Mercy: The Heart of God

One day, many years ago, as my wife was driving home from running errands in Grants Pass, disaster struck.

She was stopped at a red light on Redwood Highway, surrounded by midday traffic. When the light turned green and she pressed the gas pedal, the engine shuddered—and died. Frantically, she tried restarting the car, but it wouldn't even turn over.

Behind her, drivers began honking. Some swerved angrily around her, shouting obscenities, tossing rude gestures as they passed. She sat helpless through several cycles of the light—ignored, berated, and stranded.

Then, a small sedan came to a halt behind her.

Its hazard lights blinked urgently. The bass pounded from the speakers, mixed with the unmistakable flare of accordion and brass—mariachi music in full force. Four Hispanic teenage boys spilled out of the car.

One ran to the driver's seat of her stalled vehicle. Two got behind it to push. The fourth stepped into traffic to safely block a lane as they moved the car to the shoulder.

Once she was out of danger, they checked on her. She told them her husband was on the way. They nodded, accepted her thanks, and without waiting for praise or reward, climbed back into their car and drove away.

Jesus told a story with a similar rhythm. And just as He did with the crowds that day, I'll ask you this: **Which of the people who passed by showed mercy?**

Jesus told this parable in response to a question about loving our neighbors. The reason He did so is because mercy is at the very heart of God. Mercy is one of the most dominant ways that God expresses love, and it is a core attribute of who God is.

When Yahweh declared His name before Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34, He named mercy first in describing Himself:

Exodus 34:6 Then Yahweh passed by in front of him and called out, "Yahweh, Yahweh God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth."

And so, as we have studied some of God's attributes in my last couple sermons, namely His Faithfulness and Holiness, this morning we're going to look at the heart of God: His Mercy.

What exactly is mercy? I remember back in my AWANA days having to memorize the definitions of various biblical words, and mercy was one of those words. IIRC, the AWANA definition of mercy was something like "not getting the bad things that I deserve", and I thought of it as a counterpart to grace, which was "getting the good things that I don't deserve". I don't think that was a very comprehensive definition of mercy.

The **Merriam-Webster dictionary** describes mercy as: 1) *compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one's power. 2) a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion. 3) compassionate treatment of those in distress*

I think it's very interesting that one of those definitions specifically attributes mercy to an act of the divine, and rightly so. Some common synonyms for mercy include compassion, pity, charity, grace and sympathy. With that brief definition of mercy, let's turn to our passage this morning as we explore the mercy of God.

Titus 3:3-7 For we ourselves also once were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the kindness and affection of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace, we would become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

This passage tells us 3 key things about God's mercy that I want us to take away today:
1) We need God's mercy (v3)
2) God gives mercy (v4-5a)
3) God's mercy transforms us (v5b-7)

Let's begin with verse 3, in which we are presented with our former condition.

For we ourselves also once were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.

As I read this list in verse 3, every word brings to mind headline after headline that crosses my news feed on a daily basis. Our world is fully engaged in rebellion against God, and so He has given them over to the depravity of their minds. Let's not be too quick to judge them, however, because verse 3 is about us, not them. Each one of us may not have been the epitome of all of those words, but certainly that list applies to every one of us, and if any part of that list applies to us, James 2:10 says that anyone who stumbles at any point in keeping God's law becomes guilty of breaking all of the law.

That list is a pretty brutal summary of our pre-saved condition, but it's also very honest. Romans 3:23 says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:10 says there is none righteous, not even one. Jeremiah 17:9 says that our hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Our sinfulness isn't just a pattern of behavior, it's a heart condition. Ephesians 2:1-3 describes our pre-saved condition as dead in our trespasses and sins, gratifying the cravings of our flesh, and by nature deserving of wrath. Remember my AWANA definition of mercy: not getting the bad things I deserve? According to that verse in Ephesians, we all deserve God's wrath. Not only do we deserve His wrath, but Roman's 6:23 tells us what that wrath looks like, when it says "The wages of sin is death". And so Paul starts us out in verse 3 with a clear picture that we deserve wrath, and that anything otherwise that we might receive will be an act of divine mercy.

