

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 19th July, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY 1

The people on whom God has mercy

Ephesians 2:4 speaks of a God who is rich in mercy, a God who has met us in the extremities of our distresses as sinners. We are accustomed to seeing ourselves under the judgement of God for our sins, and rightly so, but it is a fact of revelation that God hears the cry of his people when they are in all sorts of trouble *because of their foolish sinfulness*.

The question of God's mercy is vital. Is there a God who is sympathetic with our concerns? And if so, on what grounds? In particular, does God relate to us at the point of our weakness, folly and transgression?

Human beings, being sinners, have a constant need for mercy and become 'screwed up' when not constantly assured of it. They have no inner springs of life and all external provocations become major; they have no tenderness to offer to others—other than a weak sharing in their resentment and anger.

God has mercy on those whom he chooses

God's relation to sinners has never been a matter of guesswork or wishful thinking. From the earliest times God gave hope by his word of promise and made covenants to assure otherwise anxious sinners of his serious and saving intentions concerning them (Rom. 9:14-18). This was his mercy to them, and so to us (Rom. 11:30-36).

Steadfast love (*hesed*) was given to Israel in terms of his covenant promise, and all this arose from his love (*ahabah*; Deut. 4:37; 7:6-10).

The New Testament equivalent (roughly speaking) is grace (*charis*). By this steadfast love or grace, God has established us, and keeps us in covenant relationship with himself (Rom. 4:16; Eph. 2:8).

Relation of mercy to steadfast love (O.T.) or grace (N.T.)

The word mercy (*raham* or *rahamim* in the O.T. and *elios* in the N.T.) overlaps the meaning of steadfast love or grace (e.g. Isa. 63:7-9; Eph. :2:4-8) but has a particular emphasis which will become the focus of these studies; i.e. we will not cover the same ground as a study of grace.

R. C. Trench shows that the specific meaning of mercy in the N.T. is compassion to one in need or helpless distress, or in debt and without claim to favourable treatment: 'Grace is concerned for man, as guilty; mercy, as he is miserable' (*Synonyms of the New Testament*, pp. 166ff., ref. NBD, p. 761). The same tends to be so for the word mercy in the O.T.

By mercy God reassures us of our covenant relationship when, through our sins, we fall into all manner of troubles.

No sooner had God made his covenant with Israel than they broke it and lay under his judgement. Moses prayed for them and asked to see the glory of God (Exod. 33:19). In the context of covenant love and faithfulness, God promised to have mercy on them (Exod. 34:5-10; so Ps. 103:7-14). God made it clear to Moses on that occasion that he would be merciful according to his own choice and not because he was prevailed upon by man.

It is this occasion and text which is referred to by Paul in Romans 9:15 as the basis of God's election of Israel, and so for Gentiles (11:30-32; 15:8f.; Gal. 6:16). The whole N.T. church is the people on whom God has had mercy and who will always do so (Gal. 6:16; 1 Tim. 1:2; 11 Tim. 1:2; 1 Pet. 2:10; 11 John 3; Jude 2).

Thereafter, succeeding generations were assured that when they fell, came into all manner of strife, and longed to return to God, they would know God's mercy (Deut. 4:25-3 1).

Examples of persons seeking mercy

David preferred to fall into the hand of God than into the hands of man, because God was merciful (II Sam. 24:14).

Hezekiah reminded the remnant of the Northern tribes that this was the nature of their God (11 Chron. 30:9).

Daniel sought such mercy in regard to avoiding the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:18).

Ezra reminded the restored nation that this had always been the nature of their God. This mercy was God's fulfilling his covenant and giving expression to his covenant love (Neh. 9:16-32).

The Psalms are notable in their recognition of God as the merciful one.

They show that:

- sinners can confidently trust in God (25:6),
- even in the presence of their enemies (40:11),
- and even when they have sinned grievously (51:1);
- they can pray to God (69:16),
- reason with him or concerning him (77:9),
- and ask him to act for his own name's sake (79:8-9);
- they become profoundly confident that God will be merciful (102:13)
- and they are grateful to God (103:4, 8);
- they know that God's mercy has regard for his law and they are made tender concerning it (119:77, 156);
- they know that all things are under the hand of God's mercy (145:9).

