

A discovery of mercy

My testimony

From 1984 until the late 1990s I was involved in very high profile campaigns in the Church of England General Synod and in the British media over biblical beliefs and morality. Initially this involved affirming the Virgin Birth and bodily Resurrection of Jesus over against some bishops and others who were denying or undermining those truths. It also involved affirming that Jesus is the only Saviour over against those Christians who were undermining this belief by implying he was only one way of salvation. Finally, it involved standing for biblical sexual morality over against those in the church who were selling out to secular permissiveness. And I want to make it crystal clear that I stand by all those campaigns to this day.

However, in 1995, in a remarkable spiritual experience, God highlighted the following attitudes which had developed in me:

- a. legalism: an emphasis on truth but insufficient emphasis on mercy.
- b. judgmentalism: a tendency to jump to negative conclusions about people and events.
- c. negativism: a tendency only to see the failure and sin in the church (and in charismatic renewal) rather than to balance this with an equal emphasis on rejoicing in and affirming that which is good.
- d. the “older brother” syndrome: a tendency to object to the idea of God blessing those of whom we disapprove.

All this led to a deep experience of repentance. Let me earth this in some examples of the practical changes which have taken place in my head and my heart:

1. I developed a much more positive attitude towards people, including non-Christians and Christian leaders in serious error (whilst maintaining a clear opposition to that error). The attitude to non-Christians began some time ago as a result of writing *Jesus the Only Saviour* and seeing the depth of love and extravagant blessing which God showers on them: seeking to win them to repentance through kindness.
2. I gained a new understanding of the unfathomable riches of God’s mercy is overwhelming both to mind and heart. I define it as follows: “God’s mercy can be described as him taking an absolute (perfect) stand on the principles he has revealed in Scripture but nevertheless blessing richly those who disobey those principles (Matt. 5:45)!”

MERCY IN SCRIPTURE

1. *Mercy is an eternal divine attribute*

Psalm 25:6 “Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.” Micah 7:18 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.” Eph 2:4-5 “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.”

2. Mercy is a sovereign act

Exodus 33:19 God says: "... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" cf. Rom 9:18

3. Mercy is exercised to the outcast

Jesus showed mercy which conflicted with the attitudes of Jewish culture around him to the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:22), to the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:36-7) and to the tax collector (Luke 18:13).

4. Mercy is exercised to persistently rebellious sinners

Neh 9:16-31 Moses speaks of this divine characteristic when he tells the Lord that in the incident of the Golden Calf the people "were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, ... So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies."²⁸ "But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time."²⁹ "You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen."³⁰ For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples."³¹ But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God."

Dan 9:9 The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him." cf. Isa 55:7; Rom 11:30-31; 1 Tim 1:13

5. Mercy tempers wrath

Habakkuk prays "... in wrath remember mercy." (3:2). James writes: "Mercy triumphs over judgment!" (2:13) cf. Gen 19:16

6. Mercy is an obligation for believers

In Hosea 6:6 God says: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." Micah says: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Jesus says: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Matt 5:7) "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:36)

James 2:13 James warns: "... judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful." He adds that "the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." (James 3:17).

7. Mercy is an incentive for believers

Paul writes: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship." (Rom 12:1).

SUMMARY

Mercy is a sovereign act of undeserved kindness shown to a defeated enemy; a condemned sinner or criminal; an outcast; a persistently rebellious sinner or a debtor

Mercy tempers wrath and is exercised even after judgment has been meted out.

It is an eternal divine attribute and an obligation for believers to show too. It is an incentive for self sacrifice amongst believers.

MERCIFUL EXCEPTIONS TO STRICT APPLICATION OF OT LAW

1. Abram

Gen 18:32 Abram's intercession for Sodom shows the mercy of God. God says he will destroy Sodom but Abram pleads with him to have mercy even if there are only ten righteous people there. God agrees.

2. Israel in the wilderness

In the wilderness God responded positively to the Israelites' grumbling at the Red Sea Ex 14:11-12 at Marah Ex 15:22-24; in the Desert of Sin cf. Ex 16:2-3; at Rephidim Ex 17:1-2.

In Exodus 32 the Israelites worship the golden calf and the Lord says to Moses (v. 10): "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." But after Moses intercedes for them (v. 14) "Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."

At Kadesh the people rebel (Num 14) and the Lord threatens to destroy them because they deserve death according to the Law (vv11-12). However he forgives them.

3. King Ahab

God showed great mercy to Ahab who was a very evil king when he repented. 1 Kings 16:30-33 states that "Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him." Elijah said to him (1 Kings 21:20-29): "Because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel-- slave or free. ... (There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.) When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day...."

4. King Jehoahaz

God shows mercy to another evil king when he repents. 2 Kings 13:2-6 "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD by following the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit, and he did not turn away from them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and for a long time he kept them under the power of Hazael king of Aram and Ben-Hadad his son. Then Jehoahaz sought the LORD's favor, and the LORD listened to him, for he saw how severely the king of Aram was oppressing Israel. The LORD provided a deliverer for Israel, and they escaped from the power of Aram. So the Israelites lived in their own homes as they had before. But they did not turn away from the sins of the house of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit; they continued in them. Also, the Asherah pole remained standing in Samaria."

