

Sermon 156: Romans 12:8: The Gift of Mercy

OUTLINE

Mercy defined
Mercy exemplified

INTRODUCTION

Plato once said, 'How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?' This question highlights the tension between joy and commanded service, duty and desire. Yet this is the very thing that Paul is calling us to as he moves on in his discussion of the spiritual gifts, 'the one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness.' It has been said that all the gifts mentioned in Romans 12:6-8 relate to the office of elder and deacon, this could be the case, but we are trying to show how there is the calling of office but also a universal responsibility for all Christians. Spiritual gifts have too often been used as an excuse for opting out of general Christian responsibilities. Today we are looking at mercy, something that would have been officially administered by the office of deacon, but something which is also a universal Christian responsibility.

Please notice with me the last three gifts mentioned. They feature differently in the list than the previous four. Notice how the one who contributes must do so with generosity; the one who leads with zeal, and now the one who shows mercy with cheerfulness. In each case Paul calls not only for right action but right feeling. Not only external correctness but a heart that agrees. This throws us right into the conundrum of commanded love.

Let me amplify this problem slightly. We all know that you cannot command love. The heart is not like a hand. It does not follow commands, it must be won. Add to the issue a sinful heart that is made to be love; but because of sin is naturally selfish. Add to this the problem of heartless obedience which God despises, so it isn't an option. And then add another layer of difficulty in the problem of legalism manipulating action through guilt, which is not how God motivates His children. This difficulty has resulted in an eternal conflict. There are those who see the importance of human joy and freedom and who sacrifice the right for rights. And on the opposing side are those who see the necessity of love and doing good who put the deed before the doer. In the gospel there is a third way where God can command us to do and want the good we can't do or want by enabling us to want to do it. God serves us by His grace in the gospel that we want to give with generosity because of how He has given to us; we want to lead with zeal because of our deep desire to please love; and our mercy can be cheerful because of the mercy we have received.

So today we want to look at mercy defined and then mercy exemplified for us.

Mercy defined

Let's begin by defining Mercy, what is mercy? Making a distinction between mercy and grace, Dr D Martin Lloyd-Jones says, "Grace is especially associated with men in their sins; mercy is especially associated with men in their misery." Grace seeks to remove the guilt of sin, mercy seeks to alleviate the consequences of sin. It boils down to pity over another's suffering, and the desire to alleviate that suffering. A. W. Pink adds to this definition, "it causes it's possessor to make the cause of another his own, so that he is grieved by it, for when our heart is really touched by the state of another we are stirred within." To be merciful then is to have compassion and pity for another, and act to bring relief.

If this is the case, a simple issue of feeling sorry for someone is not mercy. Many of us can see suffering and say, 'ah poor thing!', but unless we do something to help ease the suffering we have not shown mercy, only empathy. A merciful person is not someone who says, 'what a pity' a lot, but someone who acts to end another's suffering.

Since the entrance of sin into the world, God and the godly have acted in mercy. It could be argued that the first act of mercy was the clothing of Adam and Eve after they sinned. It is true that the animal sacrifice was necessary for their sins, but they now needed clothing for the new unfriendly environment of the cursed creation.

Even before the law was given, mercy to the needy and desire to alleviate suffering was a hallmark of the godliness. Job when protesting his righteousness put it in these terms. Job 31:16-22, "If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it (for from my youth the fatherless grew up with me as with a father, and from my mother's womb I guided the widow), if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or the needy without covering, if his body has not blessed me, and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, because I saw my help in the gate, then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket.'

Under the law God commanded Israel to look after the poor and needy, Deut. 15:7-8, "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, 8 but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.'

During the time of the prophets, the prophets constantly scolded Israel for neglecting the poor, Isaiah 58:6-7, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?'

Jesus Himself was born poor and ministered to the poor.

In the NT church we see people selling their possessions to help those in need, and even appointed deacons to ensure the needy are ministered to.

In fact mercy is seen as a proof of salvation. Remember the beatitude, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.' Let me ask you, do we receive mercy from God, because we are merciful first, or do we show mercy because God has been merciful to us? This verse is descriptive not prescriptive, it describes what those who have received mercy do, not what we must do in order to receive mercy. This note is struck several times in the NT, that those who are truly saved will be merciful. 1 John 3:16-18, 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.' John is proving whether one is a Christian or not, the test in this instance is love in acts of mercy to the needy. Likewise James 2:14-17, 'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.' And of course we all know the parable of the sheep and the goats. Those who were merciful to the least were those who were saved and welcomed into eternal life, the goats were those who claimed religion but only had the external trappings but were not truly born again, and this was proven in their lack of mercy.

