

## CHAPTER VIII

# THE MERCY OF GOD

### A. INTRODUCTION

1. In Jesus Christ's parable of the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer (Luke 18:9-14), we have portrayed two men, one who is wholly ignorant of his need of God's mercy, and the other who hopes only in God's mercy.
  - a. The Pharisee is comfortable with himself. In fact he boasts in a personal sense of well being that others have not attained. His posture as a religious dignitary suggests that the word "mercy" is part of his everyday vocabulary, though remote from personal experience. His mock confession, "I thank Thee," v. 11, his perversion of sovereign grace, must be interpreted as, "I congratulate myself as being worthy of grace." In theological discussion he would vainly confess that any unbeliever needs the grace of God. His definition of overt sin in v. 11b is certainly biblical. His condemnation of sin is severe, though it is exclusively directed towards others. His appreciation of personal guilt is at best suppressed and at worst calloused. He is insensitive to pangs of personal corruption and the torments of his fallen nature.
  - b. The tax-gatherer also prays, but he appears as a man with low self-esteem who is greatly, even visibly, physically troubled. He speaks of his need of mercy with trembling and desperation. His posture is that of a broken, subdued man. His body shakes as he strikes his chest with deep remorse. He bemoans his condition, and so does the critical world around him. His confession leaves no doubt as to his estimate of his problem, "God, be merciful to me, *the* [emphasis added] sinner," v. 13. Like Paul, he sees himself as the "chief of sinners" (I Tim. 1:15). However this man knows something of the true nature of God since he pleads, "God, be merciful/be propitious/be kindly disposed, [ἰλάσκομαι, *hilaskomai*] to me, the sinner." He implores God that He be mercifully inclined toward him and so heal the present miserable breach that his sin has caused. This man is certainly aware of his distressing guilt before God and consequent need of grace. But more than this, he is in agony of soul in his present condition. Being so tormented, he urgently needs God's relief from this misery, which deliverance is distinctively called "mercy." This man, having cried to God for mercy [a propitious, kindly disposition], "went to his house justified [δικαιόω, *dikaioō*] rather than the other," v. 14. The legal language here describes relief being brought to an unrighteous soul.

2. When David sinned in numbering Israel, he cried out in anguish of soul, "I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man" (II Sam. 24:14). Only Jehovah's mercy, based upon the presupposition that He has been offended, can relieve a guilty soul that is in agony. However, when man is offended, he tends to desire the extraction of vengeance rather than offer mercy.

## B. THE MERCY OF GOD DIRECTED TOWARD MAN IN DISTRESS

1. Mercy is essentially God's relieving love poured out upon man in deep misery and trouble. Such affliction is spiritually rooted in the soul, though physical consequences are to be expected (Ps. 31:9-10; 32:3-4). Hence, when God's mercy relieves the soul, it may be expected that there will be attending physical benefits (Ps. 30:1-2; 107:19-20).
  - a. In the Old Testament mercy is God's practical exhibition of loving-kindness, רַחֲמִים, *chesed* (Ps. 86:14-15; 136:1-26), which ought to be evident in His children. It also means practical pity and compassion, רַחַם, *racham* (Isa. 47:6; 49:10, 13).
    - (1) By way of illustration, in a sermon based upon Hosea 5:15, Jonathan Edwards declares, "that it is God's manner to make men sensible of their misery and unworthiness before he appears in his mercy and love to them. . . . The mercy of God, which he shows to a sinner when he brings him home to the Lord Jesus Christ, is the greatest and most wonderful exhibition of mercy and love, of which men are ever the subjects."<sup>1</sup> Edwards further draws from the life of Joseph to illuminate this point.
      - (a) Joseph, before his great promotion in Egypt, languished in captivity for twelve years. While innocent when Potiphar's wife propositioned him, then imprisoned, his great suffering led to great mercy.
      - (b) Joseph's brothers, before being reconciled and cared for, suffered twenty-two years of guilty anguish in their souls. What pain of conscience they suffered, then the terror of standing before Joseph,
      - (c) Joseph's father Jacob, before receiving gifts from his lost son and refuge in Egypt, also felt the sorrow of those arid twenty-two years. How he mourned over a seeming insoluble tragedy.
    - (2) David vividly describes the agony of his soul to which the relief of mercy answers. In vexation and distress he implores God for deliverance. "<sup>2</sup> Be

