

1 Samuel 24 - Mercy

Our chapter this morning really revolves around the theme of mercy. In a very real way, for all those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, our lives revolve around mercy. We, of course, are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the death of the Lord Jesus for our sins. But I think it would also be fair to say we are saved by mercy alone through faith alone. That sounds odd at first, but the Bible uses mercy all the time to describe how we were saved.

Titus 3:5: he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

1 Pet 1:3: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Eph 2:4-5: According to his great mercy...he made us alive together with Christ.

Even in the OT, in the Tabernacle, in the Holy of Holies, was the Ark of the covenant - that big golden box with angels on top and poles to carry it. And the high priest would only go in there once a year to put blood on the ark to atone for the sins of the people. You know what the top of the ark was called? It was called the mercy seat. God's glory rested on the mercy seat in the Tabernacle in the OC. And we know that the Tabernacle was made after the pattern of things in heaven which means that when we read in the Bible that God is sitting on his throne in heaven what he is sitting on in heaven is a throne of mercy. Our loving God reigns on a seat that is defined by mercy.

We love God's grace, but we also love God's mercy. Grace and mercy are really two sides of the same coin. Grace is God giving to us what we don't deserve. Mercy is God sparing from what we do deserve.

When I was a kid we would play a game called "mercy." I don't know if anyone still does this - or if I should even mention it to kids - but two people stand face to face, hold hands and you try to twist the other person's hands until they cry out "mercy!" The idea is they are asking you to relent from the pain you get for being weaker.

When I think of God's mercy toward me in salvation, that's what I think of. God is the all powerful judge whom we have offended by our sins and to whom we cry out and beg to spare us from his own wrath. Except with God mercy is not a game. With God it's the real deal. We can't even fathom the wrath we deserve even though it's always depicted in the starkest, most vivid terms. Fire, destruction, wrath, hell, smoke, vengeance.

Which makes his mercy toward us all the more sweet and amazing.

And I think that's why we also connect with stories of mercy in the Bible as well. God showed mercy to Adam and Eve, though they had clearly violated his commands. He showed mercy to Lot who was sitting in gates of Sodom. Boaz showed mercy to Ruth, the gentile, whom he would later marry. The apostle Paul showed mercy to John Mark who had abandoned their missionary journey but was later useful to Paul in his last days. Even many movies revolve around mercy because it's such a powerful theme that originates in the person of God.

And that's what we see here. We see David at the pinnacle of mercy, most clearly reflecting the God he serves. So I want to walk through this section and just meditate on this theme.

1) Mercy, by definition, means we have suffered unjustly.

Now, we've read our chapter, but before we start unpacking it we need to recognize that there's been some history between David and Saul. If we were to just pick up our Bible at chapter 24 and start reading, we might conclude "Well that's nice, David is sparing Saul's life." But it's the back story that makes this chapter all the more amazing.

Except for Saul praising David a few times, his jealous hatred of David has been the driving force of their relationship. In fact, it's been the driving force of Saul's reign as king. From complaining about the praise David received for killing Goliath, Saul deceiving David about giving his daughter to him in marriage, promoting him in the military, demoting him in the military, Saul trying 10-12 times to kill David, his maniacal ravings about David to people in private. We have to keep all of that history in mind as we come here to realize just how amazing this act of mercy is.

That's where we have to begin. When we think about mercy in general, we have to understand that the backdrop of mercy is always that someone has been treated unjustly. In the gospel, it is God - the holy sovereign of the universe we have sinned against. In life, it's we who have been sinned against.

If someone comes on to your property and does damage to your property, you have 2 options. You can seek justice, require them to pay for or replace the damage or you can seek mercy, let them go. If someone insults you or injures you you have 2 options, let them have it or show them mercy.

Sometimes wisdom dictates that it's a combination of justice and mercy. Sometimes if someone injures us they need to spend time in jail, but we still long for reconciliation. God does that too. Someone who commits adultery and gets a serious STD doesn't just get that disease erased, although if they come to faith in Jesus they get eternal forgiveness. Someone who has done drugs for years and comes to faith in Jesus doesn't just get their mental faculties back good as new, although they receive the imputed righteousness of Christ.

