

Seeing Mercy in Christian Doctrine-Dr. Philip Ryken

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By Dr. Philip Ryken

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As we begin this evening, I'm going to take just a moment and introduce our speakers, but in one sense they really need to be introduced together because we have a great privilege of seeing two men reunited who labored together at Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia for 15 years and Dr. Phil Ryken was, of course, the lead pastor there, teaching pastor for many of those years following Dr. Boice who, as I mentioned earlier, helped to get this conference started some 17 years ago, and it's a great joy to have open to us the theology and practice of mercy ministry from two men who have not only done it and study it themselves, but these are men who have done it together and one of the most powerful parts of Dr. Apple's book is the testimony of how God changed a whole congregation. He didn't just change one person here or there but he changed the whole congregation and it's very exciting to read that and I'm sure that we're going to hear some about that this evening.

So more on Dr. Apple in a little bit, but Dr. Ryken, as you know, is President of Wheaton College. He has been there for 4+ years now and prior to that he served for 15 years at Tenth Presbyterian. He is the father of five children. His wife, Lisa, is with him and those children range in age from 10 to 21, and so we're grateful for him taking time away from his family to be here with us. In terms of his theological education, after going to Wheaton College himself, went on for his Master of Divinity at Westminster Seminary and then his Doctorate at Oxford studying historical theology. One of the most fascinating things from my perspective is that his father is a professor at Wheaton so he's probably one of the few people in life that ends up getting to be his dad's boss. I know they're in very different departments and so forth, but he can at least pull rank when it comes to Thanksgiving dinner or whatever else.

Dr. Ryken has spoken for us before, most recently probably five or six years ago, when he and Mike Lefebvre spoke here on the doctrine of the Trinity. So we're really grateful to have Dr. Ryken with us as he brings this first session to us, "Seeing Mercy in Christian Doctrine."

Dr. Ryken: Well, I'm so grateful to be here tonight with you for a lot of reasons. First of all, the weather is not so great out there so I commend you for making your way here this evening for the worship of God. I was surprised, I have to say, to see a motorcycle out there, so whoever you are, special congratulations to you. That's going the extra mile, for

sure. Also, anytime somebody invites you to come back to a place where you spoke before, you know, that's a special blessing so I'm grateful for that. And to have an excuse to spend some time with my friend, David Appel, which we don't get to do as often as we would like to do is another great privilege. So all of those things are great, but maybe even more than any of those things, just the fact that this is a Reformation conference on mercy ministry, I just think is amazing and exciting, I'll say. You know, a lot of times if you're thinking about the Reformation and Reformation theology, you're thinking about the doctrine of justification by faith, or you're thinking about something like Soli Deo Gloria and, I mean, all of that is great too, but to have something as practically minded as this conference and hopefully in a way that's encouraging to people that are engaged in mercy ministry in the city of Indianapolis, and we've already heard a couple of testimonies of what God is doing here, just to me it's a very exciting opportunity, and also very much in keeping, as you'll see as I go on this evening, in the theology and history of the Reformation as it comes out of the theology and history of God's work in Scripture.

There's another reason I'm always grateful for an opportunity like this one and it's because my life is marked a little bit by a missed opportunity to be a servant of mercy. Around the time that I was graduating from college and getting ready to go to seminary, one of the elders in my church said that he wanted to speak with me and he caught me then after a worship service not long after that, and he really surprised me by saying that I had been nominated by our congregation to serve as a deacon. I was really surprised by that. For one thing, I was only 21 years old and so I was youthful and I don't know that my life had demonstrated really a lot of gifting in the area of mercy ministry, but because we were leaving Wheaton and heading out to Philadelphia for seminary, I just knew right away this is not an opportunity that I'm going to have; it's just not something I'm going to be able to explore at all, and in the providence of God, that hasn't been my calling. I've been called to be an elder in the church, I've been called to teach and preach the Gospel, but I always still have that little sense of regret that there was an opportunity that I couldn't take advantage of, and so I've had a different kind of role, not so much somebody who is on the front lines of practicing mercy ministry but moreso somebody who hopefully is an encourager and a cheerleader and somebody who can point to the Scriptures to say why this kind of ministry is important in the life of the church, and why it's important for all of us as followers of Jesus Christ to be engaged in showing mercy.