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, II, pp. 830-8.

gracious to me, O LORD, for I am pining away; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are dismayed. 3 And my soul is greatly dismayed; But You, O LORD—how long? 4 Return, O LORD, rescue my soul; save me because of your lovingkindness” (Ps. 6:2-4; cf. 31:9-13; 51:1, 8).

b. In the New Testament mercy is similarly God’s compassion, ἔλεος, *eleos*, relief from distress, or “the outward manifestation of pity”<sup>2</sup> “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Tit. 3:5; cf. Luke 1:72).

(1) The parable of the Good Samaritan best pictures the physical, relieving aspect of mercy, and also its communicable nature. “<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him [most likely being a Jew]; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, <sup>34</sup> and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him” (Luke 10:33-34).

(2) More often it refers to God’s mercy toward the miserable sinner. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Pet. 1:3). “For you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (I Pet. 2:10; cf. Rom. 15:7-9; Tit. 3:5).

(3) Note that while grace is God’s response to the sinner in his guilt and rebellion, mercy is God’s response to the sinner who suffers on account of his guilt and rebellion. He is in agony over his sin; the sting causes him to cry out to God for relief. David felt the pain of guilt as if God had broken some of his bones (Ps. 51:8).

2. Mercy may be more specifically understood according to different categories, depending upon the areas where sin has had its effect; it also arouses the use of a variety of superlatives employed by the objects of such compassionate relief.

a. Arthur Pink describes three aspects of God’s mercy as follows:<sup>3</sup>

(1) General mercy, to all of His creation. “The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:9).

<sup>2</sup> Vine, Unger, White, eds., *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, p. 403.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 73.

- (2) Special mercy, to all of mankind. "Be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45).
- (3) Sovereign mercy, to all heirs of salvation. "For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy'" (Romans 9:15-16).

b. There are distinctive qualities of God's mercy:

- (1) *Great mercy.* "Then Solomon said, 'You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for Him this great lovingkindness, that you have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day'" (I Kings 3:6).
- (2) *Covenant mercy.* "I said, 'I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments'" (Neh. 1:5).
- (3) *Abundant mercy.* "For You, LORD, are good and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You" (Ps. 86:5).
- (4) *Everlasting mercy.* "For the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children" (Ps. 103:17).
- (5) *Tender mercy.* "Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us" (Luke 1:78).
- (6) *Rich mercy.* "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us" (Eph. 2:4).
- (7) *Full mercy.* "We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (Jas. 5:11).

### C. THE PSALMIST'S DELIGHT IN THE MERCY OF GOD

1. John Calvin has well stated that the Psalms are, "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." At the same time, the chief response of the human authors is that of praise and

adoration, and surely one of the leading themes that results in such heartfelt worship is that of the mercy of God which relieves the miseries of the soul.

