



Jerome Thayer

# Balancing Justice and Mercy in Classroom Assessment and Grading



**A**t the end of each term or grading period, teachers are frequently approached by students asking: “What can I do to raise my grade?” They perceive that if justice is applied, they will get a poor grade, and they are asking for mercy. A justice-oriented teacher is likely to reply: “You will get the grade you deserve—based on the quality of your work for the class.” Students in church schools who view the teacher as a model of Christian behavior come away from this encounter with a perception of

God as One who sternly administers justice.

On the other hand, a mercy-oriented teacher is likely to reply: “Here are a few things that you can do to raise your grade.” Students come away from this encounter with a perception of God as Someone who can be manipulated into granting favors.

After a few of these encounters, both teachers and students come to dread the grading process. While teachers must adhere to grading policies set by their school administration, conference, or state, they can make decisions regarding how

best to apply these policies. How can a Christian teacher balance both justice and mercy appropriately in grading?

Many teachers and students have a negative view of assessment-related activities such as assignments, quizzes, exams, and grades. Many teachers feel frustrated during assessment activities and guilty after completing them. Similarly, there are students who do not think the assessment-related activities are fair and do not see any benefit from them—they think such activities are handled vindic-

tively and with little mercy, viewing them as extrinsic motivators.<sup>1</sup>

In order for classroom assessment and grading procedures to be positive, fair, and accurate, teachers need a new framework to inform their assessment practices. In this article, I propose that teachers in Christian learning environments discover principles to use as a basis for their assessments and grading that are based on how God uses assessment—how

Many times, teachers will over-emphasize the justice aspect of grading to the detriment of mercy or vice versa. The goal of this article is to suggest principles that will enable a teacher to maximize both justice and mercy in the grading process.

He deals with humans when making salvation decisions related to them. I will propose a framework within which assessment can be positive for both teachers and students. This framework will include suggestions for balancing both justice and mercy, and it will also recommend broad principles that can be applied by teachers in their assessment planning and decisions. I will primarily focus on one assessment task—how data

should be used in decisions related to assigning grades. Many of the grading decisions that are informed by assessment data will be examined, and principles will be suggested that can be used to guide these decisions.<sup>2</sup>

Justice is maximized if grades are based on appropriate data that can be used, with a minimum level of subjectivity, to measure students' achievement or performance related to clearly specified, appropriate outcomes, objectives, or standards. Mercy is maximized if assessment is conducted during the learning process to aid learning, and grading decisions are based on data collected in a way that takes into consideration individual differences and circumstances.

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#### How God Uses Assessment

It is clear from Scripture that God does not avoid assessment (Genesis 1; Psalm 19:2-24; Romans 12:1-8). The decisions God makes related to human salvation will be based on His assessment of how each individual has met the "criteria" specified in Scripture. While there may be disagreement over what the criterion or criteria might be, it is clear that God does not make salvation-related decisions in a casual, subjective, or non-documented manner. Seventh-day Adventists believe that human beings who are saved will spend the millennium reviewing God's records to confirm that salvation-related decisions were made appropriately (Daniel 7:22; 1 Corinthians 6: 2, 3; Revelation 20:4, 6). It is not clear what types of data are contained in the "book of life," but it appears as if the data are the bases for God's decisions—and after examining these records, the righteous will con-

clude that God is just and merciful.

Teachers should not view evaluation and assessment as activities to be avoided if possible. Evaluation and assessment of students' knowledge and skill levels provide them with objectives for their specified fields of study and for living as productive citizens, and equip teachers with information about how well students are meeting objectives. Failure to appropriately assess and evaluate increases the possibility of sending into society individuals who are ill-prepared to effectively serve and unlikely to succeed in life. Since important decisions are made based on how well students are meeting the objectives of the class or school in which they are enrolled, it is important that evaluation and assessment be done in an appropriate and defensible manner.

The following section describes ways in which God handles assessment in salvation-related decisions and provides examples of how teachers might model their assessment-related decisions on how God acts in similar situations. These examples are shared with the understanding that teachers and students are human beings, born in and shaped by sin (Psalm 51:5), and even with careful, consistent, and thorough application of the principles of God's kingdom on earth, failure frequently occurs (Ecclesiastes 7:20). And although falling short of the ideal is inevitable, there is assurance that grace and mercy abound even more when teachers and students follow the command of the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, to forgive each other (Micah 7:18, 19; Ephesians 4:32).

