



The Merciful Heart

Matthew 5:7, Romans 12:3-8

The world in general is unmerciful. Often people find revenge delicious and frown upon forgiveness as an action which is taken only by the weak. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Matthew 5:7) Mercy is compassion for people in need. It is not the same as grace. Mercy extends relief or cures, heals, and helps. Grace extends

pardon and cleanses and reinstates.

Jesus said that those who show mercy find mercy. We don't merit mercy by being merciful just as we don't merit forgiveness by being forgiving. But we cannot receive God's mercy unless we repent and we can't claim to have repented unless we are merciful and forgiving toward others. In our meekness we acknowledge that we are sinners and in being merciful we have compassion on others because they are sinners, too.

It is not always to the deserving that mercy must be extended. If it must be deserved then it would no longer be mercy but mere justice. What moves Christians to mercy is the knowledge that they themselves were undeserving but have been forgiven.

Mercy is the ability to enter into another's situation and be sympathetic toward her plight or problem. This is a distinctively Christian grace because humans are naturally geared more to criticism than to mercy. The old adage "hate the sin but not the sinner" is true. We can love and forgive a person without approving of her actions or denying the sin she has done. If a person's own action puts her in need of our mercy, it does not mean that we condone that person's sin when we extend mercy to her.

Sometimes we think that pity and mercy are the same. Pity is merely an emotion. Mercy is both an attitude and an activity. It goes beyond pity to become compassionate action. It does not condone sin, but works to repair sin's devastation. It encourages the one who has failed to begin again.

Deuteronomy 4:31a says "The Lord your God is a merciful God." God's chosen people, the Israelites, turned against God to worship idols but God promised them when they returned to the true God they would not be abandoned or destroyed. God did not forget the covenant made with their forefathers. They did not deserve God's mercy but God chose to give it. They were in need of mercy because they had broken the law of God. But others need mercy through no fault of their own.

James 1:27 reminds us to look after widows and orphans. They represent those who cannot be blamed for their circumstances and are in need of our mercy. We are not to judge them or look down upon them because of their condition but we are to show compassion to them. When we

remember how merciful he has been to us, how can we not imitate him when others need our mercy?

Paul reminds us, as “Women of the Word,” to be realistic and objective when we look at our own lives. Read Romans 12:3-8. We are a part of the body of believers and cannot separate ourselves from it. We all have God-given abilities to serve in the community of faith. Paul urges each one to use her gifts for the well-being of the whole body since others need the gifts we have to offer.

Paul lists mercy as one of the gifts. As one of the spiritual gifts, the gift of mercy means someone is particularly sensitive to the needs of others and is able to show this by relieving the suffering of others. As Christians each of us has a ministry. We may not all possess the “gift” of mercy but we all are commanded to be merciful by Jesus himself. In Luke 6:36 he says, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Jesus tells us that when we minister to others we are actually ministering unto Him. “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ “ (Matthew 25:40)

Paul reminds us that as God’s chosen people we are to be compassionate. “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Colossians 3:12) The many Bible references we find to mercy serve to remind us that in God’s eyes mercy is an important characteristic of his children. If we show mercy then we have Christ’s promise that we will receive mercy.

Heart-to-Heart Activities:

1. Leader should list on chalkboard or chart particular programs, projects, or ministries which involve an aspect of mercy their particular church or community is involved in. (Example: Nursing home ministry, Prison ministry, etc.) Describe what the goal of each is. Then ask participants in your group to prayerfully consider making some kind of commitment to one or more of these.
2. The leader should make sure there is a small trashcan in the classroom. Give each participant a pencil and paper. Ask each to write down ways she has received mercy from God or from other people. Then invite each woman to tear their paper into tiny pieces and toss away in the trashcan in recognition that God has been merciful to her, as the group sings “At Calvary”.

Reflection Questions:

- ♥ Name some ways that you are merciful as an individual; as a church; as a community.
- ♥ Why do you suppose we find it easier to extend mercy to some than to others?
- ♥ Why do we sometimes mistake pity for mercy or compassion? Why are they not the same?

- ♥ Name some examples of truly merciful people (either living or dead).
- ♥ Whatever our particular gifts are, how can we include mercy as a part of our individual “ministry”.

Prayer:

Merciful God,

We thank you that you had mercy upon us when we were the worst of sinners. As your children we realize that your mercy has brought us to the place we occupy at the present time. Help us to fulfill your command to extend the mercy we have received from you out to others who may be in need. May we show a spirit of mercifulness to all, even those who may not deserve it. And may that spirit be a witness to our Savior, Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name, Amen.