So this conference gives me one of those opportunities to be a cheerleader for those of you who have had a kind of privilege that I haven't had in my own life, and so those are some of the reasons why it's such a huge privilege to be here this evening and speak with you about seeing mercy in Christian doctrine. I'm probably stealing a line from David Apple but as we were visiting before this in our time of prayer before coming out here, he just remarked that what we're going to give you over the next 24 hours, I guess it's less than that, 18 hours, we're going to give you the why and the how, and I'll do a little bit more of the why but it'll have a little bit of how in there, and David is going to give mostly the how but it'll probably have a little bit of the why in there as well. But we want to ground our practice of mercy in a theology of mercy and so I want to speak with you this evening about the place of mercy in the great doctrines of the Christian faith, and

maybe more specifically, in what for many of us we would say is our own Reformed theology, the theology of the Reformation.

Now, to me it's a little bit strange to say but I think it's true, that not everyone sees that connection. It's not obvious to everyone. I think it's fair to say there are some theologians who underestimate how important the demonstration of mercy is to the credibility of the Gospel and it may be the case that there are some people who are active in mercy ministry who haven't gone very deep in their theology. They have an instinct that they need to show mercy but they haven't really immersed themselves in the theology of the Bible so that they understand in the deepest way why it is that God calls us to show mercy.

We had a little example of this in Philadelphia, and David will remember what I'm talking about. There was a team of sociologists that came to visit us at Tenth Presbyterian Church and they were doing very good work. They were doing a survey of churches around the city of Philadelphia that were very active in demonstrating mercy to the city; they were very involved in practical ministry on the streets of Philadelphia and Tenth Presbyterian Church was one of the congregations, and it was a wide variety of kinds of churches, but we were featured in this study, and before their research went to publication, they gave us a chance to read it and see if we had any comments on it. Their work was very well done and I think we only had a quibble with one sentence and it was actually only a quibble with one word in that sentence, and I said, "There's just one word here I just think I cannot agree with, and I think on reflection you might agree with me to disagree with yourself." Here's what they said, "Tenth is," something like this, "Tenth is deeply committed to teaching and preaching biblical doctrine, however, it also has a heart for ministry." And I said, "That word 'however' is just, to me, the wrong word, and if you could just take that word out and change it to 'therefore,' I'd just like that sentence a lot better. Tenth is deeply committed to teaching and preaching biblical doctrine, therefore, it has a heart for ministry." And certainly that's what we want to see in our churches, that this connection between the teaching of Scripture and the life of mercy is deeply demonstrated.

I believe that far from being hindered by theology, the ministry of mercy is fueled by theology properly understood, and in saying this, I draw a lot of courage and take a lot of good examples from Calvin's Geneva. Now, just think for a moment: what are the images that come to your mind when you hear the Reformation? What's the first thing that comes into your mind? What do you see in your mind? Well, probably Martin Luther standing at the door of the Wittenberg Church, probably a hammer in his hand, putting his 95 theses on the door. If you were able to read Latin, you would see that many of those theses had to do with the care of the poor and how the Church was abusing the needs of the poor in the way that it was carrying out its work in the world.

What do you think of when you think of John Calvin? I think of him probably in his study with a lot of books, maybe standing up in the great pulpit of St. Peter's Church in Geneva, but actually if you look at the influence of Calvin's ministry in Geneva, you

would readily see that he was somebody that was out and about in the community on the streets of Geneva and very concerned with what was happening in his city.

Prior to the Reformation, Geneva was infamous for immorality. What were its common vices? Drunkenness. Prostitution. Gambling. Disorderly conduct. I mean, the city was known for all of these kinds of things. On occasion, Genevans had been known to run naked through the streets singing vulgar songs. Unfair, unjust business practices were common. Here's the way one historian just gives us a little sense of Geneva and I'm quoting here,

"Like most middling cities of the 16th century, Geneva's physical space was small. Its inhabitants rubbed shoulders daily in social interactions and commerce. Such was the age it was recounted that when the humanist Erasmus passed through the squares, he would cover his nose with a cloth on account of the stench. In narrow streets, churches, marketplace and taverns, friends and enemies were in constant contact. Nothing of our modern sense of privacy. Rumor and gossip were the daily fare of social discourse. Violence was a common means of conflict resolution. All across Europe rulers and common people worried about what to do with the youth, in particular, young men, the poor and foreigners. Fear of disease, the threat of fire from lightning was constant. Most diseases were thought to be constant, making the close proximity of people all the more a source of fear."

This gives you a little glimpse of what it was like to live in a city in the 16th century.