One of the reasons we can be so disinclined to show mercy is because of how much we puff ourselves up in pride. Jesus has a lesson to teach us, found in Luke 7:37-47. That woman's actions toward Jesus stemmed from her deep awareness of her sin. She sought Him out to worship the Savior who had forgiven her great debt. On the other hand, as Jesus said, he who is forgiven little, loves little. Our

failure to love God as we ought stems from a distorted perspective of just how much we've been forgiven. As we reflect on our own sinfulness and the wrath that we justly deserve, our pride shrinks and our love for God grows, because we have a God who is merciful, which brings us to my second point: God gives mercy. Verses 4 and 5a reveal God's mercy to us.

But when the kindness and affection of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy

How exactly did the kindness and affection of God our Savior appear? You all know the answer. They appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, born as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. Because God saw our condition and took pity on us, He exercised mercy and got personally involved in procuring our salvation. Showing mercy was God's initiative. He didn't do this because we earned it in any way. On the contrary, verse 5 says this wasn't a result of any works of righteousness which we did. The prophet Isaiah paints a very disgusting picture of our so-called works of righteousness: he calls them filthy rags. The best that we can offer to God in our own efforts to earn salvation is to bring Him some used toilet paper.

So no, our own righteous deeds have no positive impact in our salvation. In fact, they only contribute further to our great need for mercy. Thankfully, God's mercy is more abundant than the sum total of all of our sins. We sing about it in one of the songs we love, "our sins, they are many, His mercy is more." Lamentations 3:22-23 says, *the mercy of Yahweh never ceases, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is His faithfulness.*

Our God is a God of mercy. Instead of wrath, He gives us new mercy every morning. The fact that you don't perish in your sleep, but that you wake up in the morning is an act of mercy by God. All of us are here this morning because God gave each of us fresh mercy this morning. Ephesians 2:4-5 continues to mirror our passage in Titus, going from a description of our condition (dead in our sins), to two of the most powerful words in the Bible: "but God." Verse 4 says, *but God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.* Our God is a God of merciful love. Again, He loved us not because we deserved His love, but as Romans 5:8 says, *God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

And so God lavishes His mercy on us by saving us from the wrath that we deserve, through Christ's death on the cross in our place. As a result of this mercy, not only are we eternally saved, but we begin immediately to be transformed, which is my third point. Let's look again at verses 5-7: *He saved us, not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace, we would become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

Part of the work of salvation, according to those verses, includes the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. Regeneration and renewal are transformative processes. Let's look at each of these phrases. Washing of regeneration looks at the process that we more often describe as being "born again." In John 3:3 & 5, when Jesus is having a conversation with Nicodemus about salvation, He says that entry into the kingdom of God requires that a person be "born again". When Nicodemus asks for clarification, Jesus says that we must be "born of water and the Spirit". He chastised Nicodemus for being a teacher of Israel and not understanding this concept. Nicodemus should have known about this renewal, because the prophet Ezekiel foretold of it in 36:25-27,

proclaiming this message from God: *then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to do My judgments.*

When we are saved, when we are born again, God replaces our sinful rebellious heart of stone with a heart of flesh. He washes our record of sin clean (remember from my previous message about uncleanness being the opposite of holiness?). In Psalm 51:1-2 David prays, *Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the abundance of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.* He continues in verse 7: *Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.* Finally, verses 9-10 say, *Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.* Part of the transforming work that occurs in believers as a result of God's mercy is being washed clean. I think of the story of the prodigal son, who came to his senses while living in a pig sty and sharing in their slop. I have no doubt that when he arrived back at his father's house, he was given a bath. His time of living in filth was over. In Ephesians 5:26, Paul writes that Christ cleansed believers (collectively called the Church in this verse), by the washing of water with the word, that is, the Bible. In John 15:3, Jesus tells His disciples that they are already clean because of the word which He has spoken to them. In that context, the cleaning is for the purpose of being more fruitful. They have been cleansed of the aspects of their lives that are dead, decaying, and unfruitful: their sins and deeds of darkness. Psalm 19 poetically describes the Word of God as that which is perfect, able to restore the soul, and that which is clean, leading to a fear of the Lord that endures forever. God's Word reveals our sinfulness so that the Holy Spirit, working within us, can perform His work of renewal.

