

THE MERCY OF GOD

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“O give thanks unto the LORD: for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever” (Psa 136:1).

For this perfection of the Divine character God is greatly to be praised. Three times over in as many verses does the Psalmist here call upon the saints to give thanks unto the Lord for this adorable attribute. And surely this is the least that can be asked for from those who have been recipients of such bounty. When we contemplate the characteristics of this Divine excellency, we cannot do otherwise than bless God for it. His mercy is “great” (1 Kings 3:6), “plenteous” (Psa 86:5), “tender” (Luke 1:78), “abundant” (1 Pet 1:3); it is “from everlasting unto everlasting upon them that fear Him” (Psa 103:17). Well may we say with the Psalmist, “I will sing aloud of Thy mercy” (59:16).

“I will make all My goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exo 33:19). Wherein differs the “mercy” of God from His “grace”? The mercy of God has its spring in the Divine goodness. The first issue of God's goodness is his benignity or bounty, by which He gives liberally to His creatures as creatures; thus has He given being and life to all things. The second issue of God's goodness is His mercy, which denotes the ready inclination of God to relieve the misery of fallen creatures. Thus, “mercy” presupposes *sin*.

Though it may not be easy at the first consideration to perceive a real difference between the grace and the mercy of God, it helps us thereto if we carefully ponder His dealings with the unfallen angels. He has never exercised mercy toward them, for they have never stood in any need thereof, not having sinned or come beneath the effects of the curse. Yet, they certainly are the objects of God's free and sovereign grace. **First**, because of His *election* of them from out of the whole angelic race (1 Tim 5:21). **Secondly**, and in consequence of their election, because of His *preservation* of them from apostasy, when Satan rebelled and dragged down with him one-third of the celestial hosts (Rev 12:4). **Thirdly**, in making Christ their *Head* (Col 2:10; 1 Pet 3:22), whereby they are eternally secured in the holy condition in which they were created. **Fourthly**, because of the exalted *position* which has been assigned them: to live in God's immediate presence (Dan 7:10), to serve Him constantly in His heavenly temple, to receive honorable commissions from Him (Heb 1:14). This is abundant *grace* toward them; but “mercy” it is not.

In endeavoring to study the mercy of God as it is set forth in Scripture, a threefold distinction needs to be made, if the Word of Truth is to be “rightly divided” thereon. First, there is a *general* mercy of God, which is extended not only to all men, believers and unbelievers alike, but also to the entire creation: “His tender mercies are over *all* His works” (Psa 145:9); “He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25). God has pity upon the brute creation in their needs, and supplies them with suitable provision. Secondly, there is a *special* mercy of God, which is exercised toward the children of men, helping and succoring them, notwithstanding their sins. To them also He communicates all the necessities of life: “for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45). Thirdly, there is a *sovereign* mercy which is reserved for the heirs of salvation, which is communicated to them in a covenant way, through the Mediator.

Following out a little further the difference between the second and third distinctions pointed out above, it is important to note that the mercies which God bestows on the wicked are solely of a *temporal* nature; that is to say, they are confined strictly to this present life. There will be no mercy extended to them beyond the grave: “It is a people of no understanding: therefore He that made them will not have mercy on them, and He that formed them will show them no favor” (Isa 27:11). But at this point a difficulty may suggest itself to some of our readers, namely, Does not Scripture affirm that “His mercy endureth forever” (Psa 136:1)? Two things need to be pointed out in that connection. God can never cease to be merciful, for this is a quality of the Divine essence (Psa 116:5); but the *exercise* of His mercy is regulated by His sovereign will. This must be so, for there is nothing outside Himself which obliges Him to act; if there were, that “something” would be *supreme*, and God would cease to be *God*. It is pure sovereign grace which alone

determines the exercise of Divine mercy. God expressly affirms this fact in Romans 9:15, "For He saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom *I will* have mercy." It is not the wretchedness of the creature which causes Him to show mercy, for God is not influenced by things outside of Himself as we are. If God *were* influenced by the abject misery of leprous sinners, He would cleanse and save *all* of them. But He does not. Why? Simply because it is not His pleasure and purpose so to do. Still less is it the merits of the creatures which causes Him to bestow mercies upon them, for it is a contradiction in terms to speak of *meriting* "mercy." "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5)—the one standing in direct antithesis to the other. Nor is it the merit of Christ which moves God to bestow mercies on His elect: that would be substituting the effect for the cause. It is "through" or because of the tender mercy of our God that Christ was sent here to His people (Luke 1:78). The merits of Christ make it possible for God to *righteously* bestow spiritual mercies on His elect, justice having been fully satisfied by the Surety! No, mercy arises *solely* from God's imperial pleasure.

