

Grace for the Day

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Learning from Eliot Spitzer

By Rev. Peter Eng

Introduction

Eliot Spitzer, first term Governor of New York, resigned following the public exposure of his involvement in a prostitution ring.

The media, always ready to report sleaze, were quick to join in publicizing Spitzer's faults. It is said that many on the NY Stock Exchange cheered when they heard his downfall. This was, perhaps, in response to Spitzer's effort and method of prosecuting white-collar crime. To some, it seems that he took personal pleasure out of prosecuting the rich. Spitzer had built his political career as the state attorney general who targeted white-collar and organized crime. He was dubbed: "The Enforcer," "The Sheriff of Wall Street," and "The Lord High Executioner."

He called to account powerful establishments such as Merrill Lynch, Tyco, and many mutual funds. He pursued prostitution rings and other organized crime. In the name of cleaning up corruption (which is good), he utilized methods that were highly questionable. Spitzer was known to be very heavy handed in dealing with suspects. To incur the mere suspicion of Spitzer, may result in the destruction of a life-career as he would leak suspicions to the media.

The media loved Spitzer because of his salacious leaks to them. This rumor-mongering exposed the guilty; but it also

condemned the innocent. To be Spitzer's suspect was to have the media make allegations against you, and have the rumor mill for judge and public gossip for jury.

With Spitzer's fall from power, some media personnel have come forward and admitted their complicity in Spitzer's use of the media to bring people down. This is to their credit. (For example: "Spitzer's Media Enablers" by Kimberley Strassel, *WSJ*, March 12, 2008).

The moral concern I have concerning Spitzer is the abuse of power. His involvement with the prostitution ring is the lesser issue.

What is the issue?

The laws that Spitzer broke are less important compared to the larger issues. He was guilty of engaging the services of a prostitute and used methods of payment that ran foul of money laundering laws. His moral failure in patronizing a prostitute does not require elaboration. That moral failure is something he has to sort out with his wife.

Many of you come from countries that legalized prostitution. If prostitution were legal in America, Spitzer would not have committed a crime, and he would not have had the need to commit another crime (money laundering) to cover his first crime. And at this point there is no allegation that the money was criminally appropriated. The prosecutable action by Spitzer is really the

lesser issue because they would not have occurred if prostitution were legal.

The greater issue

Many have rightly identified the greater issue. It is Spitzer's hypocrisy. He had advocated stronger laws against the patronizing of prostitutes and against money laundering. He had presented himself not only as the law-enforcer, but also the moralist against "Johns."

Spitzer found himself quite alone when the scandal broke. Though he had been a very significant force within his own political party. It was hard for anyone to defend his hypocrisy.

Failing to live up to our ideals need not be hypocrisy. The only way we can live up to our ideals is not to have ideals or to make them achievable by lowering them to the point they cannot even be called ideals. Inconsistency is not always hypocrisy. We will always be inconsistent as long as we are human. Hypocrisy is condemning others when we are guilty of the same wrong. When we excuse ourselves and prosecute others for the same failure, we become hypocrites. Hypocrisy involves deception and the persistent action of engaging in a double standard when applying the rules to others and when to oneself.

Jesus challenged the conscience of the crowd that gathered to stone the woman caught in adultery. He asked the one who did not sin (like this woman did) to cast the first stone. And the crowd, equally guilty of adultery quietly dispersed (John 8:9). If Spitzer had been there, he would have picked up the biggest stone to hurl at the woman. But those eager to stone Spitzer must ask if they wish to be judged by the same legal exactitude. Spitzer and his lawyers are engaged in bargaining so he can escape the punishments he put in place.

We should not wink at sin. Yet Spitzer's prosecutable wrong is minor compared to his hypocrisy. Jesus warns his disciples, "*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 (harsh judgment), and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Lk 6:37-38). Nothing calls for greater caution than when we are about to make a judgment. Even if our antagonists have no occasion to repay us according to our judgment, we have to reckon with God himself.

In a similar vein, Jesus tells the parable of the servant in debt. He owed a large sum to his master who forgave him his debt. But when a fellow servant owed him a small debt, he had this co-worker thrown in prison. The master, on hearing this, condemned him who owed the greater debt (Mt 18:23-35). God is offended when we will not show mercy after we have received mercy. Though this is not an issue of hypocrisy, it follows the same principle: "Do unto others what you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:31).

Spitzer's hypocrisy is too apparent for any other interpretation. We can choose to mock him, but we can also choose to hope for his redemption. In his resignation, he said, "I have insisted ... that people ... take responsibility for their conduct. I can and will ask no less of myself." If these words are spoken sincerely, Spitzer may have taken his most important step in his personal development.

