

BODY – BUILDING
“Mercy Is As Mercy Does”

*“May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus,
because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.”*

Pastor and author, Gordon MacDonald tells of a plane flight he and his wife were on once.

They were flying to Boston – seated near the back of the plane. And, as the passengers boarded, he says, a woman with two small children came down the aisle and sat down right in front of him and his wife.

Behind her was another woman.

Well, the two women sat in the window and aisle seats with one of the children between them. The other child sat in the lap of the woman closest to the aisle.

MacDonald figured these must be two mothers travelling together. And, honestly, all he hoped for that day was that the kids wouldn't be too noisy.

Let's just say, he didn't get his wish!

It turned out to be a rather difficult flight.

They hit a lot of turbulence and that made the children cry. Their ears hurt. It was just a miserable experience.

And, MacDonald says he watched as these two women tried their best to comfort the children.

The woman in the window seat played with the child next to her – trying to make her feel better and paying lots of attention to her.

“Boy,” he thought, “these women get a medal for what they are doing.”

But, things continued to go downhill.

Toward the end of the flight, he says, the child in the middle seat got sick.

“The next thing I knew, the child was losing everything from every part of her body. Her diaper wasn’t on tight and, before long, a stench began rising throughout the cabin.”

“It was unbearable!”

“I could see over the top of the seat -- stuff you don’t want me to describe was all over everything. It was on this woman’s clothes. It was all over the seat. It was on the floor.”

“It was one of the most repugnant things I had seen in a long time.”

Well, MacDonald says that he watched as the woman near the window patiently comforted the child and tried her best to clean up the mess and make something good out of a bad situation.

The plane landed. And, when it pulled up to the gate he says that they were all ready to get off as fast as they could.

Just then the flight attendant came up with paper towels and handed them to the woman in the window seat.

“Here, Ma’am,” she said, “these are for your little girl.”

But the woman replied, “This isn’t my little girl.”

“Aren’t you travelling together?” the attendant asked.

“No. I’ve never met this woman and these children before in my life.”

MacDonald said, “Suddenly, I realized I had just seen mercy lived out.”

A lot of us would have just died in this circumstance. This woman found the opportunity to give mercy.”

“She was, in the words of Christ, ‘The person who was the neighbor.’”

Well, mercy can be messy – can’t it?

It can also be inconvenient...

Awkward...

And, just plain costly!

The practice of mercy often takes us out of our comfort zones. It stretches us and sometimes leads us to places where we’d rather not go and into situations we’d rather not face.

And yet, there’s probably no greater need in the Church and in the world today than for just a little more mercy.

Several years ago researchers conducted an experiment at Princeton Seminary in which students were scheduled to give a talk on the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Some of these students were told they were late and had to hurry across campus to make it on time. And, along the way, researchers had hired an “actor” pretending to be in distress.

What they found was that 90% of students...

Divinity students mind you...

90% of the one who were told they were running late ignored the person pretending to be in distress!

In some cases they literally stepped right over him on their way to lecture about being a neighbor to someone in need.

So, what do you do when you see a person with a flat tire by the side of the road...

A mother in a grocery store trying to juggle four kids...

An elderly neighbor whose driveway needs shoveling?

How do you respond when a friend tells you he's been laid off...

When someone you know loses a spouse...

Or someone you sit side by side with in church can't pay their bills?

We can define mercy a lot of different ways.

But, at its core, mercy is simply compassionate action.

That's all it is! It's compassion in action!

Its flesh put to faith!

It's seeing a need – and then meeting a need – all for the sake of Jesus Christ.

It's not the most glamorous of all the Spiritual Gifts.

It's definitely not one of the ones that gets noticed or gets you any press.

But, by and large, it's one of the most needed today!

And, of all the Gifts of the Spirit, it's one each of us can practice to some degree or another – because there's nothing complicated about helping someone in need.

Now, as you might expect, the concept of mercy gets a lot of play in the Bible.

You find it running throughout the Old and New Testaments where we're told – for example – that the Lord our God is a merciful God (Deut 4:31)...