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 26th July, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY 2

The true people of God who depend on God's mercy

Israel was the people on whom God had had mercy, but because of **their presumption**, there had to be a sorting out as to who was and who was not a part of the true Israel.

Israel had consistently broken the covenant; therefore, their covenantal blessings of land, worship and monarchy were suspended; and in all of this, the prophets showed that Israel must hope for the mercy of God.

The following are references to *raham* or *rahamim* in prophets. They relate to Israel's restoration, but ultimately, to the renewal effected by Christ.

Jonah knew the mercy of God but refused to have it as a part of his own life-to his great detriment (Jonah 4:2).

God promised that, after the captivity, he would re-establish the people in their own land (Isa. 14: 1; 49:10, 13; 60: 10; Zech, 1: 12-17; 10: 6), for the sake of his own name (Ezek. 39:25).

Many times previously, God had sought to do them good but they preferred to put their trust elsewhere. God would have to wait-until they waited on him-to be merciful to them (Isa. 30:18)!

His compassion would be on the basis of his relation to them, as Father, and be expressed in his redemption of the people (Isa. 54:7-8, 10; 63:7, 15) and in his forgiveness (Micah 7:18-20). Israel should therefore consider the great goodness of God and turn to him (Isa. 55:7; so Joel 2:13).

The time of the captivity was a season when God's mercy was removed from the people (Jer. 16:5); but he still yearned for them (Jer. 31:20). He would not have it said that he did not care for his (divided) people; he would restore their Davidic king to effect all his good purpose for them (Jer. 33:19-26). The people who first heard this message needed to live through the threats that surrounded them, trusting that the mercy of God could work mercy in the hearts of their overlords (Jer. 42:12).

All of this had been lived through before by the Northern tribes of Israel and in relation to their captivity (Hosea 1:6-7; 2:19, 23).

In the time of judgement, Israel should learn to trust in the mercy of God (Lam. 3:31-33; Hab. 3:2). Daniel understood that the restoration would be the manifestation of God's mercy and not of their own righteousness. This was the key element in Israel coming to receive the mercy of God. (Dan. 9:4, 9, 18).

The captivity, together with their entire former history was intended to show them that they must depend on the mercy of God: it was intended to humble them and to make them ready to receive the final revelation of God's mercy.

Some sorting out may have occurred through the years of waiting in captivity, and after the captivity-with still no king to establish them, but the prophecies were far from fulfilled in the return of captives from Babylon. Jews waited to see the meaning of the prophecies. Events between the Old and New Testaments would have shown that military and political and legalistic approaches could not be the revelation of God's mercy indicated by the prophets.

In Luke 1, Mary and Zechariah are awed by the fact that they are to be the recipients of God's mercy and that they are to make it known to their generation. The mercy of which they speak is that which was promised to the fathers. Mary's song reveals a true response to God's mercy (Luke 1:46-55, 67-79; cf. 2:38).

When Christ came, he would 'clear his threshing floor', gather the wheat and bum the chaff (Luke 3:16-17). This would be the final sorting out as to who was and who was not amongst the people of God. It is those who see God's mercy coming to them in Christ who are his people.

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 26th July (b), 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY 3

Messiah's mercy and ours

The mercy which Jesus showed was not a mercy of his own choosing; he came to fulfill the promise of mercy to those whom God had chosen (see Study 1), to those who, through chastisement, were ready to receive mercy (see Study 2).

Jesus travelled extensively around Israel to reveal the compassion of the Father (Luke 15:20) and to announce the time of renewed favour upon the nation and its inhabitants. In all of this, he showed that the compassion and action of the Messiah was truly present in him (Matt. 9:35-39).

The compassion of Jesus

Jesus came to Israel with compassion or pity (Gr. *splagchechachna*).

- He felt and expressed compassion for a leper (Mark 1:41);
- He fed 5000 (Mark 6:34 or Matt. 14:14) and later 4000 (Matt. 15:32);
- He healed two blind men (Matt. 20:34);
- He had compassion on a widow from Nain and healed her son (Luke 7:13).

The compassion of Jesus would have been worth receiving because it was not just an expression of indulgence or shared anger but the out-working of the holy purpose of God.