Now, when the Reformation came to Geneva in the early years of the Reformation as it came to one city and then another city in Switzerland and Germany and other places, the city's council, what was called the Council of 200, they wanted to see progress in their city and so they passed a series of civic ordinances that were designed to promote the Protestant religion and also to restrain public indecency. Now what do you think they discovered when they passed those laws? They quickly discovered that laws alone make relatively little difference, what was really needed was a change of heart. There would be no social transformation without biblical proclamation, and so the council decided to do something you can hardly imagine a city council doing today, they wanted to really change the fabric of their city so what did they do? They hired a theologian, John Calvin. They said, "That's what we need in this city of Geneva, we need somebody to teach us sound theology," and that's how Calvin reformed Geneva, simply by preaching the Bible, teaching the great doctrines of the Christian faith verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, Calvin often preaching five, six, seven times a week, preaching what some people like to call Calvinism, if you want to call it that, but it was really the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners, teaching as the Apostle Paul did, the whole counsel of God.

And what was the result? People came to faith in Christ. They grew in grace. And because of that, the whole urban environment was transformed by the practical

application of Gospel mercy. Taverns were closed, reducing alcoholism. Sewers were cleaned, helping to eradicate illness. Refugees that were streaming to Geneva from all over Europe were offered Christian hospitality. Let me just give you one fact about Calvin's Geneva, which I think is absolutely amazing: within a very short period of time, less than a decade, a city of 10,000 welcomed 10,000 refugees from France and from other places. I don't care how big your community is, you can just imagine what it would take to double that community. You know, there are seven people that live at my house, what would it be like if all of a sudden we had 14 people living at our house? You know, it's just amazing what Calvin's Geneva did in welcoming the stranger so that people would be given an opportunity to make progress in life, and just imagine how you'd have to be organized as a congregation to care for those kinds of needs.

Calvin's community appointed deacons who would have the responsibility of providing leadership in caring for the poor. They developed a job program in the clothing industry. Schools were opened, not just for boys as was common in that era, but also for girls. One visitor from another place said that under the teaching of sound doctrine with its faithful application in practical mercy, the city of Geneva had become "the wonderful miracle of the whole world." That is what theology can do when it is put into practice in the life of the church.

If you want to get a little flavor of how Calvin preached on the importance of mercy, listen to this from one of his sermons on the book of Deuteronomy.

"The one who shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he shall cry himself and God will not hear. But on the contrary, if we are compassionate and having heard of the destitution of the poor are moved to help them, God also will bestow pity and have compassion on us to rescue us in our time of need. God ordained that we should have an open hand to the poor who dwell among us since the Lord gives us the means, which we must not seek some excuse because we will remain guilty if we have not used the occasion that was offered to us."

There's a wonderful balance there between a word of warning but also an opportunity of blessing when it comes to the care for the poor. That's Calvinism. That's what Calvinism preaches. Now I don't know about you, but I would love to see this wonderful miracle, as people called it, repeated in every community in every city where there is a Gospel preaching church. And it's encouraging just even how this conference is organized. I commend you that we would have people giving testimonies about what God is doing in mercy ministry in the city of Indianapolis and give people an opportunity to go to the tables, learn more about that. This is not a conference where you need to go away with kind of a vague feeling of guilt about something you're not doing. We're going to give you an opportunity to do something if there's something new that God may be calling you to do and there's an opportunity for that in this conference.

So how will this happen in our lives, that we will be more actively engaged in caring for the needs of the poor? I think it will come from understanding the Scriptures and what the

Scriptures teach. So what exactly does our theology say about mercy ministry, and I want to answer that question pretty rapidly in about a dozen different ways. This isn't a three point message. This is more like a 12 point message or something like that, but actually you don't have to worry about getting all of those points. I mean, if you want to take notes and do that sort of thing, super and maybe there will be some things to write down, but I'm actually only going to make one point but I'm not going to make that point until the end, and I think when I get to that point...so this isn't what they tell you in speech class. You know, in speech class they tell you, "Tell them what you're going to tell them and then tell them and then tell them what you told them." I'm going to tell you and then I'm going to tell you what I told you and then I'll just sit down at the end. I have to say that our brother here that's doing the signing is a little worried tonight because I told him that I just wanted to go through all of the doctrines in Scripture that relate to mercy ministry and he said, "Well, that means we're going to be here all night." We won't be here all night. I'm going to do it pretty rapidly.

