

Mercy

Opening Hymn: #160—"Entirely Thine"

Prov. 28:13 He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines mercy as "kindness in excess of what may be expected or demanded by fairness; forbearance and compassion." "Kindness" is Strong's definition for two Hebrew words usually translated mercy. He defines the Hebrew word used in Proverbs and the usual Greek words in the New Testament as "compassion."

Mercy and God

Ex. 34:6,7 And The Lord passed by before Moses and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

The sentiment of these words in Exodus thrilled the translator Rotherham. In a footnote to these verses he says: "This most gracious proclamation by God of His name and character is . . . worthy to be described as the refrain of the Bible. The devout reader cannot fail to be delighted with reminders of this fundamental revelation which are scattered throughout the Old Testament. Although this paragraph in full may not occur anywhere else, snatches of it abound."

It is only because of God's mercy that you and I are here today.

Rom. 11:30-32 For as ye [Gentiles] in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their [Israel's] unbelief: even so have these also now not believed that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy. For God had concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.

Paul says we have obtained mercy, meaning "kindness in excess of what may be expected or demanded by fairness; forbearance and compassion." God was under no obligation to extend any special opportunity to us. After Adam and Eve disobeyed, they could have died and that would have been the end of it. There would not have to be any provision under God's justice to change the sentence. There need not be any resurrection of the dead. And certainly a change of nature from human to heavenly need not be granted to anyone.

Paul in the Romans scripture also teaches us that the unbelief of God's original "Chosen People" does not mean they are being consigned to some special punishment, nor are they everlastingly "lost." In spite of their unbelief, God will have mercy on them all.

We know that without God's mercy, we are nothing. We could never save ourselves. We have done nothing whatsoever to deserve favorable treatment from God. "Grace" is another word that is sometimes used to describe what we have received from God. Grace means "unmerited favor."

How Do We Receive God's Grace?

Although we do not merit God's favor, according to our theme scripture in Proverbs, “whoso confesseth [his sins] shall have mercy.” A recurring theme in the scriptures is that confession of sin is absolutely required before God can bless.

Luke 18:10-14 (NIV) Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

David made mistakes, he acknowledged them, and God forgave him. Even in so serious a matter as his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, David was quick to acknowledge his error. After the prophet Nathan confronts him with the enormity of his sin, we read:

2 Sam. 12:13,14 And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. Howbeit, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.

David's predecessor, Saul, did not have the same attitude. In the 13th chapter of 1st Samuel, Saul waits seven days for Samuel, but when Samuel does not come, he offers the burnt offerings, something he knows he should not do. As soon as he finishes, Samuel appears and asks him what he's doing. After Saul tries to rationalize his behavior, Samuel speaks:

1 Sam. 13:13,14 Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee; for now would the Lord have established thy kingdom upon Israel forever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue.

Saul does NOT confess his sin and he is NOT forgiven. Samuel leaves, and Saul continues on with his life. Cain is another example. Cain becomes so angry with his brother that he kills him. When God asks where Abel is, Cain replies “Am I my brother's keeper?” God passes sentence and Cain responds:

Gen. 4:13 And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. [vs. 16] And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord.

Cain does NOT acknowledge his sin nor does he show remorse. Consequently there is no forgiveness. Even Adam does not acknowledge his sin nor does he show remorse.

Gen. 3:12 And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.

Adam shows no contrition of heart for what he's done. This is a dangerous position for any who expect to maintain a relationship with God since God has made it very clear where he will make his abode:

Isa. 57:15 Thus saith the high and lofty One who inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

We are not surprised that God dwells in a high and holy place. But it is surprising that the God of the universe says he also dwells with those who maintain humility and contrition of heart. We can't avoid sin in our lives. But if we have the right heart attitude as shown by acknowledging our shortcomings and failures, we will receive the cleansing we need:

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We are Christians because we have named the name of Christ. If we have made a consecration to God, we have accepted Christ as our personal savior. But we would never be brought to this position if we did not first confess our sins and acknowledge our need for a redeemer. Those who cannot acknowledge their sinful state cannot accept Christ because they see no reason to do so. [see Reprints p. 2235]

What Happens After We've Obtained Mercy?

Jesus made it abundantly clear that the mercy God grants to us must radiate out toward everyone with whom we come in contact. This is beautifully illustrated in one of the easiest-to-understand parables the Master ever gave:

Matt. 18:21-35 (Goodspeed) Then Peter came to him and said, "Master, how many times am I to forgive my brother when he wrongs me? Seven times over?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times over, I tell you, but seventy-seven times over! For this reason the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king, who resolved to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he set about doing so, a man was brought in who owed him ten million dollars. And as he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all he had, in payment of the debt. So the slave threw himself down before him and implored him, 'Give me time, and I will pay you all of it.' And his master's heart was touched, and he let the slave go and canceled the debt. But when the slave went out he met a fellow-slave of his who owed him twenty dollars, and he caught him by the throat and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow-slave threw himself down before him, and begged him, 'Give me time, and I will pay you.' But he refused and went and had him put in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went to their master and reported the whole matter to him. Then his master called him in and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I canceled all that debt of yours when you entreated me. Ought you not to have taken pity on your fellow-slave, as I did on you?' So his master in his anger handed him over to the jailers until he should pay all he owed him.

