

Mercy: The Better Option

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Have you ever said the wrong thing and wished with all your heart that you could retract the statement?

Have you ever gossiped, revealed a confidence, or passed on a rumor that caused a problem for others?

Have you ever misjudged a person or situation and later came to see that your judgment was wrong, and because of your wrong judgment, the individual felt separated from others and hurt?

Have you ever judged another correctly as being wrong, but failed to consider the individual's background and what they have had to overcome?

Have you ever taken God's job and passed a condemning judgment on another person?

Have you ever had a poor attitude that caused you to be unforgiving toward a fellow member of the church?

Have you ever looked down on someone who seemed never to be able to get things right and who continually slipped in the same areas over and over, and because of this, you felt free to be critical of them?

In all of the above questions and more, I would have to admit to being guilty on all counts. We are likely all guilty of these sins many times over.

As a lay member, deacon, and elder through the years, I have made incorrect judgments of people and circumstances, revealed confidences, and passed on gossip and rumors, resulting in hurt feelings and worse situations. Though the results were painful, and I wished with all my heart I had not been so stupid and thoughtless, the experiences were instructive! Perhaps I can pass on a few lessons learned over the years.

Learning to Judge

The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 6:1-3:

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints [members of the church]? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?

In a broad sense, Paul is teaching that we are to learn to deal with situations as God would, and our training ground is here in this life and in the church. We are undergoing extensive hands-on training for the profession of judge, which, as Paul implies, will be among our duties as children of God in His Kingdom. This is no minor matter!

Earlier in my conversion, I clearly left out one of the most important elements needed for making right judgments. Jesus points out which one in His Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Had I shown more mercy in those situations, their outcomes would have been far different—and definitely better.

Generally, the merciful are those people who are affected by the suffering of others. They are affected in a manner that causes them, not only to offer encouragement to one who is experiencing a rough spot in his life, but also to work to lessen his suffering.

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary defines *mercy* as "a form of love determined by the state or condition of its objects. Their state is one of suffering and need, while they may be unworthy or ill-deserving. Mercy is at once the disposition of love respecting such, and the kindly ministry of love for their relief."

A secular dictionary, *The Reader's Digest Encyclopedic Dictionary*, concurs: *Mercy* is the "kind, compassionate treatment of an offender, adversary, prisoner in one's power; compassion where severity is expected, or deserved." Among its synonyms are "leniency," "compassion," "forgiveness," "pity," "kindness," "tolerance," "charity," "benevolence," "clemency," and "forbearance."

The primary idea behind mercy is rendering a kindness when harshness or condemnation is expected or even deserved. A merciful person looks beyond the present state of affairs to the potential good that may result from his compassionate handling of the matter. He is willing to forgo the other's punishment, his "just deserts," or his own desire for revenge in an attempt to produce good fruit from a bad situation.

Following in Christ's Steps

The nature of God is to be merciful to those He calls. We know that He calls the weak, foolish, and base (I Corinthians 1:26-28), those who are undesirable in society's eyes and guilty of sin in His eyes. He extends great mercy to them, redeeming them from the death penalty and setting them on the path toward eternal life in the Kingdom of God. In doing so, He sets us an example to follow!

Jesus teaches this in Matthew 9:10-13:

Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

In saying that He desires mercy and not sacrifice, Jesus is teaching that He prefers it when people practice mercy and not blindly follow ritual. He is not condemning the laws of sacrifice He set up for

Israel to practice until He fulfilled them, but explaining that He is more pleased with acts of forgiveness and kindness than strict external compliance to the law.

He is telling the Pharisees that, though they were exacting in keeping the letter of the law, they had completely missed its intent. In Matthew 23:23, He reminds them of this very point: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

It is good and right to tithe to God, even to be exacting in our accounting, but not at the expense of the far more important matters of justice, mercy, and faith! These weightier matters are a Christian's priorities, so if a question of "What do I do?" ever comes up between practicing them and keeping the strict letter of the law, our judgment should lean toward these Christian virtues. If we can do both, all the better!

