



Judge Caprio's Compassion Explained in New Memoir
***The Wired Word* for the Week of February 16, 2025**

In the News

Retired municipal court judge Frank Caprio, 88, of Providence, Rhode Island, just published his memoir, [*Compassion in the Court: Life-Changing Stories from America's Nicest Judge*](#). His brand of what he calls "compassionate justice" began to capture the imagination of over 20 million people who follow him on social media, through a public access television program called *Caught in Providence*, in 1998. The program was later syndicated on 200 stations nationwide and ran until his retirement in 2023.

Most of the defendants appearing before Caprio were facing misdemeanor charges for minor infractions of the law: parking tickets, traffic violations and the like. Before rendering any decision, he took time to listen to their stories to better understand what brought them to his court. "Under my robe, I have a heart, not a badge," he says.

One mother of two young children, an elementary school teacher, came before him, prepared to take responsibility for two unpaid traffic tickets issued to a car registered in her name. The father of her children had committed the traffic violations but wasn't in court because he was in jail.

Caprio dismissed the charges, even though legally, the woman was liable for the fines for the tickets, because, he said, "I knew those tickets were not her doing and paying them would have caused her greater financial and personal hardship. She was not only a good mother but also a teacher who would have an important impact on the lives of many children. ... That money needed to be spent on [her children,] Luke and Bella."

"Too often, tickets and fines mount while people are in jail," Caprio wrote in his book. "When they get out, they are saddled with fines they cannot pay. Often their licenses have been suspended because of their unpaid tickets, making it next to impossible for them to seek employment and get their lives back on track. We need to remove these hurdles as much as possible for the good of all of us."

Sometimes, Caprio dismissed a defendant's charges, other times he lowered penalties, or paid the fees himself. Many who viewed episodes of Caprio's court cases on television or online sent in unsolicited donations to support his acts of mercy.

Once, after Caprio's grandfather was arrested on a drunk and disorderly charge, his grandmother had gone to court to plead, in broken English, that the judge not send him to jail, explaining that he worked hard to support their 10 children. The judge dismissed the charges and told her to feed him well. That incident weighed on Caprio's mind when he became a judge.

"When I was on the bench," Caprio wrote, "and I looked at a defendant, particularly an immigrant who stood before me with fear and uncertainty in their eyes, what I saw was my grandfather and my grandmother."

The grandson of Italian immigrants, he says he had "the privilege of growing up poor." His father worked as a milkman, and sometimes paid a destitute family's bill out of his own pocket. Caprio's judicial philosophy is closely related to the Roman Catholic faith he saw his parents model. "Be kind to others, be slow to judge, and always show mercy," he said in an interview. "I feel like I'm doing God's work."

"I'm just a small time municipal court judge who's trying to do good -- that's all I am -- who tries to take into consideration the circumstances surrounding the people before me and remember what my dad told me: When someone appears before you, put yourself in their shoes. Imagine it's you before them," Caprio said. "How do you want to be treated?"

More on this story can be found at these links:

[An Interview With Judge Frank Caprio, America's Nicest Judge -- Just Ask His 20M Followers. ABA Journal](#)

[Compassion in the Court: The True Story of Judge Frank Caprio \(Video 12:02\). EWTN](#)

['Nicest Judge in the World' Talks New Book \(Video 4:11\). Good Morning America](#)

[Retired Judge Frank Caprio Releases New Book \(Video 10:36\). NBC 10 WJAR](#)

['Don't Say Another Word!': Top 12 Funniest Moments From Caught in Providence \(Video 45:06\). Law&Crime Network](#)

The Big Questions

1. What is the difference between judgmentalism and discernment?
2. What factors should a judge consider when trying to determine guilt or innocence of a defendant?
3. How should a judge determine what constitutes justice in a particular case?
4. What scriptural passages about judges and justice come to mind, and what do you take away from them that is useful in your own life?
5. How can we implement principles of justice and mercy that best reflect the heart of God revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 38:24-26

About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has prostituted herself; moreover, she is pregnant as a result of prostitution." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again. (For context, read [Genesis 38:1-26](#).)

