

Week 4

Hesed – the faithful mercy of God

22-28

22/ Read Exodus 34:1-9

Unfailing Love

We don't seem to have too much trouble identifying the God of the OT as a God of justice (or judgment). In fact, that seems to be the one thing we identify Him with above all else. Sometimes it seems like that's the only thing we think God is – the One who Judges us.

Sometimes we're not even sure what to do with declarations of God's mercy in the OT. They can seem out of place to us, and we wonder how they can be true with all the references to His righteous judging. Such doubts can lurk in our minds and drive us to the NT where we feel like we find a more gentle loving God.

But the God revealed in the OT Scriptures abounds in mercy. The words '*steadfast love*' in this passage (Exodus 34:6,7) represent the Hebrew word '*hesed*'. It is an important word throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, occurring some 248 times. Like a lot of other biblical words, the richness of meaning makes it difficult to translate with one word in English. Sometimes the word '*mercy*' is used (like in Psalm 23:7 and in many versions of Micah 6:8) and sometimes '*kindness*', but most of the time '*steadfast love*' is the English rendering chosen (by the ESV translators at least).

Significantly, some translate '*hesed*' as '*covenant love*'. This is because the term is prominent in covenant passages. Dale Ralph Davis says, "*covenant and 'hesed' are corollaries.*" It is first used in Genesis in the context of family and has that type of relational significance. God's '*hesed*' is His unbreakable, uncompromising, promise of grace to those He loves.

The strength and fidelity of God's '*hesed*' is captured by the apostle Paul in 1Corinthians 13 where he says, '*Love never fails*'. That is - God's love never fails. So, what we are talking about here is '*unfailing love*' which of course is the love of God. Not only is God merciful, but as the Psalmist says, His love (mercy) '*endures forever*'.

Prayer: Dear God, it is hard for us to fathom the depth of Your great love for us because it is just hard for us to fathom Your greatness all the way round. You are infinite in Your power and Your love. Help us as Paul says to "*have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that (we) may be filled with the fulness of God.*" Amen.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. Psa 89:14

We read the first part of this Psalm a couple of weeks ago when we were thinking about God's throne being a throne of justice (day 5). But the passage talks about God's mercy (*'hesed'*) as well as His justice. We have a very difficult time reconciling God as judge with God of mercy. We tend to see these two things not just as opposites but as mutually exclusive realities. When you think about it, it does boggle our minds that God could be perfectly just while at the same time being perfectly and consistently merciful. (See Rom 3:26 for more on that.)

But these two apparently exclusive realities are both presented to us in His Person as essential and foundational to our understanding of the reality of God. We cannot embrace one at the expense of the other. We cannot diminish either. They are both essential to our understanding of Who God is and what He is like.

We often think of the Trinity as a demonstration of how great God is and beyond our comprehension. How can God be at the same time both Three and One? That's just how great God is. I think the same answer can be given to the question of how God can be at the same time both just and merciful. That's just how great God is.

A few weeks ago we talked about God's throne in Israel (day 4), and how it was to be a throne of justice. But think for a minute about the laws God gave to Israel and particularly those laws that were laws of mercy? There are different examples, but the cities of refuge come to mind. This inconceivable marriage between justice and mercy are pictured by the psalmist in Psalm 85.

Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Psa 85:10

Prayer: Loving God, Your greatness is unfathomable, and we worship You alone as our great God and Saviour. You are the One we worship in holiness, and You are the One who saves; the only One who saves. Thank You for Your justice. Thank You for Your mercy. Help us dear Lord to be act justly and to love mercy, just like You. In Jesus' name, amen.

The idea that God's 'steadfast love' ('hesed') is a covenant love is demonstrated clearly in the account of David and Jonathon. Jonathan would later be killed in a fateful battle which also saw his father Saul killed, and David would go on to be king.

I know you probably don't have the time right now to read 2Samuel 9 but it's the rest of the story of David's 'steadfast love' (covenant love) of Jonathon. After Jonathan's death and David's coming to power, the king went looking for relatives of Jonathan that he could bless and honour out of covenant love for his friend. He found only one left – Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was a small child when his nanny accidentally dropped him as she fled from the scene of his father's and grandfather's violent deaths. By this time he is a disabled man, crippled in both feet. He is the picture of fear and alienation when David brings him right into the palace and to his table and treats him as one of his own sons. Why? Because of the covenant of steadfast love he had made with Jonathan.

And David said, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" ... 7 And David said to him, "Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always." 2Sam 9:1,7

This is an important part of all this. The covenant isn't with Mephibosheth. The covenant is with Jonathan. David showed steadfast love to Mephibosheth BECAUSE of his unfailing love for Jonathan.

