**God of mercy**

Bruce and I attended the Baptist Hui at Rangiora last week. Hui is the annual gathering of all the Baptist churches in NZ. The theme of the conference was Justice, Mercy, Humility.

Let me pick up on just one of those topics. Let me look at mercy.

God is a God of mercy as well as justice, a God of love as well as wrath.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The need for mercy comes after Justice

Someone wrote: If one is accused of a crime and the case is about to come to trial, one needs a good defence lawyer. On the other hand, if the trial is over and you have been convicted and sentenced to death, you don’t need a defence lawyer. You need a pardon. The human race without Christ needs a pardon from sin. A defence lawyer will not do, because we have no defence; we are guilty. We need a pardon, lest we spend eternity in torment and separation from God. God recognized our pitiful situation, and he could have responded by telling us that it is our problem, and we should work it out ourselves. But our compassionate God saw our need and took it upon himself to provide the solution.[[2]](#footnote-2)

He showed mercy to us when we were still in our sins. Thank you, God.

Christianity has at its core a most unnatural concept called grace which means that we can do nothing to counterbalance our sins. God has already paid the penalty, and we need merely accept it, by trusting him for the remedy.[[3]](#footnote-3) We need his mercy.

Grace is what God gives, mercy is what we receive.

We believe that the God of judgment also is a God of mercy who stands ready to redeem and restore when his people come before him in repentance.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We sinners are encouraged to repent and turn to God. When we do, He will forgive, because he is a God of mercy.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There are a huge number of scriptural passages that refer to God as a God of mercy.

I am using the KJV translation a lot in this sermon, and that is because the modern translations change the word “mercy” to many other words for some reason.

In the biblical Hebrew language, the word for “mercy” is racham. It suggests God’s “mercy” toward humanity is the same kind of divine protection that a baby has in its mother’s womb.

The repeated refrain in many verses is something like in 1 Chronicles 16:34 (KJV)) *O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; For his mercy endureth for ever.*

In NRSV, the word mercy is translated as love

Think of Numbers 14:18 (KJV) *“the LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression*

Again, NRSV translates the word mercy as love

Think of Mary, after learning that she would be the mother of the Messiah, says (Luke 1:50): *His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*

Think of 2 Chronicles 30:9 (NRSV) *For as you return to the LORD, your kin and your children will find compassion with their captors and return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.*

And Scripture reinforces the pathway to mercy.

Proverbs tell us that (28:13, NIV): *“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy”*

That is why people can confidently call on the name of the Lord, pleading for mercy. We have a pathway to receiving mercy.

The sequence is this: Sin, found guilty, repentance, forgiveness, mercy.

No mercy without justice. No mercy unless there is a penalty that needs to be paid.

And we know that need. The wages of sin is death.

Even in our courts of law, the fact of an early guilty plea and signs of contrition affect the sentence imposed.

If that is how our human justice system shows mercy, how much more does God for us.

As a result of God’s mercy in forgiving sinners, David pleaded for mercy in forgiving his sins in Psalm 41:4, NIV): “*I said, ‘O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you’* and this is repeated by many people in many verses throughout Scripture, all falling at the feet of God, seeking (but not demanding) his mercy.

Some people think there is a divide between OT and NT: that justice and judgment characterize the God of Israel, while mercy and grace belong to the Lord of the Church but both the Old and the New Testaments proclaim the mercy of God, and the Old has more than four times as much to say about mercy as the New. We should banish from our minds for ever the notion that only Jesus exhibits the God of love.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is all through Scripture.

All of the prophetic utterances which promise wrath from God end with the offer of mercy if the people repent and turn from their evil ways. God stays his hand – that is mercy.

Think of the story of Jonah, when the prophet finally went to Nineveh and delivered God’s judgement on the inhabitants *“40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned*”

Jonah 3:5 *The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth*.

Jonah 3:8-9 *The King decreed “let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”*

Then God showed them mercy, v.10 *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.*

Sin, found guilty, repentance, forgiveness, mercy

The idea of God’s mercy is summed up in a passage from the book of Nehemiah

Nehemiah 9:17 (NRSV) *they refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.*

Nehemiah 9:31 *In your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.*

So, why are we chosen for mercy?

Why would God offer us mercy when throughout history we have been rebelling against him and turning to idols, being described even by God as a stiff-necked people? An image of an unsubmissive, defiant, and stubborn animal that will not accept the yoke of the master or work the land.

The reason that we are offered mercy is that God loves us and goes out of his way to seek a relationship with us, even if we rebuff him continually.

He sent prophets and the people killed them. That did not stop him sending them. Finally, he sent his son in the ultimate act of love, and we killed him too.

What God did for us in Christ on Calvary is an act of great mercy.

Never think that we are entitled to that mercy.

We cannot demand mercy; we are not entitled to it. We are entitled to our punishment for our sin, which is death but never entitled to God’s mercy.

Many people take God's grace for granted, almost as if they deserve his grace. If it is deserved, it isn't grace. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Simply because he grants mercy to my neighbour, it gives me no claim on his mercy. Again, we must remember that mercy is always voluntary on behalf of God.

*“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.”* (Romans 9:15)[[8]](#footnote-8)

Mercy and grace are not earned.

It is impossible for anyone, anywhere, any time to deserve grace.

