

Attributes of God 6 – Mercy

Reading: Ephesians 2:4 “*But God, who is rich in mercy* ¹.....”

Introduction:

This is the final lesson in the series where we are looking at the attributes of God.

In previous lessons, we considered the fact that justice demands that a penalty be paid for those who do the wrong thing. We also looked at the fact that God is a just God. Being just means that judgements must be made according to consistent, ethical and proper principles – one of those principles being that those who do wrong are to be punished, while those who do right are rewarded.

But this raises the question: if God is a just God, how can sinners be saved? After all, sinners have done the wrong thing, and **Romans 6:23a** states that the wages of sin is death; separation from God. Yes, Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins through His sacrifice on the cross (**Isaiah 53:5-6; John 1:29**), and so in that sense, justice has been satisfied. But there still remains the fact that we are the ones who sinned (and continue to sin – **1 John 1:8**); we are the ones who have done the wrong thing, not Jesus (**Hebrews 4:15**). So how can we now live in a close relationship with God? One of the answers to that question is the topic we will cover in this lesson – God’s mercy.

LESSON

1) Definition of “mercy”

Mercy is described in Strong’s Concordance of the Bible in the following ways;

- *to stoop in kindness to an inferior* (Hebrew word numbers 2603).
- *showing favour as a result of kindness* (Hebrew word number 2617).
- *to show compassion, tenderness* (Hebrew words number 2617 and 7356).
- *to show compassion through word or deed, to show pity* (Greek word number 1653).

A modern definition of the word is; “*compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone who is within one’s power to punish or harm*” (www.google.com).

Putting all these definitions together, we come up with the picture that mercy is an action performed by one person toward another through kindness and compassion, and most significantly, it is done by someone who is in a superior position over another.

To put this in the context of this lesson, God is the one who is in the superior position, and we are the ones in the inferior position, deserving His wrath because of our sins. Now, there have been times in bible history when people have incurred God’s wrath, and I will get to the reason for that later in this lesson. But the Bible also shows that God has always been a merciful God.

2) God has always had mercy

There are many passages from one end of the scriptures to the other that state how God is a merciful God, and always has been. The following are a sample;

Genesis 19:16 “... *the Lord being merciful to him* ...”

- in relation to Lot being saved from the destruction of Sodom.

¹ All biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

Attributes of God 6 – Mercy

Deuteronomy 4:31 “... for the Lord your God is a merciful God ...”

- Moses exhorting the Hebrews when they call on God and obey Him.

2 Chronicles 30:9 “... for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful ...”

- Hezekiah’s exhortation to Judah to return to the Lord.

Psalms 136:1-26 “.... for His mercy endures forever ...”

- a Psalm of thanksgiving to God for His enduring mercy.

2 Corinthians 1:3 “.... God The Father of mercies ...”

- a part of the encouragement that Paul was giving to the Corinthians.

Ephesians 2:4 “But God, who is rich in mercy”

- Paul’s message to the Ephesians about God’s grace and mercy.

James 5:11 “... the Lord is very compassionate and merciful ..”

- James encouraging his readers to be patient and persevere.

Not only do the scriptures state that God is a merciful God, but there are also biblical accounts to demonstrate this fact. For example;

a) Towards Israel during the time of the Judges

After the death of Joshua and the leaders who knew him, Israel went through cycles of turning away from the Lord (**Judges 2:7-19**). When they forsook the Lord and turned to false gods, the Lord would punish them in one form or another, in keeping with the warnings He gave through Moses in **Deuteronomy 28:15-68**. During the time of punishment, the people suffered and were distressed (**Judges 2:15**).

Eventually, they would realise the error of their ways (to some extent) and cry out to the Lord, confessing their sins and asking for deliverance – for example, **Judges 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10**. When they did this, God took pity on them and showed His great mercy towards them (**Judges 2:18**). He sent judges to lead them out of their tribulations.

b) Towards Nineveh

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. As we saw in the previous lesson, we don’t know what instructions or teachings they had received from God with regard to sin and righteousness. But nevertheless, they were accountable to God, and because of their wickedness, they were under threat of being overthrown by God (**Jonah 1:2; 3:4**).

Once Jonah had preached his message, the people, from the king down (**Jonah 3:5-9**), believed God, put on sackcloth and ashes, and vowed to turn from their evil ways. However, whatever sins they had committed in the past, they could not go back and undo them - they were at the mercy of God.

God saw their change of heart and was merciful toward them. And so He relented from the calamity that He said He would bring on them (**Jonah 3:10**).

c) Towards us

In **Ephesians 2:4** we read how God, being rich in mercy, has made us alive through Jesus. As sinners, we separated ourselves from God through our own deeds (**Isaiah 59:2**) – we were spiritually dead (**Ephesians 2:1**), deserving God’s condemnation (implied in **Romans 8:1**).

