



**You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. PS 86:15**

Divine Mercy

God's mercy is the core of biblical revelation and the expression of God's own heart. When we study the Bible—both the Old and New Testaments—we discover that God's most fundamental attribute is mercy. The God revealed in Scripture suffers with his creatures and has a heart for the poor and the lost.

An abstract and philosophical notion of God describes God as infinite, eternal, almighty, and all-knowing. This understanding of the divine being seems awfully distant from the personal situations and real life of people. When God is conceived so apathetically, it is difficult to imagine much divine empathy for the struggles of human life. Such a God seems alien and ultimately irrelevant in a world with such pressing problems.

But God's historical self-revelation, as understood through the tradition of ancient Israel and the Christian church, presents quite different divine characteristics. This merciful God does not tire of seeking out his beloved ones. God cares deeply about the plight of his people and shows deep compassion in their suffering. When God's people are unfaithful, God responds to their rejection with a merciful love that they will never merit or deserve. Again and again, God demonstrates faithful love for the world and calls people to a joyful and abundant life.

Reflection and Discussion

- In what sense is mercy revealed in Scripture as God's most essential quality?

- Why is it important that God be revealed as both almighty and merciful?

Mercy in Salvation History

There is a false but widely held opinion that the God of the Old Testament is a vengeful and angry God, while the God of the New Testament is a gracious and merciful God. But in reality, both testaments reveal the same God, who is revealed through words and deeds of mercy. Throughout the history of salvation, God's mercy creates and sustains life. Mercy is the divine power that continually protects, promotes, builds up, and creates life anew.

The opening verses of the Bible testify that the creation of the world and its creatures is not the result of some inherent right to exist, but of God's desire to extend divine love. When alienation from God led to human hostility toward nature and other people, God did not abandon the world to its fate but enacted countermeasures to prevent humanity from running into disaster and falling into misery. With great mercy, God made a new beginning with the call of Abraham and promised blessings for all the people of the earth. God does not resist evil with force and violence, but over and over again, God creates new life and blessings.

The Old Testament message of mercy is not simply a spiritual message; it is a message with a physically concrete and social dimension that is essential to it.

When God saw the suffering of his people in Egypt and heard their cries, God came down to liberate and redeem them. This is not an indifferent God who sits obliviously on a heavenly throne, nor is this a rash and vengeful God who responds from afar. The God described in Israel's Torah is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love. With a heart full of mercy, God intervenes on behalf of slaves, offering them freedom and abundant life.

God demonstrates divine mercy throughout the history of ancient Israel. God's people merited death because of continual transgression, rebellion, and sin. But God, through divine mercy, grants them space for living anew. Biblical history testifies that God takes no satisfaction from the death of the sinner but finds delight when the sinner repents and continues to live.

But we must also understand that the revelation of God as merciful has nothing to do with false familiarity. God is not a chummy companion who is lax toward evil and overlooks our sin. Rather, the truth of God's mercy is indissolubly bound up with the revelation of divine holiness, with God's sovereignty and superiority over everything earthly. God is totally transcendent, yet condescends to draw near to creation.

The message of God's mercy does not stand in opposition to God's justice. The manifestations of God's justice in Israel's history and the assurance of universal divine justice gave hope to the people. Evidence of justice in an unjust world is already a work of mercy for the oppressed and those whose rights have been denied. So the message of God's mercy is not a message of cheap grace. God expects the Israelites to do what is right and just in imitation of God's own nature.

Because of God's holiness, God must offer resistance to evil. In the Bible this resistance is revealed as the wrath or judgment of God. We may dislike this depiction of God, yet divine wrath does not imply angry responses and emotionally surging rage. Wrath is God's resistance to malice and injustice. It is God's dynamic expression of his holiness in the face of evil. On the basis of God's holiness, God can't do anything other than punish evil and reward good. For this reason, mercy does not stand in opposition to the message of justice. Only a God who stands above and not under the demands of pure justice can forgive and pardon. God demonstrates divine sovereignty above all in forgiving and pardoning.

