

The Mercy of God 8-20-00 revised for 5-5-02

You are here this morning because of an attribute of God – Mercy. Psalms 5:7 (NIV)⁷ *But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple.* Together, as living stones, we are the temple of God, and that is by God's mercy. We, by His great mercy have come into His house, the family of God. We are so indebted to this wonderful attribute of God and yet we so often take it for granted. Mercy – it is more than giving someone something that is much more than he or she deserves, it is giving it to him or her even though one could argue against it being reasonable to give it. How is that different from grace? Mercy says you deserve some type of punishment but you will not get what you deserve. Grace is a gift of something you have not earned. Do you see the difference? If you came this morning without shoes and I just gave you a pair out of the goodness of my heart you would be a recipient of grace. If you threw that pair into a dumpster, but then realized you needed them and I gave you another pair, then you have received mercy. Listen to the application in Psalms 41:4 (NIV). ⁴ *I said, "O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you."* I have sinned, and I deserve this affliction, but I ask for something that is contrary to what I deserve. That is asking for mercy. Both attributes, grace and mercy, spring from the goodness of God and are unearned by anything we do.

Yet mercy is only applied in righteousness. God said to Moses, *"I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."* (Exodus 33:19) It sounds very arbitrary, but we must remember God's attributes are all one thing and never act independently of the other attributes. In the rope of God's character the cord of mercy is wrapped with the cords of justice and love and righteousness.

Let me give you an illustration from Israel's history. When the Children of Israel defeated certain cities they were to dedicate the possessions to God and burn them as an offering. If someone kept them it would stop God from showing mercy to them for God is just and righteous. To reward rebellion is not right or just or even genuine love. Deut 13:17,18 *"None of those condemned things shall be found in your hands, so that the LORD will turn from his fierce anger; he will show you mercy, have compassion on you, and increase your numbers, as he promised on oath to your forefathers,¹⁸ because you obey the LORD your God, keeping all his commands that I am giving you today and doing what is right in his eyes."*

Obedience opens a window for God to pour in His mercy. It is not that our being good deserves mercy or earns it, but that sin, outright rebellion, blocks it. Dan 9:18 (NIV)¹⁸ *Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.*

Even though we can never earn it, we can close the door to mercy by rebellion.

Repentance also opens a way for mercy to be received. Prov 28:13 (NIV)¹³ *He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.*

So we see God chooses to have mercy on those who are repentant and those not in rebellion against Him, those not disobedient to His commands. Obedience and repentance open a channel for the mercy of God to flow. They do not earn mercy but allow it to flow righteously. Numerous times through the psalms we see this expression of repentance and a request for mercy to be displayed toward the psalmist or the nation. Are you unbolting the door to God's mercy through your confession of sin, your acknowledgement that you have rebelled against God, and your willingness to change?

Some theological traditions within the church would argue that God is not moved by anything outside Himself and so repentance and obedience have nothing to do with mercy. He just decides to have mercy on whoever – Not only does that contradict the examples I have just given, the history of Israel, and in our own lives but throws out the other attributes of God. It is saying His mercy can act independently from His justice. That is injustice. Yet, man cannot find repentance and obedience in himself without the mercy and grace of God moving upon his heart. This mercy that moves upon the heart of every man is the light that lights every man that comes into the world.(John 1:9)

When that mercy clearly reveals God calling us to Himself, we become accountable to respond. Before we have really received that calling of God we are undeserving sinners by nature. We need a clear picture of what the fallen human condition is to truly appreciate mercy. God would be perfectly justified in wiping our sin loving lives off the planet for all the pain and havoc our rebellious hearts cause. Lam 3:22 (KJV)²² *It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.*

Before that revelation of God's love to us personally we have not yet received that invitation from God. We haven't felt His knocking upon the door of our heart. It is the rejection of that mercy that places us then one step closer to impending justice. If you look carefully at the hardening of Pharaoh's heart you will see that the first five times he hardened his own heart. Then God hardened it until Pharaoh confessed his sin (Exodus 9:27, the seventh plague). Then once more Pharaoh had to harden his own heart. God gave Him another chance because of repentance and confession. When Pharaoh spurned that, God began to harden Pharaoh's heart again.

