

GOD IS MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS**PSALM 103:8-18; EPHESIANS 1:3-9**

Have you ever wondered what God looks like? A little girl was drawing some pictures on the living room floor. Her dad asked, "What are you drawing?" She said, "A picture of God." Her dad responded, "But no one knows what God looks like." She said, "They will when I'm through." You have to admire her confidence, right? No, we can't know what God looks like, but we can definitely know what God is like.

What is God really like? And what difference does it make to your life and mine? Those are two questions we've asked and tried to answer in this current message series I'm calling *What's Most Important About You? What You Think About God*. You can find notes for today's message on our website. Click on the black Stay At Home Resources button. Then, click on Worship. Finally, click on Message Notes to find an outline of today's message. Who you believe God to be – or not to be – determines how you live out your life more than you can possibly imagine. We've been considering several of God's attributes. An attribute is simply something the Bible says is true about God. Today I want you to think with me about God's mercy and God's grace. Aren't they the same thing? The words "mercy" and "grace" are indeed used almost interchangeably in the Bible. But some time ago I came across definitions of mercy and grace that I found to be personally insightful and impact. Here's the first one.

MERCY IS NOT GETTING WHAT I DESERVE.

Last year, Cheryl and I visited Italy. One highlight was visiting the plant where Ferrari automobiles are made. Those are super luxury sports cars. Depending on the model, they can range in price from \$200,000 to well over a million dollars. So, let's imagine I managed to steal a Ferrari with all the options. I'm caught by the police, booked for grand larceny, and put in jail. Eventually, I'm hauled before a judge where the evidence is presented and I'm pronounced guilty. With my knees shaking, I stand up to receive my sentence. But then something totally unexpected happens! Instead, of getting a lengthy jail sentence as well as a stiff fine for my crime, the judge sentences me to 25 hours of community service. What? That's all! I think we can all agree the judge was very, very, unbelievably merciful to me. Mercy is not getting what I deserve. One of the greatest Bible passages about God's mercy is found in Psalm 103. I want to read v. 8-18. You'll hear the word "compassion" used several times in the Bible version I'm using. Your translation might use the word "mercy." Actually, compassion and mercy mean exactly the same thing in Scripture.

Here's the first of three important truths about God's mercy. Because God is merciful, He is constantly good to everyone. I love the message about God found in Lam. 3:23 (NLT), "Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning." How often? Each and every morning! God's mercy is a product of His goodness – another attribute we discussed a few weeks ago. God isn't just good to Jesus followers. God is good to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, and other people who totally reject Him. God's isn't just good to Americans. He loves all people everywhere. God isn't just good to nice people. He's even good to evil, cruel, and miserable people. The Bible says in Ps.

145:16 and 119:64 (NLT), “You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.... The earth is filled with your love, Lord.” God could wipe out every human being on the face of the earth instantly because we’ve all fallen short of His standards. He would be perfectly just in doing so, because it’s His universe and He made the rules. But instead God is wonderfully merciful. He gives us life and health. He provides food and shelter. He blesses us with family and friends. He gives us the capacity to love, to create, and to enjoy what He has made. God is merciful and good to every living thing.

Because God is merciful, He withholds His judgment on everyone. Listen to what the Bible says in and Ezk. 33:11 (NLT), “As surely as I live, says the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live.” God never takes any pleasure in anyone’s misery. He never finds joy in someone’s pain. God never wants to see anyone enter Hell for eternity. The Bible says one reason God doesn’t immediately put an end to all the evil, depravity, and injustice around us is simply because He wants to give every man, woman, and child the opportunity to discover a relationship with Him. It says in 2 Pt. 3:9 (NLT), “The Lord ... is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.” Yes, God will and must render judgment eventually, but His mercy causes Him to be patient.

Because God is merciful, He’s already acted to save you. Because we’re made in God’s image, we experience compassionate and merciful feelings. Often, that’s precisely where they get left, too. For example, we see a TV report about a precious child enduring some terrible, terminal disease. Tears form in our eyes and a lump gathers in our throat. Yes, you feel compassionate and merciful, but do you act on those feelings? Not always. In fact, not very often. But it’s impossible for God to feel merciful without acting mercifully. God’s greatest single act of mercy was what He accomplished in and through Jesus. 1 Pt. 1:3 says, “All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.”

How did God do it? We deserve Hell and eternal damnation. We deserve eternity without God. But God’s mercy means we don’t have to get what we deserve. Seeing how far we were from God, He took the initiative and acted to save us. Mercy welled up within His great heart and He refused to make Hell inevitable for anyone. Mercy compelled Him to do something – to act. He sent His own Son to pay the penalty for our sins on the cross so we could begin a new and eternal relationship with Him as our Father. That’s the message of Titus 3:5 (NLT), “He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and a new life through the Holy Spirit.” Remember that great truth as we celebrate Communion in a few minutes. It’s a constant reminder of God’s mercy. Because of Jesus, you and I don’t get what we deserve. But, let’s think about grace.

GRACE IS GETTING WHAT I DON’T DESERVE.