Usually when people talk about the theology of mercy ministry, they spend a lot of time talking about the incarnation, so let me just mention that briefly. I'm not going to dwell there tonight but I certainly could. Effective mercy ministry is always incarnational; it meets people where they are; it enters into their life situation to do life with them and when we do that, we are simply imitating the life of the Son of God Incarnate who came down from heaven's throne to be born in a Bethlehem stable and enter into the life situation of a family that was on the run that would soon become refugees that were in very limited financial circumstances, and more than all of that, Jesus was simply taking on the flesh of our humanity so that he could have mercy on our lost and fallen race. That's the incarnation and, of course, that has huge implications for how we would do ministry ourselves, entering into people's situation. I'm sure in various ways, Dr. Apple is going to touch on ways that we can do that in a practical way but everywhere you go in the world in situations of the most extreme poverty, you will see believers in Jesus Christ not only caring for people in that community but entering into that situation, living in those communities. I see just a simple example of that in my own community of Wheaton, Illinois, which is, you know, it's a wealthy suburb, it's a very wealthy county. It also happens to be one of the most rapidly changing counties in the entire country in terms of immigrant populations and I have graduates from Wheaton College that are making a decision towards the end of their time in college or afterwards to move into apartment complexes that are mainly comprised of immigrant families so that they can do ministry and do life and share God's love in that kind of context.

That's incarnational and we can talk about that, I could go on about that, but I actually want to start way farther back than the doctrine of the incarnation, I want to start with the doctrine of God. Just think of all of the divine attributes that compel us to show mercy. There is mercy itself, that's a divine attribute. God is, the Scripture says, rich in mercy. He loves mercy. I think of the kinds of things that God says about himself when he reveals himself to Moses. His compassion, his kindness, that he's slow to anger, these are the things that we learn about the character of God from the testimony of Scripture.

Here's just another example from the book of Jonah, just a verse I noticed today in Amos, Obadiah, Jonah. I'll get there. Well, that reference is not the right reference. Jonah 3:2 is, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." That obviously is not the right reference, although even that was done in mercy. Maybe somebody can show me, what's a verse in Jonah that's on mercy? 4:2? Yes, 4:2, that's what it is. What does Jonah say about God? "I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love." This is the character of God. Jonah knew that because he had read Exodus and read Psalms and other places in the Scriptures where this kind of testimony is given.

Then there are all of the attributes that relate closely to mercy: compassion, kindness, love, all of those attributes are ones that would teach us to reach out to people and help them with their needs. God is merciful and gracious, the Psalmist says, abounding in steadfast love. This is the kind of God that we meet in the pages of Scripture. It is characteristic of him that he would show mercy to us and, therefore, ought to be characteristic of us as people who follow him, that we would show mercy to others.

What about justice? There is another very important biblical attribute, divine attribute, and showing mercy to the needy often demands defending the righteousness of their cause. I like the comment that was made earlier. Sometimes if you just give somebody a certain kind of help, it's like a band-aid that then loses its stickiness, what is really needed is a heart change but there's another dimension of that, sometimes just giving people help without dealing with the reasons, some of the structural reasons of why they are in a situation of poverty, only has a limited effect. Justice is more comprehensive. It seeks the shalom, the total peace and well-being of the whole situation and that flows from the character of God because God is just.

These virtues are all demanded when we show mercy and they all find their source in the character of God and they're characteristic, let me say, of all three persons of the Trinity. The Father is the God of all comfort. The Son is the God of perfect love. The Spirit is the God of sweet compassion. It's Father, Son and Holy Spirit in all of their fullness that show these attributes. Think, for example, of the fatherly love that we see in the parable of the prodigal son. I mean, he has no claim on his father's mercy at all, and yet the Father runs to him. That's fatherly love. Think of the parable of the lost sheep, as I like to call it, the parable of the found sheep which is really the point of the parable. That's the story of a shepherd, the loving Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who goes out to find the lost sheep. Think of everything the Scripture says about the ministry of the Holy Spirit who helps us in our weakness. Even when we don't know what to pray, the Spirit in his mercy is coming alongside us to help us articulate our prayers.

I'm going to have to stop there with the attributes of God but we could go on a long time talking about all of the attributes of God that would compel us to show mercy. Mercy ministry is not just an imitation of the incarnation but it is also more deeply a reflection of being in the nature of the Triune God. I love this quotation from Ulrich Bach which David pointed to me many years ago and it's been a reference point for me, "Tell me how you talk about God and I will tell you what your mercy ministry is like, or what

handicapped people can expect from you, or whether you expect anything from them." Now that's a marvelous statement. It's saying how you talk about God and who you think God is, is going to have these practical implications for people who are in need in your community. I absolutely see this at college church in Wheaton where we worship these days, because there's a ministry there to children with disabilities and to their families. There are 100 families in the church who have children with special needs and it's a comprehensive ministry. It's during the week as well as on Sunday and it's marvelous, every year when the Star, that's the name of the ministry, when they participate in our public worship and to see somebody, for example, who has certain difficulties with speech reciting Scripture and talking about how we have this treasure in jars of clay. I mean, it's going to come to you in a powerful way that it wouldn't otherwise. Or I think of the time that the Star's ministry sent a team of 15 sort of high school age young people with special needs to do a mission trip to Paris and just the tremendous response that they had. They touched people's lives in a way no other mission team with any other set of gifts could've touched them.