As Christians we have the greatest reason for serving others in acts of mercy. Christians should be the most merciful people on the earth. Not because we have the greatest fear of hell; nor because we have the greatest sense of guilt if we don't. No, it is because the Greatest Person has gone to the greatest length for the most undeserving. We have been more greatly served than anyone else and should have the greatest sense of love and gratitude that desires to do God's will. Only those who have seen their own sin and seen a holy God who has every right to punish them, then go and serve them. Only they will be able to view another who is needy, even if it is their own fault, and give to them willingly, cheerfully, unbegrudgingly, not making them feel like a burden, counting it a privilege and a joy to imitate Christ.

Listen to how B. B. Warfield applies this in one of his sermons:

'Now dear Christians, some you pray night and day to be branches of the true Vine; you pray to be made all over in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like him in your giving... 'though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor'... Objection 1. 'My money is my own.' Answer: Christ might have said, 'my blood is my own, my life is my own'... then where should we have been? Objection 2. 'The poor are undeserving.' Answer: Christ might have said, 'They are wicked rebels...shall I lay down my life for these? I will give to the good angels.' But no, he left the ninety-nine, and came after the lost. He gave his blood for the undeserving. Objection 3. 'The poor may abuse it.' Answer: Christ might have said the same; yea, with far greater truth. Christ knew thousands would trample his blood under their feet; that most would despise it; that many would make it an excuse for sinning more; yet he gave his own blood. Oh, my dear Christians! If you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and the poor, the thankless and the undeserving. Christ is glorious and so happy and so will you be. It is not your money I want, but your happiness. Remember his own word, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Our mercy is in imitation of God's and because we have experienced it ourselves. Matt. 5:43-45, 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.' And we know the parable of the unforgiving servant. The servant who was forgiven much was expected to forgive because he had been so much forgiven.

It is this gospel which creates a third way for commanded love. It is this gospel which has served us mercy that enables us to give mercy. It was the Father's pleasure to bruise His Son for us, and so it is our joy and pleasure to suffer in giving mercy to others. We are able to give to those in need without thinking them a burden and cheerfully because God's done this for us in Christ. We can serve with cheerfulness because heaven is secure and we are not trying to do it for salvation but because we are saved. We do it cheerfully counting it a privilege to walk in the footsteps of Christ. We are cheerful because we are tapping into the purpose we were made for, serving not sinning. And we are beginning to taste the truth in the promise that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We delight to serve another because the gospel has shown us the value of a single soul to God; the depth of their suffering in sin from which God seeks to rescue them; and because it is a high calling not a servitude. Not only is mercy done with cheerfulness but all our emotions are involved. Apathy gives place to zeal in response to the gospel, laziness to industry; sin to holiness; stinginess to generosity; pride to humility; minimal obedience to maximal obedience; hard-hearted to tender-hearted. The traditional conflict between duty and desire is swallowed up

in God serving the unworthy and an irresistible willingness to respond to such love, to please such love, to emulate such love. Plato was wrong we can be happy and have to serve at the same time.

Mercy exemplified

The classic text for looking at a good example of mercy is the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25-37. It is important that we understand the context because it pulls together all that we are saying. Notice in verse 25 that Jesus was being tested, 'And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"' So, this lawyer, an expert in the law, was trying to discredit Jesus by getting him to speak against the law somehow. The great irony is that this man did not obey the law himself and could not see that he was in need of salvation to come from another and not his own good works. You will notice that this man, like the rich young ruler asks Jesus what one ought to do, to inherit eternal life. This betrays a mindset that says, if I am good enough I can get eternal life. There is the Pelagian version of this lie which says, my good works are so meritorious God owes me salvation because of my goodness. But there are few who are so brazen more often than not this heresy is a form of Semi-Pelagianism, a law gospel mix. It usually goes something like this. God saves me by His grace and brings me into His covenant community, then I keep myself in and on judgement day God will look on my imperfect works and overlook the minor imperfections because I tried really hard. This is very close to what first century Jews believed. God saves me by grace and my works through a type of congruent merit.

