

1 Samuel 26 - Mercy...Again

If you've been here for the last month or so you know that this episode in David's life is identical in many ways to the what we saw just 2 chapters ago in **1 Sam. 24**. Saul is about to catch David, God sovereignly puts Saul in a vulnerable position where David could easily destroy him, and yet David shows mercy and restraint. Chapters 24-26 really are all about the mercy of David. Mercy to Saul, but also mercy to Nabal despite being wronged by all of them.

And what this passage gets down to is probably one of the most practical issues in our Christian life: how often do we show mercy to people? How many times? And what is the extent of that mercy? What does Jesus call us to in the gospel?

Matt. 18:21-22: Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

The original language is a little vague there, it could be 77 times or 70 times 7 times which would be 490 times. Either way, the point is not that we keep a list, but that we show continual, lavish mercy toward those who sin against us.

Even the way Jesus taught us to pray: Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. God forgive me in the exact way I have already forgiven everyone else. **Matt 6:12**

So if you're nursing a grudge, giving the cold shoulder or hanging on to junk against other people, when you pray for forgiveness your prayer: God please do that to me. The prayer is convicting and honest because we are asking God to forgive us based on our own standards.

We praise God that his mercies are new every morning. (**Lam 3:22-23**) Are your mercies new every morning? Or are offenses carried over?

Just how thoroughly do you want to be forgiven by God? When we think about Jesus and we say he died for our sins. What percentage of those sins are we hoping were wiped clean by his death on the cross? I'm hoping for 100% because that's what the Bible promises. And when the Bible says he was raised for our justification - that is, faith his resurrection is the means by which God considers us not just not guilty but perfect holy and righteous - just how righteous are we hoping God views us as? I don't know about you, but I'm in need of 100% righteousness. Which, again, is what the Bible promises.

So it's a circle. Our prayer for mercy from God is based on our mercy to others. And the mercy we show to others is based on our mercy from God.

Col. 3:13: forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

The gospel doesn't just tell us how we can be saved from God's wrath, it informs us how we live out our salvation. So as we're living life and having to forgive people and show them mercy, we look back at Christ who has forgiven us and that's standard. That's our model.

And I think David - our ancient brother in the faith who was a man after God's own heart - helps us wrestle with a very particular issue concerning forgiveness. What do we do with people who sin against us over and over and over again. What does mercy look like to the person who continually sins against us? What does mercy look like to those who sin against us in grievous ways? What about when they sin against us, apologize, and then go and do the exact same thing? Again and again?

As believers in the Lord Jesus who look to his own sacrifice to save us, do we have any principles or commands we can apply? I think we see lived out in David's life here is godly wisdom for people who are continually sinned against.

1) David verifies that there is actually an offense taking place. **Read 1-5**

So David is still in southern Israel when Saul comes after him. The precise locations of these cities aren't critical for the overall picture. What is critical to understand is that this seems like time 43 that Saul has been after David to kill him. David has been betrayed over and over again by people; the Ziphites back in chapter 23 that alerted Saul that David was in their area. But in particular it is Saul who keeps trying to kill him.

Here's what I think is key. At the end of **Vs. 3** we have essentially an overview statement: when he saw Saul came after him in the wilderness. And I think the idea there is that he perceived that this was Saul. He had a good hunch. He saw the soldiers, figured it was Saul. But he was not 100% sure. He was maybe 95% sure. So in **Vs. 4** what we have is how he figured that out. **Read**

So here's what I want to point out - this is why they pay me the big bucks: In **Vs. 3**, he was mostly sure this was Saul coming after, but in **Vs. 4** he verified it by sending spies. I know you're thinking: Wow, the exegetical insight there is amazing.

What I want to point out here is not an exegetical insight, but really more of a devotional one: David does not assume anything about anyone, not even the person who continually sins against him; who continually tries to murder him. He verifies everything.

Imagine you're David, you're out in the wilderness hiding, in the area of Ziph - where the locals have ratted you out before - and then along comes an army. Looks like Saul's army who has tried to kill you over and over. What you conclude? "Saul's out to get me again." What did David conclude? "I need to verify this is true."

Here's what happens when people sin against us over and over: we just begin to assume the absolute worst of them all the time. Even rumors and whispers of wrongdoing are immediately confirmed in our mind: "Yep that's them; they always do this." Or there are similar elements to what they've done in the past and we're not naive so we immediately conclude guilt. Or their participation.

And we don't even wait to verify anything. We don't talk to that person, we don't get all sides of the argument. We don't give them a fair shake at explaining even **if** they did something, let alone why they did something.