I remember hearing somebody make a kind of critical comment about the church, about how...obviously somebody that didn't really know the ministry of the church very well, just kind of saying, "Yeah, no, that church is all about, you know, just teaching doctrine but what is the real impact of that?" Well, I'll tell you what the impact of it is: these young people are liberated to use their gifts in all of their fullness in ways that bring people to faith in Christ. I don't know how you could see any better fruit of the proclamation of who God is than to see that kind of work flourishing in the life of the church. Tell me how you talk about God and I will tell you what your mercy ministry is like, or what handicapped people can expect from you, or whether you expect anything from them.

How about the doctrine of creation? There's another great bedrock doctrine of the Christian faith. The one true God made the entire universe out of nothing. Here is the part of our theology that teaches us the goodness of creation that shows us the way that things are supposed to be, which then when we see that things aren't the way that they're supposed to be, drives us to seek the well-being and restoration of broken people in a broken world.

The doctrine of creation is also the doctrine that declares the dignity of the people God made in his image and that dignity, when we recognize it in the lives of others, is something that has a claim on us, it has a claim on our mercy. God "created man in his own image," the Scripture says, "in the image of God he created him, male and female, he created them." It's not just male and female, male and female is a way of saying it's the whole human race and that means old and young he created them, born and unborn, able and disabled, rich and poor, uptown and downtown, from the right side of the tracks from the wrong side of the tracks, my color and your color. Each of us is made in the image of a merciful God and if you don't have that doctrine in your theology and if that doctrine doesn't have an influence in your theology, you will always be dividing people into two groups: a people who deserve your mercy and a people who kind of don't.

I was reminded of this from a letter from our friend, John Freeman. John Freeman has a dynamic ministry to people who are sexually broken, Harvest USA, and I remember reading a letter from John in which he was talking about some of the experiences that he had that really compelled him to be involved in mercy ministry and he talked about the time he met a homeless man right outside the corner grocery store and he was on his way into the store and the man said to him, "Can you spare a quarter, mister?" And Freeman ignored him, turned him down or whatever, but the man was still there when he came back out and he had the same question, "Can you spare a quarter, mister?" And Freeman hesitated for just a moment and the man saw an opportunity and he said, "Son, come a little closer." And so Freeman took a step closer and now he was close enough that he could smell the stench of sweat and dirt and alcohol and suddenly the man startled Freeman by reaching his hand out and putting his hand on his shoulder and he said, "Son, I haven't always been out here on the streets, you know. I was somebody once."

Now that statement had a profound influence on Freeman, but as he reflected on it later, he came to learn that actually what the man said was not true and our Reformed theology tells us that it was not true. There is no such thing as somebody who was somebody and no longer is. That man is somebody. That's the real point and that's the real point of saying that we are all created in the image of our God. When I see myself in God's image as an image-bearer of Almighty God, I know in a deep way that I am called to be like him in showing mercy and when I also recognize the image of God in you, then I will know that I am supposed to give to you the same mercy that I have received from this same God.

Now there is something to really stop and remember anytime you're in a situation where there is a human being that you are tempted to pull back from rather than to lean in towards. Now, I don't know who the person is that you're tempted to pull back from, maybe it's somebody that wears a tie and wears a suit and is Caucasian. That might be the person for you. Maybe it's a person that has body piercings in strange places or hair that probably is not the color that they came out of their mother's womb with. I don't know who that person is or what that person would look like, the person that you would be tempted to pull back from, but when you have a thought, "Now here is somebody made in the image of God. Now here is somebody that God has a purpose for, even if that purpose is not yet fully realized." That is now a person that you may actually be compelled to embrace and I actually think we make progress in our own sanctification when we have the impulse to pull away and immediately instead of pulling away, we take a deliberate step forward and say, "Even if this is uncomfortable for me, I want to move towards this relationship and not away from it." That is what it really means to recognize that every human being is made in the image of God.

Maybe this explains this principle of the image of God, explains why Calvin said that neglecting the poor is a kind of sacrilege. You see, Calvin believed that caring for the poor was as sacred as the worship of God; that worship and charity were inseparable, these two duties. I think he believed this in part because he knew that the people we are serving are made in the image of God and, therefore, in serving them we are giving honor to God, but in not serving them we are dishonoring God. That's why not caring for the

poor would be sacrilege. This doctrine of the image of God is yet another doctrine that when we understand it in its fullness and when we grow in our understanding of that doctrine, it compels us to show mercy for people in need.