This chapter tells the story of Tamar, who married Judah's son Er. When he died without producing an heir, the law required that Onan, Er's brother, marry his widow, so that she could become pregnant and have a son to maintain Er's lineage. Onan married Tamar, but refused to impregnate her, since the offspring would not be his. God was displeased with his actions, "and he put him to death also" (v. 10).

By this time, Judah might have concluded that Tamar was either a jinx or somehow to blame for the death of his sons, so he was disinclined to give her to his third son, Shelah. But he pretended that when Shelah grew up, he would fulfill the law's requirement and marry her (v. 11).

After Shelah grew up and Judah failed to give him in marriage to Tamar, she hid her identity and played the role of a prostitute in the red light district where Judah was working (vv. 14-15). Without realizing who she was, Judah solicited Tamar for sex and negotiated a price, a kid from the flock; she required that he give her his signet, cord and staff to ensure that he would keep his promise (vv. 16-18). But later, when Judah tried to send a kid by his friend to recover his personal items, she was nowhere to be found (vv. 20-23).

A few months later, Judah learned that Tamar was pregnant as a result of prostitution. He was quick to find her guilty, and demanded that she die by fire, as the law required. But in her own defense, Tamar presented his personal items that he had given her in pledge. If he condemned her, he had to admit his own guilt in having sex with her, which would have meant he also should be put to death. Not only that, but he had violated the law, which required him to give his son Shelah to her in marriage, which he had not done.

A side note: If Judah had followed through with his demand for capital punishment for his daughter-in-law, he would have killed the unborn twins in her womb, who were his own offspring. One of them would be added to the lineage of Jesus, the Messiah ([Matthew 1:3](#))!

Questions: What does this incident reveal about why human judicial decisions are inherently complicated and potentially flawed? What are we to make of the fact that Judah and Tamar are included in the ancestry of Jesus?

Luke 6:31, 35-38

[Jesus said,] "Do to others as you would have them do to you. ... Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (For context, read [Luke 6:31-42](#).)

Judge Caprio says he has been guided by the principle of the Golden Rule which Jesus spells out here: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." That involves placing himself in the shoes of the person who comes before him, he explains, "taking into consideration their background, their trials, their tribulations." If he was in their position, he asks himself, how would he hope a judge would treat him?

In the Bible, we are taught that you reap what you sow ([Galatians 6:7](#)). Other religions teach a similar concept, popularly known as "karma," or "what goes around comes around." If you sow seeds of condemnation, judgment and unforgiveness, that's the crop you will reap; if you plant seeds of love, good deeds, mercy and forgiveness, you will be shown love and mercy and receive forgiveness in return. Jesus tells us not to sow good seed *in order* to get favorable treatment ("expect nothing in return"), but he assures us that God will greatly reward those who do this. Jesus also points out the problem of condemning others for what amount to insignificant offenses ("the speck in your neighbor's eye") when you are guilty of much greater sins against God ("the log in your own eye") (vv. 41-42).

Questions: How does Jesus' teaching in verses 41-42 apply to the situation in Genesis 38 in the preceding scriptural section above? Why might we resent God showing kindness and mercy "to the ungrateful and the wicked"? What will it take for us to show that we are truly "children of the Most High"?

Luke 12:13-14

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" (For context, read [Luke 12:13-21](#).)

Jesus was not eager to take on the role of a jurist. Elsewhere, Jesus said, "You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid, for it is not I alone who judge but I and the Father who sent me" (John 8:15-16). And again, he said, "I do not judge anyone who

hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world" (John 12:47).

Questions: What do you think it was about being a judge or arbitrator that didn't appeal to Jesus? Why do you think we are so quick to judge others when the one we say we follow was not eager to act in that role? What human standards do people use to make judgments about what is right and wrong? How do those standards differ from Jesus' standards?

John 8:7, 10-11

When they kept on questioning him, [Jesus] straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ... Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (For context, read [John 8:1-11](#).)