And, Jesus demonstrates what mercy's really all about in His parable of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), where we discover what being a neighbor truly means.

One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture comes from the prophet Micah who says:

And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Again – we tend to complicate things. But, it's really quite simple.

In fact, it's so simple it often gets overlooked!

I mean...

How many of you have ever heard of a man named Onesiphorus before?

C'mon! Be honest!

You may have not ever heard of him. But, Onesiphorus was proof positive that when the chips are down, you really find out who your friends are!

You see, Onesiphorus is singled out by the Apostle Paul for his compassion and mercy when Paul was going through a really rough stretch in his life.

The situation?

Paul's in prison – again! And, this time he's almost certainly facing execution during the reign of the Emperor Nero.

Now, you may remember the Book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28).

And, although the story ends there, tradition has it that Paul was eventually released and resumed his missionary activities – only to be arrested again some time later and ultimately put to death.

Well, it's during this 2nd imprisonment in Rome that Paul writes to his young friend, Timothy.

And, the purpose of Paul's letter is clear! He wants to encourage Timothy and share some final instructions with him. And, the reason Paul does this is because he expects to die! He says so himself!

In 2 Timothy 4:6-7, Paul says:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Paul clearly knows he doesn't have much time left. And so, he writes Timothy to encourage him in his own faith and as a minister of the Gospel.

But, in this letter – which is one of the most personal of all Paul's letters – he also shares something of his own hardships and the difficulties he's faced...

How everyone had abandoned him while he was in prison.

In fact, Paul mentions two people by name – Phygelus and Hermogenes – “one-time disciples,” we suppose, who evidently turned their backs on Paul in his hour of need.

So, the situation Paul found himself in was bleak!

Sitting on Death Row in a dark dank Roman dungeon – without a friend in the world!

And, even Paul might have begun to despair – were it not for this otherwise anonymous man named Onesiphorus.

Now, what little we know about Onesiphorus – and believe me, it is just a little – is found right here in 2 Timothy.

Apparently Onesiphorus was from Ephesus – which is in modern-day Turkey.

And, it seems he'd been extremely helpful to Paul while Paul was visiting there during his 2nd and 3rd missionary journeys.

The two became friends. And, later on, after Paul was arrested this second time, Onesiphorus began to search for him in Rome until he found Paul and began ministering to him.

Now, why is this important?

Well, what we have to understand is that ancient prisons weren't like modern prisons today.

Now, I'm certainly no expert when it comes to being in jail.

I've visited people who were incarcerated. And, while I'm sure being locked-up is no picnic – let's face it -- the basic necessities of life are taken care of.

You get the proverbial “three hot's and a cot!” – not to mention air conditioning, TV and a shower!

But, in Paul's day it was different!

In Paul's day, if you didn't have someone on the “outside” looking after you – bringing you food and clothes and blankets – you did without – because the Romans weren't providing any of that stuff!

In fact, in many places throughout the world that's how it still is today!

You need someone on the outside taking care of your needs on the inside!

Well, this is what Onesiphorus did for Paul – bringing him what he needed as well as providing him with much needed companionship.

You see, Paul had no one else!

No one to supply his physical needs!

But, he also had no one to encourage him and to stand by him during all his trials.

Again, most of Paul's other friends had abandoned him.

Now, we don't know why. But, it's not hard to imagine.

Maybe they just didn't want to be associated with him!

You know – jail carries a certain stigma for some folks. Maybe they were embarrassed.

Then again, maybe persecution against Christians was being ratcheted up and the heat became too much for some of them.

Or, maybe taking care of Paul just grew too inconvenient for them – especially as time dragged on!

It reminds me when I was a freshman in college and we were heading home one night from a soccer game.

The team was riding in two 15 passenger vans.

The coach and some of my teammates were in one van -- while the rest of the team and I were in another van – being driven by one of the players.

Well, the two vans got to racing up I-29 north of St. Joseph, Missouri.

“80 ... 85” miles an hour – which is a really stupid thing to do – especially in a 15 passenger van.