People who sought mercy

Given the powerful action of this compassionate Messiah, it is not surprising to see that he was sought out eagerly by many, and, significantly, by those whom the official covenant people had excluded. These outcasts cried out for mercy (Gr. *elios*), usually addressing Jesus as 'Son of David'. The suppliants were:

- two blind men (Matt. 9:27),
- a Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:22),
- a man with an epileptic son (Mark 9:22; Luke 9:38),
- two blind men outside Jericho (Matt. 20:30-31; Luke 18:38-39; Mark 10:47-48, indicating that this include Bartimaeus),
- ten lepers (Luke 17:13),
- a grossly demon possessed man living amongst the Gadarenes (Mark 5:19).

Note that God's mercy came (and comes) to sinners in their pitiable condition, to bring some immediate help. This is not to indulge their self-pity—as though their real problem were their immediate situation, and not as an end in itself, but as a witness to the compassion of God.

There is only one occasion recorded in which mercy is sought from God with regard to a moral fault and this is in a parable (Luke 18:13). It is true in life that we tend to seek mercy for our physical well-being rather than for our moral accountability. But God does not wait until we understand this to have pity on us; his purpose is to lead us on to understand our true situation.

Harshness with the deprived exposes our refusal of God's mercy

Israel had never really understood God's steadfast love or mercy, and now, even with Messiah in their midst, could not understand it.

Dependence on mercy is exposed by the mercy shown to others. Those who have compassion on their enemies have understood the nature of God and are truly his children (Luke 6:32-36). By parables Jesus showed his disciples that without a forgiving spirit they did not understand God or the covenant relationship they had with him (Matt. 18:21-35; Luke 10:30-37—*splagchna*).

Israel had moved from an understanding of God's mercy to a petty performance of regulations and needed to be reminded that God desired mercy, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6 quoted in Matt. 9:13 and 12:7). Note that mercy has been equated with the knowledge of God by poetic parallelism.

But the merciful obtain mercy (Matt. 5:7).

Mercy a weightier matter of the law

Mercy then, is a 'weightier matter of the law' together with justice and faithfulness—or trust in God (Matt. 23:23; with Micah 6:8). Jesus reminded them that their law had always had mercy in view. It had particular regard to the weak and needy (e.g. Prov. 31:8-9). It should also have recalled for them that, where law was concerned, they also had great need for mercy.

For failure to see these things, Israel was poised on the edge of disaster. Ultimately, those who failed to see the nature of God and so failed to show mercy would receive no mercy (Luke 16:19-31).

Receive mercy! and so fulfil the law

Jesus came to fulfill the law. By his mercy, he has now established us in the love of God and love of our neighbour—so fulfilling the law. This latter love is to be expressed in the form of mercy (Luke 10:25-37). In knowing God's mercy we are made to be like him.

We must ask ourselves: 'Do we know God? Have we been made like God?'. Let us not evade our pitiable condition when measured by this test, but come to Christ whose heart was moved deeply by harassed and helpless people and by outcasts, and be renewed by mercy.

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 9th August, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY 4

Christ—a merciful High Priest

As Westerners we do not think in terms of having a high priest, but Israel's dependence on her priestly worship was a representation to us of how things are essentially. We cannot come to God apart from a high priest. His mercy comes to us through Christ who has become our great high priest.

It must also be apparent that the high priest necessary for us must be a merciful one.

Jesus said, 'No one comes to the Father, but through me' (John 14:6).

A cursory reading of the Gospel shows that Jesus was not strong on criticism, and what he had was for those who were obstinate in their self-righteousness. Note our inclination to secretly or openly despise those who get into all manner of trouble. What grounds do we have for such smugness? What deception has engulfed us?

The study will be centred on *Hebrews*. It will concentrate on the mercy of the High Priest rather than on any other aspects of Christ's high priestly work.

THE BASIS OF CHRIST'S MERCY

His likeness to us. He has suffered and been tempted, so is able to help those who are tempted (2:17-18).

He is able to sympathise (*sumpathesai* = suffer with) with our weaknesses—on the grounds of being tempted as are we (4:15).

His likeness to Old Testament priests. The Old Testament high priest was encumbered with weaknesses (5:2). Christ was appointed from among men (as were the weak priests), as one who had to call on God (as must we all), and who learned obedience through what he suffered (5:5, 7-8).

It is as one made like us that he has been made perfect. As such, he has become, for us, the source of eternal salvation (5:8-9).

