

TWO THINGS WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE LORD'S MERCY

7⁵³Then everyone went to his own home. 8 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2Early [the next] morning he again came into the temple [courts], and all the people came to him; he sat down, and taught them. 3Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought [to him] a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They made her stand before them, 4and they said to [Jesus], Teacher, this woman has been caught committing adultery—caught in the very act. 5Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such [a person]. What then do you say about her? 6Now they said this in order to test him, so that they might have something of which to accuse him. Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground. 7When they continued questioning him, he stood up and said to them, Whoever among you is without sin, let him cast the first stone at her. 8Again he stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground. 9Then, those who heard began to go away one at a time, beginning with the oldest down to the youngest, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10Then Jesus stood up and said to her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? 11And she said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn you. Go your way; from now on leave your life of sin. (Jn. 7:53-8:11)

Introduction

A tall man with a dark complexion walked into the little chapel on the boardwalk. He wore a black leather jacket and mirror teardrop sunglasses. His hair was greasy and disheveled. He took a seat in the back row.

The speaker was addressing the group of volunteers who had come to work at the chapel for the summer, eager to share the gospel with the people who would be spending their vacation at the New Jersey shore.

Suddenly, the man with the dark complexion stood up. His voice was loud and searing, "Hey man, I got a question. I killed six men in Viet Nam. Where does that put me with God?"

Everyone sat stunned. No one moved. The man stood there, waiting for an answer. The speaker did not address the man, he simply continued speaking to the group of volunteers huddled around the front of the chapel.

The tall dark man shouted again, this time louder, "Hey man! You! I'm talkin' to you! I killed six men in Viet Nam with my bare hands. You hear that? I want to know, where does that put me with God?"

One of the volunteers, a young man named Mark, sat in his seat, almost afraid to move. He prayed that the speaker would come up with something to say to this man. Suddenly it occurred to Mark that maybe he should get up and go speak with this man who was standing there so hurt and alone at the back of the chapel. Mark's

knees were quivering. His heart was thumping. Then, finally, he made his decision: he got up and walked back to where the man stood.

Mark extended his hand to the tall man with the dark complexion, "My name is Mark, what's yours?" The man took Mark's hand, shook it quickly, and then dropped it. "Vince," he said, "what's that to you?"

Did God have something to say to this man? Mark silently prayed, "LORD, please help me. I don't know what to say to him."

As Mark looked at Vince he thought of Jesus on Calvary's cross. Suddenly the words of Isaiah 53:10 popped into his mind:

It was Jehovah's will to bruise him; he has caused him to suffer. Though Jehovah makes his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days, and Jehovah's good pleasure shall prosper in his hand.

Mark thought of God sending His Son, Jesus, to the cross. God did understand Vince. God did have something to say to him.

"Vince," began Mark, "God does understand." Mark turned to Isaiah 53 and began reading. "Vince," he continued, "God knows something even worse than killing people with your bare hands. He knows what it's like to see His own Son be crucified. He made it happen for us. Vince, God understands where you are, what you're feeling."

Vince took off his sunglasses. He looked at Mark and asked meekly, "You really think God understands?"

"Yes, Vince. Yes, He does. The Scriptures confirm it."

Vince smiled ever so slightly. Mark sensed that a barrier had been broken down in Vince. Perhaps now he was ready to hear the gospel. Mark felt grateful and hopeful: God knew where Vince was. (*POWER*, 8/12/90, pp. 2-ff.)

God also knew where that woman was, the one brought before His Son in Jerusalem that day so many years ago: She had been caught in the very act of sin. She stood condemned by the law of God. She stood surrounded by her accusers.

After dispatching her self-righteous accusers, Jesus addressed the woman with these words:

Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? ¹¹And she said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn you. Go your way; from now on leave your life of sin. (Jn. 8:10-11)

As we consider Jesus' words addressed to this woman, let us learn two things we need to know about the LORD's mercy. Because the LORD is rich in mercy, we can confidently look to Him for mercy—but we must not abuse His mercy. These are the two things we need to know about the LORD's mercy.

I. We May Confidently Look to the LORD for Mercy

Throughout the Bible the LORD reveals Himself as **the God who stands ready to forgive**, the God who stands ready to extend His mercy to us:

... you are a God [who stands] ready to pardon; [you are] gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness ... (Neh. 9:17b)

Seek Jehovah while he may be found; call to him while he is near. ⁷Let the wicked man forsake his way, and let the unrighteous man [forsake] his thoughts. Let him return to Jehovah, and he will have mercy on him. [Let him return] to our God, for he will abundantly pardon—⁸for my thoughts are not [like] your thoughts, neither are your ways [the same as] my ways, declares Jehovah. ⁹As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts [higher] than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:6-9)

Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord Jehovah, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but, rather, that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezek. 33:11)

Who is a God like you, who pardons iniquity and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not retain your anger forever, because you delight in lovingkindness. ¹⁹You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our iniquities under foot; and hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. (Mic. 7:18-19)

... for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world; but [rather], that the world might be saved through him. (Jn. 3:16-17)

The LORD reveals Himself in the Bible as **the God who is able to forgive**:

Ah Lord Jehovah! You have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm; there is nothing too difficult for you. (Jer. 32:17)

And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of Jehovah, and Satan was standing at his right hand to be his adversary ... ³Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the angel. ⁴Then [Jehovah] spoke to those who stood before him, saying, Take off of him the filthy

garments. And to him he said, See, I have taken away your sin, and I will clothe you with festival robes. (Zech. 3:1,3-4)

God presented [Christ Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement ... He did this ... so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:25-26)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness ... we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One, ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 Jn. 1:9; 2:1b-2a)

We may say that we know these things, but we still do not “feel” that God can forgive us. If such is the case, consider the story of a woman named Mary and the comments of the Christian counselor who ministered to her:

Mary’s eyes glistened with tears. She choked out the words, “I know the Bible says God loves me and Christ died for me. I know I’m supposed to believe my sins are forgiven. But I just can’t *feel* forgiven! I’m not good enough.” ...