But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, because of the oath of the LORD that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. 2Sam 21:7

Truth be known, we experience the 'steadfast love' of the Lord the same way – because of the covenant that God the Father has made with the Son. "He will give Him the sure mercies of David..." (See Isa 55:1-3)

Prayer: Dear God, I am so grateful for the covenant You made with Your Son Jesus. I thank You for Your words Lord Jesus when You say, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." Thank You my Lord for including me in Your forever family. It's all because of You, my Jesus. Amen.

25/ Read Psalm 23

The Hound of Heaven

Is there a more known or loved passage in all of Scripture than Psalm 23? In this beautiful piece of inspired poetry, David the shepherd king exalts in his relationship with the great Shepherd of his soul. The psalm rehearses the abundant provision of the Lord in David's life, throughout his life, on the mountain tops and in the valleys.

It is overwhelmingly beautiful and true and as he comes to the end of his song of praise, David is more than confident that God's goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life as he has been assured a place in God's forever family.

The word translated mercy here in this last verse is the *'hesed'* of God that we have been learning about. Hebrew language scholars point out that the phrase *'follow me'* is actually much stronger in the Hebrew and has the idea of someone being pursued. Think about that! God is not just merciful to us, His mercy pursues us!

The English poet Francis Thompson wrote a poem in the late nineteenth century in which he describes the Lord's dogged pursuit of a lost soul. It is an amazing piece of poetry (182 lines) which he entitled, *'The Hound of Heaven'*.

*I fled Him down the nights and down the days, I fled Him down the arches of the years
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways, of my own mind, and in the midst of tears ...*

The poem had a profound impact on the likes of J. R. R. Tolkien. But is it an accurate reflection of the reality? Consider Jesus, the Good Shepherd who left the ninety nine sheep safe in the fold and went after the one that was lost. It is exactly the message of the gospel, that God pursues the lost out of His great love and mercy for us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You are the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. I acknowledge that I have fled from You in my lost state and often still have a tendency to hide from You in fear and shame. And yet, over and over again, Your great grace pursues me. There is no greater love than the love You have for me in spite of the fact that I deserve none of it. Thank You, oh, my merciful Saviour. Amen.

26/ Read Jonah 4:1-11

Gospel Grace

The story of Jonah takes place long after the days of Moses and the days of David. And Jonah's story stands out for a number of reasons. There is the sovereign hand of God and all He prepared in advance to accomplish His will including the great fish! And there is also the fact that God called Jonah to go as a prophet to Nineveh, the capital of the nation of Assyria.

Assyria was not only a Gentile nation but a sworn enemy to Jonah's own people Israel. This was the reason for Jonah's stubborn reluctance; another thing that stands out in the book. We marvel not only at Jonah's reluctance and his disobedience (even while we disobey ourselves) but we also marvel over his pouting attitude when Nineveh repents, and God takes pity on them instead of punishing them. The book of Jonah closes with an embarrassing description of the pitiful prophet, but don't miss the words Jonah uses to explain his chagrin and the reluctance he had in the first place.

"... is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." Jonah 4:2

This is a direct quote from the passage we looked at a few days ago where God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34 (day 22). Once again, God's amazing 'hesed' is front and centre.

In an interesting development in the book of Acts, Peter is at Joppa (see Acts 10 Cf Jonah 1:3) when he receives a call to go and share the gospel with Gentiles. And, like Jonah, Peter is reluctant to go, even many years after the commission he received from Jesus (Matt 28:19,20; Acts 1:8).

What does all this mean? It means that God's great mercy is extended to all through the gospel, but we struggle to extend it to others who are different from us, or whom we perceive to be our enemies somehow.

Prayer: O, God, Your great heart for the world humbles me because I can be so petty and vindictive compared to Your great love and mercy for people. You love Your enemies, even enough to die for them (for us). Lord, please help me to love others enough to be willing to go and to rejoice like You when even one sinner comes to repentance. In Jesus' name, amen.

27/ Read Luke 10:25-37

Your Pain in My Heart

I know we already read this passage last week (day 21) but when considering justice and mercy you can't get a more relevant passage than the story of the Good Samaritan. When we looked at it last, we considered the amazing way this despised man was willing to pay the price in full for a needy neighbour.