Let me give you another doctrine. I don't even know how many we're up to, four, five? I mean, I said it was going to be about a dozen but let me just remind you, you don't have to take it all in, just get the main point at the end. Just let it sort of wash over you, the depth of biblical teaching about mercy.

Here is the doctrine that makes mercy necessary and that's the doctrine of sin. If all you had was the doctrine of creation and the creation itself, there wouldn't be a need for mercy, but let sin into the world and now you really need it. How could we ever begin to understand the mercy needs of all the broken people around us unless we had a healthy grasp of humanity's total depravity? And let me also say this: how could we ever address our own unwillingness at times to show mercy unless we recognized that we were part of the problem?

You know, in recent days I've been struck by some of the brokenness in the world around us, real problems in the world that are very distressing. Ferguson, Missouri, what that shows about broken race relations in the United States not just in that community but in so many communities around our country. What's happening in northern Iraq and the beheading of Christians, the destruction of entire villages. I mean, do you know what is happening? Has this crossed your radar screen in the news? It is estimated that 800,000 people of one form of Christian conviction or another are facing homelessness in northern Iraq with the approach of winter. In our own community just in Chicagoland, just last week there was an attack on a synagogue in Lombard, which is one of the next towns over from Wheaton. I happen to have a personal friendship with the rabbi of that synagogue. Hateful things put on the door of their synagogue by a man who had stashes of ammunition in his house. Very distressing for that community.

It's all part of the brokenness of a fallen world and the doctrine of sin has tremendous explanatory power to help us understand these things. I remember seeing an interview with the pastor after the school shooting at Virginia Tech University and he just had a very simple statement that put everything in perspective. As Christians we believe that there is evil in the world and that evil comes from sinful hearts, including our own sinful hearts, and it just explains why people end up homeless or in prison. It explains why inner city kids can graduate from high school, if they do graduate, without being able to read or write. It explains why in the city of Chicago there will surely be more than 400 homicides by the end of the year. It also explains this, it explains why when I am walking to church on a Sunday morning, I will often encounter another family also walking to church, a family with two sons of about the same age. One of those sons is as absolutely as gifted as an eighth grade boy can be. I know that because he's my son's classmate. He can sing, he can act, he gets straight A's. I mean, just the kind of son that a family would hope to have with all of these gifts. They have another son who can hardly communicate at all, who is in a mechanized wheelchair, who when he sits with the family will sometimes utter in worship, utter strange groans that no one can really understand. There

is a profound brokenness that has to do with his physical disabilities that will not be made right until the coming of Christ. How do you make sense of that, that in one family such an absolute contrast and then both the joys and the sorrows that those parents walk through. It's all part of being in this fallen world into which sin has made an entry.

It is often the case that people who are poor and broken are suffering the consequences of their own sins. Is there room in your theology also to recognize that sometimes they are suffering that poverty and brokenness because of the sins of others?

I love this wonderful poem I read by Jane Kenyon, a noted American poet. Her poem "Man Sleeping," and Kenyon remembers a snow day in our nation's capital when she was out sightseeing and an image from that day that she just can't get out of her mind, this is some time later, she's reflecting on that and she asks the question, "Why do I think of the man asleep on the grassy bank outside the Sackler Museum in Washington?" That's the image she couldn't get out of her mind and then she describes the man she saw, "Lying on every he owned, belly down, his head twisted awkwardly to the right, mouth open in abandon." To Kenyon, this man "looked like a child who has fallen asleep still dressed on the top of the covers, or," she said, drawing an image from Scripture, "like Abel, broken, at his brother's feet." Now that is a profound poem. It puts Kenyon in the place of Cain who is her brother's keeper, and she is reflecting on this man, this homeless man in this broken condition. "I have a responsibility for that because he is broken, perhaps through his own sins but also through what our society has done to him," and she is standing there recognizing that she has a responsibility to take care of her own flesh and blood.

Then here's another reason why people sometimes need mercy in a fallen world, it's simply because they're suffering the natural and inevitable hardships of this world, this creation groaning in frustration. The hurricanes and tsunamis. The diseases and disabilities. Even those trials and tribulations are the ultimate result of sin's corruption and the entrance of death into the world. That's something to think about when you see the reaction to the Ebola virus in our country and how people respond to that; what their fears are; what this tells you about what it means to be in a fallen world.

It is our theology of depravity that explains why mercy is needed, but I'm obviously not going to stop there. Let me tell you about the doctrine of salvation because there's a lot in that doctrine about mercy, why mercy is even possible, because we have a God who is at work in the world to bring redemption specifically through the person and work of Jesus Christ. "Blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," the Scripture says, "according to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through Jesus Christ."