On the surface, such testimonies express low self-esteem. Because Mary is not good enough, God does not forgive her ... But beneath the surface, such gloomy outlooks are actually forms of boasting ...

Mary’s feeling that “God can’t forgive me because I’m not good enough” implies a deeper belief: My goodness is the basis on which God deals with me.

The Apostle Paul discredits this common misbelief in his letter to the Ephesians, explaining that God’s basis for dealing with an individual has nothing to do with his worth:

It is by grace that you have been saved through faith—and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹it is not of works, therefore no one can boast. ¹⁰We are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance in order for us to walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10)

We are unable to make ourselves worthy before God, for we are bankrupt: *“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6a.)*

Self-pity is self-piety. By wallowing in negative feelings about our self-worth, we are in effect bragging that we are too tough for God to handle ...

A powerful insight that heals people in counseling is that God could snuff us out at any moment. We have nothing with which to bargain with Him. We are helpless. It is *His* idea to be gracious towards us ...

When we function out of a mistaken self-esteem, it is because we have forgotten who we are and who God is ...

Although Mary knew the Scriptures about God's ... mercy ... the light dawned as she saw that God's nature is what moves Him to forgive her.

Finally, seeing her need and God's goodness, she asked Him to forgive her. Now she *feels* forgiven.

Mary came to realize that God is not bound by her feelings of unworthiness. Trusting in His strength and mercy, she found her proper self-identity—and learned an important truth: God is able to break down our misconceptions and bring us into full fellowship with Himself. (*POWER*, 4/3/83, pp. 4-5)

We may confidently look to the LORD for mercy, knowing that He is both ready and able to extend His mercy to us:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16)

If we are in debt, it is good to have a friend who can sympathize with us. But it is even better if that sympathetic friend is also rich and can pay for our debt. As Hebrews 4:14-16 assures us, the Lord Jesus Christ is just such a Friend.

II. We Must Not Abuse the LORD's Great Mercy

We are a people given to extremes: We either fail to appreciate the greatness of God's mercy, or we tend to abuse that mercy and take it for granted. We either refuse to trust in the LORD's assurance that His mercy is able to reach us ("God can't forgive me because of how I've lived!"), or else we presume upon His great mercy ("God will forgive me no matter how I live!")

We must listen to **all** that Jesus says to this woman:

Then Jesus stood up and said to her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? ¹¹And she said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn you. Go your way; from now on leave your life of sin. (Jn. 8:10-11)

Let us consider what the Scripture explains to be the **purpose** of God's mercy extended to us:

*... the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹²It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, **Jesus Christ**, ¹⁴who **gave himself for us in order to redeem us from all wickedness** and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)*

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... ³... **God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering ... ⁴in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:1-4)***

Conclusion

We either fail to appreciate the greatness of the LORD's mercy, or else we have the tendency to abuse His great mercy. The proper perspective is provided for us by the Psalmist in Psalm 130:

In verses 1-2 the Psalmist cries out to the LORD from the depths—the depths of guilt and human despair: *"Out of the depths have I cried out to you, O Jehovah. ²Lord, hear my voice, let your ears be attentive to my supplications."*

In verses 3-4 the Psalmist acknowledges that no man stands innocent and acceptable before God—but he goes on to acknowledge that there is mercy with the LORD, and then adds the commentary, *"so that the LORD may be feared."* That is to say, the purpose of the LORD's mercy is to restore our relationship with Him, a relationship that must be characterized by reverence and righteousness: *"If you, Jehovah, keep a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴But with you there is forgiveness, so that you may be feared."*

In verses 5-6 the Psalmist testifies that he places his hope in the LORD and in His Word, (as opposed to trusting in his own efforts or his own feelings,) and he waits for the LORD with the confidence and expectation of the night watchman who waits for the coming of the morning: *"I wait for Jehovah, my soul waits; and in his word do I hope. ⁶My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning; indeed, more than watchmen wait for the morning."*

In verses 7-8 the Psalmist exhorts us, likewise, to hope in the LORD, assuring us that there is mercy with the LORD—indeed, abundant redemption—and he reminds us also that the LORD's design is to redeem us not only from the guilt of our iniquities but also from iniquity itself: *"O Israel, put your hope in Jehovah; for with Jehovah there is lovingkindness, and with him is full redemption. ⁸He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities."*

The LORD is rich in mercy; therefore, we may confidently look to Him for mercy. But we may never abuse His great mercy, entertaining a false confidence that we can continue to practice the sins that incur His righteous judgment.

Let us heed the whole counsel of God as He spoke it to that woman in Jerusalem so many years ago:

Then Jesus stood up and said to her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? ¹¹And she said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn you. Go your way; from now on leave your life of sin. (Jn. 8:10-11)