

THE BLESSED LIFE—MERCY

INTRODUCTION

It's probably hard for some of you to believe but I once was a high school student. If you are younger, it might surprise you to know that I still remember what it was like to be young; most older folks do. I wince at some of the things I did when I was young, and I am so thankful there were no cell phones to record lots of stupid things. I still do stupid things but not as many and in much slower and more careful way.

One of the things I did involved a motorcycle. I had several of them over the course of my younger life. I would ride my motorcycle to school. Back in those days, Mitchell High School had an open campus, meaning we could leave during the lunch hour. Crazy. You didn't want be anywhere near the school when the lunch bell rang. Cars and motorcycles would come flying out the parking lot heading to find food.

One day, my friend, Ronnie, and I ran to our motorcycles and headed to a convenient store, picked up some junk food, ate it, and then headed back to school. We had a little extra time so we went "riding around." I was following Ronnie on his Suzuki 400, and that turned out to be a mistake. He decided to do something I would have not have done on my own, but I literally was following him.

The next thing I know, we are riding through the front yard of the high school, and there's a big crowd of kids standing under the awning that covers the front doors. Ronnie looks back at me and says, "come on." He rides right through the middle of crowd, right next to the front doors, and I, like an idiot, follow him. We were careful and didn't hit anyone. The crowd cheered for us; they loved it. I think we popped wheelies as we left.

We were so cool! We did a little more riding and then parked our bikes in front of the school. The big crowd of kids was still standing there, cheering for us, but it was suddenly subdued. The principal had made his way out the front doors and to the front of kid crowd. There he stood. He assumed a very aggressive authoritative posture. I thought about running the other way but didn't.

"Go to my office," he barked out. I was terrified because I was a fairly good kid. I had not been in much trouble throughout my school years mainly because my Dad was a schoolteacher and a strict disciplinarian. We had a household rule, "If you get in trouble in school, you'll be in a bigger trouble at home."

As we sat in his office, the principle looked at Ronnie and me, kinda picked up his phone, and said, "I could call the police have you arrested." Then he put his phone down, and said, "I'm going let you off this time." Then he looked at me—and he knew my Dad—and said, "Burris, you're Dad is going to skin you!" And I agreed with his assessment and prediction.

Well, after school was over, I rode home in fear. Our custom was for my Dad to come home, change clothes, and then we would head out to do something on the farm every day. There was always something to do. I don't remember what we were going to do that afternoon, but I know I was terrified about what was going to happen. I knew the punishment would be unimaginably severe. I knew my life was over.

I remember we were riding in a truck, and it was so tense. I was just waiting. Finally, my Dad asked rhetorically, "What happened at school today?" I told him. I waited. He hesitated and said, "That was stupid. Don't do it again." What? That was it? I can't tell how relieved I was. I can tell you I never rode my motorcycle anywhere inappropriate again. My Dad showed me mercy that day. It was unexpected, undeserved, totally appreciated, and not forgotten 50 years later.

DISCUSSION

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

—Matthew 5:7 NIV

What does it mean to be merciful—to show mercy? The Oxford Dictionary says this:

mercy >n. compassion or forgiveness shown towards an enemy or offender in one's power.

Let's say you have the right and the power to punish or harm someone because of something they did, but, instead, you choose to be compassionate and forgiving. Mercy is withholding deserved punishment. The Greek words translated mercy essentially have the same meaning and concept as our English word.

Mercy is an outward and active expression of compassion. I like to define compassion as “your pain in my heart.” Mercy looks at a person and understands his or her plight. Mercy understands the frailty of humanity. Mercy understands how flawed we are and how deeply sin penetrates all of our hearts. Mercy says, “we’re all messed up; this time it was you and next time it could be me.”

One day, Jesus was talking about repairing broken relationships through face-to-face conversations about what went wrong. Specifically, if someone sins against you, Jesus said, “you need to go talk to them and tell them.” His hope is the other person will listen and confess wrongdoing. Then, you forgive, and the relationship is repaired. Mercy is a key part of forgiveness.

A little later, Peter—one of the closest to Jesus—has been pondering what Jesus said. Peter comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” Peter is being generous and knows it—maybe trying to impress Jesus. The Rabbis of the day taught you only had to forgive someone three times for the same offense.