Again, though it be true, blessedly and gloriously true, that God's mercy "endureth forever," yet we must observe carefully the objects *to whom* His "mercy" is shown. Even the casting of the reprobate into the Lake of Fire is an act of *mercy*. The punishment of the wicked is to be contemplated from a threefold viewpoint. From God's side, it is an act of *justice*, vindicating His honor. The mercy of God is never shown to the prejudice of His holiness and righteousness. From their side, it is an act of *equity*, when they are made to suffer the due reward of their iniquities. But from the standpoint of the redeemed, the punishment of the wicked is an act of unspeakable *mercy*. How dreadful would it be if the present order of things, when the children of God are obliged to live in the midst of the children of the Devil, should continue forever! Heaven would at once cease to be heaven if the ears of the saints still heard the blasphemous and filthy language of the reprobate. What a mercy that in the New Jerusalem "there shall in nowise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither worketh abomination" (Rev 21:27)!

Lest the reader might think in the last paragraph we have been drawing upon our imagination, let us appeal to Holy Scripture in support of what has been said. In Psalm 143:12 we find David praying, "And of Thy *mercy* cut off mine enemies, and destroy all them that afflict my soul: for I am Thy servant." Again, in Psalm 136:15 we read that God "overthrew Pharaoh and his hosts in the Red Sea: *for His mercy* endureth forever." It was an act of vengeance upon Pharaoh and his hosts, but it was an act of "mercy" unto the Israelites. Again, in Revelation 19:1-3 we read:

I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honor, and power, unto the Lord our God: for true and righteous are His judgments: for He hath *judged* the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath *avenged* the blood of His servants at her hand. And again they said, *Alleluia*. And her smoke rose up forever and ever.

From what has just been before us, let us note how vain is the presumptuous hope of the wicked, who, notwithstanding their continued defiance of God, nevertheless count upon His being merciful to them. How many there are who say, I do not believe that God will ever cast me into Hell; He is too merciful. Such a hope is a viper, which if cherished in their bosoms will sting them to death. God is a God of justice as well as mercy, and He has expressly declared that He will "by no means clear the guilty" (Exo 34:7). Yea, He has said, "The wicked *shall* be turned into hell, all the nations that forget God" (Psa 9:17). As well might men reason thus: I do not believe that if filth be allowed to accumulate and sewage become stagnant and people deprive themselves of fresh air, that a merciful God will let them fall a prey to a deadly fever. The fact is that those who neglect the laws of health *are* carried away by disease, notwithstanding God's mercy. Equally true is it that those who neglect the laws of spiritual health shall forever suffer the Second Death.

Unspeakably solemn is it to see so many *abusing* this Divine perfection. They continue to despise God's authority, trample upon His laws, continue in sin, and yet presume upon His mercy. But God will not be unjust to Himself. God shows mercy to the truly penitent, but not to the impenitent (Luke 13:3). To continue in sin and yet reckon upon Divine mercy remitting punishment is diabolical. It is saying, "Let us do evil that good may come," and of all such it is written that their "damnation is just" (Rom 3:8). Presumption shall most certainly be disappointed; read carefully Deuteronomy 29:18-20. Christ is the spiritual Mercyseat, and all who despise and reject His Lordship shall "perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little" (Psa 2:12).

But let our final thought be of God's spiritual mercies unto His own people. "Thy mercy is great unto the heavens" (Psa 57:10). The riches thereof transcend our loftiest thought. "For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him" (Psa 103:11). None can measure it. The elect are designated "vessels of mercy" (Rom 9:23). It is mercy that quickened them when they were dead in sins (Eph 2:4-5). It is mercy that saves them (Titus 3:5). It is His abundant mercy which begat them unto an eternal inheritance (1 Pet 1:3). Time would fail us to tell of His preserving, sustaining, pardoning, supplying mercy. Unto His own, God is "the Father of mercies" (2 Cor 1:3).

"When all Thy mercies, O my God, My rising soul surveys, Transported with the view I'm lost, In wonder, love, and praise."