Grace by definition is undeserved. As soon as we talk about deserving something, we are no longer talking about grace; we are talking about justice. Only justice can be deserved.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It was while we were steeped in our sin, that (Eph 2:4, NIV) “*because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy*” stepped in to save us.

Our new spiritual birth comes to believers as a result of the mercy of God (1 Pet 1:3).

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”*

As a result, those who formerly had no relation to God are now his people, it says in 1 Pet 2:10. None of this happened because of us, but because of God’s great mercy![[10]](#footnote-10)

God's promises are his wonderful gifts of grace to us. They are entirely undeserved. We should be extremely careful that we receive them in humility rather than expecting their fulfilment as though they are our just due.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We struggle with this idea of mercy given to us, because it is in our human nature not to be merciful. We are more like Ming the Merciless than a merciful God in our relationships with others

We do not show mercy to the weak, we stand on them and climb over them, survival of the fittest.

That consciousness of our own lack of mercy, and evidence of the same lack in others, renders it difficult to conceive of the infinite mercy of God.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We do not understand why the almighty God would stoop to deliver us.

But he says it and offers it. All we can do is accept it.

We need to acknowledge our need for mercy

There are 2 words that I have used almost interchangeably – grace and mercy – but they are not the same.

As I said, grace is what God gives, mercy is what we receive.

2 Chronicles 7:14 *If my people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*

The great DL Moody wrote: if I am too proud to confess, I need to expect no mercy from God and no answers to my prayers. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Grace and mercy are only effective when there is a need for it. To get to a place of grace, we must experience a need. We must reach the end of ourselves and find out that things are really bad,[[14]](#footnote-14) and we cannot fix it.

That is why so many people in prison turn to God, because they have come to an end of their resources and recognise that they need salvation.

We need to express gratitude for that undeserved favour that has been poured out on us by God. God has been merciful to all of us in many ways.

The song I chose for my baptism was Wonderful Grace, written by John Pantry in 1986

Wonderful grace that gives what I don’t deserve,

pays me what Christ has earned then lets me go free.

Wonderful grace that gives me the time to change,

washes away the stains that once covered me.

And all that I have I lay at the feet

of the wonderful Saviour who loves me.

We can sing with the psalmist (Ps 89:1, KJV), “*I will sing of the mercies of the LORD for ever: with my mouth will I make known thy faithfulness to all generations.”*[[15]](#footnote-15)

Again, NRSV translates the word mercy as love.

As a result of receiving mercy ourselves, we need to exhibit God’s mercy to the world

As always, that’s nice that God shows us mercy but how will that affect my interactions with others?

For those who have received much, much is expected. (I am misquoting Jesus – he says forgiven much)

Jesus moved the emphasis from God’s holiness (exclusivity) to God’s mercy (inclusivity). Instead of the message “No undesirables allowed”, he proclaimed, “In God’s kingdom there are no undesirables.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

He gives grace and mercy to all those who repent, not just the people we like.

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.[[17]](#footnote-17)

How well are we doing in that modelling?

We may ask, “How can I show mercy? I am not God”. Yes, I agree “you are not God” but you have the Holy Spirit living within you that helps you do what is impossible in your own strength.

The commitment of mercy, compassion, love and service is the calling of every Christian, and it is that calling that leads us into close personal relationships with unbelievers around us.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The church is supposed 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 the circumstances.[[19]](#footnote-19)

How well are we doing that reflection?

It has been said that mercy is love with legs on it.[[20]](#footnote-20)

How do our legs look?

The reason for us exhibiting mercy is this:

Grace and mercy are a far more effective means of creating love and devotion to Jesus than condemnation. A new affection for Christ has a far greater power to drive out sin and bring lasting repentance than any sermon on moral improvement or any program for straightening out one’s life[[21]](#footnote-21)

How well are we creating that devotion to Jesus?

In Micah 6:8, God speaks through the prophet to give us three big instructions for our lives. *“The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”* (NLT).

What does our report card look like on those counts?

A Prayer for Mercy

“Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.” Lord, like David in Psalms 4, we cry out to you as our authority and the author of true mercy. Thank You for being a God of compassion and love. Life is hard enough without constantly being afraid of a God who’s out to get us.

Help us see what you want us to see when You don’t lift the consequences of our actions. Help us to pay it forward to others when you do. Be that constant voice inside our heads and the soothing arms around our hearts. Mercy is a gift. Never let us forget to mirror to others the compassion You’ve shown us.

1. Lawrence, M. *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministr*y 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Feinberg, J. S *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* 359–360 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Philip Yancey *Rumours of another world* 149 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Madden, S. C. “Joel” In *CSB Study Bible: Notes* 1369 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Feinberg 362 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tozer, A W *The Knowledge of the Holy* 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tommy Tenney *The God Catchers* 132 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R C Sproul *The Holiness of God* 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sproul 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Feinberg 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Henry and Richard Blackaby *Hearing God’s Voice* 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Charles Finney *Principles of Christian Obedience* 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. D L Moody *The Overcoming Life* 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cloud & Townsend *How People grow: what the Bible reveals about personal growth,* 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Feinberg, 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Philip Yancey *The Jesus I Never Knew* 155 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Brian Hathaway *Beyond Renewal – the Kingdom of God* 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jerram Barrs *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Charles Colson *Against the night: living in the dark ages* 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rusaw & Swanson *The Externally Focused Church* 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Jerram Barrs *Learning Evangelism from Jesus 1*02 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)