

CHAPTER VIII

THE MERCY OF GOD

A. INTRODUCTION

1. In the 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.
 - (1) His posture as a religious dignitary suggests that the word "mercy" is part of his everyday vocabulary, though remote from personal experience.
 - (2) His mock confession, "I thank Thee," v. 11, his perversion of sovereign grace, must be interpreted as, "I congratulate myself."
 - (3) His definition of sin, v. 16b, is certainly biblical. His condemnation of sin is severe, though it is exclusively directed towards others.
 - (4) 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.
 - (1) 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.
 - (2) 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).
 - (3) However this man knows something of the true nature of God since he pleads, "God, be *merciful* [CCCCCCCCC] hilaskomai, be propitious, kindly disposed] 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.
 - (4) This man is certainly aware of his 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."

- (5) This man, having cried to God for mercy [a propitious, kindly disposition], “went to his house justified [δικαιοῦν, dikaiōō] 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 soul in agony. When man is offended, he tends to extract 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, ἔλεος; ἔλεος (Ps. 86:14-15; 136:1-26), which ought to be evident in His children. It also means practical pity and compassion, ἔλεος; ῥάχμις (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.”¹ 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.
- (b) Joseph’s brothers, before being reconciled and cared for, suffered twenty-two years of guilty anguish in their souls.
- (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.
- (2) David vividly describes the agony of his soul to which mercy answers. In vexation and distress he implores God for relief (Ps. 6:2-4; 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”² (Luke 1:72; Tit. 3:5).

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, II, pp. 830-8.

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

- (1) The parable of the Good Samaritan best pictures the physical, active aspect of mercy, and especially its communicable nature (Luke 10:30-37).
 - (2) However, more often it refers to God's mercy toward the sinner (Rom. 15:7-9; Tit. 3:5; I Pet. 1:3; 2:10).
 - (3) Note that grace is God's response to the sinner in his guilty rebellion, whereas mercy is God's response to the sinner who *suffers* on account of his guilt and rebellion.
2. Mercy may be more broadly understood in different categories.
- a. Arthur Pink describes three aspects of God's mercy as follows:³
 - (1) General mercy, to all of His creation (Ps. 145:9).
 - (2) Special mercy, to all of mankind (Matt. 5:45).
 - (3) Sovereign mercy, to all heirs of salvation (Romans 9:15-16).
 - b. There are distinctive qualities of God's mercy:
 - (1) Great mercy (I Kings 3:6).
 - (2) Covenant mercy (Neh. 1:5).
 - (3) Abundant mercy (Ps. 86:5).
 - (4) Everlasting mercy (Ps. 103:17).
 - (5) Tender mercy (Luke 1:78).
 - (6) Rich mercy (Eph. 2:4).
 - (7) Full mercy (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 surely one of the leading themes that results in such praise 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 (Ps. 38:1-12, 21-22).

³ Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 73.

- b. But God, who is known for His great mercies, His relieving aid and comfort, is both petitioned and praised (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 (Ps. 34:17-19; 146:7-9).
2. The mercies of God meet every situation.
- a. In Psalm 25, consider how God's mercy, vs. 6-7, answers to the following trials:
 - (1) Ensnarement, v. 15.
 - (2) Loneliness, v. 16.
 - (3) Distress, v. 17.
 - (4) Affliction, v. 18.
 - (5) Violent hatred, v. 19.
 - b. In Psalm 103, consider how God's mercy, vs. 8-14, answers to the following trials:
 - (1) Sin as a disease, v. 3.
 - (2) Destruction as in a pit, v. 4.
 - (3) Oppression, v. 6.
 - c. In Psalm 109, consider how God's mercy, vs. 21, 26, answers to the following trials:
 - (1) Heartache, v. 22.
 - (2) Fading strength and weakness, v. 24.
 - (3) Condemnation and cursing, vs. 25, 28.
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 (Ps. 63:6-8; 107:19-22; 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, vs. 1-9.

- (2) God's mercies evidenced in *redemption* are cause for thanksgiving, vs. 10-22.
- (3) God's mercies evidenced in *providence* are cause for thanksgiving, 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 (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; 23:23; Luke 10:25-37).
2. God's election of sinners is productive of mercy (Col. 3:12-13).
 - a. Our election is unto the fruit of the Spirit, v. 12.
 - (1) Election essentially speaks of purest 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 (John 15:16).
 - (3) Election, according to sovereign mercy, is identified by reassuring graces, including mercy (II Pet. 1:5-10; Jude 1-2, 20-23).
 - b. Our example as God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, v. 13.
 - (1) He is a tender shepherd (Is. 40:11; Luke 15:5).
 - (2) He is a compassionate physician (Matt. 14:14).
 - (3) He is a burden-bearing Savior (Phil. 2:1-2).
 - (4) He is a merciful High Priest (Heb. 4:14-15).
3. The authentic believer is directed by the principle of mercy rather than judgment (Jas. 2:12-13).
 - a. Mercy should regulate judgment (Hab. 3:2), v. 12.
 - b. For the merciless there is only judgment, v. 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."⁴

⁴ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, VI, p. 415.