

Good Politics ~ The BE Campaign
BE Good ~ BE Just ~ BE Merciful ~ BE Humble

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. ~ Micah 6:8

Week 3 ~ BE Merciful

Over the past two weeks we've seen that God is the source and standard of what is *Good* and *Just*. So it will come as no surprise that what we know of *Mercy* also comes from God. And as we saw with *Good* and *Just* the reason we are to be *Merciful* is because this is how God is, and we are to be like God.

The word translated as mercy here in Micah is the Hebrew word "*hesed*" (or "*khosed*"/"*chesed*"...you gotta make the sound of trying to get phlegm up to pronounce it correctly) It is a difficult word to translate into English. While it's often translated as mercy, it's also translated as lovingkindness, steadfast love, loyal love, grace, kindness. It is a complex, robust, and deep word occurring about 250 times in the Old Testament, and one of the most frequently used words to describe God.

One of the most important things we learn about God in Scripture is that He is a covenant-making and *covenant-keeping* God. God's "*hesed*" is most frequently seen in how He faithfully keeps His covenantal promises...even when, especially when, He doesn't have to and it isn't deserved by those who break covenant with Him. This is how covenants work: if one party is unfaithful, it basically nullifies the covenant...and the other party is off the hook. BUT, God keeps His promises regardless. This demonstrates the extent to which God loves, and works for the good of those He is in covenant with. "*Hesed*" persists, endures, perseveres...even when it's not deserved. This is the kind of loyal love God has for His covenant partners...the type of loyalty that overcomes betrayal. "*Hesed*" willingly takes a loss, and is rooted in a strong and secure character.

The Bible Project has a nice little video on "*hesed*" (I wouldn't want you to miss your weekly dose of the Bible Project 😊) <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/loyal-love/>

In the Greek language, "*eleos*" is the word translated "*mercy*" in the New Testament. It can be defined as "*kindness or goodwill towards the miserable and afflicted, along with a desire to help them.*" While this is part of what "*hesed*" connotes, probably the word that comes the closest to "*hesed*" in Greek is "*agape*", which is translated as "love" in the New Testament. (Think: God is *love*; God so *loved* the world; *Love* God and *love* neighbor; the great *Love* chapter, I Corinthians 13...basically, the supreme word for "love".)

- *Share of a time when someone showed you mercy. (A time when someone had the power and opportunity to really go at you, but did not.)*

- *Share of a time when you showed someone mercy. What motivated you in that instance?*
- *What is your initial instinct, impulse, response when you are wronged, insulted, disrespected, done dirty? (Perhaps share of such a time.) How do you tend to resolve those situations?*

To get a good handle on the idea of “*hesed*” we can reflect on a couple parables of Jesus, along with an episode from His life. First, the Parable of the Prodigal (Luke 15:11-32). In the parable, the younger son wants his share of the inheritance (a way of telling his father that he wishes he were dead...or at the very least, that the father’s money means more to him than a relationship with the father). We all know how the story plays out after the son took his money and left...in time, due to poor decisions and negative circumstances, the younger son finds himself at the end of his rope. He comes to his senses, and decides to go home and beg for his father’s mercy, and to be allowed to be a hired hand for his father. What we see from the father—longingly scanning the horizon for his son, running to him, embracing him, celebrating his return, restoring him to sonship—this is a picture of “*hesed*”. The original hearers of this parable would recognize that Jesus was painting the father in the parable as YHWH...their God, whom they were in covenant with, with whom their history portrays them much like the younger son.

The other parable that comes to mind is the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35). In this parable, a servant owes his king an astronomically large amount of money, far more than he could ever pay back. The king mercifully cancels the debt. BUT, the servant turns around and has a fellow servant thrown into jail for not paying him a relatively small debt. In this parable, “*hesed*” is shown/illustrated by the king. The lesson of the parable, however, is that as “*hesed*” has been shown, so should it be given. God has shown mercy on us...it’s His basic posture towards us...so it should be our basic posture toward those we interact with.

An account from Jesus’ life which demonstrates “*hesed*” is found in John 8:1-11, where a woman who was caught in the act of adultery is brought to Jesus in order to test Him...to see how He will interpret the Law of Moses. Those who brought the woman to Jesus were hoping to discredit Jesus. But, of course, Jesus outwitted them. He revealed that there was something deeper than the Law at play...it’s what the entire Law was based on, which is God’s character...and God is full of “*hesed*”. By saying, “*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her*”, Jesus was essentially saying, “*Whoever of you is not in need of God’s hesed/mercy can be the first to show her no hesed/mercy.*” None of the accusers were willing to say that they were not in need of God’s mercy.

My friends, there is not a day that goes by, not a moment in the day, in which we—each and every one of us—aren’t in need of God’s mercy. Moreover, we never grow to a point, or attain such a standing, in which we are no longer in need of God’s mercy. Perhaps it might help to think of God’s mercy like air or oxygen...that’s how much we need it.

The Scriptures drip of God's mercy, and the expectation that we would, in turn, show mercy to others. It is a very practical outflow and application of "do unto others as you would have them to do to you". (Matthew 7:12...to keep the Sermon on the Mount fresh in our minds.) Of course, this assumes that we recognize our own need for mercy, and that great mercy has been shown to us. I would contend that we easily forget this.

- *How aware are you of your need for God's mercy? (Honestly, what thoughts and feelings are evoked in you with this question?)*

There's a recurring theme/pattern in Scripture which makes it abundantly clear that God has shown His people that He expects them to do to others as He has done for them. Deuteronomy 10:17-19 will suffice as an example [with bracketed comments]:

"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome [thus legitimate in making requirements], who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes [God is just]. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving them food and clothing [He is merciful and compassionate]. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt [do as I have done for you]"

- *As you consider and reflect on the character and attributes of God which are the most important or significant to you? Why those?*

A verse from the prophet Hosea, that Jesus would later quote while tangling with the religious leaders, states, "For I desire mercy (hesed), not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6) God does not want religious performance and posturing, rather He desires humble acknowledgement of our need for mercy and a willingness to extend the same mercy that we have received.