The mercy of God is sometimes an excuse for an unrepentant life. I've heard people say, "What kind of merciful God would send a soul to hell." That ideology is merely a justification for not yielding to the mercy of God drawing them to repentance. What a sad excuse for remaining in rebellion. God pleads with each one of us not to go on destroying our lives with rebellion, and some would insist on going down that path by twisting the very nature of God. To say God is merciful without being just is to distort His integrity and make God into man's image, and to insistently continue down our path of self-destruction.

God's wrath on the wicked is mercy. It is an exercise of His justice to turn them from self-destruction. Hell for the unrepentant rebels who will ignore His love of God in giving His own Son for them is just and in keeping with the rebels' demand to live separated from God. God will not show mercy that ignores his holiness and

righteousness. For those who reject the love of God and the gift of His Son, the judgement they receive will be equity for their choices. What they have sown they will reap. They have sown the wind and they will reap the whirlwind. Ps 9:17 *The wicked shall be turned into hell and all the nations that forget God.* Since they reject what the Son has done for them, they will be paid in full for their sin – death (separation from Life). Anything else would be inequitable and God cannot be unfair. It's just not in His perfect character.

For the redeemed it is an expression of God's mercy in that heaven will not be defiled with the slander of the wicked. Rev 21:27 *"There shall in nowise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither worketh abomination."* Sin allowed in heaven is unimaginable. Even the wrath of God is an expression of his mercy for it separates those who insist on darkness from those who have chosen the Light. A rebel against the goodness of God might say, "Just because I want to do my own thing apart from God, surely, as merciful as He is, He would not throw me into a Lake of Fire?" Don't count on it. It may be the perfect expression of His mercy toward the redeemed and an answer to their insistence to live apart from Him.

Difficulty in life, illness, trouble, and trials can be an expression of mercy. David understood that, Job learned that, and Paul knew it was true. Jonah was mercifully thrown into the sea, swallowed by a great fish and spit up on the shores of the very place he had been running from. He probably wouldn't have described it as mercy at the time, but later when Ninevah repented he could see it was. In weakness we are made strong. In difficulty we turn from self and look to the One who is our Strength. This, too, is the mercy of God. Mercy doesn't always come in the form we expect.

As with all His attributes, the ultimate expression of mercy is the cross. One problem with the Jews of that day is they did not expect mercy to appear in a form so humble and so gruesome. God cannot bless us with saving mercy while the justice for our rebellion against Him is unmet. In the cross, the justice of God was met, so that we could justly be recipients of the mercy of God. It is by the mercy of God you are saved. You deserved justice of eternal punishment for your rebellion against your Creator who gave you life. But the mercy of God sent Jesus, who took what you rightly deserved so that mercy could be poured out on you – justly. "... *saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.*" Titus 3:5a It wasn't because we repented, or because we responded to his grace that drew us, although that unbolted the door – It is because His Son died in your place.

It delights the heart of God to express mercy toward you. Micah 7:18 (NIV)¹⁸ *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.* God would love to show mercy to every soul. It is His delight. But some refuse to come to Him for His redeeming mercy and grace.

And like all the attributes of God, we are to exhibit this beautiful quality as the life of Christ is expressed in us. Micah 6:8 (NIV)⁸ *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with*

your God. We are to love mercy. God doesn't just like to show mercy. He loves to. More than any ritual we can perform or routine we can go through God wants us to express this attribute of His. Hosea 6:6 (NIV)⁶ *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.* It was one of the three important things Jesus told the Pharisees they were lacking. Mt 23:23 *But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness.* (The important matters of the Law are the attributes of God that we are to reflect.)
Zech 7:9 *This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.'* If you want mercy from God and others, Jesus said to be merciful. If you show mercy you will receive mercy. Mt 5:7 *Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.*

How does this mercy express itself in our lives? First we are drawn to Christ and convicted by His mercy. When we repent and look to God we are saved by it. Then in view of that mercy given us we respond by presenting our bodies to God a living sacrifice. (Ro 12:1,2) Then through that same mercy we are given a ministry. 2 Cor 4:1 (NIV) ¹ *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.*

In daily life the opportunities to be merciful are plentiful. It is most often expressed as forgiveness, patience, and endurance. The schoolteachers at Cornerstone discussed some of the challenging children and I saw mercy expressed in a great number of ways. Choosing to keep loving the offensive is to choose mercy. They offend and offend and offend, but God's love conquers all and it is an expression of His mercy. The school's administering discipline is a form of mercy on that child to turn him or her from their destructive ways. Some respond and others do not. Those that do not respond step away from the mercy shown them and go their own destructive ways. Those who respond receive more mercy and are transformed. In two weeks you'll meet some of those young people as they lead us in worship.