But all that to say, we need to begin our understanding of mercy with the reality it assumes someone was injured wrongly.

2) Mercy is displayed when people are at their most vulnerable. Read 1-7

You know, there are just some interesting things you end up talking about when you go through books of the Bible and, if we're honest, whatever is going on, this is a pretty funny situation. Here's David hiding in a cave when Saul comes in to do his business. What we're to understand here is that David could have easily killed Saul, Saul would have never even known what happened, and there would have been no harm come to David. Not only would David's men fight, but the men with Saul probably would not have fought against David if their king was dead. So what we see here is mercy.

Now, at the risk of getting a little silly with this section, I do want to spend a couple minutes explaining what's going on here. Because there are some aspects that deserve attention.

First of all, we don't know exactly where these guys are at. We don't know where the Wildgoats' Rock is or which cave is being talked about but wherever it was was obviously a good spot to stop because both Saul and David unknowingly camp their troops in the exact same spot. The cave was probably both large and deep because all of David's troops seem to be in the cave. And this cave is a common feature around the land of Israel.

So they're in the cave hiding from Saul, when Saul comes in to relieve himself. Saul is, for lack of better phrase, going number 2. We know that actually from the Hebrew. The English term most of us have is "relieved himself" but the Hebrew is "to cover his feet." Just like there are many euphemisms in English to describe going to the bathroom, Hebrew does so with "cover his feet."

There were no toilets or porte-potties in ancient times, and so many cultures just went wherever. This led to rampant disease and sickness and, frankly, disgusting conditions.

But God back in **Deut 23:12-14** actually gave laws for sanitation and cleanliness when they were at war. Men have always sunk to the lowest common denominator when it comes to cleanliness - and ancient military camps were among the worst. And so there were some laws God commanded to keep his people clean.

Deut. 23:12-14: "You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. Because the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up

your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

So when you were at war and had to go to the bathroom, you were to have designated area outside of the camp, and a small shovel and you had to dig a hole, do your business in the hole, then cover the hole. Now, actually the reason God gives is not sanitization - though we know this would be way more sanitary. The reason he gives is because he is holy and having poo all over the camp is indecent and disgusting. And if God is going to be proverbially among the soldiers and fight alongside of them, he doesn't want poo everywhere.

So this is what's going on. Saul comes into this cave, probably not very far into the cave because it would get too dark. But he comes in for some privacy, he probably takes off his outer robe, sets it aside and then digs a hole and sits down to relieve himself.

And David's men light up. "Are you kidding me?! God has given the king right into our hand; we don't even have to wage war. We'll kill him and it will be all over. This has to be from God!"

And David sneaks over and cuts off part of the robe. And Saul never knows that David was there. How is that possible? How does he not know? Well, again, maybe the robe is off to the side, it is dark. The troops may have been making noise outside. We just don't know.

But the moment David cuts off the robe, he convicted of sin. Although he hasn't killed the king, he has still defied him, still acted against him. And David's conscience is sensitive so he feels guilt.

What makes David's mercy toward Saul so amazing is that the king is basically a sitting duck. He is in a completely vulnerable position. Were David to kill him it would be quick, without a fight, and in a completely humiliating manner which, by every human count, Saul deserves. Saul is a demon-possessed madman who has disqualified himself from the throne more times than we can count. For David to dispatch Saul in this situation would be both understandable and fitting. And yet he holds back. He spares the king.

In our own lives this is when mercy is the most essential and most power in the lives of others. This is when our spouse has completely messed up, our child is at our utter whim, when we could throw our co-worker under the bus, that family member is in greatest need.

Jesus says blessed are the merciful, you know why? For they shall receive mercy (**Matt. 5:5**).

The mercy you want to receive from Jesus at the judgment - when you are in most need of it - is the mercy he calls us to show to others. Not just on the small stuff or when it's a tit-for-tat situation where we've done wrong and they've done wrong and we just let it go because it's a relational standoff.

