



God's Preferred Response

What's One Behavior that "Sets You Off"?

One of my favorite short stories is Aesop's "The Lion and the Mouse". A lion was fast asleep when a timid mouse stumbled upon the lion unexpectedly. In her panic, she tried to scamper away, but she accidentally stumbled upon the lion's nose. Suddenly awakened from his peaceful nap, the lion lifted his powerful paw and was about to strike the little mouse dead. "Please don't hurt me", begged the mouse. "Let me go and some day I will most surely repay you", he squeaked. The lion laughed out loud at this! "What could you ever do to help me", he rumbled but in mercy, he finally let the mouse go. A few days later, the Lion as he was hunting in the forest was caught in the netting of a trap set by a huntsman. Not able to get free of the ropes, the lion roared in rage. Some ways away, the mouse recognized the voice and quickly came to where the lion was trying bitterly to get free. The mouse hurried to one of the mighty ropes that had the lion bound and gnawed at it until the rope came apart and the lion got out of the trap. "You laughed at me when I said I would repay you", said the mouse, "but even a mouse can help a lion".

One of the central themes in the Bible is mercy. **"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. (Zechariah 7 :9 NIV)** Jesus clearly indicated what place mercy must have in all our relationships. **Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. (Matthew 5: 7 NIV)** James the brother of Jesus underscores this call of God to show mercy. This how it reads literally. **Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgement! (James 2: 12-13 NIV)** Mercy is something everyone wants shown to them but not all are so eager to be merciful. Most often in the Bible the word mercy is used by those calling out to God for mercy or detailing the mercy the Lord has provided.

The value of mercy cannot be overstated. It is the basis of salvation, of eternal life and of how happiness is protected and sustained. Jesus once told a parable that explains how mercy works in actual life. In Luke 13: 6-9 is the story of a landowner who had a fig tree that hadn't born any fruit in three years. He told the gardener that it seemed reasonable to just cut it down and clear out space for something else. The gardener countered by proposing that he be given a year to try and work on the fig tree, providing fertilizer to get it going. Jesus was of course not giving a lecture on farming. He used the parable to describe mercy. Mercy is not grace. It is just a bit different. Mercy is having compassion on others in a bad spot, seeing what can be done to relieve their hardship and doing so. Mercy sees the trouble others face and coming to their aid, not coldly letting them "face the music" so to speak, forcing them to suffer the consequences of their bad actions.

What is axiomatic is that God is merciful. We see this in the account of Jonah and his assignment to go to Nineveh and warn the people there of the judgment they faced because of their horrific sins. Jonah hated the Ninevites knowing full well their cruelty and wickedness. When Jonah refused to go and warn them, the Lord sent the storm that resulted in Jonah being tossed into the ocean by the crew of the ship he was on trying to get away from God and His assignment. Then of course the Lord sent the great fish that swallowed Jonah and only spit the prophet out on land when he turned to God and prayed. The Lord went to a lot of trouble to get Jonah to comply because of his mercy...not just for the people of Nineveh but also the rebellious prophet

he loved. The reason why God so badly wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh was because as He put it at the end of His conversation with Jonah, **“But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”** (Jonah 4: 11 NIV) Despite how terrible the people of Nineveh were and how much terror they brought to the countries surrounding them, mercy was the response of God. He gave them time to repent and change their ways.

Here is a second example of mercy and it is how Jesus handled the woman at the well. He knew she was a corrupted soul whose immorality was certainly recognized by the people of the small village where she lived. Rather than confronting her or chastising the woman at the well, He instead shared with her something quite astounding. Jesus told her what almost no one else knew, that He was the Messiah. She realized it had to be so because Jesus was able to discern she had been married five times and was living with a man not her husband despite never having met her or ever visiting her village. The knowledge she recognized had to have come to Jesus supernaturally. What Jesus did for her by revealing Himself to her as the Messiah was to enable the woman to return to her village, not as a promiscuous, forsaken woman but as an expert in the field of salvation and the Messiah. **Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days.** (John 4: 39-40 NIV) It was truly amazing how the woman's place among her neighbors changed dramatically because of the quiet mercy Jesus showed her. I could describe the mercy Jesus showed Zacchaeus, Peter, Paul, the man filled with thousands of demons and many more but let's turn to how mercy looks in us.

Consider first the priest and prophet Samuel who despite his great frustration with Israel and its king Saul, made a commitment to the people. He said of them that they had done all sorts of evil and yet he would pray for them. **As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.** (1 Samuel 12: 23 NIV) Mercy is a discipline of prayer, faithfully bringing up to God the needs of those who perhaps do not deserve what you are asking for them. There is also the Babylonian guard who was overseeing the exiles from Israel who were in training to be leaders in the Babylonian empire. When the king ordered that all of the leaders in training eat the same food as he served at his table, Daniel and his Jewish friends balked. **But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.** (Daniel 1: 8 NIV) The guard knew what a risk he would be taking if he let Daniel and his friends have their way. **Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."** (Daniel 1: 9-10 NIV) However, despite his fears, the guard let Daniel and the others avoid the king's food and just drink water and eat vegetables. Mercy sometimes is risky for a variety of reasons, but mercy is practical, it is doing what is perhaps not reasonable but nonetheless right.

A third example and we shall close. David spent years running for his life from Saul the king. He and his four hundred men and their families were always at risk of being massacred. Yet, when David had the opportunity to kill Saul he would not do it. His reaction to his soldier's urging him to cut down the king is memorable. **He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord."** (1 Samuel 24:6 NIV) If you are going to choose to be merciful like Jesus, to live as the Lord clearly wants of His people, then consider these four rules of mercy. 1. Choose generosity over greed. Don't hold onto your kindness for a rainy day. Use up all you have each day and invest in love. 2. Choose compliments over criticism. Don't speak badly about others to make them look badly even if they deserve your harsh assessment. 3. Choose relationship over rejection. Don't cut others out of your life when you have the opportunity to be the funnel through which the goodness of God is poured. 4. Choose praying over putting off. Never let an opportunity to pray for others pass...especially those whose actions and attitude clearly need God's help to make them good. Remember

your mission in life. God through you reaching the world for salvation. Mercy makes that come alive in real time.