

Luke 18:9-14  
October 27, 2019

Mercy

The sacrifices of God are, “a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” In the 51st psalm we find a penitent sinner, confessing a lifetime of sinfulness and pleading to be restored to God’s favor in a poem that begins, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. . . .”

The picture that is meant to be in our minds in this psalm is of David, the great Judean king, after he had been caught in his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife, and after he has been caught having given the order that led to Uriah’s death. Many faithful people have been challenged and comforted by the words of this psalm, and hymns have been written from its lines:

“Wash me and I will be whiter than snow, cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean.”

“Create in me a pure heart, O God  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence, O Lord  
nor take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”

Literally, mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone with whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm. For David, there was no one but God who had this power. For most of the rest of us, we are

at the mercy of others, yet still we find this psalm helpful, because it reminds us to choose a path of humility and service and to maintain a reverential attitude in our pursuit of life and God.

Luke

So it is no surprise when we open Luke’s gospel and near the end find Jesus on his way to what would be the end of his life, commenting on the piety of some of his fellow travelers. He contrasts the prayers of two parabolic people, one a religious leader, and a pretentious one at that, who prays a notoriously arrogant prayer, “God, I thank you that I am not like the others . . . ; and a tax collector, one known for deceit and treachery, who prays a notoriously humble prayer, recalling the first line of Psalm 51, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And then Jesus makes sure that no one misunderstands by saying, “I tell you that this man (the tax collector), rather than the other one (the pharisee) went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Thus we are challenged by this contrast between pride and humility, one that may seem simple and straightforward on the surface, but underneath reveals the more sinister and complex side of human nature.

## This Is Not . . .

Bear with me while I qualify things a bit by saying what humility is not. This attitude is not the result of victim-shaming, as we would call it in the 21st century, it is not humiliation. It is not the requirement that someone who has no power is required to act humble in order to excuse an injustice done to them by someone who does. A person who does this will just end up angry and deeply hurt.

And this attitude is not, “poor, poor, pitiful me,” guilt-inducing manipulation on the part of someone who is actually refusing to take responsibility for their own sins and manipulating others to feel sorry for them.

And this is not false humility, that is, when a self-righteous person deludes themselves into a very self-satisfying attitude of an ironic humility in which they take a great deal of pride. All these caveats; the victim-shamed person, and the one indulging is self-pity, and the falsely humble are all involved in a deceitful application of the 51st psalm or the parable of Jesus.

Rather, what is called for is integrity before God, that is, the willingness to be *completely honest*. This sincerity means that the humble person is not seeking to be justified or exalted, but is simply reckoning with the truth about their life.

## The Truth About Life

What makes the biblical story so compelling and what has resulted in its being the most widely published and read book in human history is that it tells the story of our lives and compels us to be realistic and very honest about our experience of life. It moves us from any situation in which we might be tempted to fudge things a little.

Its honesty is not gratuitous, but is born out of deep struggle, that is, it comes out of life’s most difficult experiences. Additionally, is that the struggle produces hope, and holds up love and compassion, humility and service, as the sources of a meaningful life.

It proclaims God’s mercy towards all of us. That God is a merciful God is a great religious discovery, one not easily made and people who accept it without thought are not typically unable to practice it very well until they have known something of the struggle, and something of the failure that leads to vulnerability. The other option is denial which leads to the conclusion that one is not responsible for what one is clearly responsible.

Vulnerability opens the door to Grace. This discovery is a great truth about life. Jesus puts it this way: “whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.”

There is no way to truly humble oneself if it is *meant* to achieve or earn exaltation. True humility is not concerned with exaltation. That is its power.

## Have Mercy

I wish I had better words to describe the majesty of this great religious discovery, that God is merciful and that the prayer for mercy is warranted by reality, not a foolish dream. This text is a warning, and a celebration.

It warns us that access to mercy is not a human achievement, but the gift of God. It is not earned by being good enough to deserve it. It is given, and easier to access by the person who, all things considered, is willing to see their need for it and make it a supplication of prayer.

And it is a celebration that the answer is “yes,” in the very fabric of the universe God has made, in God’s very nature, is the willingness of the only one with the power to punish, to grant forgiveness to those seeking it. Once it comes into a person’s heart, it transforms, heals, enlivens, leading to, well, you know what it leads to;

Compassion, courage, kindness, honesty, integrity, service, helpfulness, it actually leads to humility, and love, peace, joy, and hope, the grand slam of life’s attitudes that we seek.

Pray it.

“God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

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