Jesus answers Peter's question in a surprising way. “No, not seven times, but seventy times seven!” There are variant translations of the Greek but it's not about math. It's about forgiving from the heart—a heart filled with mercy. Jesus goes on to tell a parable, found in Matthew 18. It goes something like this:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who decided to update his accounts with servants who owed him money. In the process, he brings in one of his debtors who owes him millions of dollars. The man can't pay, so the king orders that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to help pay the debt.

The man falls down before the king and begs him, “Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.” The king moved with compassion, shows and extends mercy, forgives the debt, and lets him go.

But this freshly forgiven man goes to a fellow servant who owes him a fraction of what he has been forgiven—a relatively small amount—a couple of thousand dollars. Our freshly forgiven friend grabs this other guy by the throat and demands instant payment. He shows no mercy.

His fellow servant falls down before him and begs for more time, using familiar words. “Be patient with me, and I will pay it.” No! Having no compassion or mercy, he has the man arrested and put in prison.

*Some of the other servants see this and are very upset. They go to the king and tell him everything they saw. The king is furious and calls in the man he had forgiven a huge unpayable debt, and says, “You evil servant! I forgave your tremendous debt because you pleaded with me; I gave you mercy (and was happy to do so). **Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?**” Then the king sent the man to prison.*

Jesus then adds, these unsettling, disturbing words: **“That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”** (Matthew 18:35 NLT)

To say it another way—in a beatitudinal way: *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

We show mercy because we have received mercy from God. The mercy we show and give is rooted in the nature of God. Of course, God has no flaws or faults but He understands ours:

The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are. . .

—Psalm 103:13,14 NIV

From the loving compassionate heart of God we receive mercy. There are so many Scriptures we could look at to talk about God’s mercy. Ephesians 2 is a good one. It describes how our sins separate us from God and actually make us objects of God’s wrath. God’s holiness will consume anything that is not holy—anything sinful. Sins unforgiven place us in great peril. God does not want us separated from Him. He loves us.

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

—Ephesians 2:4,5 NIV

This raises a good question. What the difference between grace and mercy? Grace and mercy both involve kindness and compassion that come from love. Mercy, because of kindness and compassion, chooses not to punish someone—even though that would be appropriate or right. Grace, also rooted in kindness and compassion, goes a step further—it gives a gift or a blessing to someone. Mercy withholds the punishment that is deserved; grace gives what is undeserved—unmerited favor, a gift.

Mercy and grace are both found in Jesus. Through the death of Jesus on the Cross, God provides mercy from the consequences of our sin. We won’t receive the punishment we deserve. Through the death of Jesus on the Cross, God provides grace. We receive the gift of salvation and all that comes with it—peace, joy, confidence, and eternal life.

Because God has given us grace and mercy, He wants us to show it—extend it—to others. Jesus said, in Matthew 9:13, while quoting Hosea 6:6, *“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”* He means he wants heart transformation rather rituals and rules. Jesus often took to task the religious leaders of His day because many of them were focused on rules rather than relationships. They were lacking in mercy.¹

One day, one of those guys wanted confirmation that as long as you did the right things, and checked off a list, you were good with God. He was also trying to trick Jesus into saying something that would get Jesus in trouble.

This elite religious leader comes to Jesus and asks, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”²

This guy then asks, “Who is my neighbor?” He wants Jesus to define neighbor as people like him. Jesus doesn’t. Instead, He tells a story—the parable of the good Samaritan—and as He does, He provides us with a picture of mercy.

¹See Matthew 23:23,34.

²Luke 10:25-28.

You know the story, right? A Jewish guy was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, which was a notoriously dangerous road. And sure enough, this guy was attacked, beaten, robbed, and left for dead. A little later, Jewish priest was going down that road, sees the bloody beaten fellow Jew, and crosses over to the other side, walking on by. Shortly thereafter, a Jewish Levite—another religious leader—comes up to this victim. He, too, looks and leaves, continuing on his journey.

A little later, a despised and hated Samaritan comes up on the scene. The Jews and Samaritans hated each other with a passion, so this would be a great opportunity for the Samaritan to have a little fun, to get a little revenge on an enemy. He goes over to the Jewish victim. If this victim was conscious, then I imagine him looking through swollen eyes with blurry vision to see a Samaritan coming to him. I'm guessing he imagines the worst. But Samaritan surprises him.

The Samaritan has compassion. He feels the victim's pain in his heart, looking past their differences. His compassion leads to action. He takes care of this Jewish victim—an enemy. He cleans him up, bandages him up, and puts him up on his donkey, and then puts him up in a hotel to recover, covering all the costs.