As the prophecy in Ezekiel said, He fills us with His Spirit (the Holy Spirit), giving us the desire to obey Him. This renewed desire to obey God, given to us by the Holy Spirit within us, is the 2nd part of this transformative process: renewal by the Holy Spirit. Romans 12:2 says to be *transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what the will of God is, that which is good and pleasing and perfect.* This renewal is not a one-time event; it's a continual process of spiritual reformation. The Holy Spirit doesn't just clean up our behavior—He rewires our thinking, reshapes our desires, and reorients our affections toward God.
Before salvation, our minds were darkened (Ephesians 4:18), hostile to God (Romans 8:7), and unable to understand spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:14). But now, through the mercy of God and the indwelling of His Spirit, we are given new spiritual eyes to see, new ears to hear, and new hearts to respond. The Spirit becomes our internal compass, guiding us into truth (John 16:13), convicting us of sin (John 16:8), and producing fruit in our lives (Galatians 5:22–23).

This renewal is deeply personal. It's not just about knowing what pleases God—it's about wanting what pleases God. Ezekiel 36:26–27 captures this beautifully: *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."* That's mercy in motion—God not only forgives our past but empowers our future.

So when Paul says in Titus 3:5 that we are saved "by the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit," he's describing a total transformation. Mercy doesn't just rescue us—it remakes us. We are no longer conformed to the patterns of this world, but are being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

This renewal of the mind by the Holy Spirit isn't just about gaining spiritual insight—it's about cultivating a heart that reflects God's own character. As our minds are renewed, our values begin to shift. We stop asking, "What do I want?" and start asking, "What does God want?" And one of the clearest answers Scripture gives to that question is this: **God wants His people to be merciful.**

When we are born again—when we are renewed in our minds to obey God—we discover that mercy isn't just something we receive; it's something we're called to extend. Among the many commands in Scripture, one that echoes repeatedly is the call to be merciful. Mercy is not optional for the believer—it's essential. It's the natural outflow of a heart that has been transformed by grace.

God's mercy toward us doesn't end with us, but functions in more of a "pay it forward" way. On two different occasions Jesus condemned the Pharisees by quoting Hosea 6:6 to them and telling them to learn what it means. Hosea 6:6 says *I desire mercy and not sacrifice"*. In each of these instances, the Pharisees were being overly legalistic in regards to their traditions of extra obedience. They had taken God's law and distorted it into a religion of man, trying to earn salvation by righteous works. Jesus turned their understanding of God's will upside down each time with that quote from Hosea. God's desire for His people is that they should be people of mercy, just as He gave them mercy. James 2:13 says, *for judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.* In the parable of the two debtors found in Matt 18:23-35, we are confronted with the startling story of a man who has been forgiven a great debt that he owed a king, but then he refused to forgive the small debt that another man owed him. When the king hears of the man's lack of compassion, he summons the man to appear before him and condemns the man's actions with these words: *you wick slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?*

Because we have been the recipients of such great mercy from God, we are commanded to show mercy to our fellow man. In fact, things get pretty scary for us on the topic of mercy when we look at Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:31-46. Let's turn there and spend some time understanding God's call to us to show mercy.

Now, that passage isn't saying that we earn salvation by our acts of mercy. What it is saying is that our saving faith must be living and active (actually James says that part), producing fruit as evidenced by our mercy.

Now, I have a confession to make before you all. The reason I picked the topic of mercy for today's sermon is because I felt convicted about it. Mercy isn't something that I'm good at. I work for the City of Medford, and in my work there I frequently drive all over the city. Everywhere I go, but especially down town near my office, I see people on the streets, homeless and enslaved to addictions. My default attitude toward them, I confess, is that they made stupid choices and are reaping the consequences of those decisions. They are getting justice. I'm generally not one to stop and have a conversation with them, or give them money if they're panhandling, or go and buy them food if they have a sign that says they are hungry. I'm overly suspicious of deceitful motives. I've witnessed panhandlers in Medford at the end of the day get into nice cars and drive away. I don't like the idea of giving them cash, because I don't want to finance their drug addictions. And yes, there is prudence in such thinking, but there isn't mercy.

God, in His mercy toward me, has gifted me with a very merciful coworker. He is the type of guy whose heart bleeds for people in need. Every one of them that he sees causes him grief. Frequently I

have witnessed him buying food for people on the street corners, always stopping to talk to them and treat them like fellow human beings, and I am convicted by his actions and his heart. I have tried to excuse my attitude by focusing on passages such as James 2:15 and 1 John 3:17, which specifically talk about believers taking care of other believers, but those passages don't excuse me from the other places that teach compassion for everyone. In fact, Galatians 6:10 says, *"so then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith."* We don't get to neglect non-believers to take care of fellow believers, but we are to do good to all people.