

MERCY

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been in a situation where you've done something wrong...and then you got caught. Your heart is pumping, you're beginning to sweat, you're fearful of the consequences that are coming. It's a terrifying and tough spot to be in. However, in an unexpected turn, the wrong you've done is forgiven and the consequences you were expecting were either less than you anticipated, or completely dropped.

As we continue our series, the "Heart of God in the Lives of Believers", we are going to build on our discussion. Last week we looked at compassion. And one of the key aspects of compassion is recognizing the situation of someone else and being moved to action. Compassion is the inward feeling we have over someone else's situation fused with an appropriate action in response to that feeling. We looked at Luke chapter 10, where a man of the law came to Jesus and questioned him about how to earn eternal life. Jesus responds with the famous parable of the good Samaritan who was traveling along the road and came upon a beaten man, left for dead. In this parable the Samaritan man had compassion, which led him to sacrifice greatly to save the life of this man. When the story was complete, Jesus questions the man of the law to see if he recognizes the importance of the Samaritan's actions. As the lawyer responds, he highlights the merciful nature of this Samaritan man in Jesus' parable. Mercy. That's the topic we'll be taking up tonight.

These two concepts of compassion and mercy are tightly interwoven. Often, they are difficult to separate. And, as the original languages are translated into English, some forms of these words are even interchanged between mercy and compassion, depending upon the situation and the translator.

Mercy is a very important attribute of our God. As Jesus walked the earth, people were begging him to have mercy on them by healing their broken bodies and lives. (Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31) Jesus' life on earth was highly characterized by mercy. But mercy isn't only a New Testament concept. In fact, mercy is one of the self-described attributes of God in the Old Testament as well.

LOOKING AT MERCY

So, let's take a look at a key New Testament passage on mercy, and see what we learn about mercy.

A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and

from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

— *Luke 6:27–36 (ESV)*

This passage comes just after Luke records Jesus calling the rest of the twelve disciples to follow him and naming them as his apostles. He comes down from a mountain and is greeted by a great multitude of people, including people who had been following him. Jesus heals many diseases and releases people from demon possession. It's still early in Jesus ministry, but his fame is still growing and people are drawing to him because of his wonders works and teaching.

In the verses immediately before this, we see Luke's telling of the beatitudes where Jesus blesses those who are like children of the Most High and proclaims hardship on those who are not. Immediately after this, we find our text. Jesus continues teaches the crowds and disciples about the unexpected character of God's children. He continues on in our passages in verse 27.

UNEXPECTED MERCY

But I say to you who hear:

Love your enemies

do good to those who hate you

bless those who curse you

pray for those who abuse you.

To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also,

and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.

Give to everyone who begs from you,

and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.

And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

– *Luke 6:27–31 (ESV)*

Look at this long list that Jesus starts with in the first two verses. He builds on the kind of people that are God's children. Jesus looks our on his disciples, followers, and the crowds in front of him and gives them a very different view that would have been common in their culture (and even ours today).

Love your enemies. Aren't we supposed to hate them an destroy them? I mean, after all, they are enemies. No, Jesus says that children of God love those who are opposed to them. They'll even go out of their way and do good things to those people who hate them. And that actually fits well, because when we follow Jesus, we will undoubtedly encounter people who hate us and are become our enemies (John

15:18). We who recognize what Jesus has done, and become his disciples, his slaves, his sons, will have enemies and haters. And they will go out of their way to curse us, and even abuse us (John 15:18-25). But, if we are God's children, we will strive to unexpectedly bless those who tear us down with their words and actions. We will look at them and speak well of them, going out of our ways to be the opposite kind of person they are being to us. Again, with people who abuse us with physical force, we will look to God and intercede on their behalf lifting them up in prayer. These first two verses of our passage have set an expectation that any person could easily be overwhelmed with.

Jesus continues on in verses 29-30, adding more nuance and weight to this loving merciful caricature of the children of God. When we are struck or stolen from, we are not to seek revenge then and there, but rather do the unexpected and offer more of ourselves. Now, I know this can be a difficult text to hear, apply to our lives today. You may ask questions like: Should I then be offering my left cheek when someone punches me in the right? Or if a robber steals my jeans and shirt, should I offer my undershirt and underwear as well? Should I carry around thousands of dollars everywhere I go and give it to every sign-holding panhandlers on the highway exits? That's certainly one way to read this text, but I think Jesus is doing more than giving literal command for us in these circumstances. Jesus is showing us what unexpected mercy can look like...especially when it's in response to evil done to us. Perhaps Jesus is speaking with exaggerated words, but either way his disciples and followers would have been shocked and gripped by his words.