5. *Ezra - Nehemiah*

The Lord is so merciful that although he lays down repentance as the condition of restoring the Jews to the land of Israel, yet he doesn't seem to keep strictly to this. The Israelites had already returned to the land before Ezra led them in repentance in Nehemiah 9.

It is true that there was a good deal of fasting during the exile lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and there were genuinely godly individuals amongst the exiles, such as Daniel who expressed penitence for the nations sins (Dan. 9:1-19). But the Lord said through Zechariah (7:4-7) that much of the fasting of the exiles was insincere.

The first group returned from exile in 538 BC (see section 4). But in 520 Zechariah is still calling them to return to the Lord (Zech. 1:1-6). In the same year Haggai accuses them of selfishly neglecting to build the temple (Hag. 1:1-11). The Lord said through him that whatever the nation did and offered was defiled (Hag. 2:14).

In 458 BC Ezra discovered to his horror that the returned exiles had intermarried with pagan wives, a practice which would almost inevitably lead them into idolatry. And idolatry was the main cause of the exile. Ezra leads them in public repentance (Ezra 9-10).

In 446 BC Nehemiah mourned the "*great trouble and disgrace*", of the exiles who had apparently suffered some recent destruction in Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1-4). He went on to confess that the people had "*acted very wickedly towards*" God. It included himself and his house. (Neh. 1:6-7).

The following year Ezra publicly read the Book of the Law to the people, who were clearly ignorant of it. The people wept at its contents (Neh. 8). Ezra led them in public repentance acknowledging that the exile and their present state was a just judgement by God. (Neh. 9) The people then covenanted to obey God (Neh. 9:38-10,39). This major repentance, reading of the neglected law, and covenant to obey God's law took place 93 years after the first exiles were restored to the land. Even so Malachi, after this (probably after 433 BC), prophesied against the sins of the people which included offering blemished sacrifices (1:6-14); intermarriage with pagans (2:10-16); sorcery, adultery, perjury, social oppression (3:5) and withholding tithes from the Lord (3:6-15). The Lord pronounces a curse on the priests who have dishonoured him and led the people astray (2:1-9).

All of this supports the contention that God in his mercy restored the exiles to the land before there was real, widespread repentance.

6. *Isaiah*

- There is corruption and desolation but forgiveness is offered (Isa 1)
- There is idolatry, divination and superstition and judgment 2:6-9; chap. 3. But the blessings of Messiah promised (4:2-6)
- Judgment through Assyria promised (ch 5, 7, 8). but Messiah is promised (9:1-7) “
- The Lord is angry against Israel (9:8-10:4). But the remnant will return (10:20-25), messiah will come and the remnant will return with joy (Isa 11:10-12 see also ch.12; 14:1-2)
- A prophecy against Jerusalem (22:1-19) but Messiah promised

7. *Jeremiah*

- Israel has forsaken God (ch 2-3) but the messianic age promised (3:14-19)
- ***Disaster will come (ch 4) but destruction will not be total - Jer 5:18 "Yet even in those days," declares the LORD, "I will not destroy you completely."***
- Jerusalem will be besieged (ch 6), its false religion condemned (ch 7) but forgiveness possible
- Judgment declared (ch 8-9) but God exercises kindness

- Idolatry breaks the covenant (ch 10-11 esp. 11:14 but a remnant will return (Jer 12:14-15
- Judgment foretold (ch 13-15 esp. 15:1-2) yet restoration possible (Jer 15:19-21)
- Disaster will come (ch 16) yet the exiles will return (Jer 16:14-15)
- Judgment pronounced (ch 17-22) yet the messiah promised (Jer 23:5-6)
- Judgment and exile takes place (ch 23-28) yet the exiles will return (Jer. 29-33, esp. 29:10-14); cf. Jer 30:11; 31:40. See also Jer 32:34-41; 33:16-18, 20-22, 25-26.

CHECKLIST ON MERCY

1. Do I want the person to come to repentance and God's forgiveness and restoration within the fellowship of the church?
2. How can I best encourage the person towards repentance - through rebuke and/or through discipline and/or patient kindness?
3. Do I gladly acknowledge any good points in the person?
4. Is any anger I feel towards the person righteous and unselfish, i.e. focused on the effects on the work of spreading the kingdom or the welfare of the church and of individuals?
5. Is my anger making me feel legalistic towards the person, his errors and the treatment he deserves?
6. Have I correctly understood the person's motives through patient dialogue and listening?
7. Have I correctly recorded the person's errors, relying only on first-hand evidence, whilst taking note of other evidence, and hearing both sides of the story, where relevant?
8. Have I mercifully followed the biblical stages in seeking to correct this person?
9. How can I show the kindness of God to this person?
10. Will any delay in firm action result in serious harm being done to others?
11. Is the person clear about the rights and wrongs and my conviction that he needs to repent so that my showing mercy will not give a false impression of my justifying his faults?

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