

## ONE

# Mercy Defined

### *What Is Mercy?*

Perhaps you were the child who didn't heed your mom's warning to stop roughhousing, and broke a window. Your exuberance turned to sorrow, shame, and fear. But when your father got home, he picked you up, wiped away your tears, and said, "I forgive you." Perhaps you were the teenager whose teacher took a personal interest in you, assured you of your potential, and greatly encouraged you. Maybe a neighbor gave you a bicycle that her son or daughter had outgrown, or a stranger gave you tickets to take your son to the game. Maybe your boss gave you a second chance when you failed to close the big deal, or your spouse forgave you for unfaithfulness. Or maybe you have simply been the recipient of a kind word or kind gesture from a stranger.

If you have ever experienced any of the situations above or any other similar experience, you have experienced mercy. Most of us, if not all of us, have experienced mercy, and therefore have an innate understanding of it. But none of us can fathom the depths of mercy we have received. We can

hardly recognize the amount of mercy shown to us daily by our fellow man; so when it comes to God's mercy toward us, we tend to be downright oblivious. The goal of this book is to wake us up and intoxicate our hearts with a new realization of God's great love and mercy.

Lest we try to run before we walk, we will start by considering a simple definition of mercy. Mercy is commonly defined as: (a) forgiveness of the offender by the offended or (b) as compassion given/shown to one who does not necessarily merit such compassion. While these definitions fall woefully short of communicating the depth of what we shall come to understand as mercy, nonetheless, they are a good place to start.

Everyone, even those who profess no particular creed or code, can readily admit that to be human is to be imperfect. Each of us has been mean, rude, or disrespectful to another. Each of us has spread a rumor, lied, or cheated another. And each of these acts has unjustly hurt another.

In addition to the intentional harm that we might inflict on others, we can also unintentionally cause injury through negligence. You might have forgotten the milk because you failed to write it on the shopping list. You might have underbid the job because you failed to double-check your figures. You might have missed your child's recital because you got too caught up in work and lost track of time. Regardless of what you might have intended, in each of these situations your actions caused someone else pain.

What was the result of these intentional or unintentional wrongs? Fortunately, your child didn't run away from home because you missed his or her recital or because you served

toast instead of cereal. Fortunately, your mother didn't disown you for your disrespectfulness. Your friendship survived a "betrayal," and your spouse didn't get even for your lie by hiding your car keys. Instead, each of these people was merciful and forgave you.

The mercy we receive through explicit or silent forgiveness is complemented by the mercy shown to us through the compassion of others. Maybe we were taught by an enthusiastic scout leader or treated by an empathetic nurse. We have walked through gardens planted by generous volunteers and driven through neighborhoods illuminated by Christmas lights. We have received countless birthday wishes, invitations to lunch or dinner, and words of condolence for the loss of a loved one. Every day, we experience a smile, a kind word, or maybe even a complement. Everywhere we turn, we see mercy extended by our friends, family, and even strangers.

Our lives are inundated with the mercy shown to us by others. And yet this mercy is but a faint reflection of the infinite, overwhelming mercy that we will soon realize comes from God.

### *Infinitely Inequitable Mercy*

The depth of mercy extended in each situation is revealed by the relationship between the giver and receiver and by the nature of a merciful act. Conversing with and giving money to a beggar is more merciful than a lunch purchased for a good friend because nothing is *owed* to the beggar; there is no chance of repayment and it is uncomfortable to stoop down and talk to someone whose plight makes us uneasy. Greater

mercy is shown by a mother who mows the grass when her son forgets to on prom weekend than the son who mows it as his regular chore. It's easier for the son to mow the grass, and his act is more an act of justice than mercy because of everything he receives from his mother.

Now let us try to imagine the mercy of God. It is merciful for you to forgive a friend who gossips about you or to give your coat to a homeless man. It is even more merciful to forgive an unfaithful spouse or to devote every Friday night working in a homeless shelter. It is heroically merciful to forgive someone who has murdered your child or to sell everything you have and work as a missionary. But God has not given us a coat, some food, or forty years of service. God has given us life, the earth, our families and friends, and the potential for eternal joy in Heaven.

God does not merely offer to forgive us for all the times we ignore him, take his name in vain, and negligently hurt one of his other sons or daughters. God offers to forgive us for every thought, word, action, and omission that we have committed against him, ourselves, and our neighbor. God is so merciful that he lowered himself, becoming man, in order to suffer and die in reparation for every sin that would ever be committed by all mankind.

All of creation is a pure gift from God. He is so loving and so merciful that his love and mercy cannot be contained; he created us so that he could give us every good gift, especially his very own divine life, for all eternity. There is nothing we have done or could ever do to merit our lives and the innumerable

blessings God has bestowed upon us. And yet, he desires to unceasingly share his love and bestow his mercy on all.

God completely transcends his creation, yet mercifully offers us intimacy with him. Imagine yourself stooping to pick up an earthworm washed onto the sidewalk and returning it to the soil. That image is nothing compared to God's mercy toward us. God transcends us more than we transcend the worm, and yet to God we are not worms but beloved children!

God reaches down with the love of a perfect Father to embrace us and to be in an ongoing personal relationship with us. God wants to walk with us, speak with us, share our hopes and dreams, bear our burdens and sorrows, guide us, guard us, and lead us to our perfection in Heaven. Jesus tells us that God would not be satisfied with ninety-nine out of a hundred of us embracing his mercy. Rather, he would leave the ninety-nine and seek the one who strayed. If that one was willing, God would not merely lead the strayed sheep back but lift it up on his shoulders, rejoicing in its return (*cf.* Lk 15:1–7)! Such is the love of God! Such is his mercy!

God's love and mercy is seen in his gift of free will. We, the creatures, are given the power by our Creator to accept or reject anything and everything he desires to give us, even eternal life and joy. God gives us all that is good but forces nothing upon us. He expects nothing from us but desires everything for us. God is so merciful that no matter how many times we reject his gifts, he never ceases to offer them. No matter how many times we wrong him, he never ceases to offer us forgiveness.

For us to forgive even a terrible wrong done to us by a neighbor is noble, but pales in comparison to God's merciful

forgiveness. God created us and sustains us. We owe everything to him. But every day we “do God wrong.” We ignore him and disobey him, and we hurt his children (including ourselves). Yet, God is merciful. The Creator forgives the creature. The Giver embraces the one who squanders the gift.

God’s mercy is unearned, infinite forgiveness and compassion. It reaches down from the heights of Heaven into the depths of our soul. It forgives all—completely—forever. It washes away every sin, every evil thought, every inadequacy, every stain, and every blemish. God’s mercy recreates us and bathes us in radiant light. In mercy, God lifts us up from the depths of despair and remorse and proclaims, “This is my beautiful beloved child whom I love!”