Finally, we arrival at verse 31 where Jesus provides a short summary of the preceding verses, "And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them." What is Jesus saying? Why has Jesus laid these examples before the crowd? Well, they should sound somewhat familiar. The Old Testament law in Leviticus makes provision of mercy for the poor (Example: Leviticus 23:22) and the needy. We even see the wisdom of Proverbs is alluded to several times (Proverbs 25:21-22, 26). Yet, this would have also been pretty shocking, pushing what they (and we) would expect to do in situations like these. Jesus is saying to the crowd: Be merciful! Have compassion on those you encounter (even the wicked) and be moved to mercy. Jesus shows us what unexpected, extravagant mercy looks like. Children of God are to be characterized by this kind of mercy. Mercy that does not demand repayment for what is owed. Mercy that does not doll out the punishment that's earned or deserved. But, Jesus doesn't stop there.

EXPECTED MERCY

If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.

– Luke 6:32–34 (ESV)

Verses 32-34 are characterized by worldly love, or rather non-love. Jesus provides two examples of the kind of things that even sinners living in the flesh would do. First, if we are only loving back the people that love us, that's nothing special. If we are simply reciprocating and reflecting back to individuals who love us, that's to be expected from people who aren't God's children. Jesus continues in the next verse

not just with the idea of love, but with our actions. In the same way as with love, if we withhold good deeds and only do good to those who do good to us, that doesn't display anything special. It's nothing. In fact, even sinful people do that! Now, if you haven't gotten it yet...Jesus gives us a third example in this section. If we lend (not give) to someone and expect to get it back, then we have not done anything special.

If you're hearing this and you're starting to question some things about the way you live your life and interact with others, good. That's part of what Jesus is getting us to think about here. Jesus is showing us that children of God should act differently than the world. This kind of 'love' is what the world demonstrates, this is what someone who has not experienced love and mercy of God would do. This is the worldly. This isn't extravagant mercy. In fact, this really isn't mercy at all.

Now, you may be wondering why I'm talking about mercy, when Jesus has been talking about love. Up to this point in our passage, Jesus has been using the word love and focusing on that core aspect of the believer's life. However, he's about to make an turn in the next few verses. And, as we'll see love and mercy are deeply interconnected.

OUR HEAVENLY EXAMPLE OF MERCY

*But love your enemies,
and do good,
and lend, expecting nothing in return,
and your reward will be great,
and you will be sons of the Most High,
for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.
Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*

– Luke 6:35-36 (ESV)

Jesus continues in verse 35 by repeating and reviewing the same points he made in the previous verses. Children of God are to love those who don't love them. They are to go so far as to love those who oppose, hate, mock and tear them down. Yes, even those who want to harm and kill them. God's children should be characterized by doing good things to all, despite what they'll receive back. Even if what they'll receive back is hate and vicious attacks. God's children are to be generous, giving out what they have without expecting anything in return. Then, Jesus brings to add a kingdom-focused twist. Even though we lend without expecting anything in return from the people we lend to, we will still have a great reward. We will be the sons of heaven, because this is how the people of God should love and live in the world. This is not about works-based salvation or earning our way into God's good-side, but rather a reflection of what God has done for us (Ephesians 2:8-9; James 2:18-26). True sons of heaven are characterized by this kind of behavior in their lives.

This is a good point of reflection for most of us. If we stop to review the last 6 months, 1 year or even 5 years of our lives, what do we see? Jesus is calling his children to a high standard, not to earn our salvation but to show it outwardly. Do we love those who don't love us? Do we show unexpected love to

those who don't deserve it? Do we give of ourselves and our possessions to those who might not give back? Are we so caught up in this world that we've lost our heavenly focus?

The good news is that Jesus doesn't leave us there. He points us back to the character of God. We do these things because God is like this. He is kind to people who are ungrateful. He is kind and generous to the wicked in this world. It can be tempting to look through the Old (and even the New) Testament and find all the times that God punishes or disciplines people, and then say "see God is mean!" But, consider for a moment the generations of Israel that God was patient with, providing for them, caring for them, and correcting them. He did not wipe them out at the first sign of abandonment or sin. And though generations of judges and kings continued downward spirals he was patient, sending prophets to warn and to correct. Yes, God did work acts of judgement on Israel and other nations, but not until after warning and patience. And Israel is just one example. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus mentions how God brings rain that waters the earth and helps plants grow, whether you are wicked or just. And today, here, now, you're still breathing despite a very imperfect life. God is loving. But not only that, God is merciful.

This final verse is the summary and the conclusion to our passage tonight. What we have just seen in this passage is a clear picture what mercy is. And just like a children born into his world display physical characteristics of their father, children born of the father should display his character. Mercy.