Today, think about the last words on the lips of the self-righteous one in answer to Jesus' question – who was the neighbour? as he reluctantly concedes - "*the one who showed 'mercy'.*"

The word for mercy here is the Greek word '*eleos*'. And it is the word that the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament used commonly in Jesus' day) has most of the time for the Hebrew word '*hesed*' (steadfast love) that we have been learning about. And interestingly, '*eleos*' is almost always translated '*mercy*' where it occurs in our New Testament. So, the steadfast love of God is manifested in His mercy. And we are called to love mercy; to love the kind of love that this man showed.

There is another significant Greek word in this text. When it says of the Samaritan that "*when he saw him, he had compassion*", it is the Greek word '*splagchnizomai*'. Before your eyes glaze over, understand this is a very strong word. It is literally, '*bowels of mercy*'. If you've ever experienced intestinal pain, you can appreciate this. The word describes an intensely visceral response; a feeling of acute physical pain in response to the pain of another.

One more interesting thing about this word here for compassion. It occurs a total of 12 times in the gospel accounts and nowhere else in the NT. Ten times it describes the response Jesus had to human suffering. Once it is used to describe the Father's response at the return of the prodigal son. And the only other occurrence is the one in this passage. The take away? The kind of love and mercy shown by the Samaritan was the very compassion or mercy of God. No one cares like Jesus cares. But we are called to love others with the very love of Christ. If we do, we will quite literally feel their pain inside of us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Your great compassion for me is dumbfounding! Your capacity to care causes me to be in awe of You. But I have to confess that I am often left unmoved by the plight of others the way I should be. O God, I need Your heart and Your love for people, especially for those who are hurting. I'm asking You to give me the capacity to love with Your great love and to be moved to care and to act in the interest of others in a way that reflects Your great love for others. May I be moved by mercy and compassion like You are. In Jesus' name, amen.

28/ Read Luke 6:27-36

The Heart of God

Wow! Eh! You may be aware that the ethic of Jesus expressed in this passage is unlike anything taught in any other 'faith teaching'. It far exceeds any and all of what has come from the mouth of Plato, or Socrates, or Confucius, or Gandhi, or anyone else in all human history.

One of the things we need to see here is the tenderness of a Father's love. We tend to think of the Fatherhood of God as a NT concept, but the OT too reveals the love of the Father. We've been looking at the Hebrew word '*hesed*'. In this NT passage from Luke, the word translated '*merciful*' (v.36 "... *be merciful as your Father is merciful.*") is the Greek word '*oiktirmos*'. This word is the most prominent rendering in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) for the Hebrew word '*racham*' which is typically translated in our OT as '*tender mercies*'. It's the kind of tenderness a parent has for their child.

In the OT account of Joseph's deep affection and yearning for his brother Benjamin (Gen 43:30) '*racham*' is the word that is used. Here's another sample:

"Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy (racham) on him, declares the Lord." Jeremiah 31:20

The word '*darling*' in that verse is the Hebrew word '*yakir*' which was used to express delight; specifically the type of delight a parent takes in their child. The Father delights in those He loves.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love (hesed); according to your abundant mercy (racham) blot out my transgressions. Psa 51:1

These are profound glimpses into the Father heart of God. Why are we to be merciful? Because our Father is merciful. This is a vital part of what it means to have God as our Father. He doesn't just love those who love Him. He doesn't just do good to those who do good to Him. He doesn't just give to those that He can get something from in return. He is '*kind to the ungrateful and the evil*'. Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees who were out to get Him. "*You are doing the works your father did.*" (Jn 8:41)

So, if God is truly our Father, we will be known by what we do and especially by the way we show mercy.

Prayer: Lord, we want to represent You well as Your children in this world. We are so blessed to have You as our Father, and it is such a great honour and privilege to bear Your name. It is so obvious by Jesus' words here and by the example of His life and death that Your love is exactly what this fallen world needs and the only thing that has the power to change people's lives. May the supernatural power of Your love flow into our lives and through us to others. In Jesus' name, amen.

Week 5

Grace – the generous compassion of Jesus

29-35

29/ Read Luke 1:46-55 & 76-79

Presenting Jesus

The baby Jesus was presented to God (dedicated) at the temple in Jerusalem eight days after His birth just like all Jewish boy babies were. When He was thirty, the traditional age when he could be considered a Rabbi (Teacher), he was presented to the nation at his baptism in the Jordan river. Some were waiting and watching for the One to come, but most of the world remained unaware of both these events. However, the NT presents Jesus to the world. When we read through the OT thoughtfully, the need grows as the expectation builds over many generations creating a sense of anticipation for a great and coming King who will bring the kingdom of God to earth. Then it's quite like Jesus walks onto the pages of the NT.