Jesus spots this thinking in the Lawyer and so asks him about the law, v26, 'He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"' now we know that the law is a mirror that exposes our inadequacies and inability. When we compare ourselves with God's perfect requirements we would never come away thinking I can do anything to save myself and gain eternal life, but this expert in the law does not know this first lesson. We see by his answer that he has some head knowledge of the law but does not properly understand its purpose. V27, 'And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.'" These are the 2 commands which summarise the 10 commandments. All of the law is either about our duty to God or man. List any commandment and it will fall under one of these commands. But there is also a connection between these commands. If we truly love God, and are genuinely saved, then we will love mankind just as God does. A lack of love would be a great revealer of a false love towards God which is what much of first century Judaism was.

The purpose of the law is to show you that you can't keep it, so as an invitation to self-discovery, as an invitation to despair Jesus sends the lawyer to the law to learn that he is not a perfect law keeper who can earn eternal life. V28, 'And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.'" Now picture yourself as this lawyer, you are an expert in it, you are a Jew not a Gentile, you are circumcised, a devout person who tries to keep all the laws, at this point you would be expecting a commendation from Jesus or an acknowledgement that you were already on your way there. Jesus implies that this man is not there yet, that he still has to perform the law in order to complete it. This no doubt would not sit well, for you think you are a good person. You quickly search for anything that might count as not fulfilling these two commands. Sadly the lawyer sees no deficiencies in his keeping of the first commandment and only thinks he needs a better definition on how to keep the second to show that he is ok. So as with all those who have any form of perfectionistic teaching, redefining the law or sin is the way he comes back. Notice the language of seeking to justify himself, v29, 'But he, desiring to justify himself,

said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" It seems to me he is saying, 'I see no possibility that I break the first of the two, the only way I could break the second is if you define neighbour in a particular way.'

The parable is then given. It is given to show this loveless lawyer that he is not fulfilling the law of love. And if we are not fulfilling the law of love then we are not loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength because He is the one who commands us to love. The parable of the Good Samaritan is not merely preached as an example, but as an example to expose lovelessness that we might see that the only truly Good Samaritan is Christ, and we need His life and death to save us, for we cannot save ourselves by well we love others.

Jesus sets the scene by giving a typical picture of a man who has been a victim of a crime. And Jesus parades two men just like the lawyer, who have what appear to be valid reasons to neglect this man in his need. V31-32, 'Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.' Here is a man who is sick, who might appear dead, who is in desperate need. Now it was the priest's job to attend the sick and diagnose them, they would have had some basic medical skill. Likewise the Levite would have been responsible for alms giving. Jesus knows that the lawyer would be able to give plenty of reasons for why they should not have stopped; lots of legitimate sounding reasons. The man could have been dead and touching an unclean body would make the priest unclean and interfere with his service in the temple. This man was a recent victim of crime, evidence that criminals were in the area and so as an act of self-preservation one could not stop. Who is to say the man is a Jew at all he could be a Samaritan or Gentile. He had no clothes to identify him as Jewish. This person could have been an unclean person. What if it was an ambush? Can you hear the many excuses?

V33, 'But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.' Samaritans were hated by the Jews, they were unclean half breeds. But look, he has compassion where the others had excuses. This Samaritan's example is showing up the barrenness of Judaism's legalistic religion, the lovelessness disguised as law keeping. And see how much he does. He stops, where they walked by. He feels where they were unfeeling. he risks his own life to help this victim. He gave him medical treatment, nourishment, transport, paid habitation, nursed him himself and secured future care.

V36, 'Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?'" Notice the word 'proved' the Greek word is 'dokw' which means appears. The lawyer was speaking about love, but this Samaritan give evidence of the appearance of love. He loved in deed not merely word which is what the lawyer was doing. When Jesus asks which one showed mercy, the lawyer could not even say, the Samaritan, but said, 'the one who showed him mercy.' Jesus then tells this man, 'You go, and do likewise.' These words have two functions, firstly, they properly define what mercy looks like, and secondly, they show this racist lawyer that he is loveless and is not able to perfectly obey the law to save himself. He needs a saviour.

Jesus Christ is the only one who has loved God and man perfectly. He is the one who became the Good Samaritan in leaving heaven to come an rescue us. He is the one who had compassion upon us and ministers to our needs. This lawyer needed to stop trying to save himself by his law keeping and accept Christ's law keeping on his behalf, and then embrace the law not as a stairway to heaven but as a guide for life. Serving God not to try and save himself but because he is saved. Then his love could be free, cheerful, non-racist,

risking one's life for others, and fulfilment of what Paul calls all Christians to do, to do acts of mercy with cheerfulness.