DEFINING MERCY

So what is mercy then? Up to this point we've been talking about love and kindness. Well, love, kindness and mercy are very tightly connected concepts. And, in these verses love and mercy are deeply interwoven. I grew up with the very simple definition of mercy being "not getting what you deserve", but mercy is a rich word. I like this short, but more rich summary that defines mercy by Eerdmans:

The compassionate disposition to forgive someone or to offer aid, assistance, or help to someone in need. Closely connected are such concepts as grace, goodness, love, loving-kindness, compassion, and patience... God's mercy is more than punishment withheld. It actively helps those who are miserable due to circumstances beyond their control.¹

In our previous message in this series we looked at compassion and how it's not simply a feeling but also accompanied by an appropriate action. As we have seen in our passage tonight in Luke 6, Jesus has summarized these kind of loving actions as merciful. Mercy can be the kind of actions that accompany and are induced in a compassionate heart. Mercy goes beyond withholding what is deserved and actually gives what's not deserved. It's not sitting there gripping it's fists in tight anger, wanting to doll out judgement and consequence but reluctantly holding it back. Mercy is doing the opposite of what's expected. And that's what makes the Gospel so wonderful.

MERCY IN THE GOSPEL

¹ Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible under "Mercy"

The story of the gospel is rich with mercy. We are a part of a human race that rebelled against God (Genesis 3; romans 5:12-19) and now we are all sinners destined for hell (Romans 6:23). We were dead in our sin and unable to do anything about it (Ephesians 2:1). We were stuck on a way path to eternal destruction. It was completely righteous for God to send us all to hell. But, that's not the whole story, and that's not how things will end. Even though all of humanity deserved punishment and judgement, God showed us mercy. While we were enemies of God, the Father sent his Son, Jesus, to come to earth and take on a fully human-fully God form. Why? So he could do what we could not, and provide a way for humans to be saved. He walked this earth perfectly, never sinning once (Hebrews 9:11-28). He willingly died a gruesome death as the perfect sacrifice, taking on the wrath of God that we deserved (Mark 15:21-41; 1 John 4:9-10). Then, in a glorious display of power, he was resurrected, brought back to life (Mark 16:1-8). This work makes it possible for us to escape the eternal punishment and spend eternity in the rich grace of God's presence in heaven for eternity, praising and worshiping our great and wonderful God. This is what mercy looks like. Rather than giving us what we all deserved, God went out of his way to show great mercy and give us what was unexpected...salvation.

LIVING IT OUT

Do we think about the Gospel often enough? Do we recognize the kind of mercy that God has shown? Do we meditate on it? Does it change us? Does it cause us to worship our wonderful God?

If you're listening to this message, and you're hearing this for the first time, this is a true story. Anyone who is without the hope of Jesus is doomed. You are awaiting judgement that's beyond comprehension. But, Jesus came so that you could confess your sins, turn away from them, and turn to Jesus as your king. He is the only way to be saved from the eternal punishment that is coming. You can have your punishment removed! Instead of a meaningless life ending in eternal punishment, you can have hope-filled life ending in eternal joy with Jesus. He calls you to come and give your life to him...because, this is why we were created, to live as children of the merciful King to glorify him and love those around us. It's not easy to do this, especially the people who are hard to love. But, when we know the mercy of God, it's much easier to do so.

And if you're a believer who's heard this message a thousand times over, try and hear it like it's the first time. Just take a moment and realize the hopeless that you had in your sins. You were dead! But, God in the most wonderful display of mercy worked through Jesus for you. Don't take it for granted, don't get comfortable with it, don't let it become white noise. This is the anthem of our lives! Hallelujah! This should be changing us into the kind of people who are ready to show mercy, just like the Father has shown us mercy.

When people sin against us and our first instinct is to demand justice, and to have them suffer...are we ready to show mercy? Are we ready to offer forgiveness? Will we go out of our way to give them the unexpected response to their sin against us?

When we're serving with others in ministry, and there's disagreement, friction, frustration, or annoyance...are we willing to love them? Can we slow down and recognize opportunities to be merciful to the people we serve with?

As a part of the church, the body of Christ. Do we regularly look around and search for opportunities to do merciful things to those who are in need. Are we are we eager to go out of our way to put the mercy of Jesus on display to our brothers and sisters?

In our day-to-day lives, many of us have opportunities to interact with unbelievers. Are we known by our love, infused with mercy? Does our mercy stand out? Can the world look at us, see us, and wonder why we seem to have an extra capacity for mercy? Do we look on them with compassion knowing that without Jesus they are headed for an eternal suffering that we cannot comprehend? Are we working and laboring to make connections and opportunities to share the mercy of the Gospel with them?

Today's culture is increasingly becoming one of regular complaining, open critique, loud condemnation and brutal attacks. But that's now how we're called to be. Jesus says that we are to be like our father, full of mercy. Let's be merciful as our father is merciful.