Do you remember the Ferrari I stole earlier today? Let's imagine the same merciful judge who gave me only 25 hours of community service for my crime did something even more amazing than giving me such a light punishment. Let's imagine he goes out and buys me a brand new, shiny Ferrari and gives it to me as a gift. It could happen! That judge is not only being merciful, but he's also being unbelievably gracious. He's giving me something I don't deserve at all. You might say, "Rick, you've got a very vivid imagination when it comes to stolen Ferraris. No judge is ever going to do that." Of course, you're right. But something happened 2,000 years ago outside the walls of a city called Jerusalem half way around the world that's far more amazing and unbelievable than what that some make believe judge did for me. Sure, it's Jesus, the cross, and the empty tomb. Not only did Jesus pay the penalty for our sins there – we didn't get what we deserve (in other words, mercy) – but God has now dumped so much blessing into our lives it will take all of eternity to receive it all. That's grace. That's getting what we don't deserve. Can I point us to just one description of God's grace? It's found in Eph. 1. Frankly, I don't fully understand much of that, but I know it's really good stuff. I know it's grace. And I know I don't deserve any of it.

Years ago I came across three ideas about grace that I want to pass along to you. First, because God is gracious, He commenced your salvation. In other words, our salvation begins in and with God and is a product of His grace. Why did you respond to God and His offer of a restored and eternal relationship? Because He took the initiative. He started it. Frankly, we wouldn't want anything to do with God unless God wanted everything to do with us first and foremost. Here again what the Bible says in Rom. 3:24 (NIV), "[We] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." This grace comes to us as God's gift. We don't deserve or earn it. Eph. 2:8-9 (NLT) says, "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it." It all began in God's heart and mind.

Secondly, because God is gracious, He continues your salvation. We don't just need grace at the beginning of our relationship with God. If you're like me, you need God's grace every day from then on! Grace isn't something God dumps on you once. His grace is the constant and continuing expression of His love and kindness to you. He continues to both convict you of and forgive your sins as you confess them to Him. He put His Holy Spirit into your inner spirit, so you'll enjoy His guidance in confusing times, His comfort in sad times, His peace in anxious times, and His Fatherly presence in lonely times. He gives you the added joy of helping to build His Kingdom during your lifetime by discovering and using your spiritual gifts and by reaching out to spiritually lost people. God's grace began in your past, yes, but it continues into your present.

The Chronicles of Narnia are a wonderful series of children's books written by C.S. Lewis. In one scene, Lucy, one of the human characters, re-enters the magical land of Narnia. She longs to see Aslan again after many years. He's a great lion who represents Jesus. Finally, they're reunited and they enjoy a wonderful reunion. Lucy says to Aslan, "You're bigger now." Aslan says, "That's because you are older. You see, Lucy, every year that you grow, you will find me bigger." That's the way it should

be in our relationship with Jesus. As we grow spiritually bigger every year, we find Jesus is bigger in His grace, bigger in His mercy, bigger in His goodness, and bigger in His faithfulness. That's because your salvation and mine isn't something static and finished in the past. It's continuing to grow and expand today and every day.

Thirdly, because God is gracious, He completes your salvation. I believe we experience that truth in at least two ways. On the one hand, God's grace keeps you as His child forever. Just like your child stays your child forever, in a far greater way, if you've ever become a genuine child of God, you stay that way forever. I love the message found in Rom. 5:1-2 (NLT), "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." Yes, you were saved by grace, but you also stand in grace, live in grace, and exist in grace. On the other hand, God's grace gives eternal life to you as a gift. That began the moment you trusted Jesus, continues today, and will be there and available to you tomorrow and for all eternity. Did you know Jesus guaranteed it? In John 10:28-29, Jesus said, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand." God's grace is as eternal as God Himself.

Let me close today with a remarkable story about God's grace. David and Svea Flood went out to Africa from Sweden as young missionaries in 1921. They were on fire for God. They did pioneer evangelism ministry among a group of people who'd never even heard the name of Jesus. But the Africans they worked with turned out to be hostile toward them instead of thankful for their presence. Soon after the birth of their second child, Svea died. The pain and loss proved too much for David. Why had God failed and forgotten them especially when they'd sacrificed so much for Him? For all their intense ministry effort, they had only one convert and he was a child. David fell into absolute despair and left Africa with his son. He left behind his baby daughter who was too weak to travel. Another missionary couple took her in. They died, also, and she was passed on to yet another missionary couple who ended up raising her in the United States. In the meantime, David, who now lived in Sweden, gave up on God and the church altogether. A second marriage ended in divorce and he began living with a mistress. He thought little about the daughter he hadn't seen since she was a baby.

His daughter, Aggie Flood, thought about him often, however. She learned about the ministry he and her mother began in Africa. After high school, she went to Bible college. She got married and, along with her husband, they served in a variety of full time ministries. But she longed to visit her father and her homeland of Sweden. Finally, she was able to make the trip to Stockholm. She was able to track down her now 73 year old father, David Flood. He was now 73 years old, bedridden, and living in a run down apartment full of empty liquor bottles.

Aggie took her father in her arms and told him she loved him and that God had taken care of her through all those years of separation. Indeed, God had done more than that! Together again in that dirty apartment and sitting on his grimy bed, Aggie told her

father something he didn't know. That little boy who had been converted through his and Svea's ministry had grown up and won his village of 600 people to faith in Jesus. He'd become a great leader in the African church. It was an emotional moment for David Flood. Through his daughter's urging and her love, he recommitted his life to God. There was much joy on that day in that tiny apartment. Neither David nor Aggie could have known that David had only six months to live. He died a trophy of God's marvelous, matchless grace.

God is both merciful and gracious. Which do we need more? God's mercy or God's grace? Truly, we need both equally. Mercy is not getting what I deserve. Grace is getting what I don't deserve. Today, we have the opportunity to acknowledge that fact before God and to ourselves in the sharing of Communion together. Mercy is not getting what I deserve. Grace is getting what I don't deserve. To God be the glory.