



Love Mercy

Bottom Line: The Christian life must be marked by a love for one another that is distinct from the way the world understands love.

When is a time in your life when you were shown mercy?

Mercy is the withholding of punishment that someone actually deserves. If someone does something wrong, to have mercy on them means to refuse to enact the penalty their actions require. From the outset, we see how this command sets itself against the previous one: to do justice. God tells us both to enact justice, to give people what they deserve, but also to love mercy, to *not* give people what they deserve.

How do we make sense of this? How do we balance being both just and merciful?

This is a difficult question but consider again what all is entailed in the term *justice*. We tend to think of justice as primarily punishment for wrongdoing, but that's only half of it. Justice is giving people what they deserve, whether it's punishment OR reward. There is a positive aspect of justice that means we treat people fairly and equitably. Essentially, to do justice means to do no wrong to anyone. When understood this way, the balance between mercy and justice becomes a little clearer: justice informs how we respond to injustice toward others, while mercy informs how we respond to injustice toward ourselves. If we are to love mercy, then we must be a people that are much quicker to forgive than to demand retribution.

Do you think people (in general) are quicker to demand justice or to show mercy? Why do you think this is? What would be the consequences if society NEVER carried out justice and only showed mercy? What would be the consequences if society NEVER showed mercy and only carried out justice?

In Micah's day, the nation of Israel, God's people, were treating each other horribly. They were swindling each other out of land and possessions (Micah 2:1-2), their leaders were being corrupted through bribes and conspiracy (3:1-3, 9-11; 7:3), and the religious teachers were extorting money from their own kinsman (3:11). The threat to Israel's well-being didn't come from other nations trying to conquer them, it came from within; they were devouring one another. This is the context into which God was speaking when He told the Israelites that He required them to "love mercy." The word used for "mercy" here is *hesed* which means "faithful covenant love." The Israelites were in covenant with God, and therefore in covenant with one another. They were making a mockery of the commitment they had made to God and to each other by the way they were treating one another, and by telling them to love mercy, God was requiring of the Israelites that they love one another.

God told Israel to do justice for those outside of Israel and to love mercy for those inside Israel. How are both of these, justice toward outsiders and love toward insiders, evangelistic? (See John 13:35)

Who are you in covenant with? What does being in covenant with that person (or people) require of you as far as mercy goes?

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In the New Testament, local churches are consistently characterized as covenant communities, meaning that the local church is an assembly of people who have been brought into covenant with God (Hebrews 8:6; cf. Matthew 26:28), and what we all share in common is that covenant. This covenant that we have with God contains obligations for how we should treat one another. And these obligations to one another are sometimes different than our obligations to those who are not in covenant with God (Galatians 6:10). In fact, the majority of the New Testament letters that Paul wrote were written to churches to instruct them how to treat one another better. Because like we saw in John 13:35, the world will know that we are disciples of Jesus by the way we love one another. The love of mercy that God requires of us is primarily illustrated in showing covenant love, forgiveness, and kindness to those who are of the household of faith.

Read 1 John 3:11-18. What are the practical takeaways that we can glean from this passage? Look again at verse 18. How do we love one another in word and talk? What about deed? What about truth? How serious have you taken YOUR responsibility to love those at FBCnl in these ways? Does your ministry to those at FBCnl extend beyond generational, cultural, and affinity lines? Or do you only interact with those who are the same age as you, same values as you, and same interests as you? What steps can you take to branch out and love someone at FBCnl that falls outside your immediate niche?

According to Hebrews 10:25, one of the reasons for our gatherings, whether it's Sunday services, small groups, Wednesday nights, etc., is to encourage one another. Will you make a commitment to try and encourage someone every time we gather?

Reflection: Read these aloud, using your discretion about which questions should be pondered and which questions should be discussed.

We just read in 1 John that “we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.” So the question is simple: do you love the brothers (the church, other believers)? Do you crave fellowship with other Christians? Do you have compassion and mercy on other believers? Do you pray for the people in your small group/church? Are any of these affections increasing in your life? If none of these are realities in your life, then consider whether you have truly been born again.

John also says, “if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” The implication John is making is that the love of God does NOT abide in that person. Are you aware of any needs in the church? Are you capable of meeting that need or at least contributing? John says that closed hands, closed wallets, closed schedules, closed mouths, etc., are a sign of a closed heart. What can you “open up” to your brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need? Can you give time? Can you give your talents? Can you give encouragement? Can you give resources? Can you give hope? Can you give prayer? The emphasis is not necessarily on *how* you help, but that you *want* to help. How will you help?

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Is there anybody in our church/small group who has offended or hurt you that you need to have mercy on and forgive? Take stock of how merciful you are as a person. Now think of how merciful God has been to you. If God were as merciful to you as you are to others, how secure would you feel before God?

Is our church/our small group a place where you feel loved, accepted, and where you feel you can find mercy? If so, who has made you feel that way? How can you thank that person? If not, instead of expecting other people to create this kind of environment, what will YOU do to help make our church/small group a loving, accepting, merciful place?