When Old Testament priests were not merciful, they became uncaring of the things they represented, legalistic, and self-serving. God was unfaithfully represented and so were the people (e.g. Eli).

His difference from us and from Old Testament priests. The mercy of Old Testament priests should have been occasioned by their own need for it (5:3); Christ's mercy was shaped (not necessitated) by his own struggles with sin (2:9-10, 17-18; 4:14; 5:7-8), but has come in the context of his victory over it. His victory was

not only his victory over the temptations which came to him but over our sins (2:9; 7:26-28).

THE ARENA OF CHRIST'S MERCY

Jesus has paced through the heavens—into God's immediate presence (4:14; with 6:19-20; 9:24) there to represent us. Mercy comes to us at any point that God chooses to reveal this to us, but it is particularly in the matter of standing before him that we [lave needed mercy.

THE FUNCTION OF HIS MERCY

Christ has made propitiation (*hilasterion*) for the sins of the people (2:17-18). Propitiation means the averting of wrath. (More on this next study.)

The mercy of God seeks us at the point of our distress, but it pursues us into the depths of our moral fault (e.g. Jesus' treatment of Peter's denial, and his executioners' callousness, and the thief's repentance).

Christ has perfected for all time those sanctified (10:12-14). This phrase means that he has brought us to God (7:18-19) and established us before him with a clear conscience (10: 19-22).

THE POTENCY OF HIS MERCY

Christ's intercession is eternal, with a view to saving for all time (5:9); by the power of an indestructible life. He remains forever and so is effective (6:20; 7:3, 15-17, 23-25; 10:12-13).

From Psalm 110, we also note that the Melchizedekian priest is the king, to whom is given power to effect all that is necessary to the people he represents. So we come to a throne (of grace) to receive mercy (4:16).

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 16th August, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY 5

Mercy as salvation

Our study will be purely academic if we have no conception of our need for mercy (Rev. 3:17; cf. I Cor. 15:19).

God's mercy and our salvation (Eph. 2:1-10)

Our death meant there was nothing other to experience than 'the life of this world, . . . dominated by death and the lords of death'.

This death was effected wholly through our trespasses and sins-as a deliberate way of living.

We were not creative but followers of the world, and followers of the spirits of this age (this age as evil and transitory).

These powers were active in fostering our disobedience.

Jews as well as Gentiles were thus given up to passions and so subject to wrath.

Mercy arises from God's love; it is not elicited by our being subject to passions, wrath, and to the prince of air.

His mercy functions not by pitying our situation but by changing it, bringing us to incredible manhood in Christ.

So Romans 5:6-11 (we were weak, sinners, enemies, when Christ died, when we were justified, reconciled-God reconciled humanity to himself in Christ, he did not just make us conciliatory).

So Titus 3:3-8.

God's mercy over all history (11:25-12:1)

Paul was profoundly moved by the mercy of God (9:1-3).

Those who pursue self-righteousness object to the sovereignty of God's mercy (9:11, 15, 19, with 30-32; 10:1-3). They also object to the sovereignty of God's assessment of their lives.

Note how we pride ourselves on our laws and what we may accomplish through them; and on our freedom to make them and alter them. But all such powers are an illusion (James 4:12).

God's goodness and severity are both the operation of his mercy. His purpose in severing Israel was to include the Gentiles, and his purpose in including the Gentiles was to arouse the Jews to jealousy and so bring them to receive mercy.

All of humanity has been consigned to disobedience (as assessed by God's law) so that God may have mercy on all (as he elects—and this is concurrent with those who accept his sovereign judgement and so his sovereign mercy). Finally, there will be nothing in history of which to be proud other than the mercy of God, but how proud we will be of that!

Such mercy should bring us to an awe of God's ways, and to the presenting of our bodies for service/worship of God.

God's mercy re-establishing hope (I Pet. 1:3)

By this great mercy, we have been born again to a living hope. The resurrection of Christ has opened up to us the age to come and the powers of the age to come working in us to keep us for that day. In a judged earth, this is the mercy we have needed.

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 23rd August, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY 6

Mercy on the foolish and ignorant

This study arises from points already made, but it must try to set out the *circumstances under which God pities foolishness and ignorance*; and we must hear the *warnings* which are given to those who carelessly presume on God's mercy. It must also explore *our continuing need-as foolish people-for the mercy of God*.