To forgive those who wrong you again and again is mercy. And remember the promise, 'the merciful will be shown mercy.' The same measuring cup you use toward others, God will use toward you. I don't know how that makes you feel but it makes me want to be the most merciful person in the world. Where is the biggest mercy cup I can find? It's the life of Jesus in me. We must keep coming back to Jesus as our example. His mercy is the right kind, mixed with love, yet just and holy, not self motivated, but love motivated. His kind of mercy is always the right kind. I would give when I shouldn't because I want man to think well of me, but Jesus would speak the truth in love because that is really what the person needs. Just giving in to their immediate request does not help them in the long run. Churches often get requests for money for gas or a room to sleep in. I've taken people to a hotel, or to a meal or to a gas station rather than hand them the cash, because I discerned their true desire. A month ago we had someone show up 5 minutes before Bible study asking for gas money. I looked for someone to ask about the church policy. Being in a bind for time, ready to start the class I was ready to hand the guy some money just to get him out of our hair. That is not mercy, nor is it the love of Christ. Mercy would take him to the

gas station and buy him some gas while talking to him about his alcoholism. I want to be more like that. I want to consistently show Jesus' kind of mercy.

Sometimes the Lord will send us mercy tests, or check ups. One test of mercy from about 30 years ago sticks out in my mind. I was sending out a team of young people to witness on the streets in Hawaii. I had a list of things to accomplish and was eager to get started on my day. Most of the people had left when someone came and reported that one of the men was crying. I thought, "That big baby. The guy is 6'2", we take care of his every need, and here he is crying because someone might not like his witness. When is this guy gonna grow up." Suddenly the Holy Spirit stopped me in my tracks. I think I heard something like, "The Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep." Then I was the one with tears running down my cheeks. This man was just like me, and he needed the same kind of mercy I had been shown by my heavenly Father, the Great Shepherd. I prayed with him. Cried with him. Talked about his fears. Encouraged him, and he went out and had a good day. I almost failed the mercy test, but the merciful Spirit of God broke through to my hard heart just what I needed to hear to help me show God's mercy.

Is there someone in your life you are having difficulty showing God's mercy to? You think you've scraped the bottom of your mercy barrel. Remember the widow of Zerapheth, reach into that empty jar and - WOE it's not empty - I was just sure I'd used up all the mercy last time, but there is more of the mercy of God there to meet the need. The life of Jesus in you will never run empty. It will be in you like an artesian spring, flowing up into eternal life! Let Him express His mercy through you and you will be shown even more mercy than the ocean of mercy you have already received.

If we were a little more in touch with reality of the Kingdom of God we could see we are all swimming in an ocean of mercy. It reminds me of the man who was forgiven a debt of a great amount but refused to give mercy to the one who owed him so little. Be merciful - even as your Father in heaven is merciful. Considering all the mercy He has invested in you, it is only right for you to pass it on to everyone you come in contact with - and may I say especially those who are close to you.

Right now the Spirit of God has probably brought someone to mind that you need to be merciful toward. Would you like the same measure of mercy applied to you that you are showing them? Well? Come on now? Is that how you want God to deal with you? Then you better get ready to show more mercy by the grace of God. You need to act on the conviction you are receiving right now if you believe the word of God. I don't mean just forgiving it, but do what the LORD does for you, in the way He does it for you. Use the biggest measure you can find. Determine right now before God how you need to respond to show God's great mercy, and follow through with that plan with God's help.

Deut 4:31a (NIV) *For the LORD your God is a merciful God;*

Psalm 89:1 KJV *I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever.*