we have needed forgiveness, and we have been called on to forgive.

That is precisely the point at which relativism fails. It denies the need to ask for forgiveness, and it denies the need to give it.

The problem is: our world desperately needs both. We need a world where people are ready to ask – and to grant – forgiveness. How would the world today be different if the 5 most common words spoken were: “I apologize” and “I forgive you”?

What we need – and what Pope Francis is asking us to do – is to build a culture of mercy. The central habits of a culture of mercy are apology and forgiveness. I believe that families can be at the forefront of building a culture of mercy on the building blocks of apology and forgiveness.

Fundamentally, that’s the approach I want to take to relativism and the family today.
Let me say a word about the power of apology and the power of forgiveness.

Here’s another story:

I was trying to get onto the highway, but I was in the wrong lane. So I started to inch over into the next lane.

That’s when I saw him – the guy I almost cut off. Realizing my mistake, I straightened back out into my own lane. I figured I was done with that.

But the guy I almost cut off wasn’t done with me. He inched his car forward until it was even with mine -- then he stopped. He gave me the stink eye and started jawing at me.

So I rolled down my window -- because I wanted to say something to him! He did the same. Then I said:

“Everyone makes mistakes. I made a mistake.”

Bam! The situation was totally defused. I could see him repeating the words to himself. Then I could just begin to see it register on his face before we both drove off. “That guy just apologized to me!”

God has written laws into the universe. Some of them are physical, like the law of gravity -- they work whether we want them to or not, but some of them are spiritual, like “the law of apology.” The law of apology says that when you apologize -- genuinely -- it changes things. It opens up a space in a relationship where you can begin again.

But here’s the rub: the spiritual laws don’t work like the physical laws, in this sense -- they aren’t automatic. We have to decide to use them.

In other words, we’re free to ignore the spiritual laws God has written into the universe. But it’s not like ignoring gravity -- which works whether we want it to or not. It’s like ignoring medicine -- which only works if we take it. If we ignore spiritual laws we lose out on the benefits they offer.

That’s one of the main problems with relativism: not only that it’s untrue -- which it is, -- but that it prevents us from making use of the law of apology, and therefore from receiving its benefits. With relativism, there’s nothing to apologize for. But if we’re honest, we know that’s not true. Something is wrong, and someone needs to be forgiven. In family life we know that from both ends: sometimes we need to apologize, and sometimes we need to forgive.
We need families to be at the forefront of building a culture of mercy by applying the law of apology.

Here are two further points that we need to know to fully reap the benefits of the spiritual law of apology.

First: The apology needs to be real. No faking it!

Many people are familiar with the children’s version of faking it. Our kids were masters at this! We used to tell them “Say you’re sorry to your brother/sister.” They would shout “SORRY!” Now, instead, we tell them to apologize. Then, when they shout “SORRY!” we can say, truthfully: “That’s not an apology.”

People don’t just grow out of the kids’ version of faking it. Unless there’s a conversion they just graduate to the adult version of faking it: “I’m sorry if anyone was offended.” That’s not an apology! An apology means you’re sorry for your actions, not other people’s reactions. And the law of apology only works if you really apologize.

That’s the first point: no faking it.

Second: the proper response to an apology is not “That’s OK.” We often say that. But it’s not true. The truth is something more like “It’s not OK. What you did was wrong. And it hurt me. But I forgive you.” (C.S. Lewis has an excellent discussion of the difference between excusing and forgiving in *Mere Christianity*—see Book III, chapter 7, on Forgiveness.)

Why are those three words so hard to say -- “I forgive you”?

Partly because they actually do something. God wrote a “law of forgiveness” into the universe. So the words “I forgive you” – like the words “I’m sorry” - actually make something happen. They DO spiritual work. That’s why they’re hard. Picking up a rock requires physical effort. Picking up a hurt requires spiritual effort.

Again, that’s one of the main problems with relativism: not that it’s untrue -- which it is! But that it prevents us from making use of the law of forgiveness. With relativism, there’s nothing that needs to be forgiven. “It’s all good.” But, truthfully, there are things that need to be forgiven. I need to be forgiven, and I need to forgive.