#### God Uses Appropriate Standards

1. *God uses a criterion-referenced standard.* We are saved by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8). This standard is one that all can

# Grace



meet. God does not use a norm-referenced standard (grading on the curve). People are not given eternal life just because they are closer to the standard than other people. Our confidence in being saved should not be based on comparing ourselves to others.

God does not hesitate to save if the standard is met (e.g., a faith relationship with Jesus Christ). Likewise, teachers need not hesitate to give "A" grades to all students if they all meet the standard set for them (e.g., work completed on time, high scores on tests and assignments, etc.).

Norm-referenced grading is seldom an appropriate way to grade (2 Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 1:10; Galatians 6:4). God does not grade off the best (highest-scoring) person who has performed the most good works (Romans 11:6; Galatians 2:16) when making salvation-related decisions. Likewise, the standard human teachers set for meeting class objectives should not depend on the performance of the highest-scoring student.

2. *God clearly specifies the standard He will use for salvation decisions.* Salvation is a gift (Ephesians 2:8, 9). However, to receive that gift, one must believe in God (Acts 16:31), accept the gift (Romans 10:9), and embrace the principles of God's kingdom (Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 22:36-40).

Teachers should make it clear to students what they are expected to do to meet the objectives of the class. Students should not be surprised when they see course content and test questions, or when they receive their grades.

3. *God does not use different standards for different people* (Romans 3:23). All humans are saved by faith and faith alone. How faith is evaluated for people with different backgrounds and cultures will be understood only after the Second Coming.

Teachers should not have different standards for different students

unless it is determined (by the school) that a student is unable to meet the specified standard, in which case a documented adjustment of the standard (e.g., an Individualized Education Program) is made for that student. God uses abundant mercy throughout the learning and assessment process, which may vary from person to person, but He does not adjust the standard for the final salvation-related decision: It is a gift (Romans 8:1-4). It is best for teachers to use mercy in setting an appropriate standard that can be met by all students.

4. *God uses appropriate data as the basis for salvation decisions.* He bases His salvation decisions on data that are recorded and will one day be examined (Revelation 20:1-15). The book of life contains data that God will use to make salvation decisions. During the millennium, the redeemed will examine this data to confirm that correct decisions were made.<sup>3</sup>

Teachers should keep careful record of their assessments and assign grades based on recorded documentation. They should not hesitate to explain to students or parents the reason for the grades given, based on the recorded documentation.

5. *God does not base salvation decisions on limited, selective data* (Revelation 20:12).<sup>4</sup> It appears that the book of life contains many entries for each person (Revelation 20:1-15).

It is beneficial for teachers to assess outcomes from different perspectives (e.g., self-assessment and teacher assessment). Teachers should not shy away from conducting frequent assessments. It is usually not advisable to base grades solely on assessment done at one point in time (e.g., a single exam at the end of the grading period).

6. *God does not consider participation or involvement in learning-enhancing activities as a basis for salvation decisions* (Romans 3:20-30; Romans 11:6). He uses the outcome that occurs as the result of the activi-

ties or the motivation behind the activities. For example, God does not consider how often a person prays but assesses the motivation or result of the prayers (the person's relationship with Him). God encourages prayer, but prayer (e.g., works) without the resulting faith (relationship) is not sufficient (Ephesians 2:8).

There are many actions (activities) that teachers want to encourage or

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require that are needed or helpful for learning. These include things such as class attendance, participation, outside reading, or going on field trips. Although worthy and helpful activities, unless performing them produces the actual outcome desired, only the learning that results from the activity should be used for grading. For example, rather than grading on the time invested or number of

pages read for outside reading, the students could be graded on the quality of a written assignment (e.g., an essay) based on the reading. However, in some classes, such as a music ensemble or physical education class, participation in the activities could be considered to be an appropriate proxy for the actual learning that is occurring.

