

The Merciful God

A few words in scripture describe what is translated into the English word Mercy. Some of these words express something more wholistic and in this study it is important for us to unpack this. In the Greek it is the word *Eleos*. The more common Hebrew words are *Chemlah*, *Chanan* and *Hesed*, seen in Genesis 19:16, 19, 21. *When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. ... Your servant has found favour in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life. But I can't flee to the mountains; this disaster will overtake me, and I'll die...He said to him, "Very well, I will grant this request too; I will not overthrow the town you speak of. ²²But flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it."*

Throughout this study we will discuss both God's mercy towards mankind and the mercy of people toward other people. We see God's mercy in this passage as He is the initiator of the covenant. Lot did not go out seeking after God. In fact, he was hesitant to leave Sodom. We see this with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's mercy is the foundation of the covenant He makes with His people. It is interesting how these words mercy, kindness and grace can sometimes be used interchangeably but are fairly distinct in their meaning. Upon studying various languages we also see this distinction. In my home language, Shona, people will often pray to God saying, "Mune ngoni, mune nyasha, mune tsitsti." "You are merciful, you are gracious and you take pity on us." In this study we will focus mainly on God as the Merciful God. The Hebrew word that is more commonly used is *Hesed*. This word speaks of mercy, kindness, favour and goodness. It is a strong covenantal word that is sometimes translated "covenant love". He is committed to show us love and kindness, so He continues to do so even when we are doing the opposite. It is difficult therefore to talk about God's mercy without discussing His faithfulness. Mercy in scripture also speaks of a readiness to help those in trouble. Mercy is intrinsic to who God is and His mercy cannot be exhausted. 2 Sam 24:14 *David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands."*

Lam 3:22-23

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Ps 25:6

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.

God's mercy is at another level. It is not the same as how we tend to show mercy. We tend to show mercy towards those we like and with whom we are in close relationship.

Prov 12:10

The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.

The driving force behind God's relationship with Israel was His mercy. But notice how His justice is also included here. Hos 2:19 (ESV) *And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.*

His mercy was demonstrated by His loyalty towards them. He was committed to love them despite their resistance and inconsistency. Joel 2:13 *Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.*

God's mercy does not always look fair Ex 33:19 *And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*

It is important to also point out that God's mercy is not blind and will still occur in the context of judgment and discipline. Zech 1:12 *Then the angel of the Lord said, "Lord Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?"*

If you look at the journey the children of Israel went through with God you can identify with this in your own life. Neh 9:17, 19, 31 *They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them... Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take... But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.*

When you have a revelation of this attribute of God you are able to intercede effectively. We see this with Nehemiah and also with Abraham and Moses. They appealed to God's mercies.

As we embrace God's mercy we must never trivialize it. We must not miss the cost of His grace and mercy. When God forgives us it is not the same as when grandparents see a child's naughtiness as cute. Our sin grieves the Holy Spirit. When we recognize how just and holy God is, we discover the magnitude of His mercy when He forgives us. We live in a generation characterized by a mindset that says, "I like sinning, God likes forgiving, so the world is very well set up." God's mercy must always be viewed in the context of His wrath.

Rom 1:16-20

¹⁶*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*

¹⁸*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may*

be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

Let's examine Moses receiving the commandments from the Lord and how God reveals Himself as Merciful God in the context of establishing covenant.

Exodus 32:1-14

¹*When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods^[a] who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."*

²*Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."* ³*So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.* ⁴*He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods,^[b] Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."*

⁵*When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord."* ⁶*So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.*

⁷*Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'*

⁹*"I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."*

¹¹*But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.*

¹³*Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'"* ¹⁴*Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.*

Exodus 34:1-7

¹*The Lord said to Moses, "Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. ²Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of*

the mountain. ³No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain.”

⁴So Moses chiselled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. ⁵Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. ⁶And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

There is a lot we see about God through creation but when it comes to apprehending His mercy it needs to be revealed to us.