Attributes of God 6 – Mercy

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,”

Ephesians 2:4-6

We who were deserving of spiritual death have now been elevated to sit in the heavenly places as God’s children (**Galatians 4:6**). God has indeed been merciful toward us. Let me quote something I found once on the internet; *“Mercy is not the fruit of our goodness, but the fruit of God’s goodness.”*

3) God’s mercy is conditional

To some extent, God shows mercy to all earthly creatures through His benevolence in nature (**Psalm 145:9**). For example, He sends the sunshine and the rain on both the just and the unjust (**Matthew 5:45**). But as I mentioned earlier in this lesson, there have been times when people have incurred God’s wrath, rather than receive His mercy. For example, during the wilderness wanderings after leaving Egypt, the Hebrews did not receive God’s mercy for their sins. In fact, the whole generation of adults that left Egypt were not allowed to enter the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb (**Numbers 14:26-35**).

So why the difference? Why is it that some people receive His mercy and others don’t? The answer is found in verses such as **Psalm 103:17a**;

“But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him,”

When it comes to spiritual things, God’s mercy primarily extends only to those who fear Him and turn to Him - He resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (**James 4:6**). Therefore, the reason why the Hebrews in the wilderness did not receive His mercy is found in **Psalm 95:8-11** (and repeated in **Hebrews 3:7-11**). They are described as a people who had hardened their hearts. They are described as a people in rebellion, in spite of the fact that they had seen His works first-hand. Examples of their rebelliousness can be seen in passages such as **Exodus 32:1-6; Numbers 11:1-6; 13:30 – 14:10; 16:1-3; 25:1-9; Deuteronomy 1:19-33**. God had freed them from the yoke of slavery in Egypt and had performed various miracles in their presence. But they refused to put their faith and trust in Him – they hardened their hearts. Therefore, they received no mercy.

But for those of humble heart who turn to God, they do receive His grace and mercy (**1 Peter 5:5b**). This is the condition for receiving God’s mercy. This is why people like King David, who committed terrible sins², received mercy from God. He repented, confessed his sins to God and desired a pure heart (**2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51:1-19**), because he wanted to be right with God.

² He committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the death in battle of her husband (**2 Samuel 11:1-25**).

Attributes of God 6 – Mercy

4) Application

I want to make just two points from this lesson. The first is this;

- a) **If we want to receive God’s mercy, then we need to be following His word in humble obedience.** The reason I say this is because, at times, we hear from people who know God’s word, but are wilfully living a sinful life³, say that on judgement day, they will just throw themselves on God’s mercy. Their expectation is that God will still forgive their unrepentant ways. Well, there is nothing in the Bible that I have found that would support that thought process. In fact, what I do find in the scriptures is the complete opposite. For example;

²⁶“*For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,*

²⁷*but a certain fearful expectation of judgement, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.”*

Hebrews 10:26-27

As we have seen in this lesson, God is abundant in mercy (**Psalm 86:5; 103:8**), but it is conditional. His ongoing mercy and forgiveness is dependant on our walking in fellowship with Him (**1 John 1:7**) – walking as children of light (**Ephesians 5:8**), not as children of this world (**Ephesians 2:1-3**).

The second point from the lesson is this;

- b) **Because God is merciful, we, as His children, are to be merciful also (Luke 6:36).**

When we consider and remember how merciful God has been toward us, then that is how we need to show mercy toward others. Look at the context of **Luke 6:36**. It is not talking about being merciful to our friends or people we like⁴, it is talking about being merciful to those who are our enemies; to those who are unkind and evil. Like showing love, this is a real test as to whether we are merciful or not – showing mercy to those we don’t like – to those who are our “enemies”.

- are we really prepared to show mercy and forgive those who harm us in some way?
- are we really prepared to show mercy and compassion to someone who at one time may have given us a bad time, but are now going through a rough spot themselves?

James 2:13a says, “*For judgement is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. ...*”. How we treat others will affect how God will treat us⁵. Therefore, let us also be prepared to show mercy in the way that God has shown mercy to us.

³ “*Wilfully living a sinful life*” is not the same thing as someone who is sincerely trying to live a faithful life but stumbles now and then, repents, and seeks God’s forgiveness (**1 John 1:7, 9**). The “*wilful sinner*” generally shows no signs of repentance (**Luke 13:3, 5**).

⁴ We need to be merciful to them as well, but that is not the point Jesus is making.

⁵ Just like forgiveness and judging – **Matthew 6:14-15; 7:2**.