

Merciful and Just

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much, Danny and Alistair. Good evening, everyone. Really good to have you with us tonight. The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.

It is twice blessed. It blesses him that gives and him that takes. It is an attribute of God himself, and earthly power doth then show likest God when mercy seasons justice.

In the course of justice, none of us should see salvation. We do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy.

Shakespeare, when he put his mind to it, could be a pretty good theologian. And if we strip aside the racial stereotypes in *The Merchant of Venice*, we have a tale that is essentially about mercy and justice.

Antonio, the merchant of Venice, wants to help his friend Bassanio in wooing Portia, and so he takes a loan from Shylock. And he accepts the condition of the loan that if it's not repaid at the time stipulated, he will forfeit a pound of flesh to be taken from near his heart.

[1 : 21] Well, Antonio's ships that he was relying on don't come in, and so Shylock goes to court to try to enforce the stipulation that he's made. And there is Portia.

Portia, dressed and disguised as a male lawyer, and she has been given permission to hear the case. And in this speech that we've read part of, she appeals to Shylock's mercy.

The mercy that she feels he should have, particularly because now the money that he was needing is available. But it does no good. Shylock has no mercy, and he pursues justice.

He says, I need my pound of flesh. And Portia, as the judge says, yes, you are entitled to your pound of flesh, but not a drop of blood.

And of course, that is impossible. And the tables are turned on Shylock, and the one who refused to show mercy is himself denied mercy, as justice runs its course.

[2 : 24] I'm not going to base my sermon this evening on Shakespeare. But I think there are three things in this speech which are worth noting as we come to look at the mercy and the justice of God.

The first is that mercy can't be forced on us. That's what Portia means when she says the quality of mercy is not strained.

You can't twist someone's arm behind her back and say you must show mercy. That's not mercy then. That's compulsion. If there is to be mercy, it has to come freely and out of love and concern for others.

And so, Portia or Shakespeare compare it to the rain that comes from heaven and blesses us as it waters the ground and so on.

Mercy can't be forced. It must come from a right attitude. Second thing is that mercy comes from God.

[3 : 27] All human mercy is simply a pale reflection of God's mercy. And as it says, it is an attribute of God himself and we show ourselves most like God when we allow mercy to season justice, when we are merciful in our dealings with others.

And then the third lesson from this speech is that if justice was here without mercy, if God was just but not merciful, we would have no hope.

In the course of justice, it says none of us should see salvation. And if we are a God who is only just and enforcing what is right, then all of us would be doomed because we would have to face the consequences of our sins.

And so we pray for mercy and hopefully we show mercy to others. Three lessons that I think are very important and we'll probably build on them a bit as we go along.

But as we approach God's mercy and justice, I'm going to do the same as we've done some other weeks and we're going to make some statements that will go up on the screen and then I'll talk a bit about them to explain what I'm meaning.

[4 : 49] So let's look first at justice. So here's my statement for justice. God is always just. He punishes unrepentant sinners and forgives the penitent who trust in Jesus.

He expects us to act justly. There's a number of statements there. First, I've said God is always just. If you've been at the other services in this series, you will have really been struck, I think, by God's consistency.

God is always holy. God is always good. God is always faithful and loving. And so God is always just.

There is never any injustice in God's dealings with us. Now we look around our world and we see a lot of injustice. Most of all at the moment, of course, as we look at Ukraine and we look at what Putin's doing there, and we say that is totally unjust.

It is totally unjustifiable. And there are many other situations like that that we probably could consider. But even when human beings are trying to be just, they don't always succeed.

[6 : 09] They don't succeed because they don't know everything about a situation. And there may be relevant facts and something that we come across that we're unaware of, and so we do the wrong thing because we didn't know the full story.

And we can also be unjust because we're prejudiced, because we're biased, because we tend to do things that are in our own interests. When it comes to God, neither of these applies.

God is absolutely just. He sees the full picture. Hebrews 4 says, Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.

Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. So God knows everything that happens in our world.

He knows everything that happens in our lives. He knows everything that happens in our hearts. He has complete knowledge as we never do.

[7 : 13] And God applies that knowledge in a way that is absolutely fair and unbiased. Remember in Genesis chapter 18, as Abraham is pleading with God for the city of Sodom to be saved, if they can find some righteous people there.

What he says is, Will not the judge of all the earth do right? And we can be sure the judge of all the earth will do right. God will always ask justly, and his purposes are without bias, without discrimination.

He is absolutely fair and righteous and just. God is always just. Then the second sentence there says, He punishes unrepentant sinners and forgives the penitent who trust in Jesus.

We might wonder, well, can't God's mercy just ignore all our sins? Couldn't a God who is completely merciful just say, Well, I forgive you, whatever the situation, whatever you've done, then you are forgiven.

Can you imagine what would happen in our courts, in the earthly courts, if that attitude was taken? If a murderer comes before the judge and just says, It doesn't matter what you've done, you're forgiven, you can go free.

[8 : 34] It would be unjust. It wouldn't be right. And we as sinners, as those who have rebelled against God, the right treatment for us, the just treatment for us, would be God's punishment.