But how does the New Testament present Jesus? Mary's song and Zachariah's song at the very beginning of the gospel of Luke set the tone for Messianic expectations coming into the NT. And as Jesus' coming is announced in this first chapter of Luke, expectations are centered on the Lord's mercy. He will bring salvation. The humble will be exalted. The proud will be scattered. The hungry will be filled and the rich turned back. There will be forgiveness of sins, *"because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

For those paying attention, there are certain things being looked for. What will He be like? The proud will not recognize Him because they aren't looking for mercy. They don't think they need it. But where the need is acknowledged, the grace of God shines like a light into the darkness.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. John 3:17,18

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we are excited for your coming, but also how you've come. You have come in humility extending mercy to all who welcome it and know our need for it. Help us to live in your light which not only brings us salvation but exposes our great need for it. Thank you for your amazing grace.

30/ Read Luke 18:35-43

Lord, have mercy

The title '*Son of David*' was so packed full of meaning built upon hundreds of years of promises and expectations that it's not easy for us to wrap our minds around it. A thorough reading of the OT helps though.

Remember for example Isaiah's prophecies ... *"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore..."* Isa 9:1,2,6,7

The man begging by the road outside of Jericho that day could not see, but he did have the light of the promises of God that came with the knowledge of the Scriptures. And when he realized Who was passing by that day, there was no one who could stop him. The more they tried, the more he cried out.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" His faith was in Jesus, but specifically in the mercy of Jesus. And his faith was not misplaced and did not go unrewarded. Nor did his reward go unrecognized because *"all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God."*

Jesus of Nazareth (in Galilee) is merciful, and He wants to be known for His mercy. That's the good news of the gospel.

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.
John 6:37

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to spread the good news of the gospel that You receive all who come to You and call upon You; that You extend mercy to all who recognize their need of You. Thank you for wanting to be known as a '*friend of sinners*'; sinners like me.

31/ Read Matt 15:32-39

Cups of Cold Water

Last week (day 27) we took note of the Greek word for compassion (*'splachnizomai'*) that occurs 12 times in the gospel accounts and nowhere else in the NT. We noted how descriptive it is (actually feeling the pain of another inside our own bodies) and how in each case it's used to describe the compassion Jesus had for people who are suffering somehow.

For the next three days we will consider three of those passages which are also miracle passages. This is indicative as the miracles that Jesus performed were all acts of compassion. In today's passage (Matt 15) we have the miraculous feeding of the 4000 (plus) which was motivated by Jesus' compassion for the hungry.

... "I have compassion ('splachnizomai') on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." Matt 15:32

The food that we eat is the fruit of the earth which God created in His goodness. Food is good and addresses a basic need we have and is to be received with thanksgiving. When we give thanks for our food we are recognizing it as a gift from God's hand. And clearly, having the compassion of Jesus for others involves addressing people's basic needs when they lack.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'
Matt 25:34-36

The whole biblical teaching on hospitality relates to this but think about the basic practicality of this; even a 'cup of cold water' given in His name! (Matt 10:42)

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, we long to be your hands and feet and to serve you by serving others. Thank you for our daily bread and thank you for the incredible privilege of being instruments of compassion in your great name. Please direct our steps as we step out to serve in these very practical ways.

32/ Read Mark 6:30-34

Bread of Life

Jesus' compassion for people involved their basic needs. He cared for the hungry masses. He didn't overlook the basic needs of his disciples either. In today's passage we see him caring about those closest to him getting the basic rest they needed as well as food.

But also in this passage, as the Lord's attention turns to the masses once again we see the people suffering the lack of a need even more basic than food - the need for truth! God judged the priests and Levites in the days of Hosea the prophet because they had failed to shepherd the people. The result as God says was, "*my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*" (Hosea 4:6)

There are many instances in the OT where God judged those who were supposed to shepherd Israel because they failed to give the truth people needed and people's lives were destroyed as a result. (If you have a chance, read Jeremiah 23 for some amazing background on today's passage. See also Jeremiah 50:6,7,17.)

Again in this passage we see Jesus moved by his great compassion:

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion ('splanchnizomai') on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. Mk 6:34

The people were perishing but what was needed was good teaching. Interestingly enough, there is no miracle in this passage. Why? Because the greatest need the people had was simply a need for the truth. Think about that!

As we seek to show the compassion of Christ in a lost and dying world, the greatest thing we can do is to share the truth with people. As practical, important, and immediate the need for food and water and rest and shelter are, and as much as we are to have compassion with these things, the truth is that "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" (Matt 4:4) People's very lives are at stake.

