

Uncovering Biblical Principles in Shakespeare

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Interwoven in Christian higher education, students and faculty members seek to answer the question “How does my faith interact with the world?” Students are challenged to intersect their faith and work as they follow career paths society deems secular. In addition to the question of work and faith, another query may be presented, “How does faith interact with art?” Throughout history, art has been used to extol and to entertain. Beautiful music compositions and paintings on the walls and ceilings of churches inspire awe across centuries. Art can be a way to draw close to the things of God; through art, we come to understand Who God is in a deeper way. However, music and images are not the only means to experience God in art. The work of playwright William Shakespeare is regarded as canonical to literary art, capturing the attention of audiences both religious and secular since the 1600s. Ian Hunter describes the phenomenon of divine experience through art in Shakespeare’s work: “If you want to get a sense of what God was doing at the Creation...you will better approximate it by thinking of William Shakespeare writing *King Lear* rather than a scientist such as Albert Einstein at work in his laboratory” (n. pag.). Despite Shakespeare’s lack of explicit connection to faith, his plays reflect the Judeo-Christian tradition more often than one expects. His works do not inherently support faith, but he was nonetheless influenced by the church culture of his day and biblical themes surface in his writing. Rich with biblical symbolism and imagery, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrate Christian love, sacrifice, justice, and mercy, as well as their opposites by painting the human experience within theater. The actions of Shakespeare’s characters present lessons in these virtues and illustrate their importance, whether by their perpetuation or rejection.

Shakespeare’s *King Lear* features an old monarch wanting to yield his responsibilities as a ruler to his three daughters, two of whom feel slighted by their youngest sister’s being their father’s favorite. King Lear’s plan to split the kingdom results in his disownment of his youngest daughter Cordelia and severe damage being inflicted on his relationships with Goneril and Regan. One of Shakespeare’s more popular tragedies, this play illustrates a family dynamic that is not only dysfunctional but filled with betrayal and love lost. Audiences watching this play observe Lear as he slowly deteriorates into a state of madness because his power is stripped from him and he realizes he has ostracized the only people he loves. Sean McEvoy’s *Shakespeare: The Basics*, explains this in the scope of tragedies: “Though fate plays a strong part in these plays, the downfall of the protagonist must be due to some personal error of judgement (*sic*)” (184). The lapse in judgment is on the part of King Lear, whose decisions ultimately led to the death of many characters including himself. Unable to predict the consequences of his actions, King Lear ruins his kingdom until order is restored. Lear’s daughter Cordelia serves as a leading example of undeserved forgiveness and love toward others. After being rejected and banished by her father, Cordelia’s devotion to him remains, and she never ceases her attempts to save him from himself and others. McCoy’s analysis of the relationships in this play indicate that “Cordelia understands her father’s tragic errors and their fatal consequences, but she remains willing to die for him anyway; her awareness ennoble her devotion” (53). Even at the expense of her own life, Cordelia’s primary goal in the play is to protect her father. The tragedy of *King Lear* is far reaching; many characters meet their end during the course of the play. However, it is through their deaths that the resolution of the play comes to fruition. Derek Cohen asserts that the many scapegoats of the play are necessary to usher in new life and restoration. Even though life ends, new hope comes about from it (387). Tragedy flows through the lines of this play, but amidst the great tragedies, a promise remains for something better and the power of devotion births hope for characters and audience members alike.

This play demonstrates biblical principles in its presentation of forgiveness and love after deep betrayal. King Lear’s actions are reminiscent of Christians and their behaviors, which separate from the Heavenly Father. The story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is reflected in elements of *King Lear*, but not through a direct parallel. The biblical narrative tells of a son who requested his inheritance and squandered it, reaching the lowest point in his life before returning to his father’s house. Expecting scorn from his father for his irresponsible actions, the son plans to ask for a job as a servant but is welcomed warmly by his father. Traditionally reflecting the love of a father toward his child, *King Lear* represents love from a child to her father. Lear’s actions cast him as the prodigal son; before the conclusion of the first act, he has already burned bridges with each of his three daughters. His search for power without responsibility throughout the middle of the play reflects the prodigal son and his search for fulfillment in the world. However, much like the prodigal son, King Lear reaches a point of despair and realizes he has nothing to love. However, Lear also understands the severity of his actions toward Cordelia. Analysis of this interaction expounds the point further:

Only when he truly sees himself does he see Cordelia’s love and rise from the void. As the play approaches its final act he submits himself to her punishment, seeing both his “cause” for offense and her right to punish him, even offering his very life: “If you have poison for me, I will drink it.” She finds no fault and replies, “No cause, no cause.” She simply forgives. Her love is divine. It neither demands nor expects payment. (Jermann).

Akin to the unconditional love demonstrated by the father in Luke 15, Cordelia forgives her own father without hesitation. Despite her father’s wrongdoings against her, Cordelia’s love is greater and extends past Lear’s mistakes.