The best known verses in the New Testament, I guess, is Romans 6, verse 23. For the wages of sin is death. Wages is what we deserve. Wages is what we should get and what we are entitled to.

And Paul says the wages of sin is death. And of course, the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. So God would be absolutely entitled and absolutely just if he were to punish us all, to give us what we deserve.

And the punishment, the right thing for sin, is eternal separation from God, going to hell after we die.

But that's only half of the justice of God. So the justice of God is in punishing unrepentant sinners, but also in forgiving the penitent who trust in Jesus.

[9 : 51] And that is just as much part of the justice of God as the punishment aspect of it. Because God is just, because Jesus has died on the cross for our sins, then if we trust in him and if we're repentant of our sins, then the justice of God demands that we are forgiven.

I don't know if you noticed in both our readings how that comes out. 1 John 1, verse 9, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. And then from Isaiah, Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you. Therefore he will rise up and show you compassion, for the Lord is a God of justice.

So there are two sides to God's justice that we need to be aware of. The one side that says that those who reject him, that those who are not repentant for the wrong they've done, they must suffer the consequences of that.

And no one will be able to stand before the throne of Christ and say it's unfair that I'm being condemned for my sin. That is absolutely what we deserve.

[11 : 12] That is the wages of sin. And yet if we know the Lord Jesus, if our trust is in him, then the punishment having been taken for the wrong in our lives, the penalty having been paid, the God of justice will ensure that we are forgiven.

God punishes unrepentant sinners, but forgives the penitent who trust in Jesus. Then the final thing as we look at justice is that God expects us to act justly.

Again and again as we go through the New Testament and indeed the Old Testament, we find that the command that we are to act justly and to do right in our dealings with others.

There's no mercy on that. Perhaps Micah 6 verse 8. He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

And it is our responsibility in our lives as we deal with other people to deal with them justly and to take a stand against injustice.

[12 : 35] It is not right for a Christian to try to get the better of someone else for their own good and not have any interest in other people. That is very much what was happening that many of the prophets were speaking out against Micah and Amos and others as well.

We need to be those who do what is right, who act justly in our lives and to reflect through that the justice of our God.

God is always just. He punishes unrepentant sinners and forgives the penitent who trust in Jesus. He expects us to act justly.

Let's move on and think about God's mercy. And here's my statement for that. See what you think of it. God is merciful to the miserable who call on him.

His mercy is costly and prompts us to sacrificial living, showing mercy to others. God is merciful to the miserable.

[13 : 36] I got that from a Bible dictionary. I quite like their definition. They said that mercy is the love of God shown to those who are miserable. Now it has to be said there are mercies of God that are shown to everyone.

The sun rises in the morning. The rain comes down and waters the crops. God's mercy are renewed each day and are available to the good and to the bad.

But that's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about God's mercy to those who realize that they need mercy. What I've called the miserable.

Let's think for a second about the life of Jesus in the New Testament. Many times people came to him and appealed for mercy. For example, as he was going to Jericho or on his way to Jerusalem as he was heading to the cross, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside and they shouted, Lord, son of David, have mercy on us.

A woman came to him and said, same kind of thing, Lord, son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.

[14 : 55] Another man came to Jesus and said, Lord, have mercy on my son. He has seizures and is suffering greatly. Here were people coming to Jesus, recognizing their need, coming in their misery in the circumstances that they were faced with and pleading to him for mercy that he would step into the circumstances that they had and to make things better.

Not because they deserved it. Not because there was anything in them that particularly merited it. But that they knew that Jesus was merciful and that he particularly cared and were concerned about those who were in need and those who recognized that need.

Of course, when we think of the mercy of God, that is probably not particularly what we think about. It's important, but it's not the primary thing we think about. We think of the mercy of God to the sinner.

To the sinner who recognizes that they're in a hopeless situation by themselves. There's no way that they, by their own efforts, can make themselves right with God.

And so they throw themselves on the mercy of God. One of the most beautiful stories ever told is the story of the prodigal son.

[16:17] Of this son who went away from his father, taking his inheritance, wasted it all, ended up in abject poverty, feeding pigs and eating their food. And eventually thinks, well, maybe I could go back to my father.

Maybe he would accept me as a servant. That would be a lot better than where I am now. And as he comes to the father in his need and in his misery, the father rushes out.

He's been waiting, looking for him. He rushes out, hugs him, greets him, throws a party to celebrate his return. He shows mercy on his son.

And that is how our God is. I also read earlier from Psalm 103. I was thinking of that too. Psalm 103, just read the relevant verses.

Again, he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

[17:20] As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions for us. Or Ephesians chapter 2, talking about God's wrath, but about God's mercy as well.

Like the rest, says Paul, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were in transgressions.

It is by grace you have been saved. God's mercy is abundant. It's free. And it lifts us out of our misery, out of the pit that we're in, as sinful human beings.

And it places us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. It gives us a living relationship with the God of heaven. It assures us of forgiveness of sins and an eternal future with the Lord Jesus.

And it is available to all who call on the Lord. Anyone who comes to God for mercy and recognizes their sin can experience God's forgiveness.

