

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which, if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

— *Portia*, in *William Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1*.

This incredible speech from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice captures a number of truths about mercy: mercy is gentle, not harsh. It is a blessing to show mercy and to receive mercy. Mercy is greater than justice. Mercy is an attribute of God Himself. Without mercy, under a regime of absolute justice, no one would be saved. And our requests for mercy for ourselves teach us to show mercy to others.

Mercy is all of this and more, and understanding mercy is fundamental to understanding the book of Jonah, and so while we continue to meditate on Jonah for a few more weeks, today we will focus on mercy; what it is, what it isn't, what it involves to show mercy, and why we must show it to others. And while Jonah is our jumping-off point, we'll be looking at a number of Scriptures, and so this may feel a little bit more like a Bible drill than usual. If it helps you to look up the verses, go ahead, but feel free to just listen as well.

But even more than mining verses from all over the Bible, the central display of God's mercy is found in Jesus. Jesus embodies the mercy of God, and it is only by God's mercy in Christ that anyone can escape the judgment that pure justice demands and be saved instead. The whole Bible tells of the mercy of God, but that mercy is put on full display most clearly when God saw our miserable and wretched state as slaves of sin, and sent His Son to bear the punishment for our sins, satisfying the demands of justice on our behalf, and rising from the dead to set us free and make us right with God, granting us the gift of salvation as a free gift of sheer mercy. To understand mercy, we look to Jesus.

This is why some of the greatest summaries of the gospel are *dripping* with mercy. Hear these words from Ephesians 2:4-7:

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

So let's explore the theme of mercy in the Bible, starting with a definition, and always heading towards the cross:

What mercy is:

- **Mercy is love's response to misery.** Mercy is love or compassion or favor responding to misery or need or suffering. Showing mercy involves a disposition of favor that leads to actions that bring relief. The opposite of mercy is not helping someone in need, hardening your heart against those who suffer, devising evil against, not sparing, or oppressing the weak.
- **Mercy is an attribute of God.** As Exodus 34 says, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." This is the passage that Jonah is quoting, and it also appears in the Psalms, Nehemiah, and Joel. This is one of God's favorite self-descriptions; this captures who He is. We should also see that God is not obligated to show mercy by anything *outside* of Himself; He shows mercy because He has mercy *within* Himself. We cannot *manipulate* or *demand* mercy, but we can *expect* mercy because of the character and promises of God.

- Like God's love (the ideas of love and mercy overlap), there are different kinds or levels of mercy. God shows the world *general* mercy every day, graciously providing all sorts of good gifts - life, breath, and all things – and patiently withholding judgment. God shows *special* mercy to all who live in respond favorably to His revelation, such as the Ninevites in Jonah 3. God has *saving* mercy for all who believe in Jesus. Everyone receives some mercy from God; some receive every mercy from God. To use the categories from earlier in our Jonah series, there is creation mercy, covenant mercy, and the fullness of mercy comes through Christ.
- All mercy is shown in response to misery, but not all misery is the direct result of sin.
 - So for instance, in Zechariah 7:9-10, God tells His people to show kindness and mercy to one another, *not to oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor*. People in these categories are suffering, but their suffering is not necessarily caused by their sin. Because they are miserable, God call His people to show mercy to them.
 - At the same time, in Psalm 51, David writes, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.” David appeals to God for mercy in the face of his sins. His misery is his own fault; he is suffering because of his sin, but he still pleads for mercy, and because God is so gracious and merciful, He has mercy even for sinners.
- When the misery that provokes mercy is the result of sin, mercy is fully realized through repentance and atonement. Without repentance and atonement, mercy extended to sinners would be merciless towards their victims. In the temple, the cover of the Ark of the Covenant was called the Mercy Seat, and each year the high priest would sprinkle the mercy seat with the blood of the atonement offering. Since God is not obligated to show mercy, atonement doesn't “buy” mercy, but because God is merciful, He has graciously agreed to show mercy upon certain conditions.
 - Now, we aren't always able to make all the connections: we are not in charge of evaluating repentance and assessing whether or not atonement has been made. It might look to us that mercy has been given *apart* from justice being satisfied, which is what Jonah experienced.

- But God is the standard of mercy and justice, not us, and so we need to remember that God has mercy on whom He wills, and He is not accountable to us. He *is* accountable to His own character, though, and to His promises, and so whenever we feel that mercy has been given to easily or to the wrong people, we need to trust God to do what's right, we need to remember that we don't know everything, and that the story isn't over yet. What looks like mercy one moment might be preparation for a more thorough judgment. That's exactly what happened to Nineveh, btw, which we'll talk more about next time, dv.