- a. The child of God repeatedly finds himself in trouble, in agony of soul, in distress, in torment, bodily discomforts. <sup>4</sup>“For my iniquities are gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. <sup>5</sup>My wounds grow foul and fester because of my folly. <sup>6</sup>I am bent over and greatly bowed down; I go mourning all day long. <sup>7</sup>For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. <sup>8</sup>I am benumbed and badly crushed; I groan because of the agitation of my heart” (Ps. 38:4-8); <sup>21</sup>“Do not forsake me, O LORD; O my God, do not be far from me! <sup>22</sup>Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!” (Ps. 38:21-22).
  - b. But God, who is known for His great mercies, His relieving aid and comfort, is both petitioned and praised. <sup>1</sup>“I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. <sup>2</sup>He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. <sup>3</sup>He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust in the LORD.” (Ps. 40:1-3).
  - c. Thus we have numerous references to God’s mercy, pity, compassion, even though in many places these actual terms are not used. <sup>17</sup>“The righteous cry, and the LORD hears And delivers them out of all their troubles. <sup>18</sup>The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit. <sup>19</sup>Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all” (Ps. 34:17-19; cf. 146:7-9).
2. The mercies of God meet every situation. However it needs to be appreciated that frequent pleading for divine relief is always in the context of the life of an authentic child of God, especially with regard to David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon and Moses.
    - a. In Psalm 25, consider the cry for God’s mercy, vs. 6-7. <sup>6</sup>“Remember, O LORD, Your compassion and Your lovingkindnesses, For they have been from of old. <sup>7</sup>Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; According to Your lovingkindness remember me, For Your goodness' sake, O LORD.” This pleading is with regard to the following trials:
      - (1) *Ensnarement*, v. 15. “My eyes are continually toward the LORD, for He will pluck my feet out of the net.”
      - (2) *Loneliness*, v. 16. “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted”

- (3) *Distress*, v. 17. "The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses."
- (4) *Affliction*, v. 18. "Look upon my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins."
- (5) *Violent hatred*, v. 19. "Look upon my enemies, for they are many, And they hate me with violent hatred."
- b. In Psalm 103, consider the cry for God's mercy, vs. 8-14. <sup>8</sup> The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. <sup>9</sup> He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. <sup>10</sup> He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. <sup>12</sup> As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. <sup>13</sup> Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. <sup>14</sup> For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust." This pleading is with regard to the following trials:
- (1) *Sin as a disease*. "Who pardons all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases;" v. 3.
- (2) *Destruction as in a pit*. "Who redeems your life from the pit, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;" v. 4.
- (3) *Oppression*. "The LORD performs righteous deeds and judgments for all who are oppressed." v. 6.
- c. In Psalm 109, consider the cry for God's mercy, vs. 21, 26. <sup>21</sup>But You, O GOD, the Lord, deal kindly with me for Your name's sake; because Your lovingkindness is good, deliver me. . . . <sup>26</sup>Help me, O LORD my God; save me according to Your lovingkindness." This pleading is with regard to the following trials:
- (1) *Heartache*, v. 22. "For I am afflicted and needy, and my heart is wounded within me."
- (2) *Fading strength and weakness*, v. 24. "My knees are weak from fasting, and my flesh has grown lean, without fatness."
- (3) *Condemnation and cursing*, vs. 25, 28. "I also have become a reproach to them; when they see me, they wag their head. . . . Let them curse, but You

bless; when they arise, they shall be ashamed, but Your servant shall be glad.”

3. According to Psalm 136, every situation is cause for thankfulness at the remembrance of God’s mercies.
  - a. A mark of the true believer is not simply that he calls upon the mercies of God when in need, but rather he recognizes them as having already been received, and consequently is thankful. <sup>19</sup> Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses. <sup>20</sup> He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. <sup>21</sup> Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, and for His wonders to the sons of men! <sup>22</sup> Let them also offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of His works with joyful singing.” (Ps. 107:19-22; cf. 63:6-8; 111:4).
  - b. Psalm 136, sometimes called “The Great Hallel (Praise) Psalm,” because of its antiphonal (alternating response) form, should in fact be called, “The Great Mercy Psalm.” All of the twenty-six verses conclude, “For His loving-kindness (mercy KJV) is everlasting.” Especially notice the major divisions of God’s mercy:
    - (1) God’s mercies evidenced in *creation* are cause for thanksgiving. This concerns His “making of the heavens with skill,” His “spreading out the earth above the waters,” His making of “the great lights,” that is “the sun to rule by day” and “the moon and stars to rule by night,” vs. 1-9.
    - (2) God’s mercies evidenced in *redemption* are cause for thanksgiving. This concerns His bringing forth “Israel out of their [the Egyptians’] midst,” His “strong hand and an outstretched arm,” His “dividing the Red Sea asunder,” His “overthrow of Pharaoh,” His “smiting of great kings,” vs. 10-22.
    - (3) God’s mercies evidenced in *providence* are cause for thanksgiving. This concerns His remembrance of those “in low estate,” His “rescue from adversaries,” His provision of “food to all flesh,” all of which is cause for “giving thanks to the God of heaven, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.” vs. 23-26.