What is a sin in ignorance?

Paul said that he received mercy because he acted ignorantly in unbelief (I Tim. 1: 13). He spoke with an understanding of Israel's history as well as the experience of his own conversion.

He had been deceived. Paul's experience tells us that the poor, wretched, miserable, blind and naked are not just the obviously so but the accomplished and well-favoured in this life who are yet deceived.

Does Paul claim notoriety in his being chief of sinners? Rather, he exclaims concerning the grace of God that could extend favour to one who was so meaninglessly occupied as to oppose God and his Christ. (He would have known Psalm 2.)

Jesus had said that any An could be forgiven, including a sin against himself. He asked that none be held accountable for his crucifixion 'for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). Echoing this, Stephen had prayed-in the hearing of Saul of Tarsus-that the sin of stoning him not be laid to the charge of its perpetrators. Clearly, the gospel deals with a sin which has first sedated those committing it.

But Paul still owned his ignorance as a sin. The word in I Timothy 1: 13 suggests an erroneous ignorance, as in Hebrews 5:2. For Saul of Tarsus to confess to ignorance and unbelief is not exactly him excusing himself! (So Acts 13:27; Rom. 10:3; 1 Cor. 15:8-10.)

His error was not just a lack of information, which would have been excusable, but a misunderstanding which stood under the wrath of God; it needed to be forgiven. There needed to be the proclamation of the gospel and his response of faith.

However, his guilt was not with a high hand. He had not consciously abandoned the covenant as in Numbers 15:30-31.

For us to do the same is to deliberately defy the covenant made with us in Christ, as referred to in Hebrews 2, 6 and 10; to sin with a high hand. Note that in Psalm 19:12-13, David realizes that hidden sins can lead to the 'great transgression'-perhaps the sin with a high hand. (Cf. Rom. 11: 13-14.)

We may observe that we sin deliberately whenever we give way to a temptation, knowing it to be sin. Is sin only forgivable if it was an accident? In this case it was not really a sin. No, the sin is in ignorance because the sinner drifted into ignorance and no longer felt the force of what he was about. He must answer for his culpable neglect, but his sin is not treated as ultimate given that it was not intended in an ultimate affront to God.

Some may think that they have deliberately affronted God by turning from a sentimental, pietistic, ceremonial, legalistic or otherwise deficient faith when, in fact, all they have done is ‘tilted at windmills’. Yet, note the warnings below.

Elder John taught his readers that if they sinned, they had an advocate with God; and he taught them to pray for those whose sin was not unto death (I John 2:1-2; 5:15-17).

Paul was uniquely qualified to announce this to other sinners. He knew that there is a rationale (of sorts) in mercy being shown to him in that he would be a model of God’s patient dealings with the wayward and foolish (I Tim. 1: 16; also Eph. 3: 8).

But that does not explain his receiving of mercy. (O.T. high priests could be merciful on the basis of the mercy needed by them [Heb. 5:2].)

Beware of mercy!

Is there a condition of man to which the mercy of God does not reach? For example, calling Christ an agent of Beelzebul (Mark 3:28-30; cf. Matt. 12:28-32; Luke 12:8-12), betraying Christ for money (Matt. 26:14-25; 27:3-10), holding the Son of God up to contempt (Heb. 6), outraging the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10), selling a birthright for a meal (Heb. 12:12-17), or showing no mercy (James 2:13)?

There is a ‘sin with a high hand’ for which there is no forgiveness. Judas was a devil (John 2), a son of perdition (John 17) who went to his appointed place (Acts 1).

There is enough mystery in all of this to cause us to be profoundly careful, but abundant encouragement to arouse us to plead with God for the assurance of his mercy.

It is frequently observed that those who are guilty of an eternal sin are unaware of that fact (e.g. Matt 25:31-46). It is also common in those who fear that they may have committed an unforgivable sin, that their conscience is wrongly sensitive or that they have mistaken the absence of assured feelings as an abandonment by God.

Our continuing need for mercy

‘**Me new** covenant, under which we relate to God, recalls the foolishness and ignorance of Israel in their national history (Jer. 31:31-34; quoted from LXX in Heb. 8:11-12 using ,mercy’ for ‘forgive’).

It is in the discovery of the mercy/forgiveness of God under this covenant that we truly know him.