You look at the ministry of Jesus Christ, everything in that teaches you to show mercy. I've commented already on the doctrine of incarnation, his becoming a human being, entering into the flesh and blood of our humanity, but now the same Father who sent Jesus into the world sends us into the world and our ministry of mercy is incarnating his redemptive grace. Just follow the pattern that Jesus has set for you in his ministry, showing mercy with his words. Everything Jesus said whether it was a word of warning

to the proud or a word of comfort to the suffering or a word of instruction to the ignorant, whatever it was, Jesus was offering mercy to anyone who had the ears to listen. Jesus also showed mercy through his actions. Every miracle, every time he gave sight to the blind, mobility to the lame, hearing to the deaf, even life to the dead, it was all mercy to the people whose lives he touched. It's amazing. Just watch Jesus go through the Gospels, he's always leaning in to people in need. He's always touching them, putting his hands on them, helping them and healing them. The whole life of Jesus Christ teaches us to show the mercy of God in word and deed.

Our doctrine of the death of Christ also teaches us the same thing. You want to have a Reformation theology for mercy ministry, it is a theology of the cross, the cross where we find mercy for our own sins, atoning mercy through a perfect sacrifice to the very death, and that merciful cross now sets the agenda for our ministry. Jesus laid his life down, his life for us, we are to lay our lives down for others. God had mercy for us in Christ, now he wants us to show mercy to others. You go through the whole Passion narrative, Jesus is always doing things like putting an ear back on the head of a servant; or forgiving those who were persecuting him; or opening the door to Paradise for somebody who sought forgiveness. It's a demonstration of mercy from beginning to end.

It's not just the cross, it's also the empty tomb. I'm pretty well going to go through every major doctrine here. It's not just crucifixion but it's also resurrection because if all you had was the cross, it would just be half the Gospel, it would just be half of a mercy ministry. Our Reformation theology goes beyond the death of Christ to his life and that's what gives us hope in the hard struggle. And you folks that are in mercy ministry, you know how hard it is, you know how many times you have that experience where you, "Ah, I don't really know if I have the energy and the strength for this," and then by the time you get home, you're glad that you were there and you're glad with what God enabled you to do, but you're not always just full of energy to do it. It's difficult. It's costly. But that same power by which Jesus raised us from the dead is now at work in us. It's at work in us to make us more merciful and it's also at work in others, including all of those hopeless cases that you meet.

Anybody that's been in ministry, there are people you know and it's hard to imagine how that person would ever come to Christ. I mean, I know the Gospel is powerful but is it powerful enough for that? Just as one example of this, I was talking to a friend who's in pastoral ministry and his son had gone off to college, somewhat distant from the Lord, wasn't sure where he was spiritually. Dramatic things happened in his life in his first year of college. He came back home by spring break and he wanted to give his whole summer to ministry in a cross-cultural setting. His little sister said, "Wow, I knew the Gospel was powerful, I didn't know it was that powerful." And she was just seeing the transformation that came in the life of her brother.

That's just a simple example. People are caught up in broken marriages, they're addicted to pornography, they have committed crimes, misdemeanors, felonies even. The more you're involved with people in need, the more of that brokenness you will see. How will such people receive mercy in a life-transforming way? Only by the power of the empty

tomb. That's how and that is as much a mercy to us as the bleeding cross. The whole Gospel of the cross and the empty tomb is our motivation for ministry.

I don't even want to stop with the resurrection. I want to go on to the ascension. The risen Christ is also the ascended Christ. He's now at the right hand of God. He has power and authority over all things in heaven and on earth. He is interceding for us so that we would receive mercy. So don't just stop at the cross and don't just stop at the empty tomb, go on to the throne of heaven where a merciful Savior reigns in glory and sends out his Spirit. That Spirit is poured out on us with gifts so that we can give people mercy in word and deed. It's the whole saving work of Christ that should find expression in our own servant ministry and this, of course, is the point of Philippians 2, that story that starts the great parable of redemption that starts up in heaven with the glory of God and the Son of God descends, he becomes a man, he suffers to the death, even death on a cross, and therefore the Father raises him up and you have the whole story of redemption laid out for you, and what is the point of Paul in saying all of that? It's actually just to give a sermon illustration, his point is to show mercy, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others the same way that Jesus did." That whole story of redemption is a story of mercy.