Now, let's turn to **What mercy is not:**

- **Mercy is not opposed to justice.** Micah 6:8 puts justice and mercy right next to each other as friends: do justice *and* love mercy. We can't pick one or the other. All the same, James 2:13 tells us that mercy triumphs over judgment. Mercy is something greater than justice, never less than justice. Mercy is non-justice, but it is not injustice, as RC Sproul was fond of saying.
- Related to this, **mercy is not the removal of consequences.** It may *mitigate* or remove *some* consequences, but showing mercy is not the same thing as removing all consequences. We see this clearly when David prays for mercy in Psalm 51, and yet his infant son dies, and David's rule is forever troubled by the fallout of his sin. Yet even in the consequences that remain, mercy changes the nature of retribution from ill-willing *punishment* that wants the object to be harmed to good-willing *discipline* that wants the object to be helped. Mercy turns whatever consequences that are brought to bear into blessings, however painful they might be. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.
- **Mercy is not free.** It may be freely *given*, but it costs a great deal. Mercy involves bearing the suffering or the cost of suffering for another. Someone always pays for mercy. A good judge does not ask a *victim* to bear the cost of mercy shown to a perpetrator, but it is the peculiar glory of God that He Himself is the one who is wronged by sin more than anyone, and yet He willingly takes it on Himself in the person of His Son to absorb the high cost of mercy. The Lord our God is gracious and merciful, and bears our suffering so that He can show us mercy! How incredible is this!

- **Mercy is not safe.** Mercy can be wrongly given and wrongly received. At times, attempts to show mercy can enact injustice, and result in harm. “Always show mercy” is *not* God’s policy and shouldn’t be ours. In Deut. 7:2, God forbids Israel from showing mercy to the Canaanites, because such mercy would be *destructive* to His people. He showed mercy to the Canaanites for many years, but finally their iniquity was complete, and judgment came after the time for mercy expired.
- But here’s an important point: When God removes His mercy and brings judgment, it isn’t because He *ran out* of mercy – Lam. 3:22 says that His mercies never come to an end. Mercy hasn’t run out; it’s been *refused*, and so God in His unfathomable wisdom determines when to shut the door of mercy, in keeping with His eternal purposes.
- This is a preview of the final judgment: mercy is freely offered to everyone *now*, but a day will come when the time for mercy is past, when showing further mercy to sinners actually *wrongs* their victims who are crying out for justice. A God who waits to punish the wicked and allows time for their repentance is merciful, but a God who *never* punishes the wicked is not “super-merciful”; such a god would be wicked and unjust. And so for us as well, we must have godly limits to our mercy. We are willing to show mercy to any and all who repent, but we do not show mercy to those who refuse to repent, and who simply use our mercy to hurt others.
- This is no excuse to be stingy with mercy, but it *is* a warning not to try to be more merciful than God. Never rebuking, never disciplining, never excommunicating can seem like real mercy, but when it hurts the weak and inflicts misery on the innocent, it’s not actually godly mercy.
- **Mercy is not irrevocable.** This is a startling truth, but one that is made very clear in Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant. Since we can’t always know beforehand the effect that mercy will have, it is better to show mercy in hopes that mercy will change the sinner’s heart. But when it becomes apparent that mercy is being abused, it is entirely appropriate for mercy to be withdrawn. James 2:13 riffs on Jesus’ parable and says, “Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.” God is generous with His mercy, but He withdraws it from those who use mercy to enable sin.

- And for many of us who are easily manipulated into avoiding confrontation and who are tempted to be lazy when it comes to discipline and correction, we need to learn this lesson and stop hiding our own sin behind the lie that we are being merciful, when we're actually being cowardly.
- God does take away mercy from the merciless, BUT hear this: God will *never* remove His mercy from anyone who trusts in Jesus. The fullness of His saving mercy will transform you, so that you do not take His mercy for granted and use it for further sin. What *Les Mis* pictures in the transformation of Jean Valjean, God accomplishes in the story that He is authoring in the lives of His chosen ones. When God gives you mercy in Christ, that mercy not only relieves your misery, it changes you into the image of God, so that you become merciful like Jesus.

Receiving Mercy

- Finally, because God's mercy is transformative, receiving God's mercy ought to make you merciful, as Luke 6:36 says: "Be merciful, for your heavenly Father is merciful." The proper way to respond to God's mercy is with overflowing gratitude that gladly shows mercy to others. We show our gratitude to God through praise and thanks, and we show mercy to others when we forgive them and when we give of our resources to minister to their misery. In fact, our word "almsgiving" comes from the Greek root word for mercy. Giving resources above and beyond God's tithe to alleviate the misery of others is an act of mercy, one that characterized the early church, as we see in Acts 4 and 9. Has God shown you mercy? Then give alms in Jesus' name!
- And when Peter and John went to pray in Acts 3, they didn't have any silver or gold to help the lame man, but they did minister to his misery in Jesus' name by healing him. You may not have silver or gold, or the gift of healing, but what you do have is an experience of the mercy of God in Christ that should send you into the temple walking and leaping and praising God, as well as telling others about the God you serve, for the Lord is a gracious and merciful God.
- Rather than *resenting* His mercy like Jonah, those who have received mercy in Christ ought to sing of the mercies of the Lord forever, so that all nations might glorify God for His mercy.
 - *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*