Once, experts in religious law brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught in adultery, asking whether Jesus agreed with the Mosaic law that such a woman should be stoned. John tells us that they really wanted to trick Jesus into saying something that would get him into trouble. They wanted "to kill two birds with one stone," as it were. But Jesus didn't take the bait. Instead, he answered in a way that made the woman's accusers examine themselves, to see whether they were qualified to pass judgment on her.

There is an old saying, that when you point your finger at someone, you are also pointing three fingers back at yourself.

In his memoir about the Montgomery bus boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*, civil rights leader Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., described a crisis that occurred in 1956, when one of the officers in the Montgomery Improvement Association, Rev. U.J. Fields, angry that he had not been reelected to his position as recording secretary, publicly made false accusations against other members of the committee. Some in the protest movement skewered him "as either a 'fool' or a 'black Judas.'"

Fields came to deeply regret his actions and confessed that he had felt hurt by the board and had spoken out as his way of retaliating.

At a public meeting held to address the crisis, King reminded the congregants that they had committed themselves "to the way of nonviolence, and nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him." He urged his listeners to remember that everyone makes mistakes, saying, "Now some of us are here this evening to stone one of our brothers because he has made a mistake." After a pause, King spoke the words of Christ: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Then he called their attention to the parable of the prodigal son, and asked, "Will we be like the unforgiving elder brother, or will we, in the spirit of Christ, follow the example of the loving and forgiving father?"

Then Fields came to the podium, confessed his fault and humbly asked for forgiveness, which was granted.

Question: What can these incidents teach us about condemning and forgiving others?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this: In a *Star Trek* episode entitled "Devil in the Dark," a group of miners felt threatened by an alien creature called the Horta, which was trying to protect its eggs from the miners' encroachment.

In a social media post dated February 7, 2025, Viral Video 4 wrote: "Kirk, having pieced together the true nature of the conflict, takes an unwavering stand -- not for the familiar, but for the misunderstood. The Horta is unlike anything the crew has encountered before. It's not humanoid, not conventionally relatable, and at first, it appears hostile. Yet Kirk recognizes what so many others fail to see: *It is not the enemy*. The real threat in this moment is blind aggression, the all-too-human tendency to react with force before understanding. ...

"He defies the natural instinct of tribalism, refusing to prioritize the lives of those who look like him over the life of a being that, to the miners, is nothing more than an obstacle. His words are not just a command but a declaration of principle: justice isn't about choosing sides based on familiarity; it's about choosing what is right, even when it's unpopular or difficult. ... it's about challenging biases, confronting fear with understanding, and proving that the measure of a civilization isn't in its technology but in its willingness to recognize the value of all life, no matter how different. ...

"The greatest test of morality is not how we treat those who resemble us, but how we treat those who don't."

2. President Jimmy Carter considered Romans 8:1 ("Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus") one of his favorite Bible verses because it focuses on how God accepts us completely and reconciles us, transforming our relationship from one of enemies to one of friends. In his daily devotional book, *Through the Year with Jimmy Carter: 366 Daily Meditations from the 39th President*, Carter wrote, "Romans 8:1 doesn't mean only that God no longer condemns those who believe; it also implies that 'in Christ Jesus' we will not condemn others."

How should the fact that we are not condemned impact the way we treat others? How do [Matthew 18:23-35](#) and [Ephesians 4:32](#) speak to the matter of judging others?

3. What principles about judging might we glean from these statements from Jesus?

- The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son. John 5:22
- I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. John 5:30
- Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment. John 7:24
- Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it? John 7:51

Responding to the News

Ask God to show you pockets in your own heart where you have stashed unforgiveness and judgmental attitudes toward others. As you confess and accept forgiveness for your own sins, ask God to fill you with understanding and mercy for those who have offended you.

Prayer

Merciful God, you are faithful and just in all your ways. Guide those entrusted with meting out justice in our courts, giving them wisdom to apply the law fairly and compassionately to those appearing before them. When we are tempted to condemn those who have sinned against us, remind us of Jesus' words, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." May we remember your great mercy to us and extend that same mercy to others. Amen.