Prayer: Lord, may our mission to share the gospel with people and to help people with the '*full counsel of God*', be compelled by compassion, realizing that the truth of Your gospel is to be given, "*that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" Help us to see that the needs of the soul are of primary importance and help us to care about these things the way You do. Amen.

33/ Read Luke 7:11-17

Blessed are the Brokenhearted

So much of the call for both justice and mercy in Scripture involves compassion for the disadvantaged. The Bible speaks often of our treatment of the poor and of widows and orphans. In today's passage, Jesus has compassion on a widow who had just lost her only son. This would be tragic at any time in history but in biblical times it was far worse. This would have left her not only completely heartbroken but also entirely destitute.

As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. 13 And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion ('splanchnizomai') on her and said to her, "Do not weep." Luke 7:12,13

Jesus has compassion for our tears. He is not unmoved by broken hearts. He wept Himself at the death of His good friend Lazarus, even knowing that He was going to raise him from the dead. In his inspired writings, the apostle Paul refers to death as the '*last enemy*'. And of course, the resurrection of Jesus is a reality that is meant to address this greatest of needs, the need of eternal life, the conquering of death.

Jesus didn't just rise again and He's not going to just raise us again. Jesus said "*I AM the resurrection and the life, He who believes in me, though he were dead, yet he will live, and whosever lives and believes in me will never die.*" (John 11:33)

And it's all motivated by the merciful compassion of our God for us.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16

*Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth or song;
As the burdens press, and the cares distress, and the way grows weary and long?*

...

*Does Jesus care when I've said goodbye to the dearest on earth to me,
And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks – is it aught to Him? does He see?
O yes, He cares- I know He cares! His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares.*

Frank E. Graeff

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, your compassion for the heartbroken overwhelms my heart with hope and fills my soul to overflowing with gratitude. And may that gratitude overflow in my life as I give comfort to those who weep. May I weep with them. But may I also share the great hope that You have given us; the only hope for life beyond the grave. Hallelujah, what a Saviour! Amen.

34/ Read Matthew 12:1-14

What Matters More

This text includes two accounts back to back that appear to have happened on the same day – the Sabbath day. There are some important statements made by Jesus in the passage.

“And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Matt 12:7,8

These statements occasioned by the incident with the disciples in the grain field are followed by a scene in one of the synagogues. It is yet another one of Jesus’ healing miracles of compassion and it might be a good time to think about the many vital medical mission works being done in our day, including those led by our own association. (www.fellowship.ca/FAIR)

The passage also includes some probing questions – *“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”* In this case Jesus answers his own question – *“It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”* (v.12) But there is another question in the text that Jesus asks and it is a rhetorical question that He uses to make his point – *“Of how much more value is a man than a sheep?”*

The question of value is an all important one. There is no question but what days of rest are extremely important, thus the Sabbath law in the first place. But the reason behind the law is all important. The laws exist for our good. In Mark’s telling of the incident in the grain field, he records these words from Jesus - *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”* (Mark 2:27)

What God ultimately cares about (values) is us! And we should care ultimately about others more for that very reason. Behind the laws of the OT are the goodness of God and His goodness to us. It’s not that some things matter while others don’t. It’s just that some things matter more. God has His priorities and so should we.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” Matt 23:23,24

Prayer: Dear Lord God, thank You for making us Your priority. Help us to value what You value. May our value system be Your value system. Help us to value justice, mercy and faithfulness, not to neglect the smaller things, but to make sure our priorities are in the right place. And help us to be part of Your healing works today. Amen.

Peter tells us that “*Love covers a multitude of sins.*” (1Pet 4:8). He echoes the proverb, “*Hatred stirs up strife but love covers all sins*” (Prov 10:12).

We need to understand this in light of the whole of Scripture. It cannot mean we should try and cover our sin in an act of self-love (Prov 28:13). It can't be that if we show enough love, God will overlook our sin and accept us on the basis of our loving. The only love that can cover our sin in that sense would be the love of Jesus. So what does Peter mean because He's not talking about Jesus loving us, but us loving each other. It's an admonition.

I suspect we can understand what it means for our love to cover a multitude of sins if we can appreciate how God's love covers our sins. Scripture is clear that it is only the blood that can effect an *atonement* (covering) for sin (Lev 17:11) That there is no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22). And furthermore, that it is only the shed blood of Jesus that has the power to provide forgiveness for the sins of the world (Rom 3:24,25; 5:9; 1Pet 1:18,19; 1Jn 1:7; Rev 1:5). But can we understand the act of Jesus shedding His blood was the giving of His life for us, which is what love is and does. Blood represents life. It's *'lifeblood'*. Real love, biblical love, is self-life-sacrificing (Jn 10:18).