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 30th August, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY SEVEN

Mercy that makes us strong

In this study, we touch a key element in the difference between the world's mercy and God's mercy. My contention is that the world's mercy leads to moral and social weakness; it is clear that God's mercy leads to moral and social strength.

What I mean by strength is the power to live in the world as we should, and that means the power to keep God's law. What I mean by the world's mercy is, in part, leniency, which means softening, soothing, mild, or merciful (from Latin, to soften), but the distinction is more a matter of context and purpose, as indicated below.

In study three, we observed that Jesus called mercy a weightier matter of the law (Matt. 23:23; referring to Mic. 6:8). In a sinful world, the law cannot be fulfilled apart from mercy. Those who were specialists at 'keeping' the law in fact were only legalists. For us sinners, it is his purpose that our duty (the law) be fulfilled in the outworking of mercy.

Just as the strength of sin is the law, (i.e. as in Rom 7, it excites our sinfulness and it condemns us), so the strength of righteousness is mercy (i.e. it excites us to righteousness and it justifies us). Observe then, the way of mercy in making us strong.

God's mercy forbids soft options

Kilpatrick in *Psychological Seduction* says concerning his drift into a humanist based psychology: 'I saw no need for sacrifice or hard choices ... Any inner tendency that I might have previously restrained, I now welcomed with open arms as an old friend. I was learning to accept myself. And the liberality I extended to myself, I extended to others in a positive debauch of tolerance. I believed that I and the rest of humanity were on the threshold of deeper and more wonderful discoveries about the self. One only had to learn to let go, to float free on the stream of instinct' (pp. 19, 21).

Wishing for a 'forgiving element' in the creation subsequent to our fall, we have sought many subterfuges to evade the reality of judgement, accountability, responsibility, and the pain that is necessarily associated with this. We currently seem to have a law which says life shall not only be painless but that we should not even suffer inconvenience.

We see ourselves as victims, largely innocent. We do not see the possibility for changing ourselves. We must be assisted with therapies, engineered into usefulness. We deify our needs and become unable to make decisions or respond to discipline.

It is as though we have said: ‘We will return to Eden’. Cain was angry with God over his judgements, but God affirmed that his punishment was not greater than he could bear.

Our seeking of pity (in the weak sense) is our complaining to God that it is not fair that our life has come what it is, for not preserving us from more of our own follies than he has. The fact is that we live in a judged earth and this touches everything: our flesh (we die); our vocation (with pain, and sweat); our looking for meaning (futility).

God’s mercy brings us to account

Adam and Eve’s responses to questioning sought to evade accountability. They wanted to have an alibi. By denying a moral Being who has blessed us for reasons other than our worth, we have been driven to finding a rationale for mercy, and have found it by denying moral accountability.

The Humanist Manifesto II stated, first, that religion was not objectionable; it stated secondly that no religion should include any ideas of assessment, doctrines of damnation or salvation, and thirdly, that morals should be determined wholly from human experience.

Kilpatrick writes: ‘Half of popular psychology is devoted to praising human dignity and the other half to excusing us from responsibility. But what kind of dignity is that? It’s no good to tell a man he’s fully human in one breath, and then with the next suggest he’s no more accountable than a vegetable’ (op. cit. p. 84).

With this, we should compare Jesus’ statement that the kingdom of heaven is like a man who wished to settle accounts. As the story proceeds, it is clear that the master settled the accounts by forgiving his servant all his debt (Matt. 18:23-35). There is no mercy which is not willing to settle accounts. People know they are still ‘over a barrel’.

God’s answer to our sin is, firstly, not grace, but judgement, and his grace is the answer to his own wrath. Human pity wants to evade wrath. God’s mercy has taken us through this in the cross. Being made accountable at that point gives us the moral courage to be accountable at every other point of life.

The mercy of God has come to humanity as a settled basis of relationship (covenant), established by God so that the dimensions of his mercy could be discovered without the destruction of either the character of God or human accountability.

God’s mercy makes people milling for self-sacrifice

Paul was awed by the majesty of God’s mercy; he catalogued its triumph in bringing rebels to sonship and the nations to faith, and then called readers to give up their whole beings for the service of God, for transformation to a new service of their fellows (Rom. 12: 1). They were to make a true estimate of their abilities and give themselves accordingly.

