

Why Mercy Matters

1. Warm-up question: When we are wronged, we feel a strong impulse to get even, even in trivial matters. Think about a trivial situation where you felt a strong impulse to get even – with a spouse, friend, coworker, or stranger. What happened?
2. Despite our strong impulse to even the score, the Bible exhorts us to show mercy. Jesus said, “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.” Luke 6:36. He also said, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” Matthew 9:13. Sunday’s sermon grappled with three questions. **Question #1: What is mercy?**
 - a. If a kid asked you to define and explain mercy, what would you say?
 - b. The New Testament Greek word for mercy is *elios* [el-EE-oos] and is derived etymologically from the Greek word for olive oil. In ancient times, olive oil was used to treat wounds because it was soothing, comforting, and healing. How does the Greek word for mercy help us better understand what mercy means?
 - c. The Old Testament Hebrew word for mercy is *rahamim* [RAH-hah-mim] and is derived from the Hebrew word for womb. How does the Hebrew word for mercy help us better understand what mercy means?
 - d. Jeff told us about his first vivid memory of receiving mercy as a child. Tell us about a time in your life when you received mercy. How did that impact you? What kinds of feelings did that experience evoke within you?
3. **Question #2: Why is mercy so important?** Lamentations 3:22 puts it this way, “It is [because] of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness.” What’s true of our relationship with God is equally true of our relationships with each other. We all mess up, big time, all the time. If not for mercy – if not for your mercy toward others and others’ mercy toward you – all our relationships would break down and be consumed by mutual grievance.
 - a. Jeff said, “No relationship, no group project, no workplace, no family, no church, no community, no nation – nothing can survive and thrive without regular heaping helpings of mercy.” Do you believe that’s true? Why or why not?
 - b. Randomly pick a significant relationship (past or present) that you’ve had with a friend, family member, significant other, coworker, etc. What flaws or challenges did that other person have that regularly required you to show mercy? What flaws or challenges do you have required that other person to regularly show you mercy? Without mercy could that relationship have thrived?
 - c. Galatians 5:14 says, “The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and *devour* one another, take care that you are not *consumed* by one another.” The Verse-by-Verse

Bible Commentary says, “The word ‘devour’ means to gulp down. It comes from two words that mean: “To consume by eating” and “down.” The idea is to consume something completely. Evidently, there is such a thing as Christian cannibalism! The Galatians didn’t nibble on one another. They devoured one another!” Have you ever been in a relationship that felt like you were chewing each other up? How did that affect you? How did it affect the other person?

- d. Read the excerpt from the writings of John Piper found on p. 3, then respond to the question stated at the end of the excerpt.
4. Now let’s read Sunday’s Scripture passage together, II Kings 6:8-23, printed on p. 3.
- a. Why do you think Elisha wouldn’t let the King of Israel destroy the enemy soldiers? Wouldn’t it have been more advantageous to get rid of them?
 - b. When the Israelites shared a feast with the enemy soldiers, then sent them home unharmed. How do you think this impacted those enemy soldiers?
 - c. How do you think this experience impacted the Israelites?
 - d. What does this Bible story tell us about why mercy is so important?
 - e. In your own life, who’s someone that deserves retribution from you? If instead you were to apply our Bible story to that situation, what would that look like and what impact might that have?
 - f. Can mercy be squared with the need for accountability? If so, how?
5. **Question #3: How can I grow my capacity for showing mercy?** Jeff offered two practical suggestions.
- a. One way to grow our capacity for mercy is to get in touch with our own desperate need for mercy. We often tend to minimize our own shortcomings. But suppose for one whole day every thought that ran through your mind was displayed on a digital screen on your forehead for all of us to see. How would you feel? Would you be desperate for mercy?
 - b. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Matthew 5:7. He also said, “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you.” Matthew 6:14. What do you think these verses mean?
 - c. Another way to grow our capacity for mercy is to open our eyes to the beauty and healing that mercy often achieves. So as we wind down tonight, let’s share some beautiful stories. Tell us about a time you’ve been able to show great mercy or you witnessed someone else doing so. What happened?

John Piper, “This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence”

Picture your marriage as a grassy field. You enter it at the beginning full of hope and joy. You look out into the future, and you see beautiful flowers and trees and rolling hills. And that beauty is what you see in each other. Your relationship is the field and the flowers and the rolling hills. But before long, you begin to step in . . . cow pies. Some seasons of your marriage they may seem to be everywhere. These are the sins and flaws and idiosyncrasies and weaknesses and annoying habits in you and in your spouse. You try to forgive them and endure them with grace.

But they have a way of dominating the relationship. Sometimes it feels like that's all there is—cow pies. Noel and I have come to believe that the combination of forbearance and forgiveness leads to the creation of a compost pile. That's where you shovel the cow pies.

You both look at each other and simply admit that there are a lot of cow pies. But you say to each other: You know, there's more to this relationship than cow pies. And we're losing sight of that because we keep focusing on the cow pies. Let's throw them all in the compost pile. When we have to, we will go there and smell it and feel bad and deal with it the best we can. But then we are going to walk away from that pile and set our eyes on the rest of our field. We'll pick some favorite paths and hills that we know are not strewn with cow pies. And we'll be thankful for the part of the field that is sweet.

Our hands may be dirty. And our backs may ache from all the shoveling. But one thing we know: We will not pitch our tent by the compost pile. We will only go there when we must. This is a gift of grace that we will give each other again and again and again—because we are chosen and holy and loved.

Question: What do you make of what Piper says here? Do his words resonate with you? Why or why not?

II Kings 6:8-23, selected verses

8 Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers. He said, 'At such and such a place shall be my camp.' ⁹But Elisha sent word to the king of Israel, 'Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there.' ¹¹The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed; he called his officers and said, 'Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?' ¹²Then one of them said, 'No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber.' ¹³He said, 'Go and find where he is; I will send and seize him.' He was told, 'He is in Dothan.' ¹⁴So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night, and surrounded the city.

15 When a servant of Elisha rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, 'Alas, master! What shall we do?' ¹⁶Elisha replied, 'Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.' ¹⁷Then Elisha prayed: 'O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. ¹⁸When the Arameans came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, 'Strike this people, please, with blindness.' So he struck them with blindness. ¹⁹Elisha said to them, 'This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.' And he led them into [Israel].

Reading completed on reverse side of page . . .

20 As soon as they entered [Israel], Elisha said, 'O LORD, open the eyes of these men so that they may see.' The LORD opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside [Israel].

²¹When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, 'Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?' ²²He answered, 'No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master.' ²³So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.