Christ gave His entire life up for us; the ultimate covering of sin. But do we in some way like this participate as God's *'coworkers'* (1Cor 3) in His saving mission when we give of our very selves (I give of my life) to and for others? Compassion. True Love.

Ultimately, all sin is against God first (Psa 51:4) but we are commanded not only to be forgiven, but to forgive others. It is part of our mandate, right (Jn 13:34,35). Learning how to love like this is not corollary to our mission as His followers. It's paramount. Because speaking the truth when we can't speak it in love - real love, love like that – is simply inadequate. It doesn't get it done. It doesn't 'bear fruit'. Words (message) without love (power) are impotent.

Maybe Peter has the testimony of the church in mind. Maybe he is thinking about how our sins which are obvious to those who know us, can fade in the light of love genuinely demonstrated in radical acts like forgiveness.

Prayer: Lord help me love like that! Your loving sacrifice saves us from our sin. But it is also the ultimate example. Thank you that we not only can be recipients of Your great love, but that we can actually participate in the love of God. Lord, may I love like You today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Week 6

Forgiveness – the greatest of mercies

36-42

36/ Read Lk 6:37-42

Running Over

This week is all about forgiveness. Forgiveness has been referred to as the most aggressive act of love (compassion) there is. Today's passage is one of a number that would seem to indicate that our being forgiven hinges on our forgiving others. There is a clear and undeniable connection between the two for sure. But when we study the different passages what becomes clear is that we are not saved by the forgiveness (mercy) we extend to others, rather our mercy to others is the only sufficient demonstration that we have been humbled to receive the infinite mercy we need from the Lord.

This is the way it works. Paul puts it plainly here: *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* Eph 4:32

Is there a sense of justice in these statements in Luke 6 as well? We receive in accordance to what we give. This could be another sense in which God remains both just and merciful at the same time. Yet we shouldn't think for a moment that this is us getting what we deserve. We can never outgive God! God's grace to us is running over in our laps!

The reference to the log in our own eye is really a strong confirmation of how our recognizing our own need for forgiveness and receiving it is essential to our extending it to others. And then, as part of that, consider the size of the log in your own eye compared to the speck in your brothers! In the context of giving and receiving, of forgiving and being forgiven, what we experience from God in grace and mercy will far exceed anything we ever extend to others by just that much!

Prayer: Lord, I need Your help to see my need. I confess that I am often blind to not only the nature of my sin but the size of it. Please show it to me for what it is so I might appreciate Your grace and forgiveness for what they really are. And may the overwhelming and infinite mercy You show me overflow into my life and love for others. In Jesus' name, amen.

37/ Read Luke 7:36-50

Overwhelming Grace

This is another one of the biblical passages that can seem to indicate that our being forgiven by God is contingent upon our forgiving others. But as we have seen, that is not exactly how the relationship between the two works.

When Jesus says, *“Her sins which are many are forgiven for she loved much.”* (v.47), it could be taken to mean that God will extend forgiveness to us as a consequence of our loving and forgiving others. But what if He means our being forgiven is not a consequence of our love, but our love is a consequence of our being forgiven? This would be consistent with this passage mentioned yesterday: *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* Eph 4:32

And this is precisely the point in Jesus’ parable about the moneylender (vs. 41-43). He is talking about the great love that comes from great gratitude (the Greek word gratitude is an extension of the word for grace). I believe that Jesus intends for Simon the Pharisee (and you and me) to understand that the explanation for the woman’s great love was that she had her soul bathed in the vast mercy and forgiveness available to us in Christ. She was experiencing grace and she understood what it meant for her to receive such great mercy and forgiveness and the love she is expressing is quite simply a demonstration of her understanding of that reality in her own life. We cannot be unchanged by the love and mercy of God.

How do you understand or explain love if you haven’t experienced the kind of pure and ultimate and perfect love of God in Christ?

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.... In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
1Jn 3:16; 4:10,11

We are not saved (forgiven) by our mercy (love and forgiveness), but it is at last the only adequate demonstration that we have in deed humbled ourselves to receive the infinite mercy we need and receive from the Lord.

Prayer: Father in heaven, Your great love and mercy is what changes our lives; changes us. But we receive it by faith when we humble ourselves and see our need and Your provision. Once again I am reminded that You are the source of all life and when you give me life it is abundant and wonderful and glorious. My sins are many but so great is Your grace. Please make my life a conduit of gratitude for Your great love and grace to me.