God's mercy makes people faithful

The studies to date have indicated that God's covenant mercy always deals with the issue of unfaithfulness, and calls his people on to faithful covenant partnership; i.e. the keeping of his law.

By God's mercy, Paul gave his opinion with regard to marriage as one who was trustworthy (I Cor. 7:25). If the major threat to our persons was the wrath of God and the mercy of God has quietened our fears, wisdom is free to grow—a wisdom that is not a reaction to other forces or a catering to our need for acceptance.

God's mercy makes people courageous

By God's mercy, Paul would not be disheartened (II Cor. 4:1). He says, effectively, that the mercy of God had released the true springs of his life and that opposition could not withhold their flow (c.f. Rom. 5:1-5). The Corinthian's situation was extremely painful for Paul, but his living in the mercy of God, for salvation and ministry, kept him strongly gracious and graciously strong in dealing with those who opposed him.

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 6th September, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY EIGHT

Mercy that broadens our affections

We could hardly think of a theme more amenable to our shrivelled spirits or to our petty world than the enlargement of our affections. Sin had shrivelled our affections to petty self-interest, or to such interest in other people's lives as was consistent with our self-interest or the settling of our consciences.

The world broadens our demands, not our affections. (Cf. the two meanings of 'love for the world'.)

Jesus made it plain in all his ministry that we would need to become merciful. Hence his 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Matt. 5:7). God's mercy has come to expose us, but at the same time to humble us and to make us tender. We must be sure that mercy does its proper work in us.

Judaism had failed to understand both God and the law, as shown by their lack of mercy, and Jesus made it plain that they would need to change (see Study 3).

The apostles command us to 'put on' what is our proper dress (Col. 3:12; Eph. 4:32; Jude 23).

- Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, etc.
- Bitterness, slander, put away; 'and be kind to one another, *tenderhearted*, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you'.
- On some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.

The Corinthian example

The Corinthians were restricted in their affections (literally 'compassions') and so were more in tune with fleshly than godly appeals (11 Cor. 6:12; cf. 11:1-4, 17-21). The danger to them was not *simply* that Christ's grace was not displayed in the church or to the world, but that they, themselves were veering from the faith.

Consider how the Gospel had broadened Paul's affections. He had moved from the strictures of hate to the vastness of love.

- He had made the confession: 'I have been wrong'. Until then, the whole of his life was circumscribed by the need to be right.
- He was constrained by love—of Christ for him, and so, his love for Christ (5 : 14) .

So 'She loves much because she has been forgiven much.'

Paul claimed that he had 'unceasing anguish' in his heart for his countrymen (Rom. 9:2).

- He had abundant love for the Corinthians (2:4).
- He desired to use no more than an open statement of the truth in his dealings with them (4:1-2).
- He put no obstacle in the way of their coming to faith and fulness of life (6:1-11).
- He called the Corinthians to widen their hearts (6:13), to the Father (6:14-7:1), and to himself (7:2-4). He entreated them by the meekness and gentleness of Christ (10:1). It was not the softness of his own affections, but the sovereign mercy of the Father, and of Christ, which he represented to those with whom he dealt.

Conclusion

Living for Christ is not just a matter of the will but of the affections. Cf. the appeal made to the will, as though our will had a capability apart from the passions. Experience should teach us that the will does not operate apart from the affections.

God's mercy, by its very nature, has cancelled the negatives of our liar and anger, and released our hearts to love. So let us practise mercy!

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 13th September, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY NINE

Comfort received and given

We here consider those distresses which are not necessarily caused by our follies and rebellion (though we are never very far from these!) but which have arisen because we are in the battle of faith.

The battle Christian's wage is a most aggravated one, and staying power is a large component in any victory. Therefore, discouragement is deadly. God reaches out in compassion and comfort lest the raw aggravated nerve otherwise left exposed by experiences such as opposition, injustice, physical pain, misunderstanding, isolation, redundancy, or impotency, make us bitter and despondent. We need to receive this comfort, and we need to give it to others.

11 Cor. 1:3-11

Paul was crushed (I don't think we could equate this with depression, in which anger is frequently an ingredient or a cause) to the point of despairing of life. The occasion of this is not clear but could have been any number of things (cf. 11 : 23-29) .