7. *God does not consider "irrelevant" behaviors (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, status, etc.) present in the assessment (Psalm 51; Matthew 11:28; John 6:37).* He listens and responds to the motivation and results of the prayers of the faithful without considering the sophistication of the prayer.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers should not take off points for "style" if this is not an objective of the course. In most subjects or classes, spelling and grammar are not part of the instruction, and therefore should not be considered in grading the student's written work. In some cases, however (e.g., composition and language-arts classes), they are appropriate to consider in grading since attention is given to them as part of the instruction. In other cases, these elements may be required, but not used for grading.

8. *God does not include how hard a person tries (effort) in the salvation decision (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:10).* Jesus said that people will not be saved based on their having done wonderful works in His name (Matthew 7:21-23).

Teachers should encourage and reward effort, but not by including effort in grades. Grades should be based on the degree to which the standard has been met by students based on the level of instruction provided to help them meet the outcome.

9. *God does not allow "extra credit" to compensate for failure to meet the criteria.* When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he could do to be saved (requesting something to do for extra credit), Jesus just rephrased a previously stated required criterion (Matthew 19:16-22).

By definition, extra credit requires doing something that is not one of the regular stated assignments of the course. There is room in the lesson plan or syllabus for assignments that provide opportunities for in-depth study or additional practice to build skills. Good teachers will build mercy into the class plan so there is no need to adjust it for selected students at the end of the course. To call these assignments "extra credit" is misleading and gives students a false sense of mercy. These assignments should help students reach the standard rather than take the place of reaching it. Grades, then, should only be based on achieving the regular stated outcomes, not on additional things that can compensate for not having met the standard requirements.

10. *God does not make a single salvation decision for all persons in a human being's group—family, household, or friends (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 14:12; Matthew 10:34-37).*

While teachers may use various types of group work (e.g., collaborative learning, cooperative learning, problem- or project-based learning, etc.) to enhance the learning of each student, whenever possible the evaluation used for grading should be conducted for each student separately.

### God Uses Continuous Data Collection

1. *God does not use intermediate (formative) assessment data for final salvation decisions.* He uses intermediate assessments in our daily life, including assessing and responding to how we deal with trials and temptations, to guide us; but failure to meet the standard (not having faith) at these times is not counted against a person who at a later date meets the standard (has faith). As a result, God assesses both during and at the conclusion of each person's life (1 John 1:9; Philippians 1:6).



It is best for teachers to use many or most quizzes and daily assignments as formative learning activities and not as measures of final, summative evaluations of learning for grading. Long-term projects and term papers should have formative check-points along the way to ensure that the learner is moving in the right direction and to correct his or her course before the project or paper is completed.

2. *God does not use surprise measurements for final decision making* (John 5:24; Ephesians 2:8, 9; Acts 4:12). He bases salvation decisions on an assessment of each person's relationship with Christ at the end of his or her life, not at some unannounced point prior to that time.

Teachers should not use surprise quizzes for grading purposes. If unannounced quizzes are given, they should be used for learning purposes (formative assessment). Assessment activities used for grading purposes should not surprise students in terms of either the content or the timing of the assessment.

3. *God establishes a reasonable deadline for meeting the criteria*

(Luke 23:39-43; 2 Peter 3:9). He gives us our whole life to meet the criteria for salvation.

Teachers should set reasonable time deadlines for meeting class outcomes that can be met by most, if not all, students. Deadlines should be set up in a way that allows all students to have sufficient time to complete the activity or assignment. All deadlines should be clearly announced and adhered to (justice) but documented extenuating circumstances might create a need for the deadlines to be extended (mercy).

4. *God does not allow for evidence to be submitted after the deadline.* After the close of probation for each individual, no new data will be accepted. (e.g., Matthew 25, parable of the 10 virgins). God's mercy has limitations.

Teachers should not hesitate to announce to students that deadlines will be adhered to (unless there are extenuating circumstances).

5. *God does not take off points (lower the person's grade) for "late submissions."* Satisfactory evidence

of meeting the standard at the last moment (e.g., the thief on the cross in Luke 23:39-43) is considered sufficient for obtaining eternal life. But God does set deadlines beyond which it is not possible for His mercy to be extended (the close of probation).

It may be appropriate for teachers to not accept work after a stated deadline (with appropriate application of mercy in extenuating circumstances), but seldom advisable to lower the student's grade (take off points) for late work. If a student has achieved 100 percent mastery of the subject, but after the deadlines set by the teacher, a grade of "B," "C," or "D" as the result of points deducted because of when the assignment was turned in, this would not be appropriate—only a pass/fail grade should be given in this situation, or an "A" (the requirements were met) or an "F" (the evidence for learning was submitted too late).

