



Mercy Past and Present

How Has Mercy Upgraded Your Life?

When I was in seminary I was fired from my job working at the school gym. The son of one of the seminary professors broke a window with a basketball and I was blamed for not providing enough supervision. I was heartbroken and the director of the seminary preschool where I also worked part-time heard what happened. She called me into her office and told me she was going to give me the hours I lost working at the gym, essentially doubling my hours. I was amazed by her kindness and generosity and could not thank her enough. Later that same year, she wrote an article about me and it was published in the Baptist state paper. In it she talked about my journey in Christ and compared my strength of character to a redwood tree. Needless to say, I knew I did not deserve such kind treatment and was overwhelmed by what Mrs. Kemp did for me. Mercy is rarely expected; it usually comes like a flash of lightning across the sky, a sudden cool breeze on a hot summer day. Have you ever come across someone who has shown you mercy; who treated you much better than you deserved? What did that mercy do for you? The word mercy, emphasizing the Father's mercy, is found almost one hundred and thirty times in the Bible and nearly always it is speaking of God. Our verse today emphasizes the Father's mercy. **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.** (Ephesians 2:4-5 NIV) There are two conditions described here; both of which are more than we can fathom. The first is the mercy of God. Literally, it is described as rich or more precisely, wildly wealthy. We might use the term "filthy rich". God's mercy is beyond imagination, far more than anyone's we know. It is supernatural. When we talk about super-powers in the comic book world, we would never think of mercy as one of them but here it is, connected to God. We have no grasp of how great God's mercy is because we have no benchmark for it, no point of comparison. If you were to ask yourself what God is like, high on your list needs to be His mercy.

The second condition pointed out in the passage has to do with us, that we were "dead in transgressions." This too is nearly impossible to follow. What confuses us in this is that we know about dead people and all we have to really say of them is that there is no personality to them, there is no experiencing, no sensing or relating, just a vacuum, empty. To be dead in transgressions is a difficult concept to grasp. We know that transgressions is stuff we do that is not right with God, getting out of whack with Him. Yet you have come across plenty of people who are regular sinners and seem pretty happy with things. They are full of life and have lots of fun. How can they be dead in transgressions? Again, we have no concept of what it is like to be free of transgressions, so we have no comparison point. Imagine a teenager, raised from birth in a North Korean concentration camp. She has no idea what freedom is like, what picking out your own dinner is, what going to a store is like and being able to buy things, how it is to freely express your opinions or go where you wish. This young woman has no conceptualization of how it would be to live outside the concentration camp, of how it would feel. We too haven't known a day when we weren't wrecked by transgressions. It is quite a problem for us. We don't have any concept of what it is like to be not dead in transgressions, so it is hard for us to comprehend how important it is to not be free of all transgression.

We have these two parts of this passage that are nearly incomprehensible to us: mercy that is much greater than we can conceptualize and the deadness we have because of the sins we have committed. I recently read of an officer in the British army during the early 1700s who, known for his extraordinary courage in battle, was a wild and immoral man. Colonel James Gardiner in 1719 was waiting in his apartment for a married woman to come see him at midnight and sleep with him. For years he had told Christians who had tried to convert him that God would have to strike him dead and give him a new body for him to change. That afternoon, Colonel Gardiner picked up a book his mother had given him when he left home entitled *The Christian Soldier* and out of boredom began to flip through it. While reading, there was a sudden blaze of light and Gardiner saw Christ on the cross surrounded by glory. A voice spoke to him, "Sinner, I did this for you, and this is what I get in return?" It may have been a vision, or it was a dream, we can't say, but the change in Colonel Gardiner was well documented. He immediately threw himself upon the mercy of God and left behind forever his old corrupt lifestyle. Gardiner discovered both what it was like to be rid of such an immense amount of sin as well as something of the riches of God's mercy. The power of Christ triggered a radical transformation in this famous sinner.

Consider the riches of God's mercy. The immensity of it is so beyond our grasp because we can't fathom how big sin is, the force of its destructiveness and what a great benefit His mercy is for us. That mercy though is not just for our relief from sin. It is also a reservoir dedicated to our usage. It is here for our disposal. One of the poorly represented believers described in the New Testament is Mark, also known as John Mark. He famously quit on Paul and Barnabas when they were on their initial missionary journey. For some reason, John Mark left the team and went home. The Apostle Paul was so infuriated by Mark's action, that the next time he and Barnabas were set to go on a mission trip, he refused to let Mark join them. **Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.** (Acts 15:37-38 NIV) His anger with Mark was bad enough that even when Barnabas told Paul that he refused to go without Mark, Paul chose to leave behind both Barnabas and Mark and head out with Silas instead. Mark and Barnabas went on their own mission trip and it would have seemed that was that as far as any continued partnership Paul and Mark would have, even with both being faithful Christians. Yet, that was not the end of the story.

At some point Mark rejoined the Apostle Paul and his ministry. We don't know what got them back together, but clearly there was a reconciliation. In Colossians 4 Paul speaks of Mark. **My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)** (Colossians 4:10 NIV) Paul makes a similar mention of Mark in his letter to Philemon. **Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.** (Philemon 23-24 NIV) Here is what is intriguing. Most who comment on this are impressed by Paul and his acceptance of Mark. They note, as I have in the past, that something must have changed in Mark for Paul to welcome him back into the fold. That of course is probably the case but look at this from Mark's end. Paul had publicly humiliated Mark by refusing to take him on the second missionary journey. The Christian community was put on blast regarding Mark's lack of commitment. It must have taken a long time to live down that reputation and if Paul had simply given Mark a second chance when it clearly was important to Mark, much of the disparagement of his character would have been quieted. Paul though refused to bend, and Mark was left a disgraced minister.

Sometime later, perhaps after Barnabas passed away, Paul and Mark reconciled. Again, look at this from Mark's perspective. Mark didn't need Paul. Paul was a prisoner and Mark was free to go about his life however he saw fit. Paul had nothing to offer Mark except the potential of his association with Paul landing Mark in the same prison where Paul was. For some reason, Mark decided to put aside his disappointment with Paul and join him in the ministry. He certainly would have been justified by many if he continued to hold a grudge against the Apostle. Yet, he didn't. Mark risked his life to help Paul during his time of great

need. That is the substance of mercy. The mercy of Christ poured into Mark and flowing out of him into Paul. Who would have faulted Mark for minding his own business and doing ministry somewhere else? No one in the natural order of things would have. But in the supernatural realm, where the mercy of Christ was known and seen in Mark, it was certainly expected of Mark to show his one-time mentor the same mercy Christ had shown him.

We are at our best spiritually when we are merciful. As the Bible puts it, **A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.** (Proverbs 19:11 NIV) You are never more like Christ and fulfilling your potential as a Christian than when you are merciful. I just read where the actress Heather Locklear told a story about her daughter Ava when she was a teen. A group of friends were at Ava's house and one of the girls mentioned a classmate who wasn't there. Someone said of the girl, "She thinks she is better than us." Locklear noted that she thought, "Oh no, here it goes. A gossip session." Ava though quickly interjected, "You know, the other day I was feeling bummed for no particular reason, and it was like she knew it. She came up to me and gave me a hug." Locklear commented that those few words changed the entire direction of the conversation. Of all people, Christians should be known for their mercy. They have the supernatural power within to overlook an offence, to speak kindly rather than critically of others and to be generous in their praise and compassion. You could alter the course of generations by being merciful and even change an entire line of people. Pick out someone this week and decide on a way to be generous and merciful toward that person. Compliments go a long way toward lifting the spirits of others and making them open to the mercy of salvation found in Christ.