## D. THE MERCY OF GOD EVIDENT IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER

1. The Son of God clearly expected true disciples to manifest mercy and compassion. “<sup>23</sup>Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Matt. 23:23; cf. 9:13; 12:7; Luke 10:25-37).
2. God’s election of sinners is productive of mercy (Col. 3:12-13).

Broadly speaking, Christians are to reflect the moral character of God. Even their election in eternity past has this purpose in mind. So, “He [God] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him” (Eph. 1:4). So the Christian also reflects holy mercy.

- a. Our election is unto the fruit of the Spirit, v. 12. “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”
  - (1) Election essentially speaks of purest mercy. “<sup>15</sup> For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ <sup>16</sup> So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Rom. 9:15-16).
  - (2) Election is evidenced by mercy. Compassion declares our parentage. It gives visible proof that we as branches have been grafted into the merciful and life-giving Vine. “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.” (John 15:16).
  - (3) Election, according to sovereign mercy, is identified by reassuring graces, including mercy. “<sup>20</sup> But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, <sup>21</sup> keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. <sup>22</sup> And have mercy on some, who are doubting; <sup>23</sup> save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.” (Jude 20-23; cf. II Pet. 1:5-10).
- b. Our example as God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, v. 13. “Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

- (1) He is a tender shepherd. “<sup>1</sup>Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes” (Is. 40:11; cf. Luke 15:3-7).
  - (2) He is a compassionate physician. “When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick” (Matt. 14:14).
  - (3) He is a burden-bearing Savior. “<sup>1</sup> Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose” (Phil. 2:1-2).
  - (4) He is a merciful High Priest. “<sup>14</sup> Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:14-15).
3. The authentic believer is directed by the principle of mercy rather than judgment (Jas. 2:12-13, even as the Lord Jesus is his model in this respect (John 3:17; 8:15; 12:47. Though He will judge at that appointed future apocalyptic day on behalf of His Father(Acts 17:31).
    - a. Mercy should regulate judgment. “In wrath remember mercy” (Hab. 3:2). “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the* law of liberty” (Jas. 2:12).
    - b. For the merciless there is only judgment. “For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jas. 2:13).
  4. By way of illustration, Thomas Goodwin exhorts us: “You that have received this mercy from God, show mercy to others. Use all that is within you so as to endeavor to beget men to God. Though God alone does it, yet he uses means; though means contribute nothing, yet God uses them as the clay to open the eyes. Have you a friend who lives with you, perhaps a student or brother who is unconverted? Oh, if you have received mercy from God, endeavor to bring them in to obtain like mercy with yourself.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>. Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, VI, p. 415.

WHEN this seductive world intrudes itself into the mind, and is insidiously busy in establishing its ascendancy over the heart; when wealth is riveting its chains, to fasten us in bondage; when ambition invites us to the high places of power and distinction, and promises that we shall be as gods in grandeur and glory; when pleasure informs us, that we have "much goods laid up for many years," and bids us "take our ease, eat, drink, and be merry;" in a word, when temptation, sense, and sin, crowd around us, and prepare us to absorb all our affections in selfish gratification; let us look to the mercy of Christ, and remember and behold what he has done for us. If we are not hardened indeed, . . . we shall find it difficult, and I hope impossible, not to go, and in some measure, do likewise. We shall, like him, "love our enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return:" we shall "bless them that curse us, and pray for them who despitefully use us and persecute us."

*Timothy Dwight, 1752-1816*