No, mercy is most powerful and most godlike when you really have someone over the barrel, when you are fully justified in blasting them with wrath and anger, and instead you let them go just like Jesus let's us go. That's gospel-powered mercy. That's what David shows to Saul and that's what we are called to show to one another.

Side: A little unrelated to this whole section, but worth mentioning because it is very related to false teachers. Many times when false teachers are called out, they will use a verse like this - "touch not the Lord's anointed" - to say that they are above examination. That no one can accused them of wrong teaching or sinfulness because God has anointed them in ministry. Let me be the first to tell you that that is complete nonsense.

That's not even the context of the verse. The context here is for Israel's king. No is any pastor or teacher, or any Christian for that matter, above having to account for credible accusations.

The apostles Peter and Barnabus were publicly held to account by the apostle Paul for favoring Jews over Gentiles in Antioch. Throughout the NT those who likely held a leadership position were called out for their false doctrine.

1 Tim. 5:19-20: Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

So although men have been placed in a ministry, there is no sense in which anyone is ever above credible accusation.

So we've seen that mercy means we have suffered unjustly, it is usually displayed when people are at their most vulnerable:

3) The purpose of mercy is reconciliation and repentance. **Read 8-15**

Think about this: David could have just let Saul go and just stayed hidden in the cave. He didn't have to cut off his robe, didn't have to go address him once he did cut off his robe. Saul might not have even noticed the robe until hours or days later. But David goes. And what David really wants is to be reconciled to Saul. There is no hint of condescension or arrogance or entitlement.

David bows to the ground and addresses Saul - his own father-in-law - as "my lord the king." And as one person pointed out, he even gives Saul the benefit of the doubt that maybe it's other people poisoning Saul's mind against David (Baldwin, J. G. 1 and 2 Samuel: An Intro Commentary, p. 155). **Read 9**

I think this is a huge element of mercy: giving people the benefit of the doubt. Even when we are 99% sure we know the whole situation, when we think we know everything there is to know, we have to admit we really don't know everything. The only one who does is God.

It's sobering that when we have relational difficulties we are so prone to accuse and assume and bring out the past. Mercy, however, acts in love.

1 Cor. 13:7: Love bears all things, believes all things, *hopes all things*, endures all things.

Mercy is not naive, but mercy has gospel hopefulness that what has been done is not as bad they imagine and has been done by misunderstanding.

And the point of having that attitude, is reconciliation. Even David here doesn't just want Saul to go away. He doesn't want him dead. What David wants out of all of this is reconciliation. "Why are you coming after me, a dead dog? A flea?!" I'm no one. Now, everyone knows that's not entirely true, but David's point is that he's no threat. But he shows Saul mercy to prove that very thing.

4) The ground of mercy is in the character of God.

I want to point out a couple of things in the section we just covered because I think they're worth highlighting. David does want reconciliation and repentance on Saul's part. But what motivates him? I would say it is the character of God. Notice how David frames this. **Read 12-15**

Notice, that David doesn't ground his act of mercy in his own goodness. "Saul, don't you get how great a guy I am? I'm the nicest guy ever."

No, he grounds his mercy completely in the character of God. And actually I think this is huge for us to understand. If your mercy is just based on your own proclivity to be nice to people or because you don't like confrontation or something in yourself, your mercy will not be biblical mercy.

Many say they are merciful when they are actually lazy. They don't want to deal with an issue. Or they say they are merciful when they are actually afraid of confrontation or tough love. That's not mercy. To have true mercy we have to understand our place before God.

The Lord is Judge **Read 12**

True mercy has a very healthy view of judgment. When we come into a situation that may require mercy or may require justice, ultimately we need to step back and remember that the Lord is going to judge every single one of us. He will judge you, he will judge me, and he will judge them.

