

NICK GUY & MERCY, MERCY, MERCY AFFAIR

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THEME: What is mercy, and how is it properly given?

NOTES: In Matthew 5:7, Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Like so many of the terms used in the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5, the whole concept of mercy has been misapplied and misunderstood in our culture. Christians, while trying to walk out the commands of Scripture, are accused many times of being unmerciful, hateful and not “Christ-like.” In this installment, Nick Guy and Dr. DeSoto need to determine what it truly means to be merciful, and how to reconcile justice, forgiveness, grace, love against mercy.

MERCY - THE BIBLICAL DEFINITION: Most of us have an understanding of what it means to be merciful. But when trying to understand and interpret Scripture we need to divorce ourselves from what we believe about a word or topic and see how the Bible defines it.

In Matthew 5:7, Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Merciful is from the Greek word *eleemon*, and it means beneficial or charitable. So to show mercy is to extend charity, to give help to those in need. Mercy indicates expressing compassion and love in tangible ways, not just through feelings or emotions.

Certainly, mercy is central to the Gospel. Jesus exemplified true mercy when He went to the cross. There He expressed mercy to us in a tangible way. His suffering and death on our behalf was demonstrative, not just sentimental.

EXAMPLES OF GOD’S MERCY TO US: In Titus 3:5, the Apostle Paul wrote: [God] “saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” God’s forgiveness of our sins flows from His mercy.

But, He shows us mercy beyond just forgiving of our sins. He is merciful to us in many different ways. For example, Psalm 103:8 states: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The fact that God does not judge our sin immediately is an act of mercy on His part.

MERCY & FORGIVENESS: What is the relationship between mercy & forgiveness? Mercy has a lot in common with forgiveness, but the two *are* distinct. Mercy is extended when there is a need to be met. Those needs can be many. Forgiveness is extended when the particular need to be met is the consequences of wrong-doing.

Mercy is a response to a need. Forgiveness is a response to a particular need.

Therefore, mercy is bigger than just forgiveness. We notice in Titus 3:5 -

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God’s forgiveness of our sins flows from His mercy. But, He shows us mercy beyond just forgiving of our sins.

God is also merciful to us in many different ways, as Psalm 103:8 points out -

“The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

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MERCY & LOVE: And, just as we saw how forgiveness comes through mercy, so mercy comes through love. As it says in Ephesians 2:4,5 -

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

Mercy is bigger than forgiveness, and love is bigger than mercy. God’s love is displayed in many ways that don’t involve either mercy or forgiveness.

MERCY & GRACE: What of mercy and grace? The relationship between mercy and grace is very close, but the two are, indeed, different.

Mercy has to do with the consequences of sin. With relieving the pain, misery and suffering caused by sin. Grace deals with sin itself. As John MacArthur put it in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew: Mercy deals with the symptoms [of sin], grace deals with the cause.”

It was God’s mercy by which our sin was imputed to Jesus when He went to the cross. It was God’s grace by which Jesus’ righteousness was imputed to us at His resurrection.

God is not obligated to show us mercy or grace. Both flow from His love. Hebrews 4:16 declares, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

MERCY AND JUSTICE: Before we can proceed, we need to get a clearer understanding of what mercy is and what mercy isn’t.

There are those who believe that the one who is better off is obligated to extend mercy to those who are worse off. Certainly, based on the Scriptural verses we looked at, it can be argued that the Christian has an obligation to remember and show mercy to the poor. But, if those with the power to extend mercy are *obligated* to do so, mercy ceases to be mercy and becomes more of a form of justice.

Mercy and justice, at least on the surface, seem to be incompatible. With justice, a person is given exactly what they deserve. With mercy, a person is given either less punishment or a greater reward than they deserve. So, as fair question to ask is: By showing mercy is someone guilty of being unjust?

No. Mercy is not a form of injustice. Some will complain, for example, that God does not distribute His mercy equally on everyone. He even said, in Exodus 33:19, I “will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” They will claim then that God is not being fair, that He is being unjust. The thought is that if God shows mercy to one person, He is obligated, by fairness, to show mercy to every person.

Here is an example: A man lends money to three people in need. One of the borrowers suffers additional hardship and it becomes impossible for him to pay back the debt. The Lender, in an act of mercy, goes to him and forgives the Debtor his debt. Is the Lender obligated, out of fairness, to likewise forgive the debt of the other two Debtors? Can either of these other two Debtors claim injustice because their debts were not forgiven? No. We would reason that the forgiving or not forgiving of a debt remains in the hands of the Lender. He has not treated the other two Debtors unfairly by expecting them to fulfill their obligation to pay back their debt.

This same reasoning applies to God and His freedom to extend mercy to whom He wishes. Without being unjust.