We want justice even before we know for sure they've committed the crime. I was listening to the Briefing this last week, Al Mohler's podcast news and events from a Christian worldview and he was talking about how the defense lawyer for Harvey Weinstein is a professor at Harvard. Harvey Weinstein, by anyone's estimation, is a horrible guy who has been accused of disgusting crimes. But the students at Harvard are so offended that someone would give Harvey Weinstein a defense that they have essentially ousted the professor for even thinking about defending the guy. And maybe you know about Weinstein and think "I would too." But in our law we have what is called the presumption of innocence. You are to be considered innocent until what? **Proven** guilty. And there may be a mountain of proof, but there is still a process. That's what keeps our system from being tyrannical - at least more tyrannical than it already is. Every person who is accused, no matter how credible, is granted a legitimate defense. We are to weigh all the evidence.

Well, that's really a Christian concept. Founded in the OT where we are to patiently investigate and diligently uncover the truth not only at a legal level, but also at a personal level. We verify offenses.

Can I just say, that I think most relational conflicts would be dead in the water if we just went to the person and verified they are doing what we think they are doing. Maybe they lie and deny it. Maybe they say, "Yeah, I did it and here's why." Maybe their motivation wasn't as sinister as we think it was in our minds. Maybe it was. Maybe they ask forgiveness.

But showing mercy begins before an offense has happened with an attitude of being will to investigate if there's even anything to forgive. And humbly listening when we are hurt.

2) God is going to test our allegiance to him with forgiveness.

Now, test not in the sense of tempting us to sin. God never does that. But test in the sense of trials that he brings about. In any trial there is a potential for failure, for sin. But the difference between a trial and a temptation is that a trial is to ensure obedience, a temptation is entice to sin.

When I put my little kids to bed I tell them to lay down and that I'm going to leave the door cracked to see if they're getting up. It's a trial for them. I don't want them to fail, I want them to succeed.

We need to understand that God is going to test our allegiance to him. Remember back in the cave where Saul is doing his business and David's talking to his guys? Well, we know that the Lord delivered Saul into David's hand. His guys mention that, Saul mentions that. And yet, it was right to be merciful. Same thing here. **Read 6-12**

So here the situation is even more juicy than 2 chapters ago. David takes Abishai into Saul's camp. And there's Saul and his general, Abner, conked out! David could kill Saul at the same time Abisahi kills Abner and they'd take out the top 2 men in Saul's army. No one would see them and they could escape scott free. It's the almost same wrestling from 2 chapters ago. And this is the dilemma: how many times is God going to put Saul in a completely vulnerable situation before David takes him out? It turns out it's only 2, but if it were 32 the response should be the same: show mercy.

Let me give you an interesting plot twist because it's relevant. I know you'll be reading 2 Samuel once we're done with 1 Samuel and you'll want to know this juicy detail. David has 3 nephews that come into focus from here on out. They all come from his sister Zeruiah - these 3 nephews are the sons of Zeruiah, you'll hear that phrase often in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. There's Joab, David's general, and Joab's 2 brothers Abishai and Asahel. Here's David standing over Abner with Abishai his nephew. In time to come in 2 Samuel there will be a battle where Asahel is running after Abner who is sleeping right here. And Abner will kill Asahel. And eventually Joab will kill Abner for it. But you have to think Abishai probably replayed this very moment over and over: we should have killed Abner while we had the chance?

You ever had that situation? Why did I show mercy to this person? Had I known then what I know now I would never have forgiven them!

That's what Abishai was probably thinking. Why did we show mercy to the guy who later slaughtered my brother? Because mercy was the right thing to do. Saul was the Lord's anointed. You don't mess with the Lord's anointed. God will be their judge. We forgive because Jesus forgave us.

And think about this whole thing from the perspective of **Vs. 12**. Who put the entire army into a deep sleep? God did. I don't care how tired you are, there's always a twitchy guy who can't sleep or someone who has an active bladder. In any battalion there is a night watch. But God put them all to sleep. It's actually the same wording that is used for Adam when God removed a rib for Eve or Abraham when God put him to sleep to show him the covenant as he passed through the animals. It's like anesthesia sleep. These guys were out. David and Abishai could have just taken out the entire army by themselves. But they didn't.

David does approximately the same thing with Saul's spear and water jar that he did with cutting Saul's robe. He takes it as a token to show that he was merciful.

But God will sovereignly put us in situations that force us to be merciful and and test our willingness to forgive. Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God for our forgiveness. It was the deliberate and intentional plan of God to send Jesus to suffer and die into order to forgive the people who killed him. And when he rose again he wasn't like: "Well, if that's how you're going to treat me, forget about it." No, mercy assumes suffering. And it is the deliberate and intentional plan of God for us to be in situations where we are forced to forgive though we suffer.

3) Forgiveness doesn't mean ignoring the situation. Read 13-16

So this is humorous. And really it is an unbelievably brilliant tactic by David. David does not address Saul directly here. He takes Saul's spear and his jar of water and then he addresses **Abner**. "Abner, oh great general that you are, why are letting the king go unguarded?"

See, David and Abner probably knew each other well. There may have even been some rivalry between them because of David's skill in killing Goliath and as leader over the armies of Israel for a short time. And Abner clearly has no problem pursuing David to kill him. And David is clearly aware of Abner's skill as a warrior.