So when your kid hits your other kid and you need to work through that situation as a parent - either dealing out mercy or dealing out justice - you have to consider what God's perspective as judge is. You have to consider how much information you actually have, what is the manner of the fight, what are the stakes?

The same thing is true when your neighbor is annoying you or a coworker is taking credit for your accomplishment or when your mom is driving you bananas. You will stand before the Lord and give an account for how your part in the situation and they will stand before the Lord for their part in the situation. Which means the stakes are eternally high.

Related to that is that *the Lord is avenger* **Read 12**

Now David's point here is that if he were to kill Saul, the Lord would avenge Saul's death on him. The Lord had anointed Saul as king, and no one touches the king, not even David who is the next anointed king.

But what we need to understand is that David has a very healthy understanding that God will one day avenge all things with all people.

Rom. 12:19: Vengeance is mine, declares the Lord.

Sometimes that vengeance comes in this life, sometimes it comes on the Day of judgment, but it does come. And, oddly, a healthy understanding of God's vengeance is really the foundation of us having mercy. If you believe that one day God will avenge all wrong and all evil, then you realize that you don't have to. You can take the proper steps of justice or mercy depending upon the situation and leave the ultimate judgment in God's hands.

Last weekend 360 Christians were blown to pieces in Sri Lanka. Most of them were killed by homicide bombers. But let's say that the bombs were planted by someone who was later captured. How would we even begin to avenge them for their wrong? How do you punish one person for the murder of hundreds of others? The answer is we can't. Assuming we have the evidence to convict such a person, the most we can do is put them to death. Both the OT and NT uphold the death penalty, as should we. But even then it's not a fair exchange is it? How do we deal with situations where there's just no way that a wrong can be set right? We leave it to God's vengeance.

Luke 12:4-5: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!"

What Jesus was getting at is that God is the ultimate vengeance-taker because only he can give someone the full measure of what their sin actually deserves. Men can only kill us, it's God who can kill us and then the real vengeance begins.

See, if you know that, if you know God's vengeance toward others is certain, that he will repay everyone exactly for what they have done, leaving no little bit left out - Jesus says we'll be judged even for every careless word we speak - then we can trust 2 things. First, **we** need God's mercy. And he gives it to us freely in Christ. And second, we can show God's mercy to others, knowing that even if we're wrong and should have given justice, God will sort it all out.

Sometimes when we show mercy to someone they abuse it. They come back on us anyway. But we can trust God's judgment and vengeance.

David didn't know what would happen when he let Saul go. He didn't know Saul would try again in chapter 26 to kill him. But he knew the Lord would take care of it all, and God did.

5) Mercy is what qualifies us to reign. **Read 16-22**

Saul knows that it is not by accident that he was in the cave alone with David and all his men. The Lord put them there together and any other person would have slaughtered their enemy.

Vs. 19: For if a man finds his enemy will he let him go away safe? Of course not.

Here's what's interesting: It's this episode that confirms in Saul's mind that David will be king and God will establish it in his hand. It's the mercy that David showed to Saul that convinces even Saul that David is equipped to reign. And it's that same mercy that Saul has already received that he asks David to show his family in time to come. David will be king, and he will reign, and Saul humbly asks him to spare his family.

Jason, that's nice, but we're not all kings and we won't all reign. Actually, the Bible says we will. The Bible promises that all believers will one day reign with Christ (**Rev. 20:1-8**). We are called co-heirs with Christ, who inherit the Kingdom. (**Rom. 8:17**)

Jesus encourages the church in Thyatira: ...hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, ...even as I myself have received authority from my Father. (**Re 2:25-27**).

He says to the church in Laodicea: [to] the one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (**Rev. 3:20-22:**)

2 Tim. 2:11-12: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him;

If we're going to reign with Christ, who himself sits on a throne of mercy, what's the one trait we're going to need to perfect in this life? It's mercy. If we're going to reign in the exact same manner as our Lord reigns then showing mercy starts now. It's showing mercy in the big things, in the small things. Not in naive simplicity, but in generous grace and wisdom. Because that's exactly how our Lord works with us.

Pray