I could go on and on demonstrating how the pages of Scripture are saturated with God's mercy, but for the sake of time, here's just a couple references...

- *"But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."* (Ephesians 2:4-5)
- *"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy."* (Titus 3:4-5)

We need to understand a couple key elements or dimensions of mercy/hesed. First, it is not deserved...it is not owed...we are not entitled to it...this undeserving quality is what makes it "mercy". Secondly, there is a power dynamic at play. The person showing mercy has the option not to, and is in a position to use power to harm or to help. If this dynamic is not present, then mercy is not really in play in the situation. Consider the three examples above—the prodigal, the king and servant, the woman caught in adultery—there were undeniable power dynamics at play, and it's the one holding the power that demonstrates mercy.

Even English definitions of mercy understand this dynamic, as the Oxford Language Dictionary demonstrates, “*compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.*” (emphasis added)

The reason I’m emphasizing the power dynamic that is at play where mercy is involved is because we’re in a series about politics. Back in week 1 we presented a working definition of politics as, *Politics is the process by which people come together to create and maintain communities, institutions, and societies that are capable of achieving common goals.* Now it’s time to add to that understanding. Among other things, politics is also about, or concerned with, the distribution of power (i.e. Who has it? How is it used? Toward what end? Etc.)

In “Good politics”--and remember, God is the source and standard of what is good--power is used mercifully. Without mercy, justice is retributive instead of restorative. Because God is also the source and standard of justice, “hesed”/mercy (doing what is best for the other party involved...even if undeserved or at great cost) must inform our understanding, our imagination, our implementation of justice.

Mercy/”hesed” is power restrained and guided by love. This is what makes God/YHWH so unique, so special...or to use a Biblical word...Holy. As Lord Acton famously said, “*Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*”, but when we look to God we see Someone who is all-powerful, yet has the strength and security of character to contain it. Power contained, directed, and used properly is actually a good understanding of LOVE. And God IS Love.

- *Who would you identify as people who have power? How would you evaluate their use of power? On what basis do they hold power? (Is it power based on position or institution? Power based on wealth and resources? Power based on character?) How do they resemble (or not) Micah 6:8?*
- *Who do you trust with power? Why them? (Or who would you like to see empowered because you trust what they would do with it?)*

So, if we allow mercy/”hesed” to inform how we arrange and order our lives together (i.e. the work of politics), then demanding our rights won’t be our first priority or concern. God’s desire is to make us into people who, like Him, have the strength and security of character that we are able and willing to take a loss for the sake of others. How do I know this to be true? Simply look at the Cross. The Cross is mercy on display for all to see. The Cross is power restrained by love.

- *We could rather easily, I suspect, answer the question, “If you had more money, what would you do with it?” But instead of that question, how about, “If you had more power, what would you do with it?”*
- *Should you be trusted with more power? If so, why?*
- *How does one go about gaining power? How does one go about gaining mercy?*

Friends, Jesus didn't endure the Cross so that we wouldn't have to. Rather, He showed us by the Cross how we are to live. He calls us to "*take up your cross and follow Me*" (see Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23) In order to live a merciful life, we must be informed and shaped by the Cross. The Cross demonstrates relinquishing power for the sake of others. Our lives, and that certainly includes how we're involved in politics, must resemble the Cross. Only then will it be "Good Politics". This requires Trust...and this requires Humility...which will be our topic for next week.

- *How is the Cross of Christ forming and informing you, shaping your character, thoughts, attitudes, relationships, etc.?*

One last thought in closing...accompanied by another parable from Jesus. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a guy has been mugged and left for dead on the side of the road. Two different people, a priest and a Levite, both of whom had the power to help the hurt man, passed by on the other side of the road. Then along comes a Samaritan (boo, hiss...Jesus' original hearers would have reacted) who takes care of the man.

Jesus told this parable in response to a question posed to Him by an expert in the law regarding "Who is my neighbor?". After telling the parable Jesus returns the question back to the expert in the law, "*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*" to which the expert in the law responded, "*The one who had mercy on him.*" (This story is found in Luke 10)

A poor way of using power, an unmerciful way, is by ignoring or dismissing the needs of others when it is within our power to help. To only look out for our own interests is not Good Politics. As we reflect on the issues that are important to us, let's ask ourselves why they are important to us. Or what is at stake in those issues? Let's keep these words from Paul in mind...

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, in any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:1-4, emphasis added)

- *Power can be used by exerting it, or withholding it (as mercy can be shown by extending it or withholding it). As you reflect on how you use your own personal power (think relationally) are you more of an exert-er or a withholder?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Embracing Our Need For Mercy

We probably prefer to not think about our need for mercy because it can remind us of how weak and needy we are. The psalmist reminds us...

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love [hesed]. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever; 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 [hesed] for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him; for He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust.” (Psalm 103:8-13, emphasis added)

This week we are invited to consider our need for mercy and receive the mercy that is available to us. Let’s spend time each day reciting and reflecting upon (and perhaps memorizing) this Prayer of Confession:

*Most **merciful** God,
We confess that we have sinned against You
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved You with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ,
Have **mercy** on us and forgive us;
That we may delight in Your will,
And walk in Your ways,
To the glory of Your Name
Amen.*

Additionally, if you’d like to see some more Scripture that mentions “hesed”, I invite you to read the following Psalms. (Keep in mind that it may be translated in various ways depending on which translation/version you’re using.)

- Psalm 89
- Psalm 117
- Psalm 136