**God of mercy**

We started this year by looking at who God was. Remember, we looked at the indescribable God, we looked at our awesome God. Today I want to continue that examination by looking at the merciful God.

We have just celebrated Easter with the low of Friday and the high of Sunday, when we remembered the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our saviour.

And we remembered the reason that he had to go to the Cross for us, which was to make a pathway for us to be reconciled with God.

And last week we looked at worship and thankfulness and how one leads to the other – thankfulness leads to worship.

1 Peter 1:3 says, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”* (CSB).

Even though we know that Jesus took upon him all our sins, somehow, we think we sort of deserve the result of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Somehow, we think we are actually good enough to be in God’s favour.

But the truth is that we will never be good enough in our own strength, no matter how exemplary is our conduct or attitude or behaviour.

For all have sinned and fallen short of God, we are told in scripture.

We need to strip away our misbelief that somehow, we are good enough for God and we deserve heaven.

Thomas Merton writes that we should let ourselves be brought naked and defenceless into the centre of that dread where we stand alone before God in our nothingness, without explanation, without theories, completely dependent upon his providential care, in dire need of the gift of his grace, his mercy and the light of faith.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In truth we are acceptable to God only because of the actions of God in a wonderful word called mercy.

It is that mercy that we are looking at today.

Ephesians 2:4 *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.*

On a human level, mercy is the benevolent or compassionate treatment of someone suffering or in need. Mercy is an attitude that moves us to act on behalf of the unfortunate.

On a divine level, mercy is the foundation of forgiveness expressed in God’s pardon of human sin. By His divine quality of mercy, God remains faithful to His covenant promises and His relationship with His people despite our unworthiness and repeated faithlessness (Ephesians 2:4–9).

Only through God’s mercy, are we acceptable to him.

Romans 9:15-16 *“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God.*

But I fear that we do not understand the depth of that mercy.

Charles Finney wrote that our consciousness of our own unmercifulness, and evidence of the same in others, renders it difficult for us to conceive of the infinite mercy of God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God in his mercy allows us to live. God in his mercy forgives us our continuing sin. God in his mercy draws us back and embraces us like the father in the parable of the prodigal son.

2 Ch 30:9 *For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.”*

God’s mercy is without limit. Remember the disciple Peter asking Jesus how many times we should forgive someone, and he thought they were being extravagant in suggesting 7 times (Jewish law said 3 times), but Jesus said 70 x 7 – endless forgiveness. (Matthew 18:21)

Deuteronomy 4:31 *Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.*

In God’s mercy, He shows leniency. He withholds punishment from sinners even though we deserve it:

Nehemiah 9:31 NLT *In your great mercy, you did not destroy them completely or abandon them forever. What a gracious and merciful God you are!”*

God’s mercy also causes Him to give good gifts to those who are undeserving:

*“Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us”* (Luke 1:78, NLT).

We are not like God. We are more like Shylock in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, wanting his pound of flesh for wrongs done to us.

We harbour grudges and allow them to fester in our hearts and poison our lives.

We go to the imprecatory Psalms that invoke judgment, curses, or calamities upon our enemies, which express feelings of distress, anger, and righteous indignation against wickedness and injustice, seeking divine punishment on adversaries, desiring God's justice.

Psalm 137:8-9 *Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

Philip Yancey provocatively writes: The scandal of forgiveness confronts anyone who agrees to a moral cease-fire just because someone says, ‘I’m sorry.’ When I feel wronged, I can contrive a hundred reasons against forgiveness.

Thank God that God is not like us.

God is to be praised as a God of mercy and tender compassion. He forever cares for the afflicted and oppressed. Repenting sinners, who are helpless and exposed more than any fatherless children, are admitted into his family, and share all their blessings.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We find in Jesus, a move of emphasis from God’s holiness (exclusive) to God’s mercy (inclusive). Instead of the message “No undesirables allowed”, he proclaimed, “In God’s kingdom there are no undesirables.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Let me repeat that because it is a biggie: In God’s kingdom there are no undesirables, we are all included.

It is good to consider and dwell on this facet of God’s character. It is good to thank God for his mercy that we ourselves have received from him.

But the realisation of that mercy calls us to action as well.

Luke 6:36 *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

The NZ Pastor Brian Hathaway writes “The church is supposed to be credible witnesses to the love, justice and mercy of God to the surrounding communities. God has chosen the church to model something of his Kingdom purposes to a watching world.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

“The church is to be a community reflecting God's passion for righteousness, Justice, and mercy. When we are that holy community, we make an impact on any unholy world, no matter how desperate circumstances,[[6]](#footnote-6) writes Charles Colson. He was involved in the Watergate scandal under US President Nixon and went to prison for his part in that. He found God there and was transformed. He had received mercy from God when he deserved no mercy.

How do we as individuals or as the community of God show mercy when every fibre of our being wants justice rather than mercy?