In his mercy, God holds back his justified wrath. God delays divine judg-

ment. He does this in order to provide people the opportunity for conversion. Divine mercy grants sinners a period of grace and desires their conversion. Mercy is ultimately grace for conversion.

In speaking of God's mercy, the Old Testament most often employs one of two different Hebrew words. The most frequently used term is *hesed*. It means unmerited favor, divine grace, and mercy. It is God's free and gracious turning toward his people with loving kindness. *Hesed* flows from God's relationship with Israel, the covenant God established with them. Because of this relationship, God's mercy is faithful love.

But since a relationship is a two-way bond, it seems according to human understanding that faithful love no longer obliges when Israel breaks the covenant and no longer respects its conditions. But here, God's mercy reveals its deeper aspects as love that continues giving, a love more powerful than betrayal, a grace stronger than sin. God, who is all-powerful and all-holy, concerns himself with the self-caused distresses of his people, hears their laments and bends down to them in their needs, and despite their infidelity, continues to care, to forgive, and to offer another chance, despite their deserved just punishment. This is divine mercy. It exceeds human experience and transcends human imagination.

The other frequently occurring Hebrew word for mercy is *rahamin*. It designates tender compassion and deeply felt care. Its root, *rehem*, means "a mother's womb." Thus, the term expresses a maternal love that arises from an original bond and unity. The recipient of this tender love can do nothing to deserve or merit it. *Rahamin* arises, we might say, from the necessity of the heart. As a maternal instinct, it suggests patient understanding, protection from danger, and a readiness to forgive.

In summary, the message of God's mercy permeates the entire Old Testament. This divine mercy is the organizing center of God's many other attributes: holiness, justice, fidelity, graciousness, patience, forbearance, condescension, and generosity. God comes to the aid of those who are lost and held in bondage. He is the protector of the poor and those without a voice. Again and again, God restrains his just and holy wrath and shows mercy to his unfaithful people, offering them another opportunity for repentance and conversion. Mercy is the externally visible feature of the divine heart, the effective aspect of God's very essence.

Reflection and Discussion

- What part of the Old Testament most convinces me that God is merciful and not vengeful?

- What is the biblical understanding of divine wrath? How can I reconcile God's just wrath with divine mercy?

Mercy Embodied in Jesus Christ

The incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the supreme expression of God's mercy. Each account of healing, exorcism, and forgiveness by Jesus in the gospels is a cameo of divine mercy. In Jesus, God's mercy is extended to the afflicted, the poor, the needy, and the sinners of Israel. Through his public ministry, the primary facets of God's mercy are given a tangible and personal shape. The mercy of Jesus expresses itself in the inclusion of social outcasts in his company, the forgiveness of repentant sinners, the healing of those sick in mind and body, acknowledgment of the needs of the poor, compassion for tired and hungry crowds, and even pardon for those who violently put him to death.

Jesus' demonstration of divine mercy in individual acts throughout the gospels illustrates the redemption that God extends to the whole world through the sacrificial death and resurrection of his Son. The God of mercy has desired the salvation of all people from all eternity. In the cross of Jesus Christ, the mercy of God stands as a sign over the world, over history, and over every human life. In the mercy revealed on the cross, God's power is most clearly displayed.

God does not sit enthroned in majesty over the world, apathetic to the grief and sufferings that fill it. God became human in Jesus Christ so that divine mercy may be felt and expressed as tangible compassion, through a literal suffering with humanity. In the divine incarnation of God's Son, God voluntarily surrendered himself to suffering and death. In the humanity of Jesus, God wills to suffer with us and for us. So, in all our suffering we are joined by the one who experiences and carries that suffering with us. And because the divine Christ, who is immortal and Lord over life and death, suffered and died, he conquered death and restored life.

In the crucifixion of Christ, God expresses divine mercy in the most extravagant way. On the cross, God gives himself completely, the greatest self-gift imaginable. In pouring out his life for us completely, even unto death, God gives to the world the fullest expression of merciful love. When we look to the cross, we can see love to the full, compassion in its most tangible form, and divine mercy to the upmost.

