



"If you were a hundred times worse than you are, your sins would be no match for his mercy."

—Tim Keller

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God's Enduring Mercy

The greatest example of mercy in the Bible is, of course, found in the life of our Savior, [Jesus Christ](#). He walked in mercy every day, healing multitudes, feeding thousands, and casting out many demons. As He was dying on the cross, He mercifully asked [God](#) to forgive those who had crucified Him ([Luke 23:34](#)).

We may be most familiar with the Hebrew word translated into "mercy," *hesed*, which means "[goodness](#), [kindness](#), and mercifulness." It also means "loyal, steadfast, or faithful [love](#)," stressing that those involved in the loving relationship belong together. "Mercy" appears in the Bible around 150 times, and in the [Old Testament](#), it is most often translated from the word *hesed*. However, it is also translated at other times as "lovingkindness," "goodness," and in about fifty other cases, "compassion."

Hebrew *raham* also means "to love, to have compassion, or to show mercy." Another Hebrew word used to express mercy is *kappreth*, which refers to the Mercy Seat between the two cherubim atop the Ark of the Covenant. It

indicates a "covering." God sits on the Mercy Seat atop the Ark to judge with mercy, covering our sins. Several Greek words found in the New Testament have equivalent meanings to these Hebrew terms.

The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery defines *mercy* as "aid rendered to someone who is miserable or needy, especially someone who is either in debt or without claim to favorable treatment." *Mercy* is generally understood to mean "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm." The key factor is showing mercy to those *over whom we have power*. Few of us have power over many people in society unless we are responsible for a crew of employees in the workplace. Those of us with children have likely had plenty of practice exercising mercy. Mercy, then, is not hard to understand mentally, but it is often difficult to implement practically on a regular basis.

Some of the world's renowned theologians have attempted to describe mercy, and they invariably fall back on God's perfect example:

- Jonathan Edwards: "God is pleased to show mercy to His enemies, according to His own sovereign pleasure. Though He is infinitely above all, and stands in no need of creatures; yet He is graciously pleased to take a [merciful](#) notice of poor worms in the dust."
- Charles Hodge: "Mercy is kindness exercised towards the miserable, and includes pity, compassion, [forbearance](#), and gentleness, which the Scriptures so abundantly ascribe to God."
- Martin Luther: "This is the first work of God—that He is merciful to all who are ready to do without their own opinion, right, [wisdom](#), and all spiritual goods, and willing to be [poor in spirit](#)."

A few [parables](#) show mercy in action. In [Matthew 18:23-30](#), Jesus gives His [Parable of the Unforgiving Servant](#). A man who owes the equivalent of \$10 million is forgiven of all his debt by the king, being moved with compassion. Yet the forgiven man, having power over another individual who owed him \$20, refuses to extend mercy. How could anyone who racked up an astronomical, unpayable debt then go after someone who owes mere pocket-change?

This parable illustrates God's great desire to exercise mercy toward us. Like the unforgiving servant's inability to pay his debt, we cannot atone for even one of our sins—and we have committed so many more! If it were not for God's mercy and willingness to forgive, we would have no hope. The situation is like being personally responsible for the U.S. national debt, which is quickly climbing toward \$30 trillion, a debt that will most likely never be paid.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan in [Luke 10:30-37](#) is another example. A man is robbed, beaten, and left, helpless, to die on the roadside. At least two people, a priest and a Levite, passed by and did nothing, yet a certain Samaritan felt compassion for the man and helped him until he recovered.

We can learn a vital point from this: Unless we act on our feelings of compassion, they are useless. Our hearts may overflow with compassion and pity for someone in need, and it could be in our power to help, but if we take no positive action, what good is it? The first two men who passed by may have felt a twinge of sorrow that the man had suffered, but they did nothing! His pity moved the Samaritan to exercise mercy, putting it to work by taking care of the man.

Many pages of the Bible declare examples of God's mercy. In [II Corinthians 1:3](#), Paul calls God "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort." He is merciful even to the worst offenders and lawbreakers, and even knowing our guilt, He does not always issue the punishment deserved.

God is perfect in all His ways, but Martin Luther may have been on to something when he called mercy "the first work of God." *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* comments, "God's chief disposition towards sinful man is mercy, spawned by His love, which exerts His power to bring sinful man back to Himself." How merciful our great God is and always will be!

In [Genesis 2:16-17](#), God gave Adam and Eve permission to eat of every tree of the garden except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As we

know, they ate of the forbidden fruit, separating themselves from God. Being spiritually cut off from the Source, they died. The same happened to us because of our sins.

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. ([Ephesians 2:4-6](#))

This is astounding—so astounding that we probably cannot truly grasp what Paul is saying here!

In [Matthew 20:20-21](#), Salome, the mother of James and John, requested of Jesus that He grant her sons the honor of sitting at His right and left hands. Christ replied that "it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father" (verse 23). In Ephesians 2, Paul is saying that, though we were dead in our sins, cut off from God, He has raised us and seated us at His right hand in Christ! What mercy! No higher position exists in the [Kingdom of God](#), yet He already sees us sitting there with Him because of Jesus Christ!

In reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan, have we ever imagined ourselves as the man beaten and left for dead? When we think of God in the role of the Good Samaritan, we see Him come along and pick us up, care for us, take us to a place of safety, and even make provision for us to have whatever we need to recover fully, even promising to provide additional, necessary support when He returns. Indeed, as Psalm 136 tells us twenty-six times, "His mercy endures forever"!

- Ronny H. Graham

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Mercy and Justice](#)

by Martin G. Collins

Judicial inequities include rendering harsh sentences for misdemeanors and ridiculously light sentences for abominable felonies. Often unequal compensation is given for equal effort and vice versa. Socialistic governments destroy morale and incentive by robbing the productive and giving to the indigent. Justice and mercy must be carefully balanced so that mercy never cancels out justice. Although soft-headed lenience does not display love or compassion, mercy is a godly quality demanded in His offspring. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant reveals that, because God has forgiven us far more than we deserve, we ought to extend compassion and forgiveness to others. We are obligated to emulate God's mercy in gifts and deeds as well as kindness, forbearance, and judgment. As we extend heartfelt compassion, God will extend mercy to us.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Beatitudes, Part 5: Blessed Are the Merciful](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Mercy is a virtue that has gone out of vogue lately, though it is much admired. Jesus, however, places it among the most vital His followers should possess. John Ritenbaugh explains this often misunderstood beatitude.

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