



When Mercy is Cruel

By Eric Holmberg

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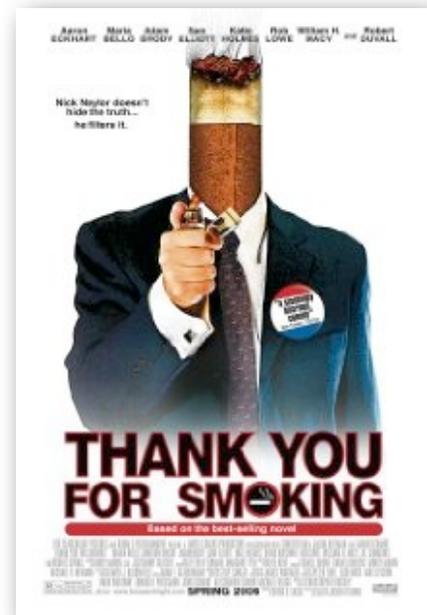
...the mercy of the wicked is cruel. Proverbs 12:10

"Angelina and Brad are the best couples in the world. These are the most sexy, beautiful, smart who

are tide up with humanitarian work rather than silly hollywood bimboos. I am so inspired by them. I FEEL LIKE LIVING WHEN I HEAR OR READ ABOUT THEM even in the most boring moment. I hope they will NEVER, EVER separate." **Online fan posting; unedited, emphases theirs**

Imagine the following scenario: A man accumulates a considerable fortune from the manufacture and sale of cigarettes. Not only is he the majority shareholder in the company with the number one-selling brand in the world, he has been instrumental in its success. Blessed with good-looks and an easy charm, his ubiquitous appearances in magazine ads and public events—invariably with a beautiful woman in one hand and a cigarette in the other—has helped make smoking as well as his particular brand icons of cool, particularly among young adults.

One day he decides to dedicate a small portion of his time and fortune to fighting lung and mouth cancer. Cleverly taking advantage of the press corps that dog his every move, he throws out sound bytes to their hungry microphones: expressing his deepest sympathies to those struggling with the disease and calling on the government to commit more money towards finding a cure. During an interview with Barbara Walters, he interrupts the tour of his palatial mansion to “bare his soul,” sharing his concerns about the impact of industrial pollution and global warming on the growth of these cancers. A week later, at a press conference celebrating the unveiling of a new cigarette brand, he pledges a million dollars towards a college fund for children orphaned by what he calls “the most preventable of cancers.” The popular media fall all over themselves trumpeting his compassion and largesse. Newsweek magazine even honors him with a cover shot along with a number of other “Good Samaritans” with the



caption "15 Winners Who Use Fame, Fortune, Heart and Soul to Help Others." Of course, he is placed conspicuously in the foreground.



Absurd, isn't it? Could never happen, right? Most people would instantly recognize the hypocrisy of a man who sells "cancer sticks" for a living boohooing about the tragedies associated with the actual disease. And then there's the press and their well-known penchant for exposing human foibles, particularly when associated with something as politically incorrect as smoking. One can imagine the sarcastic headlines: ***The Emperor Has No Clothes*** or

Anti-Cancer Gift Goes Up in Smoke.

Well, the details of the real story may be slightly more nuanced than this, but the fact remains that the same breath-taking hypocrisy has become a common feature of our cultural landscape—aided and abetted by the popular media. Nowhere is this more evident than with the most politicized, *cause célèbre* disease in modern history, AIDS.

Forget for a moment that AIDS is a disease that was born and largely propagated through lifestyle choices rather than innocent happenstance. Ignore the even more sobering fact that these choices involve activities most people view as profoundly immoral: perverse and indiscriminate sexual activity and the intravenous use of illegal drugs being the two most common. And finally, let's set aside the fact that US tax-payer funding for the treatment and prevention of AIDS eclipses every other (usually far less preventable) disease even though AIDS is not even in the top twenty diseases that kill Americans.^[1] (Actually, don't ignore these facts. Memorize them. Teach them to others. Wade into the culture wars with them inscribed on a standard for all to see.)

But if this were not enough, we are also subjected to a chorus line of actors, musicians, fashion designers and other artistes clamoring for more attention and tax money to fight AIDS even while their lifestyles and art help prop up the very attitudes and actions that help spread the disease!

And to rub it in, the drive-by media eagerly shills for them, pressing their cause, praising the size of their hearts all the while ignoring (covering up?) their rank hypocrisy.

The latest example of this—and there are many—is the way the whole world is now fawning over the humanitarian exploits of "Brangelina," the harmonic convergence of two perfect sets of genes that are Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Their efforts on behalf of African refugees, orphans, and victims of AIDS and Hurricane Katrina has landed Ms. Jolie on the short list of heroes idolized by young people (number three; right behind Gandhi and one step ahead of Mother Theresa) and her paramour on the cover of Newsweek—along with the aforementioned headline about people who are "help(ing) others."



Now don't get me wrong. Much if not all of the humanitarian work that Angelina and Brad are performing is admirable and no doubt there are many people who have been helped by their efforts. For this they should be commended.

But unfortunately their lives and art are communicating another message and having another effect that is likely eclipsing all the good they are doing. Both actors have made it very clear that when it comes to personal attitudes concerning sex and marriage, they are not bound by traditional categories of good and evil. From bi-sexuality and self-mutilation (Jolie) to one of the most publicized (and romanticized) incidents of adultery in modern history (Pitt), to the sexually omnivorous characters they play on screen, to the fact that despite their epic love for one another and their children (we mere mortals can only dream) they remained unmarried for years, Brangelina are powerfully—though perhaps unwittingly—attacking what the leadership of Uganda has proven to be the only way to halt the AIDS epidemic: teaching abstinence before marriage and covenantal faithfulness within it.



In his Newsweek cover story, Mr. Pitt demonstrates that he is capable of critical thinking when he connects the dots between poverty in Africa and the way its commodities—he uses coffee beans as an example—are handled by industrialized nations. Would that he, Ms. Jolie and the rest of Hollywood make the same connection between personal morality and the tragedy that is AIDS.

I'll close on a redemptive note. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Before I was 26, my own life helped fuel the hurricane of immorality that is wreaking such destruction in our world. Like me and countless others, Brad and Angelina can repent. They can renounce their past lifestyles. Brad can ask his ex-wife to forgive his adultery and then publicly apologize for glamorizing the sin of infidelity. They can use their considerable talents to make films that inspire and edify and instruct. They can take advantage of the bully pulpit of their celebrity to present the only truth that will set men and nations free.

May it happen. May God have mercy on them... and our sin-sick world.

[1] Heart disease is the number one cause of death in America by far, killing approximately 50 times as many people as AIDS. And yet it gets far, far less funding per patient. Another example: Lung cancer kills 10 times as many people as AIDS and yet receives 1/10th the funding per person who dies from it.