And here’s the spiritual danger of ignoring the law of forgiveness: If you ignore something that needs to be forgiven, *it doesn’t go away.* It festers -- in your heart, and in your
relationships. Then you die with the one thing on your heart that can’t be there: unforgiveness. And it can’t be there because “The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you.” (Mt 7:2 / Lk 6:38) How would you like God to ignore the things that need to be forgiven in you – as you have ignored them in others? St. Gregory of Nyssa says that’s the danger of the Our Father. Usually, we ask that we would be made into imitators of God. But when we pray the Our Father, we ask God to imitate us: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Oh, and by the way, the way we handle that is to ignore it, and hope it will go away.

In other words, by getting us to ignore the law of forgiveness, relativism is a threat to our spiritual growth, and ultimately our salvation! My fellow parents: our families cannot participate in that! We can’t raise whole and holy children in that atmosphere. We have to build a culture of mercy by applying the law of forgiveness.

The law of gravity. The law of apology. The law of forgiveness. God wrote many laws into the universe.

Relativism does not prevent the physical laws, like gravity, from working – they’re automatic, they work whether we want them to or not. But relativism prevents us from reaping the benefits of the spiritual laws, like the law of apology and the law of forgiveness – because they only work with our consent.

Families can be at the forefront of turning relativism around. We need families to be at the forefront of turning relativism around. We need families to build a culture of mercy on the building blocks of apology and forgiveness.

Now I’d like to say a word about pride, cowardice, and mercy.

Pride and Cowardice

Relativism is a philosophical error. And we can treat it philosophically. Sometimes I do: I can lecture for hours on the philosophical errors of relativism — ask my students! And that’s an important task. I don’t underestimate it.

But I’m pretty convinced there is a better approach -- more important and more fruitful. Pope Francis has taught me the importance of this approach.

The shift to the other approach happens when we realize that some of the deep roots of relativism aren’t philosophical but spiritual. I want to address three of them.

FIRST: PRIDE
PRIDE
How is relativism rooted in pride?

Relativism means no one can ever be wrong.

And that means that I can’t be wrong.

But there’s the problem: we all know that we can be wrong, and have been wrong -- in our thoughts, in our actions, even in our desires. (Through my fault, through my fault....)

Relativism prevents us from needing the humility to admit it, and facing the challenge of conversion -- conversion of our thoughts, conversion of our actions and conversion of our desires.

Conversion of desires??? Jesus’ desires / Pope Francis’ desires / My desires -- I hesitate

Culture: desires should be expressed. I know: sometimes, desires need to be converted.

Relativism is rooted in pride. Pride prevents admitting we were wrong. (That’s an obstacle to spiritual growth, and to salvation.)
Solution: Humility – to admit it and to apologize for it.
          That’s a gift we need to pray for, and a virtue we need to exercise. It begins in the family.

NEXT: COWARDICE

COWARDICE
How is relativism rooted in cowardice?

Here again, we start with the fact that relativism means no one can ever be wrong.

That means that no one else can be wrong.

That means I never need to muster the courage to stand up to someone and say “Hey, that’s wrong. And I’m going to do something about it.”

Relativism: Rooted in cowardice
Cowardice prevents standing up. (That’s an obstacle to our proclamation of the Gospel.)
Solution: Courage
That’s a gift we need to pray for, and a virtue we need to exercise. It begins in the family.

Step back and think about it: Part of the reason people are eating up relativism:
It feeds our pride.
It feeds our cowardice.
We’re growing morally obese on these!

If we want to follow Jesus we’re going to need

1) the **humility** that overcomes pride, and is willing to admit that we can be wrong, and

2) the **courage** that overcomes cowardice, and is willing to challenge others when we think they’re wrong.

That’s the moral diet we need to be on.

By promoting pride rather than humility, and cowardice rather than courage, relativism prevents discipleship. My fellow parents: we cannot raise our children in that atmosphere! We have to build a culture of discipleship on the building blocks of humility and courage.

**MERCY**
Finally, mercy.

I think Pope Francis has been trying to teach us something important about the relationship between receiving mercy and combating relativism.

Like Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI before him, Pope Francis senses the danger of relativism. But his approach to it is quite different from theirs.

**JPII: PHILOSOPHER** – which was brilliant, and I loved it.

**B16: THEOLOGIAN** - which was brilliant, and I loved it.

**FRANCIS: JESUIT**, and that means A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR – and I think that’s what the Holy Spirit is calling forth for this time.