Here's the interesting thing: Even though in **Vs. 8** Abishai is saying "God has done this, he has given you your enemy!" David doesn't know the full extent of **Vs. 12** where these guys are out, like anesthesia out, because of God's specific doing.

But he doesn't stop with Abner, David actually calls out king Saul. **Read 17-20**

David asks: What have I done? Why are you trying to kill me?

Side: There's a huge take-away should see in this. David knows of nothing that he's done against Saul. Best he can tell, Saul is just a raving madman trying to kill him. But David doesn't just put him in his place, he actually asks him: Is there a reason why you're doing this? What evil have I done?

That's actually a very humble question. When we confront someone in sin or there's a situation where need need to forgive, one of the most humble questions we can ask - in sincerity - is "Am I doing something to aid your sin?" "Are you sinning against me because I sinned against you?"

So sometimes when I'm confronting my kids with disobedience I ask them: Am I being unreasonable with what I've said or done? Or was I unclear? Sometimes I am. Not always, but sometimes.

I've had people bark at me and tell me off and I ask them what I've done to offend them. And sometimes the answer is I was rude. Sometimes the answer is they got no sleep last night and they're just irritable. They're not mad **at me**, they're mad **near me**. So we have to consider that there might be other things going on or that we might be in the wrong.

Here David gives the possibility that he could be in sin, in which case maybe it was the Lord who had compelled Saul to pursue David. If that was the case David could give an offering and be restored. That's what he's talking about in **Vs. 19. Read**

So if David is guilty, he'll give an offering. But if he's not guilty, then that means the people who are informing Saul are. And what they're doing is functionally driving David to idolatry - or at least trying. In the OC, there was a sense that all blessing came by being included within the community of Israel. If you kicked someone out of Israel, they couldn't rightfully worship God because they had no access to the Tabernacle, no access to a priest, no access to God's Holy place in Jerusalem. This was huge.

By the way this is impossible in the NC, isn't it? In the NC, Jesus said in **John 4:21** that we worship God neither on the mountain in Jerusalem nor in Samaria. We worship him in Spirit and in truth. And we don't need a Tabernacle or Temple because we are the Temple of God. And we don't need a priest because we are priests of God.

But for David and those with him, to be expelled from the commonwealth of Israel was essentially to be rendered a pagan. That's why he implores Saul in **Vs. 20** to leave him alone. **Read 20**

"Stop pursuing me, stop trying to kill me. If you kill me out here away from my people it's as though I'd be killed away from the presence of the Lord."

Here's the thing we need to realize, and I pointed it out in Chapter 24 but it's important to note here: David didn't have to do any of this. He could have let Saul just go his way in the cave, or he could have killed him in the cave. He could have let Saul just sleep and his men could have moved quickly away. But Saul is sinning against David. And the right thing to do is not just ignore that sin. It's not just to shrug his shoulders and going along in life being passive. David actually confronts the sin head on.

I will say he does it in an extremely tactful way - that's something I think we can all agree on. But he doesn't just let it go. How could he?

In the same way our whole lives revolve around the consciousness of sin. Whether among believers or unbelievers. We can't just let it go. That doesn't mean we have to make things obviously uncomfortable for everyone. But what it does mean is that we deal with it, we confront it - tactfully and graciously - but we do.

4) Even total forgiveness is not naive forgiveness. Read 21-25

So Saul confesses his sin again. And it is sin. But David doesn't return with Saul. Why not? Because David is wise. He knows that there's a worldly sorrow and godly sorrow.

Paul in **2 Corinthians 7:5-13** talks about how just because someone apologizes and maybe cries and maybe makes earnest pleas for forgiveness doesn't mean that it is true godly repentance. We've all seen lots of people confess sin, cry and plead, only to turn right around and do the same thing again.

I've also seen people who appear almost stoic when confronted about their sin, but who make radical transformations in their lives in the area of repentance. Which means that godly sorrow is not necessarily something we can detect from emotions, or tears, or even words.

You know how we can tell when someone is truly repentant? By their actions. Someone once said that you know someone is truly repentant when the changes in their life are as radical as the sin they committed was grievous. **Eph. 4:25-5:15** gives examples: When liars begin being brutally honest without having to be asked. When thieves begin working and being generous. When those with filthy mouths begin being known as encouragers. When sexual immorality is replaced by unwavering fidelity. When complainers become the source of thankfulness. That's repentance that is powered by the Holy Spirit.

And that is what is completely lacking in Saul's life. Saul breaks off the attack and blesses David. But there's no true change. And so David goes his way.

As believers there will be times when we can forgive a person - or stand ready to forgive a person - but still be cautious and still take steps to ensure we are not sinned against in a similar damaging way. In that we're like the Lord Jesus. He offers us full forgiveness of sin - mercy new every morning - if we repent and trust in him. But sometimes our sin has consequences that we have to deal with for a long time.

May the Lord give us wisdom to know the right time and the right way to reflect to others the mercy he has shown to us.

Pray