### **God Uses an Appropriate Blend of Justice and Mercy**

It is common for students to feel that the grade they received was not "just" but based on something other than their actual level of learning. To be "just," the grades students receive should reflect only the extent to which they have met the stated outcomes of the course. It is also common for students to feel that their teacher gave too much mercy (usually to other students) and/or too little mercy (to themselves). While most teachers want to exhibit mercy, many of them lack clarity over where and when mercy should be applied. Teachers need to seek to apply an appropriate blend of justice and mercy.

1. *The bases for God's decisions combine justice and mercy* (Psalm 145:8, 9; Romans 8:1-4). A clear standard is set and adhered to (justice), but mercy allows sinful persons to meet the standard (with Christ's righteousness), and God is patient

when human beings do not initially meet the standard, actively working through His Spirit to bring them to salvation.

2. *God uses mercy at appropriate times* (Luke 23:34; 2 Peter 3:10) *and in appropriate ways*. There are two main ways God uses mercy prior to the final salvation-related decision: (a) the continual pleading of the Holy Spirit to draw us to Him (John 6:44), and (b) by patiently welcom-

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ing us when we come to Him, extending to us His long-suffering nature, not wanting any to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Mercy should be given during the learning process or in deciding on the type of assessment, not after the final evaluation of the learning (e.g., grading).

There are three main times when teachers can use mercy appropriately in grading. First, before and/or

during instruction, teachers can modify the lesson plan or specific assignments to meet the needs of each student. Second, during assessment, teachers can modify the procedures used in order to meet the needs of each student (while still maintaining justice by using the same criterion as for the grade). For example, students with English-language deficiencies might be allowed additional time to take an examination, or all students might be allowed to redo an assignment or retake an alternate form of a test. Third, in awarding grades, the standard used for grading could be adjusted to make allowances for unforeseen circumstances. For example, a teacher might have initially set the standard for an “A” grade to be 90 percent. But if severe weather has caused school to be closed for many days that could not be made up, the standard could legitimately be lowered (mercy), and applied to all students (justice).

3. *God does not distribute mercy selectively—it is freely given to all* (Genesis 18; Jonah 4:2; Romans 3:22-24).

Students frequently ask teachers for mercy at grading time. If teachers believe that mercy is justified, the condition of the mercy bestowed should be extended to all students. Modification of a standard due to extenuating circumstances should not be extended only to selected students.

Common ways in which justice is not achieved in assessment would be when teachers use varying criteria for different students or offer alternative ways to demonstrate achievement only to selected students. Common ways to show mercy in assessment would be to allow alternative ways to demonstrate achievement or to allow students multiple attempts to demonstrate mastery. But the alternative ways available and the opportunities for multiple attempts should be documented, announced, and available to all stu-

dents<sup>6</sup> to ensure justice.

4. *God does not respond to pleadings for mercy after the close of probation* (Revelation 20:11-15; Revelation 22:11).

A common way in which mercy is misused is when a teacher changes the grade of a student based on evidence not derived from his or her achievement, such as the student’s pleading for a higher grade because he or she has to complete the class as a prerequisite or needs a higher GPA to graduate or gain admission to another school, because of being ill or injured at the time an exam was given, or to avoid an unpleasant confrontation with his or her parents. Mercy can be shown in these circumstances in other appropriate ways (e.g., allowing students to take a rescheduled exam) rather than by simply changing the grade, which does not ensure mastery of the content. The goal must be to ensure that at the end of the course the student has acquired the information and mastered the skills mandated in the syllabus. In areas such as healthcare, failure to ensure mastery could be a matter of life and death as students begin working with patients.

5. *God combines both mercy and justice when dealing with individual circumstances* (Genesis 18; Jonah 4:2). Because of sin, humanity was destined for eternal death (justice). In this sinful state, reaching God’s standard is impossible; however, He provided a substitute (Romans 8:1-4) so that the standard could be met (mercy), and because of this, all have the promise of eternal life.