He senses that people are afraid of God’s judgment because they don’t believe in his mercy. Because of that fear, they find it easier to **deny** that there is right and wrong than to admit “I have done wrong.” Like the Mouse Council in our opening story, they vote to deny that Despereaux exists.
Here’s the spiritual logic of it: If they have done wrong, and if there is no mercy, then there is no hope for them — Heaven is suddenly out of reach. That’s terrifying!

So we’re caught between a) denying that there is right and wrong -- and never being able to object to anything — and b) admitting that I am a sinner because I have done wrong and therefore there is no hope for me. That’s the root dilemma of a culture of despair. If that’s the case, we might as well drink, use drugs, and watch pornography, all the while claiming that there’s no right and wrong. We become morbidly obese in our morals, and hollow like an addict in our souls, all the while screaming out “help me” — and wondering if anybody hears us. Pope Francis seems to be saying: the first way to approach this situation is not to insist that another person is a sinner. The first step is to let people know that I am a sinner, and I have received God’s mercy.

That’s what first became clear for me in his big interview, published in late September of 2013. The interviewer asked him: “Who is Jorge Bergoglio?” He replied: “I am a sinner.” He wasn’t only telling the truth about himself. As a spiritual physician, he was giving a diagnosis, and prescribing the remedy by example.

In that interview, he went on to connect this answer to his papal motto -- Miserando atque Eligendo (by seeing him through the eyes of mercy and by choosing him). The motto is taken from a commentary on the call of Saint Matthew (Mt. 9.9) by Saint Bede the Venerable. We read that commentary in the Office of Readings, September 21, the Feast of Saint Matthew.

There’s a painting of that episode by Caravaggio. Reflecting on it, the Holy Father said:

“That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: he holds on to his money as if to say, ‘No, not me! No, this money is mine.’ Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.” (That’s what Miserando atque eligendo means to him.)
First of all, that’s beautiful, but what does it have to do with relativism?

When we follow the Pope’s example — when we take the medicine of humility, because we believe in mercy — we let people know that it’s OK to admit that there is right and wrong, and it’s OK to admit that we have not lived up to it. We can testify: “I am a sinner. I have stood before the judgment seat, in the power of his gaze. And there I found … mercy rather than condemnation.”

Because of that -- because I know he sees me through the eyes of mercy and chooses me -- I can live in hope and joy. I can testify: heaven is possible for sinners!

THAT’S THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL! THAT’S ONE OF THE THINGS HE’S BEEN TRYING TO SHOW THE WORLD -- AND ASKING US TO SHOW THE WORLD.

My plea today: Families -- make this visible! Be a living sacrament of the Joy of the Gospel.

Saint Paul put it this way:

_The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners [I -- Saint Paul; I -- Pope Francis; I -- Ed Hogan; I -- state your name!], but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him (I Timothy 1:15-16)._  

That’s a proclamation of the Gospel of Mercy. We need families to be incarnations of the Gospel of Mercy.

When people see -- from our example -- that there is mercy for sinners, that Heaven is still open, they can let down their spiritual defenses, admit that there is right and wrong, admit that they have done wrong, and still have hope. It’s an approach to relativism that is perfectly pitched to break through the spiritual barriers of a culture of despair.

So I leave you with these questions -- a sort of “family examination of conscience” -- corresponding to the last five sections of this talk:

**APOLOGY:** Is there somewhere in your life you need to apologize? Do it!

**FORGIVENESS:** Is there somewhere in your life you need to forgive? Don’t wait!

**PRIDE:** Is there somewhere in your life you need to exercise humility? Do it!
COWARDICE: Is there somewhere in your life you need to exercise courage? This is the day the Lord has made!

MERCY: Is there somewhere in your life you need to receive God’s mercy? 
*He waits with open arms, watching for your return.*

That’s fighting relativism, Pope Francis style.

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1 John 1:8-10. If we say, “We are without sin,” we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. If we say, “We have not sinned,” we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

“Wherever we go, we are called as Christians to proclaim the liberating news that forgiveness for sins committed is possible, that God is greater than our sinfulness, that he freely loves us at all times and that we were made for communion and eternal life.” (Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 2014.)