Spitzer made many enemies. Most of his enemies are also ours. They are those who commit crime against the society. There are also those who suffered under Spitzer's wrong accusation. Many want Spitzer's pound of flesh as he had demanded theirs. Many would want to do to Spitzer what Spitzer was well-known for: to prosecute a person to the full extent of the law and show no mercy.

We need to remember that Spitzer fought corporate crime to protect our interest when he was the DA. Spitzer's wrong is hypocrisy. His redemption must address this issue. The law may demand its fullest extent or may negotiate a settlement. But the law does not address the greater issue of hypocrisy. That is something Spitzer needs to address as his core personal need.

Spitzer's fall is not an opportunity for us to rush in and cast the first stone. Instead Spitzer's greater fault of hypocrisy is strong reason for us to pause and examine our own life.

Another issue

What I find truly disturbing about Spitzer is his abuse of power and the complicity of those around him. If we were to go back in time, it seems that we would find it difficult to recognize Spitzer's abuse of power because he did wield it for good, and that good was very visible. Yet his novel application of the law, his strong-arm tactic, which brought down crime also brought down the innocent.

Spitzer had about a 70% approval rating from the state of New York on account of his high profile successes in fighting the swindlers of Wall Street. It is easy to forget that the means are as important as the ends when we are galled by the devious greed in white-collar criminals.

Do I mock the people of New York for approving Spitzer? Certainly not. What I am saying is that the Christian community often has no more discernment than the general public in approving unethical means when pursuing a valid goal.

We look upon Spitzer as one of those who protect our interest and who uphold what is good and right. We are so appreciative of the good they do that we are blind to their abuses. I am not referring to moral failures that become apparent from time to time. I am referring to power that we confer on those who abuse it. Let me explain.

We can have a leader who is a champion of truth or orthodoxy. He stands up against all manner of false teaching (as he perceives) and gives dire warning to the community warning against the false teaching of every group (except his own of course). In the name of preserving truth, the community confers on him the power to fight falsehood even when he abuses that power. The ends (e.g. doctrinal purity) become our sole concern that we ignore the abuse of power used to preserve the ends.

A certain tradition can become so convinced of its own value and importance that its advocates believe any means can be employed to quash all opposing views. We see this among Jihadist Islam, but we also see this in the Catholic church in the past with the Spanish inquisition and the slaughter of the French Huguenots.

Empowering those who abuse their power is a very dangerous thing. Spitzer's abuse of power and those who empowered him to do it, are engaged in a moral travesty no less than hypocrisy even though neither moral failure is illegal.

One more issue

David sinned against God in his adultery with Bathsheba. He sinned even more in his attempt at cover-up. In our day, David's actions would be clear grounds of disqualification from public office.

God roundly reprimanded him and he paid the penalty of his sin as God had assigned him. As David suffered from God's chastisement, Shimei, supporter of King Saul pelted David with stones, taking pleasure in David's suffering, saying that his suffering was on account of what David did against Saul (2 Sam 16:5-8), which was not true.

Sometimes the Christian community behaves no better than the world. When a person has done some wrong that is made known, we choose to believe the worst of every rumor or malicious gossip against this

person. He may indeed be going through a time of chastisement from God, but it does not give us the right to amplify his wrong or be harsh towards him. When we have power over someone we must exercise that power judiciously. We should never assume that our pet-peeve against that person is his problem with God.

The legal system has distilled this into a clear articulation: even the guilty has rights. The person guilty for one murder has the right not to be convicted for ten murders. The person guilty of dealing with one pound of crack should not be framed for dealing with ten pounds of crack.

When someone in leadership position has done some wrong, it seems that the Christian community begin to pass word around, spinning speculations which are eventually accepted as truths, amplifying the wrongs of a person.

We have the power to destroy. Just like Spitzer, we have the power to hurt and harm through our gossip, speculation, amplification, and readiness to believe the worst of a person.

If an erring brother has repented, the word of God tells us clearly that "love keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Cor 13:5). The apostle Peter says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4:8).

If you have been the victim of Shimei's abuse, you can take comfort in David's focus on God. David did not allow his soldiers to go after Shimei. Instead, he said, "*It may be that the LORD will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today*" (2 Sam 16:12).

Conclusion

Spitzer's fall from power is not an opportunity to throw stones. It is an opportunity for us to learn a searching sincerity towards our own life, to learn a

charitable righteousness towards those who fall, and to learn the darkness of our own heart when we always believe the worst of what we hear.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.