

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

The Mercy of God Lesson #7

Christians often speak of God's mercy. It is a common word in the Scriptures and in many of the songs we sing. But what is mercy? How and why is God merciful to us? Many Christians couldn't give a good answer to these fundamental questions. In this lesson we will examine the attribute of God's mercy from the Scriptures seeking to understand the preciousness of the mercy that is extended to us because God is a God of mercy.

I. DEFINITION OF THE MERCY OF GOD

A. Louis Berkhof says,

"If the grace of God contemplates man as guilty before God, and therefore in need of forgiveness, the mercy of God contemplates him as one who is bearing the consequences of sin, who is in a pitiable condition, and who therefore needs divine help. It may be defined as the goodness or love of God shown to those who are in misery or distress, irrespective of their deserts. In His mercy God reveals Himself as a compassionate God, who pities those who are in misery and is ever ready to relieve their distress."¹

B. *The Great Doctrines of the Bible* says,

"2 Pet. 3:9—"The Lord ... is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Neh. 9:31—"Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God." Here is mercy manifested in forbearance with sinners. If God should have dealt with them in justice they would have been cut off long before. Think of the evil, the impurity, the sin that God must see. How it must disgust Him. Then remember that He could crush it all in a moment. Yet He does not. He pleads; He sacrifices to show His love for sinners. Surely it is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, and because His compassions fail not. Yet, beware lest we abuse this goodness, for our God is also a consuming fire. "Behold, the goodness and the severity of God." The mercy of God is here shown in His loving forbearance with sinners."²

C. Robert Haldane says,

"Mercy is that adorable perfection of God by which He pities and relieves the miserable. Under the good and righteous government of God, no one is miserable who does not deserve to be so. The objects of mercy are persons who

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 72.

² William Evans and S. Maxwell Coder, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, Enl. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 45.

are miserable, because they are guilty, and therefore justly deserving of punishment. The exercise of mercy is a particular display of the grace or free favor of God. In no case can it be due to a guilty creature; it necessarily implies the absence of all right. A man can never have a right to mercy; and to talk of **deserving** mercy is a contradiction in terms.”³

D. Charles Hodge has noted that,

“Mercy is kindness exercised towards the miserable, and includes pity, compassion, forbearance, and gentleness, which the Scriptures so abundantly ascribe to God.”⁴

II. THOUGHTS TO PONDER ABOUT GOD'S MERCY

A. A. W. Pink has noted,

“Though it may not be easy at the first consideration to perceive a real difference between the grace and the mercy of God, It helps us thereto if we carefully ponder His dealings with the un-fallen angels. He has never exercised mercy toward them, for they have never stood in any need thereof, not having sinned or come beneath the effects of the curse. Yet, they are certainly the objects of God's free and sovereign grace.”⁵

B. Thomas Watson has said,

“If we could remember that the divine mercy is not a temporary mood but an attribute of God's eternal being, we would no longer fear that it will someday cease to be. Mercy never began to be, but from eternity was; so it will never cease to be, it will never be more since it is itself infinite; and it will never be less because the infinite cannot suffer diminution. Nothing that has occurred or will occur in heaven or earth or hell can change the tender mercies of our God. Forever His mercy stands, a boundless, overwhelming immensity of divine pity and compassion.

Nothing is sweeter than mercy when it is improved; nothing fiercer, when it is abused; as nothing is colder than lead when taken out of the mine, and nothing more scalding when it is heated. Nothing is blunter than iron, yet nothing is sharper when it is whetted. . . . Mercy is not for them that sin and fear not, but for them that fear and sin not. God's mercy is a holy mercy; where it pardons it heals.”⁶

³ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of Romans*, electronic ed. (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1996), 480.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 427.

⁵ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 72-73.

⁶ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 97.

- C. Both grace and mercy come from the goodness of God. Grace is when *God gives us what we do not deserve*. Mercy is when *God does not give us that we do deserve*. In salvation, mercy stays the hand of God's judgment and wrath until grace can step in to save the sinner. While judgment is stayed by mercy, the sinner hears and believes in the gospel of grace and places their faith in Jesus Christ. Upon being born again, they receive the free gift of eternal life eternal life. This is why sometimes the Bible says we are saved by grace because we receive the gift of salvation. We have not earned salvation, nor do we deserve to be saved. Salvation is a gift of God's grace. Other times the Bible says we are saved by God's mercy. If God were not merciful, His holy justice would instantly consume us. Thus, mercy keeps us from receiving what we deserve -- judgment.

III. SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR GOD'S MERCY

- A. Exod. 34:6-7⁷ -- "Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."
- B. Psa. 57:10 -- "For Your lovingkindness is great to the heavens And Your truth to the clouds."
- C. Psa. 86:15 -- "But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth."
- D. Psa. 103:11 -- "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him."
- E. Psa. 145:8-9 -- "The Lord is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. 9 The Lord is good to all, And His mercies are over all His works."
- F. Lam. 3:22-23 -- "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. 23 They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness."
- G. Luke 6:35-36 -- "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. 36 "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."
- H. II Cor. 1:3-4 -- "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction so

⁷ Thomas Watson observes that this verse has six expressions to describe God's mercy but only one expression to describe justice. *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 93.

that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

- I. Eph. 2:4-5 – “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).”
- J. Tit. 3:5 – “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”
- K. I Pet. 1:3 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

IV. APPARENT PARADOXES OF GOD'S MERCY

- A. If God is merciful, and His mercy is infinite and enduring forever, and if mercy withholds the just punishment due, then how can the wicked be judged? (Rom. 9:15; Tit. 3:5)
- B. How can God judge the wicked and also be merciful at the same time? (Psa. 143:12; Psa. 136:15)⁸

V. ERRORS CONCERNING GOD'S MERCY

- A. Error -- God is too merciful to punish sinners to hell.
- B. Error -- If there is a God, I will find out when I die, then I will repent, and He will show me mercy.
- C. Error – “The God of the Old Testament was a God of judgment and wrath, but the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy and compassion.”⁹

“It is dreadful to have mercy as a witness against any one. It was sad with Haman when the queen herself accused him (Esth. 7:6). So will it be when this queen of mercy shall stand up against a person and accuse him. It is only mercy that saves a sinner; how sad then to have mercy become an enemy! If mercy be an accuser, who shall be our advocate? The sinner never escapes hell when mercy draws up the indictment.” Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 95.

⁸ Pink, *Attributes of God*, pg. 74.

⁹ Tozer points out that there are more than four times as many references to the mercy of God in the Old Testament as in the New. *Knowledge of the Holy*, pg. 90-91.

VI. **APPLICATION OF THE MERCY OF GOD**

- A. We must be careful to not presume upon the mercy of God.
- B. We should be thankful, giving praise, and obeying God because of the mercy He has extended to us.
- C. When we pray, confessing our sins, we need to remember that even though God is just, He is also merciful, not giving us what we deserve, but giving grace instead.
- D. We need to remember that every breath we breathe, every moment we are not in hell, every pleasure we receive is given to us by the hand of a merciful God.
- E. When evangelizing the lost, we must remember that it is the kindness and mercy of God that leads them to repentance.

*"When all Thy mercies,
O my God, My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view—I'm lost
In wonder, love, and praise."
Joseph Addison*