Can I just ask you tonight: are you living by that principle that the life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ is now to be worked out in the way that you put others ahead of yourself? Is your life driven by showing mercy to people in need? Or, honestly, is it a little more influenced or maybe even dominated by your own ambitions? By your own pleasures? By your own comforts? See again the mercy that you have been given in the servant life and sacrificial death and saving resurrection of Jesus Christ. You know, Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy," but I think you could actually flip the logic of that around and reverse the statement and say, "Blessed are those who have been shown mercy, for they will be merciful." And one of the best ways to test our grasp of God's mercy is to see how we treat other sinners. How do you treat whatever person at work or at home or maybe in the church, is the most difficult to live with.

We'll be talking a little bit more about that tomorrow morning and I just need to confess I'm the kind of preacher that often crosses over into meddling. Do you know the difference between preaching and meddling? Preaching, you know, that's the kind of thing, "Yeah, you know, that's great. Praise the Lord for that." Meddling is when it gets a little too uncomfortable and close to home. We're going to do a little bit of meddling, I think, between tonight and tomorrow morning. Honestly, when I have to deal with difficult people, usually my response is to get a little bit angry at them and wonder, "Now why can't they get their act together? You know, the way I have my act together?" It's not the response of someone who knows that the bondage of sin can only be broken through the mercy of the cross.

The doctrine of God. The doctrine of creation. The doctrine of humanity. The doctrine of sin. The doctrine of the incarnation. The doctrine of the atonement. The doctrine of the resurrection. The doctrine of the ascension. Oh, can I just say really briefly all the

doctrines of the benefits of salvation, not just the person and work of Jesus Christ but now all of the blessings that come to us because of that, all of these great doctrines that were rediscovered in the Reformation like the doctrine of election. Now there's a doctrine of the Reformation, for sure, and what does it tell us about showing mercy? It tells us that no one is ever saved by his or her own merits but only by the sovereign mercy of God. The Scripture says he'll have mercy on whom he has mercy. Wow, that should humble our pride. That should teach us to love people who seem to be undeserving just like us.

You know, it's strange but I've observed this, what do you think, I've observed that some Christians are Calvinists when they deal with their own sins, but they tend to be Arminians when they're thinking of the sins of others. I mean, the only solution for you surely in all of your depravity is divine grace, but somehow you still expect other people to take responsibility for their own sins to the point where they would save themselves. That's not right. The same God that reaches out to us in mercy will teach us not to be judgmental or proud but to become agents of undeserved mercy.

What about the doctrine of justification, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone? Could I just call it justification by mercy alone? That we're not saved by our own works and our own righteousness but by God's mercy covered with the blood of Jesus Christ. That's the hope that we offer to all of those messed-up, tired-out, broken-down people that we meet in ministry, or at least that you will meet in ministry if you're engaged in mercy ministry. There's hope for people who don't measure up. It's hope in Jesus because of his justifying mercy.

What about adoption? There's another great doctrine, the doctrine that teaches us that we are the children of God. We were singing about it actually in the song earlier, how God lifts us up from the dust-heap and seats us with the princes of the peoples. That's our identity because if God is our Father and we're adopted into his family and he's a King, that makes us all Princes and Princesses. This is the doctrine of adoption and if you are in that kind of family, you want to live up to the family likeness. You want to embrace the family name and tradition. And if there is one thing you know about the head of your household, he is the Father of the fatherless and the protector of widows, and when you know this, there will be a longing in your heart for all of the lost children to come home to your Father's house and so in mercy you go to them with words and deeds of love. You hand them their adoption papers so that they may become part of the family.

Oh, I wish I had enough time to speak with you about the doctrine of sanctification, how God changes you from the inside out. The doctrine of perseverance which teaches you that mercy never gives up but keeps on keeping on. Or the doctrine of glorification which shows you how amazingly transformed people become when God finishes the mercy that he starts. Or what about the great doctrines of the church? We don't have to show mercy all on our own; there's a whole community of people that have gifts, varied gifts, together as one body. We are part of this large cooperative effort to show mercy. There is a very important doctrine, the doctrine of the church for mercy ministry and the communion of the saints which teaches we are united in mercy to everyone else who is united to Christ.

Then last of all, the call of mercy comes to us in our theology of the final judgment, for what is it that Jesus will say on the last of all days when every person who has ever lived is poised between heaven and hell? This is what he will say to everyone who does mercy, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Why? "Because I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it for me." This is the standard on the day of judgment. Mercy is the standard.

So here's what I've been telling you, what I hope you will not forget: it is not this part or that part of our theology that calls us to ministry, it is the whole thing, it is the whole doctrine of Scripture, all of the theology of the Reformation, everything in Scripture is compelling us to show mercy. It is taught in every part of the Scriptures from creation to the final judgment and this is why by the grace of God we are compelled to show the mercy of the Son in the name of the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.