How does mercy show up in the scriptures?

Mt 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Jesus expects us to be merciful and shows us that it comes with a reward. There are degrees of mercy that can be shown and we seem to have more mercy shown to us when we too are merciful.

Mt 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. ²⁸“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. ²⁹“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ ³⁰“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³²“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

God's mercy is closely linked to His forgiveness. Mercy finds itself repeatedly forgiving.

Jesus practised what He preached. He demonstrated mercy toward mankind and toward those who were mocking Him. Mercy is often linked to the degree to which we can sympathise with people.

Luke 23:34

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

When someone hurts you, ask yourself what you would have done if you had been raised in the same conditions under the same influence etc. If you had been told all your life since childhood that a particular group of people was inferior to you, how would you behave? How difficult would it be for you to renew your mind after discovering the truth?

We are called to be conscious of the fact that we have been recipients of God's mercy.

Zech 7:9

This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.

Stephen followed Jesus' example by doing something similar. This is how mercy can be extended to others.

Acts 7:59-60

⁵⁹They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

When you recognize that you have been shown mercy you are more likely to be merciful. Ask God to show you how merciful He has been to you

We are called to have hearts where mercy dwells. Being merciful is a heart condition. What is your heart's bias? Is it mercy or judgement?

There is mercy we have received and mercy we will receive. When we are expecting mercy there is a way in which we live.

Jude 21

keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

We are not called to show blind unsanctified mercy to everyone

Jude 23

save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear--hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

We are not called to unsanctified mercy. This is the overextension of the strength; mercy. Sometimes showing mercy on someone can expose others to danger.

Mercy is a virtue we can extend to others based on appreciation of acts of kindness they have shown

2 Tim 1:16-18

¹⁶May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. ¹⁷On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. ¹⁸May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus.

The New Testament apostles were so passionate about mercy that they would open some of their letters by extending mercy. It was not just peace that was released but also mercy.

2 John 3

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love.

Grace = Charis; Mercy = Eleos; Peace = Eirene

The case of David and Jonathan's son is a classic example of mercy being extended based on covenant.

2 Sam 9:1-13

¹David asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" ²Now there was a servant of Saul's household named Ziba. They summoned him to appear before David, and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" "At your service," he replied. ³The king asked, "Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God's kindness?" Ziba answered the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is lame in both feet." ⁴"Where is he?" the king asked. Ziba answered, "He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar." ⁵So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel.

⁶When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor.

David said, "Mephibosheth!" "At your service," he replied. ⁷"Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table." ⁸Mephibosheth bowed down and said, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?"

⁹Then the king summoned Ziba, Saul's steward, and said to him, "I have given your master's grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family. ¹⁰You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master's grandson may be provided for. And Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table." (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.)

¹¹Then Ziba said to the king, "Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant to do." So Mephibosheth ate at David's table like one of the king's sons.

¹² Mephibosheth had a young son named Mika, and all the members of Ziba's household were servants of Mephibosheth. ¹³ And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table; he was lame in both feet.

1 Sam 24:3-7

³ He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. ⁴ The men said, "This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said^[b] to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe. ⁵ Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. ⁶ He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord." ⁷ With these words David sharply rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way.

You will show others mercy when you have a revelation that it is God who promotes you e.g. David and Saul. David waited for God to raise him up instead of trying to destroy Saul. David showed how mercy is not merely based on how they have treated you, that is why it is mercy. Mercy is more to do with recognizing how God has dealt with you than how others have treated you.

How do you react when someone is shown mercy? For example, look at the case of the big brother in the parable of the prodigal son. What did he do? He became critical of his father and also judgmental towards his brother and self-righteous, self-promoting and conceited. These are common reactions to observing someone being shown mercy.

Let's make a commitment to:

1. Praise God for His mercies that are new every morning
2. Cry out to Him to receive His mercy and grace in times of need
3. Extend mercy when we need to