Jesus' use of the term *'brother'* in this passage is significant. It converges with the stream of familial language employed in the book of Acts and the NT letters but it's really part of a massive biblical theme going all the way back to Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Throughout the OT the relationships between the tribes (sons of Jacob) carries the theme along. So, Jesus' use of the terms, brother, neighbours (see Luke 10), and enemies (see Luke 6) certainly doesn't leave anyone out!

It is of the utmost importance to recognize that Jesus is in this passage outlining for us the process that we should follow when we feel someone has sinned against us. The typical reluctance to follow Jesus' instruction on this point make this one of the least applied passages in all of Scripture.

Today, we want to take a few moments to think about Peter's follow-up question and Jesus' response to that. Upon hearing Jesus describe the reconciliation process that includes us forgiving our brother, Peter asks a question and then suggests his own answer.

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Matt 18:21

Peter thinks he is being quite magnanimous here for sure so he was undoubtedly taken back by Jesus' answer.

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." Matt 18:22

Jesus is not setting a larger limit here on forgiveness. He is using a play on words to say there is no limit. There is no limit to how many times we are to forgive. That's the point. But we shouldn't remove the point from the process. Forgiveness is not a permissive thing or a passive thing. It's not simply ignoring sin. Jesus' first command in the passage is for us to 'go' (v.15). Forgiveness is not something that doesn't involve the other person. And giving people an opportunity to listen and to speak and to own their sin and guilt is a vital part of the process on a very practical level. But as for a limit? Well, there is none! Forgiveness is an act of mercy and grace. We are to treat others and love others the way God loves and treats us. Are we thankful that God's grace to us has no limit?

Prayer: Dear Lord, I am so thankful that no matter how many times I come to you for forgiveness, You never deny it to me, provided I am sincere. Thank You for your infinite grace and mercy. Help me to follow Your instructions when I am the one being sinned against. Please enable me to love others with Your great love.

39/ Read Matt 18:21-35

Parable of the Unmerciful

This parable belongs to the teaching we looked at yesterday being occasioned by Peter's question about the amount of forgiveness we should be prepared to extend to others. It's all about the relationship between us receiving forgiveness (mercy) from God and extending it to others. This is also one of the twelve occurrences of the word *splagchnizomai* normally translated 'compassion'. The king in the story represents God and therefore the 'compassion' demonstrated by the King is the compassion of God for us.

So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity (splagchnizomai) for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. (vs. 26,27)

The amount forgiven by the king was an impossible sum to pay back while the amount the servant was holding out for was a pittance. So in this, once again, we see graphically illustrated the infinite mercy of God to us alongside the things we feel hard done by.

And this is yet another passage where our receiving mercy from God is portrayed as contingent upon us extending it to others. We have already explored the nature of the relationship between these two things but we should not allow our understanding of God's free grace to diminish the import of the warning here. We are forgiven by the grace of God, not because we forgive. But our willingness to forgive is very much the kind of fruit that we should expect to see in our lives if we really are what we profess to be. Judging ourselves in this way as Christians is a biblical teaching.

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!
2Cor 13:5

This is not so as to make us insecure in our confidence of God's grace in our lives, but it is rather so that we can be confident in His grace in our lives as we see Him work in us and the fruit of His grace in our relationships with others.

Prayer: Dear Lord. When I am sinned against I cry out for justice, but when I sin I cry out for mercy. Such is my heart. But thank You dear Lord that You are doing a work in my heart and that I am experiencing Your great grace in such a way that is transforming me more and more with the capacity to love with Your love and to forgive those who sin against me. Thank You for the transforming power of Your grace.

40/ Read Matt 20:1-16 When Life's Not Fair

It's kind of hilarious really how this story rattles us living in the 'equal pay for equal work' world we do. Let's be honest. It offends us. We go, "*Hold it a minute, that's not fair! It's just not right! Why, it's just not ... just!*" But let's make sure we understand what this is about because this portion of Scripture could be grossly misapplied otherwise.

The parable ends with these words: "*But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*" One of the things about that is that these words are also the words that introduce the parable which comes out of a conversation Jesus had with the rich young ruler (see Matt 19:16-30)

So consider that the parable is about covetousness (remember the last of the big Ten?). How so? Consider how we tend to think about ourselves and others. It's not necessarily that others receive blessings from God that we don't (though sometimes that is the case), the problem is that they get the same as us, even when they haven't worked as hard, or haven't been as faithful. Think of the prodigal's older brother. The problem is when people don't deserve to get what they get. Now, let's just recognize that when we think that way, the implication is clear - we think we do deserve what we've got!!! "*Sure, nobody's perfect, but some of us are just worse than others. I mean, let's just face it!*" "*I mean, they probably deserve something because everyone has worth, but ...!*" Isn't that what we think?