Jesus finishes this stunning story by asking the religious leader, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" The leader said,

"The one who showed him mercy."

Then Jesus said,

"Yes, now go and do the same."

—Luke 10:37 NLT

What does mercy look like in your world and mine? How do we reflect the love and mercy of God? In Romans 12, Paul says it like this:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

—Romans 12:1,2 NIV

When we see the mercy of God directed at us, then we realize that we owe everything to Him. So, we carefully choose what we think about, what we consume in all kinds of ways, and especially how we treat people. Our relationship with God is not about checking boxes and crossing things off lists. Rather, it's about truly loving others because God loved us first.

A little later in Romans 12, Paul gets really practical about what a life looks like that has seen the mercy of God and then reflects it:

Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you.

Ask him to bless them and not to curse them.

*When others are happy, be happy with them,
and when they are sad, be sad.*

Be friendly with everyone.

Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others.

Make friends with ordinary people.

Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you.

*But try to earn the respect of others,
and do your best to live at peace with everyone.*

—Romans 12:14-18 CEV

CONCLUSION

There are a couple things I want to say to clear some possible confusion.

1. We're not saying that we never seek justice, never punish wrongdoers, never allow consequences for sin. Certainly, there is a time and place for all of those things. My dad showed me mercy that afternoon after school, but his discipline for me over all my formative years helped shape me into to who I am today. I'm thankful for that.
2. I don't believe our salvation is dependent upon our mercy but our mercy is reflection of who God is. Jesus wants us to be merciful and forgiving. If we're not, then I believe God's mercy and grace will cover us.

The blessed life belongs to the merciful. I wonder who it is in your life that needs your mercy? Is there someone that needs your forgiveness? It starts with your mercy, and your mercy starts by understanding God's mercy. It flows from him to us and through us to others.

COMMUNION

I had a lead-in to communion all written out. It was a bit of a deep dive into the Old Testament concept of the Mercy Seat that was the lid of the Ark of Covenant. If you want to go deep into the concept of mercy, then do some research into that. I worked on that quite a bit but never felt like it the right thing to share. Then, Wednesday morning, I got this beautiful prayer from Claire Roth, Brad Pontius's daughter. I immediately new to shelve my Mercy Seat ideas and instead use this prayer.

Thank you, Jesus, for showing me such great mercy. Remind me of those times now. (Pause to reflect and listen.) Thank you for leading me into freedom and wholeness through mercy and for loving me without conditions no matter how much mercy I need.

Lord, search my heart and mind - I invite you to shine your light on people in my life who need mercy. (Pause to reflect and listen.) I release my complaints against them into your hands and forgive them.

Forgive me for times I've not been merciful. I've held grudges, sought revenge, looked in pride and judgment at a friend. (Pause to reflect and listen.) Soften my heart and help me to forgive, to release my offenses, and be gracious.

Holy Spirit, make mercy a way of life for me. I want to be a person who walks and talks and lives grace like you do, Jesus. Amen.

BONUS MATERIAL

The concept of mercy is deeply rooted in blood. Leviticus 17:11 says, life is in the blood. In the Old Testament, God asked His people to create a beautiful box—the Ark of the Covenant—which represented His presence in this world. The Ark of the Covenant³ was 45 inches long, 27 inches deep, and 27 inches high. The lid of this sacred box—made of solid gold—was called the Mercy Seat.

This pure gold Mercy Seat had two golden cherubim on each end, facing each other with wings outstretched. The Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the Temple. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the High Priest would carefully entered the Holy of Holies and he would do something that seems so strange to us. He would sprinkle blood on this pure gold Mercy Seat. It was the blood of bulls and goats sacrificed—giving their lives—for the sins of the people.⁴

The idea is that by giving the lives—the blood of animals—and sprinkling that blood in and on the presence of God—placing blood on the Mercy Seat—God would provide mercy by forgiving sins.

There is a connection with all that and the communion we are about receive. The writer of Hebrews, in Hebrews 9, talks about the Ark of the Covenant. He says,

Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.

—Hebrews 9:5 ESV

He then talks about Jesus becoming the true High Priest and how,

He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

—Hebrews 9:12 ESV

Jesus offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of humanity. He becomes the atoning sacrifice, the propitiation for our sins. It's all related to the Mercy Seat. That's fairly deep, but all we need to know is the blood of Jesus reveals the merciful grace-filled love of God. The bread and cup remind us.

³See Exodus 25:10-22 for more details.

⁴See Leviticus 16:14,15.