The teachings and actions of Jesus demonstrate that the loneliness, pain, and grief that humans feel—and to which God's mercy is directed—are rooted in humanity's distance from God. But God desires to have us close, to bestow his nearness on us in our adversity. God's mercy, therefore, is directed to our happiness and fulfillment. Divine mercy expands our hearts, offers us hope, restores serenity and peace, and gives us the experience of inner blessedness.

Although God offers everyone the saving effects of his merciful love, we must open our lives to receive it in order to experience its transforming power. Although God desires that his love be reciprocated, God does not force our response or bypass our freedom. We can ignore or reject God's mercy because God treats human freedom with radical seriousness. Our salvation depends on our decision and our response to the offer of God's love. God urges but does not force; he pursues but does not overpower or subdue.

In his mercy, God holds the possibility of salvation open for all human beings who are willing to allow their heart to be changed, even if their guilt is ever so great and their former life ever so messed up. Every person is able to trust in the immeasurable mercy of God. A person's "no" of refusal is always weak alongside the unconditional "yes" that God has spoken to humanity in the death and resurrection of Christ. In ways unfathomable to us, God never ceases to court human beings to the very end of life. God even enlists the intercession

of all the angels and saints of heaven on behalf of every individual so that we might choose eternal life over the rejection that results in unending death.

There is a place for everyone under the mantle of God's mercy. Jesus Christ as judge of the living and the dead is, indeed, the one who has died for all on the cross. The biblical message of mercy assures us that he is a gracious judge. In the salvation of the world, divine mercy has the first as well as the last word. The mercy embodied in Jesus Christ is the uplifting, hope-inducing message on which we can rely in every situation, both in life and in death. It is our refuge, our comfort, and the source of our confidence.

Reflection and Discussion

- In what sense can it be said that mercy is the heart of the gospel?

- In what ways do I experience God having mercy on me and on the whole world?

Works of Mercy as Our Response and Responsibility

The experience of divine mercy encourages and obliges us to become witnesses of mercy ourselves. If God treats us mercifully and forgives us, then we too must forgive and show mercy to one another. In our acts of mercy, God's

mercy for our neighbor becomes concretely realized. These acts of witnessing mercy to others have been traditionally categorized as seven spiritual works and seven corporal works of mercy.

The spiritual works of mercy are acts of compassion by which we help others with their emotional and spiritual needs. These seven are the following: converting sinners, instructing the ignorant, advising the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries, and praying for the living and dead. These works are a kind of preventive medicine for the spiritual poverty of shame, doubt, and despair. This kind of poverty drains life of all energy, joy, and sense of purpose, and it is the kind of poverty that can last forever.

The corporal works of mercy are compassionate deeds by which we help others with their material and physical needs. These seven are the following: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, giving drink to the thirsty, and burying the dead. The message of divine mercy is not a theory that is alien to reality, nor does it stop at the level of sentimental expressions of pity. Jesus teaches us to be merciful like God: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2). This pattern of *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God and his actions in Jesus Christ, is foundational for the Bible. Therefore, the message of divine mercy has consequences for the life of every Christian, for the pastoral praxis of the church, and for the contributions that Christians should render to the humane, just, and merciful structuring of society.

Jesus’ family is worldwide, and his brothers and sisters include all who are in need of life’s basic necessities: food, hospitality, clothing, health care, education, counseling, prayer, pardon, and companionship. The radical love of neighbor that Jesus demands is possible for us only because we have first received the love of God in the form of divine mercy. Only by imitating God in his gift of mercy to the world can we make talk about God’s mercy credible and persuasive; only in this way can we make it a message of hope for the world.

Reflection and Discussion

- Why does Scripture describe our works of mercy as an imitation of God?

- In what sense are works of mercy both a response and a responsibility for us?

Prayer

Creating and Redeeming God, you have manifested your presence in the world through your unfailing mercy. We praise you for the ways you have shown your faithful and compassionate love to the world. During this study, teach me the many ways your mercy has transformed the world and how I can respond to your faithful love through works of mercy. Send your Holy Spirit upon me to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I read and contemplate your inspired word.