Not allowing assessments to be redone might be justice but would not show mercy. Allowing assessments to be redone based on the whim of the teacher, or only for selected students, would be merciful, but not just. Allowing assessments to be redone as a matter of normal

procedures for all students combines justice and mercy.

### Conclusion

Assessment and grading procedures are complex, requiring many decisions related to the content, timing, administering, and interpretation of the information gathered and used. In all of these decisions, an appropriate blend of justice and mercy should be applied.

### Justice

Grades should be based solely on assessment of relevant data, assigned and assessed using appropriate procedures. They should also be based on data that are collected with a minimum of bias, using multiple measurements whenever possible, with achievement measured at the conclusion of instruction. Appropriate criteria for grades should be clearly specified.

### Mercy

Mercy should be shown during assessment by allowing multiple attempts or alternative assessments to demonstrate mastery, using assessment conducted during learning to assist learning rather than for grading decisions, and making adjustments for individual differences in the assessment process.

### Blend of Justice and Mercy

As mercy is extended, care needs to be given that justice is not compromised. And likewise, as justice is adhered to, care needs to be given that mercy is not compromised. As each assessment and grading decision is made, the appropriate blend of justice and mercy needs to be considered.

### Application

In assessment and grading, a wide variety of options are available. The appropriateness of each assessment and grading option varies by class, by teacher, and by student. It will be helpful if teachers in each

school or school system, both individually and collectively, evaluate the examples and principles mentioned above, and determine the appropriateness of each assessment and grading option for their local situation—their classes and their students. Discussing the appropriateness of these options with colleagues, will help teachers develop skill in applying the characteristics of good assessment and better understand how assessment can be used to model the principles of God's kingdom in their individual situation. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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### Recommended citation:

**Jerome Thayer**, "Balancing Justice and Mercy in Classroom Assessment and Grading," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:4 (October-December 2019): 27-33.

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Grading has long been a source of anxiety and fear. Several sources support this; see, for example, Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner, "Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently)," *CBE Life Science Education* 13:2 (Summer 2014): 159-166: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4041495/>; Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, "Grades and Grading" (2019): <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/teaching/teaching-how/chapter-5-grading-and-evaluation/grades-and-grading>; Susan M. Brookhart, "Teachers' Grading Practices: Meaning and Values," *Journal of Educational Measurement* 30:2 (Summer 1993): 123-142.
2. This article was written with the classroom teacher in mind, many of whom have taken courses in classroom testing and evaluation and possess an understanding of best practices in using as-

essment effectively. For those without this background knowledge, several resources provide examples of how to effectively plan and structure formative and summative assessments; see, for example, the work of Robert J. Marzano, *Classroom Assessment and Grading That Work* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009); James W. Popham, *Classroom Assessment: What Teachers Need to Know* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 2011); James McMillan, *Classroom Assessment: Principles and Practice for Effective Standards-Based Instruction* (Boston, Mass.: Pearson, 2013); and Kathryn Parker Boudett et al., *Data Wise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2013). Educators should take advantage of any opportunity to improve their competency in this area, since doing so can strengthen their practice and the students' experiences.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), 660, 661; see also Daniel 7:22; 1 Corinthians 6:2, 3; Revelation 20:4, 6.

4. Several Scripture texts tell of God's recording-keeping regarding the lives of all people (Revelation 20:12); the names of all believers and those who fear God (Revelation 20:15; Malachi 3:16); the number of hairs on each person's head (Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7); the tears cried (Psalm 56:8); features of every person (Psalm 139:16); every word uttered (Matthew 12:16); and service (Matthew 6:10; Hebrews 6:10).

5. God asks for a contrite, earnest spirit. Also, in *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1892), page 93, Ellen White counseled that "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend."

6. Procedures for dealing with individual exceptions, students in need of special accommodations for learning, and emergencies as they relate to assessments should be clearly documented and explained to students (e.g., define how mercy will be applied), and these procedures should be applied equally for all students and carefully documented (to ensure justice). It is important to note that accommodations or modifications to the curriculum that allow learners with learning disabilities to meet the standard should not alter curricular content, change what is to be assessed, or give an added advantage. These modifications allow students to meet the standard by learning how to work with their challenges. For more information, see National Center for Learning Disabilities, "Accommodations for Students With LD" (2019): <http://www.ldonline.org/article/8022/>.