Thomas Merton suggests that “In God, justice is mercy, mercy is justice, and both are wisdom and power and being, for all His attributes merge in one infinite Reality that elevates them beyond definition and comprehension.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Justice is not opposite to mercy in God’s economy. They are hand in hand.

This week I watched a documentary on Netflix about the 1995 Oklahoma city bombing, where domestic terrorists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols used a truck bomb to blow up the Federal building, killing 168 people including 19 children and injured 684. The public called for justice, they called for the death penalty for McVeigh and he was eventually executed by lethal injection.

But I recall a video interview with Bud Welch whose 23-year-old daughter, Julie Marie, was killed in the bombing. In the months after her death, Bud changed from supporting the death penalty for Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols to taking a public stand against it. Justice tempered with mercy.

I think also of South Africa after the fall of apartheid. Under the wise leadership of Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu, the country initiated an amazing process of confessing, finding, digging, confronting, and reconciling, called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The Truth and Reconciliation process took seven years from 1995-2002.

The TRC took the testimony of approximately 21,000 victims; and 2,000 of them appeared at

public hearings. The commission received 7,112 amnesty applications. Amnesty was

granted in 849 cases and refused in 5,392 cases, while other applications were withdrawn.

Truth and Reconciliation was needed because Apartheid was a system legally enforced

between 1948 and 1990. “Institutionalized racism stripped South African blacks of their civil and political rights and instituted segregated education, health care, and all other public services, only providing inferior standards for blacks and other non-Afrikaans. Internal resistance was met with police brutality, administrative detention, torture, and limitations on freedom of expression.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Justice tempered with mercy was offered because the leaders Mandela and Tutu knew that

without it, there would be widespread bloodshed as there had been in other African countries when the colonialists lost power.

That is mercy and justice at a national level but let’s bring it down to a personal level.

In one notable incident of the TRC, a white police officer named Mr. Van der Boek was put on trial. The court found that he had come to a woman’s home, shot her son at point-blank range, and then burned the young man’s body on a fire while he and his officers partied nearby. The

woman’s husband was killed by the same men, and his body also was burned.

A member of the South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission turned to the woman and asked, “So, what do you want? How should justice be done for this man?”

“I want three things,” the woman said confidently:

“I want first to be taken to the place where my husband’s body was burned so that I can

gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial. My husband and son were my only

family.”

“I want, secondly, for Mr. Van der Boek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice

a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I

still have.”

“And finally, I would like Mr. Van der Boek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because

Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly

ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr.

Van der Boek in my arms, embrace him, and let him know that he is truly forgiven.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

For the woman in the story, forgiveness was possible because she as a Christian,

recognized her own status as a forgiven person.

How hard and how countercultural was that? Could we have done that?

In an incident recorded in Scripture, a woman in the town who was a sinner brought an

alabaster jar of fragrant oil and stood behind Jesus at His feet, weeping, and began to wash

His feet with her tears. She wiped His feet with the hair of her head, kissing them and

anointing them with the fragrant oil.

Jesus said in Luke 7: 47 … *her many sins have been forgiven; that’s why she loved much.*

*But the one who is forgiven little, loves little.” Then He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”*

*Those who were at the table with Him began to say among themselves, “Who is this man*

*who even forgives sins?” And He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in*

*peace.”*

Jesus at this time also told a parable in Luke 7:41 *“Two people owed money to a certain*

*moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had*

*the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him*

*more?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have*

*judged correctly,” Jesus said.*

We who have been forgiven much are to forgive others, show mercy to others.

And Jesus told another parable known as the Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor

*Matthew 18:23 “… the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me.*

*Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the*

*angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. “That’s*

*what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from*

*your heart.”*

Be merciful because your Father in heaven is merciful to you.

Let’s finish with a poem by Cindy Wyatt

God Is Merciful

Our God is so gracious, merciful and lovingly kind

In his Word He gives us sweet peace of mind

He remembers our frame and that we are dust

Though He is so perfect and holy and just

He removes our transgressions as far as the east is from the west

and with Christ's righteousness we then are dressed

When he looks at our heart, He does not see sins we have done

But instead sees the blood of His only begotten son

Where would we be without God's merciful grace

Our lives would certainly be in a hopeless case

God says he will remember our sins no more

He forgets them all and for us has rich blessings in store

God's love and mercy will endure forever and ever

and from his great love nothing can sever

Psalm 118:29 O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth forever.

1. Thomas Merton Contemplative prayer 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Charles Finney Principles of Christian Obedience 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary (Ps 68:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Philip Yancey The Jesus I Never Knew 155 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brian Hathaway Beyond Renewal – the Kingdom of God 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Charles Colson Against the night: living in the dark ages 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Merton, T. (1976). The Ascent to Truth (p. 68). Burns & Oates. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://moreenigma.com/2015/06/13/truth-and-reconciliation-the-long-work-of-doing-and-undoing/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://moreenigma.com/2018/06/20/become-my-son/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)