Biblical ideals are not solely demonstrated in Shakespeare’s tragedies, though. One of Shakespeare’s funniest and darkest plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, while challenging the Judeo-Christian tradition with its plot and characters, demonstrates the power of mercy and love. Named for Antonio, *The Merchant of Venice* follows the fortunes and misfortunes of Antonio and his colleagues through a loan, a vow, a chance at love, and an act of revenge. Bassanio’s endeavor to woo and marry the fair Portia leads to his dear friend Antonio’s seeming demise after Antonio borrows money from a Jewish money lender with a vendetta. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, is embittered by Antonio because of his Christian faith and because of Antonio’s previous slander of Shylock; his revenge cannot be realized without an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, on Antonio’s life. While various characters try to convince Shylock to be merciful, his demand for a pound of Antonio’s flesh is resolute, “Proceed to judgement. By my soul I swear there is no power in the tongue of man to alter me: I stay here on my bond” (*Merchant of Venice*, IV.i.240-242). A section of the court law that is uncovered by Bassanio’s wife Portia ultimately saves Antonio from Shylock’s hand; the law states an attempt on another citizen’s life is punishable by death. Hostile interactions between characters with differing religious backgrounds question the Judeo-Christian tradition in many ways, but Shakespeare’s move to write the character of Portia alludes to many biblical principles such as justice and mercy regardless of circumstances.

Portia is a wealthy and intelligent woman whose character reveals biblical philosophies of justice and mercy throughout the course of the play. These are evident in her actions toward saving Antonio from the angered Shylock. During the court proceedings, Portia brings forth an eloquent address in her attempt to convince Shylock away from revenge:

The quality of mercy is not strain’d, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes. ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown. (*MV*, IV.i.185-189).

Shylock swears to the law and uses it as his driving argument for why he should collect his bond, but Portia implores him to have mercy, as it brings greater reward for the giver and receiver. Douglas Anderson suggests the scene, “sustain[s] the view that Portia’s New Testament Morality supersedes Shylock’s Old Testament legalism (122). Under the new covenant, Christians are given mercy when they should receive a punishment akin to Antonio’s. Shylock’s intent is to carry the law through to completion no matter the context, while Portia’s aim is to show mercy for Antonio, despite his inability to pay his debt. This position from Portia demonstrates the importance of forgiveness even when it is not earned.

Similar to Cordelia’s sacrifice in *King Lear*, both Antonio and Portia exhibit love and willingness to sacrifice for their loved ones. While unintentional, Bassanio’s decisions largely result in the predicament Antonio faces, but Antonio is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his friend’s happiness. His initial decision to help Bassanio finance his pursuit of Portia can reflect Christ assuming the debts of others through the claim of divine justice, according to Barbara Lewalski (334). When Antonio’s alacrity is put to the test under the premise of Shylock collecting his bond with Antonio’s flesh, the merchant doesn’t waver. Even in the face of a gruesome death, Antonio’s loyalty to his friend remains. It is easy to claim we would do the same for a friend or relative in need; however, Antonio’s situation brings startling reality to the notion, “take a bullet for your friend.” Nevertheless, it is impossible to affirm our intentions unless the circumstances occur. Hesitation and retraction of commitment would likely result from such a scenario in real life. However, Christ committed to and endured the very same position; the difference is Christ went through with it. There was no amount of wealth or cunning to spare him from death on the cross. Furthermore, Christ died for the sins of humanity; not everyone he was sacrificed for will choose to follow him, but he gave himself willingly anyway. Antonio’s devotion to Bassanio pales in comparison but is the closest demonstration of Christ’s sacrifice.

Likewise, Portia’s love is illustrated in her willingness to give up a portion of her wealth in order for Bassanio to save Antonio from death. Although her wealth is now Bassanio’s property as well, he hesitates to request her financial assistance in saving Antonio. Their marriage has yet to be finalized, and it would appear rude to ask for such a large sum of money. Nevertheless, Portia senses how much Antonio means to her new husband and declares, “Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear” (*MV*, III.iii.313). John Russell Brown points out that this speaks to Portia’s desire to “give joyfully in love” (68). It is clear Bassanio wants to help his friend, but without the means to do so, he is powerless. Portia’s provision of funds enables her husband to return the devotion Antonio poured out on him; her love serves as her motivation.

The biblical principles of love, sacrifice, justice, and mercy are found throughout the scenes of each of these plays; some examples are more obvious than others, but each one gives further insight to God’s nature and interaction with His creation. The darkness and the problem of sin in each of these serve as imitations of the evil in the world because of the problem of sin. However, amidst the darkness, there are consistently characters who embody love, sacrifice, mercy, and justice, to right the wrongs committed. Audiences viewing or reading these productions engage with situations that challenge their understanding of good and evil and what will prevail when the day is complete. These productions allow audiences to consider the realities of a fallen world and demonstrate the power of goodness within it. In the discourse of faith’s interacting with art, Shakespeare’s plays provide an avenue for faith to emerge within literary art.

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