



“Rerouting: Mercy”

Matthew 5:7, 38-42; Romans 2:1-8

Getting what we don't deserve

As Christians, we are asked to show and share Mercy to others. To do so, we must first understand the difference between *grace* and *mercy*.

Often, we as Christians are imprecise in some of the words that we use. Distinguishing between the crucially important concepts of grace and mercy is essential in our attempt to grasp the enormity of God's love for us.

What we do and don't deserve

None of us deserve the love, the grace, the forgiveness, and the mercy that God has offered. In this series called *Rerouting* we have been walking through the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 5 – 7). We could spend forever talking about these few chapters. In fact, John Wesley in his *Standard Sermons for the Methodist People* spent a great deal of time on these chapters.

Jesus frames for us who we ought to be. Matthew 5:7 states, “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown Mercy.” Mercy is difficult to understand in our current context—in a society governed by the Rule of Law. Mercy is better understood in an age pre “We the People.” In an age where there was a king or an emperor—someone who had pure control over all that would have happened in his kingdom. Mercy comes from that context. Where you mess up as a subject not a citizen. You commit a crime, or you fail. You do something bad. You come before the king or emperor begging for mercy. It's not a question about whether you messed up. It's not a question of guilt. It's a question of are they going to give you what you deserve. Mercy is us *not* getting what we deserve.

Grace is different. Grace is love that is unearned. I think about this in terms of children. Our daughters are now twenty-five and twenty-three. I often think about the days just before they were born. Angee and I often talked about what the future was going to hold. We talked about the love we already felt for them. We lovingly thought of their names. They had not yet been born—hadn't done anything to earn our love—and yet, we loved them...still do!

Now that's a far different feeling than when—after they were born—they messed up, apologized, and we forgave them saying, “...that's okay kid.” We gave them grace.

Grace is the unearned love that has gone before us. No matter what we do. Grace is unmerited favor. It is the love that is given to us when we don't deserve it.

Mercy is a much more specific issue.

We do not want what we deserve

In the Old Testament, it seemed that people were trying to make things fair and equal. In fact, there's a phrase that you may have heard *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. It comes from the *Torah*, the first five books of the Old Testament the framework for the way in which the Hebrew People were to live. When you just hear that phrase, it feels like it is simply balancing issues, right?

In that day and age if someone were to take out your eye, for the society to function properly and even though you might want to kill their family for what was done to you, you were required—by the law—to limit your retribution to just an eye. Let's say you lost a tooth. For the societal well-being the Old Testament framing on this was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But let's be honest here. If someone punches you and knocks out a tooth is all you want fair and equal retribution? No! There is a part of us—some more than others—that desperately wants our perpetrator to truly suffer because of *our* loss.

Can you name someone right now that has done you wrong? Are you satisfied that things are even and are you at peace in your soul?

As humans, most of us harbor at least one unfulfilled grudge. That's why *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* was a way to limit violence and keep it from escalating. It was Gandhi who turned the famous phrase, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth makes the whole world blind and toothless!" It is an appropriate statement, but also a misunderstanding of what the Old Testament intended to accomplish.

The Old Testament intended to point toward *mercy* and a limiting of judgment. We know this because of the definitive interpreter of the Old Testament, Jesus, who said in Matthew 5:38-42, "You have heard that it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek turn to them the other cheek also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile with him go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

In each of these sections of The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is helping us understand that there was a low bar in the Old Testament "...an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." An even retribution to minimize escalation. I have a friend who likes to talk about how the Old Testament was "Conan the Barbarian days"—someone takes out your eye, you kill their family. So, for the Jews to exist in the Old Testament, you needed some way to limit them. But Jesus comes saying that wasn't the goal. The goal wasn't for you to say, "I'm satisfied after getting even." The goal is for us to be satisfied without getting even...the goal is for us as Christians to craft a new ethic, a new framework, a new way for our heart to be where—even when people do what's wrong—we love them. Forgive them and do not give them what they deserve.

Do you really want what you deserve in this life?

The last few years the world has been obsessed with the question of equality or equity. How do we balance things out in the world? I simply want to state for the record that equity is *not* the Christian ethic. The Christian ethic is *self-sacrifice*. The Christian ethic is that none of us are to get what we deserve. We are all here because God has forgiven us in a way we do not deserve.

We are to be the church, a community where we come together and recognize that none of us deserve this. Where you show up, get recognized, and can say, "Hi. I'm David. I'm a broken Sinner and I have no reason to be standing up here except by God's mercy and God's grace--God's mercy being that I didn't get what I deserved and God's grace being that he has restored me fully.

At our Celebrate Recovery on Thursdays, we experience the lack of condemnation, the lack of judgment, and the lack of "...*what did you do? And what did they do? And how are we going to parse this out?*" Because anyone who's been anywhere in our world today recognizes that none of us deserve what we've been given. That all of us are broken and fallen short of the glory of God.

In fact, that's what Paul's trying to write in his letter to the Romans. Romans was addressed to a people who were trying to navigate life between Jews and Gentiles--how they were going to navigate the world and life together. In the first chapter of Romans Paul describes how the Brokenness of humanity has invaded everything else.

Paul asserts that Jew and Gentile alike are both included in the kingdom of God because of the grace of God. The only way for us to navigate this thing called life is when we understand that we are not getting what we deserve.