Mercy is a form of what we could call *nonjustice*, but it is not injustice. If mercy is required by God, then it is an obligation, in which case it is no longer mercy, but justice.

MERCY AND JUSTICE IN SALVATION: God shows mercy to us by forgiving our sins. Yet, we know that sin must be punished, the price must be paid. God will show mercy, but not at the expense of justice. To do so, He would have to violate His own character - which He would never do. Mercy without punishment would make God unjust. How does He show us mercy without being unjust?

As in our example of the Lender and the three Debtors, there was a cost that needed to be paid. Money was lent and that debt had to be paid by someone. It was. The debt was paid by the Lender.

In salvation, God’s mercy, which flows from His love, was demonstrated when Jesus died for our sins. He took upon Himself the penalty that was due our sins. In so doing, God remained just while still being merciful to us. The debt was paid on our behalf.

To sum up: Justice is giving what is due. Injustice is a violation of Justice. Mercy, though outside of justice is not a violation of justice. Also, mercy, since it is not an obligation, cannot be demanded from the one in a position to receive it, but must be initiated by the one in a position to offer it. Yet, as Christians, we have an obligation, through the command of God, to show mercy to those in need.

OUR BIBLICAL RESPONSIBILITY TO THOSE IN NEED: The Bible speaks quite a bit about helping those in need. For example, Leviticus 19:9-10 reads:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.”

Here, the land owner is told to show mercy to the poor by leaving something for the poor in their fields.

There are other Scriptural passages that admonish us to be merciful to those in need.

“Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.” Proverbs 14:21

Luke 3:10,11 relates this response by John the Baptist when asked by the crowds, “What then should we do?” He said:

“Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.”

1 John 3:17 reads:

“But 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?”

Isaiah 58:10 promises a blessing to those who help the needy.

WHAT IF THE NEED IS THE RESULT OF WILLFUL SIN?: The above verses certainly indicate that we have a responsibility before God to show mercy to those in need. But, what are we to think when we consider verses like 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 where Paul writes:

“For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

There are situations where poverty is self-induced and the result of sin. Proverbs 23:21 tells us that “The drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.”

Sometimes poverty is the result of foolishness, as Proverbs 28:19 tells us:
“He who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty.”

it would seem inconsistent with Christian doctrine to extend mercy to those whose need has been caused by wilful and consistent disobedience to God’s Law. It certainly can’t be considered unloving or uncaring to hold people accountable for their sin.

Here is where we need to get a Biblical perspective on what need is.

THE NEED TO DEFINE THE NEED: Mercy acts because of need. In order to properly meet a need, we must first determine what that need is. We almost always assume that the real need is the obvious one. For example, someone who has spent all of us money on alcohol and has none left to pay his rent has a financial need. But the that is just “a” need, and not necessarily the primary one. Many times the obvious need is just the consequence of the deeper need.

With financial needs, the cause of someone’s poverty will determine what their need truly is. Although it may appear loving and benevolent to relieve someone of their obvious need without looking for the deeper need, in reality this aid may not help the person at all, but actually hurt them.

The aid given will many times keep them from ever facing their deeper need, since there is no reason to do so. Also, someone can get accustomed to receiving things for free and will become dependent upon this aid. This weakens their incentive to provide for themselves. Even in Leviticus 19 where landowners are commanded to leave something in their fields for the poor, those in need are still required to work for what they get by going into the fields and gathering what is there.

Extending mercy to someone doesn’t always mean providing an escape for them from consequences. Sometimes the merciful thing to do is to allow someone to take on their responsibilities and face the challenges those responsibilities present.

DETERMINE THE BEST WAY TO MEET THE NEED: The second step in redemptively extending mercy is to determine the best way to meet the need. Some solutions do not deal with the real need, and some solutions actually create more or additional problems.

A government program that is designed to house and feed the poor will meet the need of housing and feeding the poor, but, if ignoring or not addressing the deeper need of encouraging and facilitating a way for people to become self-sufficient, it could cause great harm (i.e. the government taking over the role of provider for the family could cause a breakdown in families as fathers become unnecessary).

In situations like those described in Proverbs 23:21 and 28:19, to merely meet a physical or financial need without addressing the sins that caused those needs is not really merciful. We should strengthen the hand of the poor and needy, not weaken it.

CONCLUSION: We have a Biblical responsibility to help those in need. But we also have a responsibility to understand and properly define what those needs are, and then in determining what the best way is to meet those needs.

We are not to merely “fix problems,” but rather to work redemptively to help others to walk in all that God has for them.

RESOURCES: John MacAurhtur’s New Testament Commentary; R.C. Sproul’s “Essential Truths of the Christian Faith” & Commentary on Matthew.