

The Prayer of Mercy

by John Edmiston

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First I will describe mercy, why we need it and how it operates; then I will apply it to the spiritual life - especially the life of prayer. First, there are two sides to mercy:

a) Mercy is the removal of judgment, it is not punishing, not finding fault, it is choosing to ignore the wrong and instead be kind to someone when you have the right to punish forcefully. Mercy is closely related to forgiveness, compassion and kindness.

b) Mercy is also a spiritual power for healing and restoration as when Jesus had mercy on the blind men and healed them (Matthew 9:27, 20:30) or upon the daughter of the Syrophenician woman whom he delivered from a demon (Matthew 15:22), the healing of the epileptic boy (Matthew 17:15), Legion (Mark 5:19) or the mercy shown by the Good Samaritan who showed great kindness to the man beaten by robbers (Luke 10:37).

We desperately need mercy. Without God's mercy we are lost. Time and time again Paul emphasizes God's mercy in his own life:

1 Timothy 1:12-16 MKJV *And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who strengthened me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry-- (13) the one who before was a blasphemer and a persecutor and insolent. But I obtained mercy, because being ignorant, I did it in unbelief. (14) And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. (15) Faithful is the Word and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (16) But for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, as a pattern to those being about to believe on Him to life everlasting.*

Indeed we are saved, not by our own righteousness but by God's mercy:

Titus 3:3-7 MKJV *For we ourselves also were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, slaving for various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (4) But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, (5) not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, (6) whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, (7) that being justified by His grace, we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

And we continue to require Jesus's priestly intercessory mercy long after our salvation:

Hebrews 2:17-18 ISV *Thus he had to become like his brothers in every way, so that he could be a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and could atone for the people's sins.*

Hebrews 4:15-16 MKJV *For we do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted just as we are, yet without sin. (16) Therefore let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

This sense of standing in desperate need of the mercy and grace of God has almost vanished from modern evangelical prayers. It is instead associated with so-called "worm theology". We have become bumptiously over-confident and think that we have nothing to fear, that we are OK, and that no mercy is required. Some even seem to think that we are owed Heaven as a right! Yet we must remember that God is fierce in His love. He is holy - and in the Scriptures God is often referred to as a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24, 9:3, 32:22, Hebrews 10:27, 12:29).

The fact that God, in all His glory and holiness, is working in our lives, should cause us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling:

Philippians 2:12-13 MKJV *(12) Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, cultivate your own salvation with fear and trembling. (13) For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*

So how does this apply to our prayer life? In three ways:

Firstly we should always be asking for God's mercy from the throne of grace whenever we have a need (Luke 18:38, Hebrews 4:16). God is gracious and responds mercifully remembering that we are dust. He is merciful to repentant sinners and needy saints alike. Mercy means we can stand before God and we are not consumed (Lamentations 3:2 KJV) indeed they are new every morning – great is Thy faithfulness!

Secondly we should be demonstrating mercy to others and our prayers should be cries for God to have mercy on His people just as the apostle often prayed for 'grace, mercy and peace' to be with the churches he wrote to (1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4). For we shall only be blessed with mercy when we are merciful ourselves and that includes in our prayers (Matthew 5:7, 18;21-35, Luke 6:35-37, James 2:13).

Thirdly we should seek to develop mercy as part of our outlook on the world, as part of our Spirit-given wisdom and renewed mind (James 3:17, Colossians 3:12,13).

The tax-gatherer at the temple cried out "God, have mercy on me a sinner". This led very quickly to a prayer that became common in the early church and among the desert fathers. It is known as the Jesus Prayer: *"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner."* The first part of the prayer acknowledges Jesus as Lord, Christ and God. The second phrase calls on Him to have mercy on the one praying. In many ways this is similar to the "salvation prayer" at evangelical crusades except that the Jesus Prayer is prayed on a daily basis so as to show that that God's mercy is always needed.

If we are to receive mercy we must show mercy. In the Sermon On the Mount Jesus exclaims: *"Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy!"* Mercy is one of God's top priorities for the spiritual life. Jesus often quotes Hosea 6:6 saying: *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice"* meaning that a merciful heart is far more important than rituals.

Indeed our prayers will not be answered if we are not understanding, kind and merciful:

1 Peter 3:7 ISV *In a similar way, you husbands must live with your wives in an understanding manner, as with a most delicate vessel. Honor them as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing may interfere with your prayers.*

If we are to show mercy we must think mercifully. Our mind must not be full of critical and judgmental thoughts. Our inner nature and our wisdom must be changed by God:

Colossians 3:12-13 MKJV *(12) Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender feelings of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, (13) forbearing one another and forgiving yourselves, if anyone has a complaint against any. As Christ forgave you, so also you do.*

James 3:17 MKJV *But the wisdom that is from above is first truly pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.*

There is a great temptation to think that because we know the Scriptures that we are free to judge others and to take upon ourselves a "I am right and you are wrong" attitude. Instead the believer is to realize that the Scriptures show clearly that each of us is sinful and that we all have many faults and need great grace and mercy each day. We are to have humility of mind, gentleness and great forbearance.

Galatians 6:1-3 MKJV *Brothers, if a man is overtaken in a fault, you the spiritual ones restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted. (2) Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the Law of Christ. (3) For if anyone thinks himself to be something, being nothing, he deceives himself.*

We are to stand before God in fear and trembling, filled with the desire to be merciful to others, with a humble and lowly mind that seeks to bless, restore and heal those around us.

Our outlook is to be the outlook of grace. Our prayers are to be prayers of kindness and of healing. We are to love the broken and foolish and to pray for their restoration. It is our merciful heart that shows that we are godly (that is , like God who is merciful) and which makes room for us before God, and bringing blessing into our lives:

Luke 6:35-38 MKJV *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return. And your reward shall be great, and you shall be the sons of the Highest. For He is kind to the unthankful and to the evil. (36) Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (37) Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven.*

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