The story is about us who profess to be forgiven sinners and our relationships with others. Think of the prophet Jonah. Someone said this: "*You don't have to think you're perfect to be hypocritical. You just need to think you're better.*"

Commenting on this parable, Karl Jacobson says, "*... we covet God's power to forgive and God's control over who is forgiven and how.*" Wow, eh!

So is God just? He says, ... "*Friend (!), I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last.*" (vs. 13-16)

Remember, mercy is when we don't get what we deserve. Grace is when we get what we don't deserve. This parable isn't about our jobs. It is however about our life work and our personal growth and any aspirations we have to do well and be good humans. And it's fundamentally about our relationship with God and others.

Prayer: Dear Lord, You are teaching us so much in Your Word about what is real and true, about ourselves, and about others, and about You and Your ways. Lord, Your ways are not our ways and Your thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa 55:8). O, dear Lord, help us to learn these truths in such a way that they settle down deep into our hearts changing us from the inside out. Help me to keep my eyes on You because I know if I do, then I will be more than OK. I love You Lord, amen.

41/ Read James 2:1-13 Love Wins

This is yet one more example of how God remains just while at the same time champions mercy! Impartiality is a very important principle in the OT law. Judges that try important people or their friends differently than others are severely condemned for subverting justice. They would be *'judges with evil thoughts'*. Showing partiality is wrong. It's sin. (v.9)

Impartiality is about treating people the same regardless of what we perceive their success to be. In other words, nobody is any more important than anyone else. We would say that everyone is equal under the law and no one is above the law. Treating people impartially becomes an act of mercy because it is not based on our judgment of the person. When we refuse to show partiality we are being merciful because social status is all about judging people. It is based on appearance and we are just not equipped to assess these types of situations accurately. "... *Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?*"

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. 1Cor 4:5

This seems likely to be the sense that James has in mind when he talks about mercy triumphing over judgment? And this passage in James is one more instance where the royal law is referenced – *"Love your neighbour as yourself."* Think back to the parable of the workers in the vineyard (yesterday). When we treat everyone equally, regardless of their perceived position in our world, we are seeing people the way God sees people and we are seeing mercy triumph over judgment. That means love wins. (v.13)

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I confess that I am very prone to form conclusions about people based on social status and appearance. Help me to recognize that as part of my self-righteous bent. It is a type of judgment that I need to repent of and it is so unlike the mercy you show me. It's hard when the whole world seems to operate this way, but please keep reminding me of my citizenship in the kingdom of heaven that my life may reflect some of its glory. Praise Your holy name, amen.

Even as Jesus suffered unimaginable torment at the hands of sinners, as the blood flowed from His wounds, the words that flowed from His heart were, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* (v.34) How big is this? Jesus is praying prayers of forgiveness over the people that are pounding spikes into His body. Let that sink in.

Jesus' thoughts are for others throughout the whole ordeal (v.28). And don't miss the fact that what Jesus experienced was precisely what we are due (v.41) The only innocent One willingly took our place. He suffered, *"the just for the unjust to bring us to God"* (1Pet 3:18).

Jesus didn't just talk the talk. It's one thing to talk about forgiveness and Jesus certainly talked a lot about forgiveness, but Jesus didn't just teach the truth, he doesn't just show us the way, he said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life..."*

With today's devotional we prepare to move from the subject of mercy to the subject of humility. Let's take a little time today to humble ourselves at the feet of Jesus even as He hangs there on those spikes bleeding out His life for us. Because it is true that it was our sin that put Him there. So hear again these words as He prays for you and me – *"Father forgive them... because they don't even have a clue"* (my paraphrase).

*Blessed Redeemer, precious Redeemer, seems now I see Him on Calvary's tree,
Wounded and bleeding, for sinners pleading, blind and unheeding, dying for me.
"Father, forgive them," thus did He pray, e'en while His lifeblood flowed fast away,
Praying for sinners while in such woe - no one but Jesus ever loved so.*

Avis B. Christiansen

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, Your capacity to forgive seems infinite. It's so astounding that even while You were experiencing such abuse at the hands of sinners, You were praying for Your tormentors and not for Yourself. I know if I am going to be able to show mercy anything at all like that, it's going to have to be You doing it in me. I am helpless to love unless You allow Your love to flow through me. O, merciful Jesus, enable me to love like You. Amen.