

On the Meaning of Mercy

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By William Ryzek



*"Lord, have mercy on us.
Christ, have mercy on us.
Lord, have mercy on us.*

*O Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon me.
O Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon me.
O Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world, grant me your peace."*

Some of you will recognize these as liturgical lines from the worship in many churches, the Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican for example. What fascinates, and spiritually moves me are the constant references to mercy in their services and devotional works (like the Anglican Book of Common Prayer). It is a word I hardly ever hear in more freewheeling, less structured non-denomination churches; grace, forgiveness, love, redemption, salvation and the likes are spoken of in abundance but mercy, not so much. Are we missing something important by neglecting this word and all it means? The many references to mercy in the Bible along with the theology behind the term make me think we are.

There are several Greek words translated as 'mercy' in the Bible. The one we are concerned with in this part of the study is found in Luke 18:9-14 (read the parable for the full impact) and specifically in verse 13:

"But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" (Luke 18:13)

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italics mine NASB)

This parable contrasts the self-righteousness of a Jewish religious leader, a Pharisee, with someone who knows what he really is, a sinner needing the mercy of God.

The Greek word translated 'merciful' in v13 is *hilaskomai* which is used only here and Hebrews 9:5. It means primarily propitiation and as a verb used here is literally 'be propitiated'. It is also used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) where it is translated 'propitiary' (Exodus 25:17

for one example of many) and in the NKJV and NASB it's translated 'mercy-seat'. Both renderings refer to that part of the Ark of the Covenant (the gold covering between the cherubim) where the blood of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement was to be sprinkled thereby covering over the sins of Israel, hence propitiation.

Because Jesus used this word *hilaskomai* for 'mercy' instead of the more common *eleeo* He reveals that propitiation (more on this word later) is the basis for the mercy shown by someone having the authority, the means and the justification to be angry towards and execute judgment against a guilty party. In both the Old and New Covenant God is the offended party, sin is the violation, the sinner is the guilty party, wrath is His attitude towards sin and the sinner, and death the punishment. It is each of us and all of us, the whole human race, who need this mercy, or propitiation. What has changed from the Old to the New are the High Priest and the Sacrifice, Jesus being both in this New Covenant.

The obvious connection between Luke 18:13 and Hebrews 9, and v5 in particular, become profound in light of the Old Testament sacrificial system outlined in Hebrews, but more on this later. For now consider this: the significance, and even the possibility, of 'mercy' designated by any of the other Greek words so translated are based on this one, *hilaskomai*.

Another observation I think is interesting is the use of the article "a" sinner (NKJV) and "the" sinner (NASB) in v13. It is the same article (singular) in both Greek texts, Byzantine for the NKJV and Alexandrian for the NASB yet the translators used different renderings. Rather than trying to decide which one is more accurate, I think both are revealing and both 'correct'. Taking the NKJV first what is emphasized by "a" sinner is the personal aspect of sin. The Publican recognizes that he, personally is a sinner and in need of mercy apart from anyone else. The NASB "the" sinner on the other hand could denote his being one instance of all sinners and requiring mercy; i.e. a sinner among all sinners.

So, even though the article is singular, it could indicate sin ensconced in a single person, or in a person that is part of a single race of persons; i.e. generically. The point is that both renderings apply to the condition of human beings who need propitiation before God.

Note that while the Publican admits his personal culpability in sin and the race of which he is part the Pharisee views everyone but himself as a sinner. This attitude has two fatal components found in Luke 18:9 at the introduction to the parable itself: "And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others

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with contempt." The first is they trust only in themselves and their own worthiness, not God. Since trust is an essential part of faith, to not trust is to be faithless or unfaithful and without faith it is impossible to please God.

The second is having contempt for others who are measured against their own inflated self-worth. The word contempt (NASB and 'despise' NKJV) is to "regard as nothing" or treating people as though they are invisible, insignificant, and anonymous. The word is used again in Luke 23:11

where Jesus Himself, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is treated with contempt and gives us a picture of what it is like.

The point I want to make here is that there are many sins but self-righteousness seems to be at the top of the heap and I think for this reason. You well know that the Ten Commandments have two parts. The first four have to do with God and the rest with other people. Self righteousness breaks all the commandments by first replacing God with the idol of self (1-4) and, second, by treating others as if they don't even exist evidenced by stealing from them, lying to or about them, coveting what they have, destroying their relationships, or murdering them (5-10).

The most dangerous thing about a self-righteous people, and Christians can be very, very self-righteous, is failing to see their need for mercy and, therefore, unable to grant it either. This should give us pause to consider how we treat each other as Christians and how we treat those outside the faith. Is it with mercy or do we just ignore people because we think ourselves so righteous? Something to think about.

Well, the stage is set for our next study. Since propitiation is the underlying meaning of mercy in these verses, we'll 'unpack' this word and its use in other important passages. For now, dear Christian, know that mercy is available to us all when, as did the publican, we humbly admit to the Lord our desperate need.

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