We don't need anyone to interpret this parable for us. The one who owes \$10-million represents us. We owe all that we have and can never repay it. It is only through the mercy of God, the great king, that this debt is forgiven. Then we become free. Suppose we now encounter someone who is in our debt, perhaps a person who forgot to thank us for some kindness we extended. How do we react? With

mercy? If this reaction does not come easily, we must force ourselves to react with mercy. Eventually a merciful reaction will come immediately and willingly. But if we repeatedly fail to exercise mercy, then we will forfeit the mercy the Heavenly Father has already extended to us. Consider the point of the parable as given by Jesus:

[vs. 35] That is what my heavenly Father will do to you [hand you over to the jailers until you pay all you owe] if you do not each forgive your brothers from your hearts!

If we willingly forgive another's fault, sin, or shortcoming, we demonstrate our attitude of mercy. We should do this whether or not the other person asks for our forgiveness because it is our heart attitude that is on trial. The other person has his own relationship to God. Whether or not God forgives him will depend on his heart attitude. We must watch our own heart attitude with great diligence so that we receive forgiveness from God for all our trespasses.

Mark 11:25 And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any, that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

Notice that it is necessary for us to show mercy by forgiving a brother even if they don't act contrite or ask for our forgiveness. It doesn't even matter whether our complaint against someone else is justified or not. If we are Christians, we must follow the pattern set by our Master. Of course we are not God and cannot erase another's sin. But by showing mercy we can copy this wonderful characteristic of God.

Consider the Lord's model prayer:

Matt. 6:12 (NEB) Forgive us the wrong we have done, as we have forgiven those who have wronged us.

The King James says "forgive us our debts." Of course the word "debts" is not limited to the financial sense of the word. It is any situation where compassion, kindness, yes mercy, would be the appropriate behavior. If we are unwilling to forgive those who have wronged us, there is no point in asking the great king of the universe to forgive us our iniquities. Remember the servant in the parable? He lost the freedom he had gained when he was unwilling to exercise mercy toward his fellow servant.

When he delivered his sermon on the mount, Jesus uttered a series of what we called the beatitudes. This is one of them:

Matt. 5:7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

The clear implication is that those who are not merciful, who are unwilling to show "kindness in excess of what may be expected or demanded by fairness," will themselves not receive mercy from the Heavenly Father. Then Jesus went on to tell his disciples that they must do even more than just forgive someone who wronged them. They had to try to correct a relationship when they realize they have wronged another person. This is what Jesus says:

Matt. 5:23,24 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift.

The brother has an ill feeling against us because he has been wronged by us. So when we come to God (here termed “bringing a gift to the altar”) and suddenly remember the brother's justified anger because of what we've done, we must immediately do something about it. We should try to correct the problem and heal the wounds. Then we can come to God.

We Must Be Merciful

Make no mistake about it. The forgiveness God has granted to us from our sins is conditional. If we fail to observe the requirements God has laid down, we will lose even that which we have. The king in the parable never told the slave that he had to be merciful toward others since he had received forgiveness from such an immense obligation. It should have been obvious. From the parable, we see someone so blinded that he loses everything. Remember the principle: if you don't forgive your fellow servants, God won't forgive you.

Micah briefly summarizes the three things God requires of us:

Micah 6:8 To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.

Do you love mercy? Think about it. Are you still waiting for your brother or sister to come to you and ask your forgiveness for some wrong committed against you? If you are, then you do not love mercy.

Matt. 23:23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law: judgment, mercy, and faith.

Do you still remember some injustice that has never been corrected by another even while you carefully pay tithes of all you have? If you do, you're like a Pharisee for you have omitted something much more important than a tithe. You have omitted mercy. As bad as it may be to remember another's sins and shortcomings, it is worse to seek revenge or a way to get even. Such a heart attitude will keep anyone from being a part of the bride of Christ.

Rom. 12:17,19-21 (NIV) Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge, I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.” ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The truth is important, but that's not enough to save us.

Prov. 3:3 Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart.

It is mercy AND truth that we should embrace. Do you feel any responsibility at all to go to another to try to ease the tensions he may feel toward you? Do you, sad to say, even let your mind think about ways to get revenge for something done toward you? If so, then perhaps mercy has forsaken you.

James 2:13 (NIV) Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

The concept of forgiveness of others occupied a large part of the teachings of Jesus. He taught that his followers were to overcome evil with good. Whenever evil is committed toward you, welcome it as an

opportunity to overcome it by being merciful. In this way you will be growing into the image of the Heavenly Father.

Closing Hymn: #Appendix K—“Take Time to be Holy”

[First given in Los Angeles, May, 1988. Given at the 1992 Int'l. Convention in Poitiers, France.]

Antonio foolishly agrees as a co-signer to forfeit a pound of his flesh if he fails to repay a loan taken out by a friend. The friend defaults, Antonio can't pay, and the creditor demands payment of his flesh. Near the end of the court proceedings, Antonio's lawyer, Portia, pleads for mercy. This is what she says:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this scepter'd sway.
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings.
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

The Merchant of Venice
Act IV, Scene 1