Jesus Christ is the personification of mercy. Exodus 25:17-22 describes the Mercy Seat constructed in the wilderness. Essentially, it was the golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant, on which were figures of two cherubim facing each other with their wings stretched out, covering the Mercy Seat. God, the pre-incarnate Christ, says in verse 22, "And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony." The Mercy Seat represented God in His dealings with sinful humanity, and the chief element He employs is mercy.

Now notice Romans 3:23-25:

. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed. . . .

This passage tells us that Jesus Christ is our Mercy Seat, but the translators have hidden it. "Propitiation" (Greek *hilasterios*) in verse 25 is literally "place of conciliation or expiation" or "Mercy Seat." The Septuagint used *hilasterios* to translate the Hebrew noun *kapporeth* ("Mercy Seat"). This Hebrew word's root is *kapar* meaning "to cover" or "to conceal." This illustrates that the nature of God is to be merciful.

The apostle Peter writes in I Peter 2:21 that we are to follow in Christ's steps, thus as Jesus Christ is merciful, we also are to show mercy in our judgments.

Mercy Conquers All

This is so important that we are given a warning in James 2:12-13 concerning this: "So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." A divine judgment is coming, and it will be done fairly. However, God will be disinclined to show any mercy to those who have not exhibited mercy and kindness to others. This is the law of reciprocity: God will judge us according to how we have judged others (see Matthew 7:2; Luke 6:37-38).

James also says that "mercy triumphs over judgment." Indeed, the laws we have broken demand our death, but the mercy of God through the sacrificial death of His Son has made a way for us to be accepted. In the end, it will be clear that God's mercy prevails.

The kind of mercy that God wants to see from us is illustrated in passages such as Matthew 25, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. . . . Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:34-36, 40)

When we show pity, compassion, and kindness to those in difficult straits, we are practicing the merciful attitude that God expects each of His children to exhibit at all times. Of course, He does not want us to be so soft-hearted that we become an easy mark for those who would take advantage of us, but He does want us to develop a keen sense of discernment that realizes when mercy is a better option than the strict application of rules.

Undoubtedly, each of us would lend a helping hand to another who was in physical need, but there are other situations in which a physical need is not apparent that also require us to extend mercy. Particularly, we need to learn to employ mercy in our dealings with each other on a daily basis. To put it into today's language, everyone has bad-hair days, and on some days, even a normally lovable person can be very difficult to live with.

Age differences lend themselves to misunderstandings. We may still carry prejudices that rear their ugly heads from time to time, causing friction. Oftentimes, we just do not think before we speak. Mistakes made in the past can seem to hang over us like a cloud and never go away, and thus we do not feel forgiven, affecting our attitudes. And of course, we all have different backgrounds and came from situations in which we perhaps lived our lives in certain shameful ways. Each of these problems can ignite trouble with our closest family members and friends.

The problem that all of us face in making righteous judgments is that we cannot see into the other person's heart; we do not really know their intentions and attitudes. We have a hard enough time understanding ourselves, let alone someone else! In Jesus' comments about judgment in His Sermon on the Mount, He cautions us about being too critical: "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). Therefore, if we have to make a judgment call, it is far better to lean toward patience, forbearance, and mercy.

So, when we find ourselves offended by anyone, rather than responding in kind, we should apply the principle of giving a soft answer (Proverbs 15:1), turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), and extending tender mercies (Colossians 3:12).

Satan would like us to hang on to evil thoughts about another, to hold a grudge against a brother, or to arrive at church with a resentful attitude toward a fellow Christian, but Jesus Christ wants us to

remember Matthew 18:35: "So My heavenly Father will [pass judgment against] you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." Just as He forgave each of us from the heart, He wants us to learn to forgive others in the same generous, merciful way.

In my forty-plus years in the church, I have made almost all of the mistakes a person can make with his mouth, and realizing this, I have truly appreciated those who have extended mercy and forgiveness to me. They have taught me a great lesson by their spiritual maturity: that I, too, had better extend mercy and kindness to others.

What does God require of us? He tells us plainly in Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, *to love mercy*, and to walk humbly with your God?"