But Paul was comforted. He did not complain but felt himself abundantly comforted; he was in the sufferings of Christ, but was also in the Christ through whom abundant comfort came to him.

Paul would remember the word to him outside Damascus: 'Why do you persecute me?' In the trouble he had caused the church, Christ had suffered. This suffering he now experienced himself.

Cf. Christ, in the days of his flesh, who was troubled (Mark 8:12; 9:19; John 12:27; cf. 11:33-38), and who welcomed, or sought the benefit of human understanding and support (Mark 14:6-8; Matt. 26:36-46).

Paul saw his whole ministry as the overflowing of the mercy of God in Christ, so it is appropriate that the comfort he receives issues from the 'Father of mercies'; even when the cause of his troubles seems to be from others, it is mercy that comes to him—for him, and through him, to others.

Part of the rationale for his sufferings (though hardly an explanation) was that, only so, would he be able to share the rich comfort of God with those who were similarly

suffering for the faith. He was confident that this comfort would be adequate for his hearers, as for himself.

He saw his sufferings as necessary to the salvation of his hearers (so Phil. 1:12-14; Col. 1:24-25).

The comfort received arose particularly from God's compassion; it could have taken the form of human encouragement, as per later in the book (7:5-7, 13), but also by personal assurance **and invigorating of hope by God without** human mediation; and even when it was human comfort, Paul received it from God.

There is great danger in being dependent on other human beings—replete with their own insecurities—for the comfort needed for a full entering into life.

Paul saw that his being brought to the end of his own resources was necessary to him also—to deter him from trusting in anything other than God who raises the dead.

Philippians chapters 1-2

The affection of Christ was incarnated in Paul; this must mean that he received it, and that he let it flow on to the Philippians (1:8). He exhorted the Philippians to have like concern for one another (2:1-4).

Paul saw that the healing of his associate Epaphroditus was an act of mercy to both of them (2:27). Immediately, he desired that this mercy be shared with the Philippians by sending Epaphroditus to them.

© Grant Thorpe, 1988

NCTM Tuesday Morning Course; Third term, 20th September, 1988; Grant Thorpe

STUDY TEN

Mercy for the day of judgement

11 Timothy 1:18

Onesiphorus and his family were separated, either by distance or by death (household also has separate mention in 4:19). Paul desires present mercy for his household and mercy on that Day for Onesiphorus.

‘That day’ was important to Paul (cf. 2:18). It would be important because no man can expect to be proud of his work, and know God will keep it and vindicate it on the last day, apart from the knowledge of God’s mercy (1:12).

It would be important because that Day is the day of judgement and of the kingdom, and in view of that day, Paul has himself been diligent, and stirs Timothy to be the same; he is confident of ‘arriving’ (4:1, 8, 18).

In one sense, there is no distinction between mercy then and mercy now; mercy now is mercy then, and mercy then is mercy now. We know them both together because they must always be one ‘package’. If we have not now been assured of forgiveness, we can only anticipate the future with dread. But the present assurance we have that all is well is the assurance that all will be well on that day. This assurance floods back into the present.

Those who have no fear of God, or will not countenance the reality of the final accounting, can only dream of mercy. It is that day which arouses all our dreads (Heb. 2:14) and mercy for that day which settles all our momentary fears (the ‘little foxes that spoil the vineyards’).

James 2:13

Daily relationships are greatly affected by how we believe things are going to work out on the judgement day. The law of liberty is the Gospel, implanted within us, telling us what manner of persons we are, calling us to a love fulfilment of the law—blessing us if we do, and damning us if we don’t!

The Gospel, incarnated in our daily life, is the only way to stand, now, or in the judgement. God’s mercy, in the Cross, has triumphed over judgement (or in judgement), and triumphs still as we receive this mercy and grant it freely to others. Mercy will be shown to those who have been merciful (Matt. 5:7; Luke 6:37-38; Prov. 21:13). We will stand in the judgement.

Jude 21

Our waiting for mercy is in the context of living amongst ungodly people. Given our own need for mercy, we cannot afford to compete with such persons. We may oppose them, but must purpose to live by no other resources than faith, prayer in the Spirit, the love of God and waiting for the mercy of God.

In this manner, we will be fitted to convince some who are hesitant, save some who are near to judgement, and show mercy to some while yet evading their pollutions.

© Grant Thorpe, 1988