[18:38] But of course, there are many who don't. Not everyone is compelled to come and trust in the Lord Jesus. And those who spurn God's mercy, those who have no interest in the mercy that God offers, ultimately they must face his justice.

Mercy is freely available. It's freely available to anyone who believes. And yet there are many, many, sadly, who will not receive God's mercy because they don't believe.

Then I've said God's mercy is costly. God's mercy is costly because it cost him his only son, as the Lord Jesus went to the cross and took our place.

The Scripture Union group this week, we were talking to the children about the paralyzed man who was brought to Jesus by his four friends and they opened up the roof and lowered him down.

And what does Jesus say? The first thing he says is, son, your sins are forgiven. That creates a bit of a furore. People would think he'd say, rise up and walk.

[19:51] And they're thinking, how can he forgive sins? And Jesus said, and I think this is a really important question, which is easier to say to this paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven, or to say, get up, take your mat and walk?

And perhaps many of the people there were thinking, well, obviously it's easier to say your sins are forgiven because no one can really know one way or the other whether it's right. If you say, rise, get up your mat and walk and nothing happens, then it's obvious that you're a fraud.

But the reality is the opposite. It was easy for Jesus to heal the paralyzed man physically. He was the great God of heaven, the creator and sustainer of the universe.

But how difficult was it for him to be able to say, your sins are forgiven, because that required him to take the penalty for them. And to bear the weight of sin as he hung on the cross.

God's mercy to us is very costly. And we should never forget, as we think about it, as we rejoice in all that God has given us, we should never forget the cost of that to the Lord Jesus.

[21:15] And we should be forever thankful and adoring of him for the great mercy and love that he showed. And then finally, as we think about mercy, I've said it prompts us to sacrificial living, showing mercy to others.

Just very quickly to back that up, Romans 12 and verse 1. I'm sure we all know it very well.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship.

In view of God's mercy, in view of all that God has done for us, in view of the sacrifice that God made in Jesus and the cross at Calvary, we should be willing to offer ourselves as a sacrifice to him.

There should be nothing that is too much for us as we think on the mercy of our God shown to us in our need. Our lives should be wholly devoted to him.

And we should also be merciful. Be merciful, says Jesus, just as your Father is merciful. And then in the Beatitudes, blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

[22 : 41] And if we are not willing to show mercy to others when they do us wrong, then that suggests that we haven't understood God's mercy to us.

If God has been so merciful to us in such a big thing, shouldn't we be merciful to others in the small things of life? Of course, that takes our minds to the parable of the unmerciful servant.

The NIV talks about him having a debt of 10,000 bags of gold and his master freely forgives him. And then this ungrateful servant goes to another servant, who owes him 100 silver coins, a tiny fraction of what he's been forgiven.

And yet he's not willing to show mercy to that small extent. He hasn't understood or appreciated the mercy that's been shown to him.

And if we have experienced God's mercy in our lives, if we have someone against someone, if they've wronged us in some way, then we should be willing to be merciful to them.

[23 : 51] And if they are repentant for what they've done, to freely forgive them as God forgave us. God is merciful to the miserable who call on him.

His mercy is costly and prompts us to sacrificial living, showing mercy to others. To finish with one last parable.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Remember these two men who came to the temple to pray. And one is full of himself. And he thinks that he is right before God.

He lists all the things he does, his giving, his fasting, and so on. And he thinks, if there's a God of justice, then I'm going to be okay.

And he just doesn't realize that his righteousness is like filthy rags, and that none of us, if God treats us as we deserve, none of us is justified before him.

[24 : 56] And alongside him, you have the tax collector, cowering in the corner, not even willing to look up, and just saying, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And Jesus said, when only one of them went home justified, and it wasn't the one who thought he was okay to begin with. He was relying on justice, and he was relying on justice that was very different from the standard that he set.

The one who threw himself on the mercy of God, he is the one who is forgiven. He is the one who is shown mercy by God and is justified through his faith in God.

And so Jesus concludes, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. Let's rejoice tonight in the justice of God, that we have a God who is absolutely fair and impartial in his dealings, and who always does what is right.

And rejoice in the fact that if we know Jesus, if we are trusting in Jesus, then he is just and has forgiven our sins. Let me challenge, if we're not trusting in Jesus, to put our faith in him.

[26 : 15] And as we reflect on God's mercy, let's again rejoice in it, but let's apply it to the way we live, that we may live lives that are sacrificed to the Lord Jesus, and that we may show mercy to others who need it.

Let me pray, and then we're going to sing, and then we'll have our time of prayer. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word this evening. We thank you for the fact that you are such a just and merciful God, that the two are not in contradiction of one another, but they fit together perfectly, that you are the one who is fair, who does what is right.

And yet, because you do what is right, you have done a merciful thing for us, to give us a way to be forgiven for our sins through the blood of the Lord Jesus.

Help us to understand your justice and your mercy, and help us to reflect them in our lives too, we pray. We ask you to be with us now as we continue together in prayer for ourselves and for our world.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 37] Amen. Thank you. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. ■■■■■ Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.