But, we kept “egging” on the guy who was driving to speed it up and not let the coach beat us.

Then, all of a sudden, someone noticed a State Trooper on the other side of the Interstate heading south suddenly cut across the median about a ½ mile back.

Well, apparently the coach saw it too and he took off.

The guy driving our van, however, decided the most prudent thing to do was to slow down and play dumb.

But, eventually that Trooper caught up and pulled us over.

He walked over to the van...

Shined his flashlight in at us.

And, then pointing to the guy who was driving, said, *“I hope somebody else here has a license, because this boy’s going to jail!”*

And, off to jail he went!

But, the really funny thing...

And, the reason I’m sharing it with you now...

Is because after our buddy got arrested suddenly everybody’s attitude suddenly changed! Nobody” wanted to kick in and bail him out!

I mean, it was something like \$100 bucks! But, suddenly the same guys who were urging him to go faster and faster, just turned their backs on him.

It was his problem, they figured!

Nobody wanted to help!

Well, maybe that’s what it was like for Paul there in prison!

Desperate – lonely – cold...

Everybody’d turned their backs on him! It wasn’t their problem!

And then, one day he sees a familiar face at his cell door.

Someone who wasn't ashamed that Paul was in prison...

Someone who wasn't embarrassed to be associated with him...

Someone who knew he needed a friend – someone to stand by him...

Someone who had the gift of mercy!

You know, the great thing about mercy is that it can take so many different forms.

Remember former televangelist and PTL leader Jim Bakker?

Back in the 1980's Jim Bakker was embroiled in a sex-scandal and was later convicted on several counts of fraud and conspiracy and sentenced to prison.

It was a spectacular fall from grace for a man who'd headed a multi-million dollar empire and was noted to have gold-plated faucets in his bathroom and an air-conditioned doghouse for his dog.

Of course, after his conviction when all this came out, Jim Bakker became a pariah, of sorts. Very few people wanted anything to do with him.

But, after his release from prison, he says, he was invited to Billy and Ruth Graham's home for dinner.

Ruth Graham prepared a beautiful dinner. And, Bakker says they just talked and laughed and enjoyed a casual meal together like a family.

Well, sometime during dinner, Ruth Graham apparently asked Jim Bakker a question that required an address.

So, he says, *“I reached into my back pocket and pulled out an envelope. My wallet had been taken when I went to prison. I had not owned a wallet for over four-and-a-half years.”*

“As I fumbled through the envelope,” Ruth asked tenderly, ‘Don’t you have a wallet, Jim?’”

“This is my wallet,” I replied.

Ruth left the room, returning with one of Billy’s wallets.

“Here is a brand-new wallet Billy has never used. I want you to have it,” she said.

Bakker adds, *“I still carry that wallet to this day. Over the years I have met thousands of wonderful Christian men and women, but never anyone more humble, gracious, and in a word, ‘real’ than Ruth Graham and her family.*

That’s mercy!

Ray Pritchard, of *Keep Believing Ministries* shares another example.

Pritchard tells of his secretary – a woman named Gretchen – whom he says had the gift of mercy.

“You could almost see it in her eyes,” he says.

“Gretchen would cry at the drop of a hat because her heart was so tuned to the needs of people. More than once I came out of my office to find her wiping her eyes as she talked on the phone.”

Well, Pritchard goes on to share about when a man unexpectedly died in that church he served.

The fella was only in his late forties and apparently in good health – but had suddenly passed away from a heart-attack.

“Gretchen was crying when she gave me the news,” Pritchard said.

“I went over to comfort the wife and their son as best I could,” he adds. “But it wasn’t easy and I hardly knew what to say.”

“That night,” he adds, “Gretchen packed her suitcase and spent the night with her. Gretchen’s husband had died in an accident some years earlier so she knew what that woman was going through.”

“She stayed with her that night and most of the next day. No one told her to do that. She just did it. What a difference it made. They talked together and wept together and prayed together.”

“Gretchen was there in a moment of great need and that woman knew she wasn’t alone.”

Well, you see, that’s what mercy is! Compassion in action!

Being there for someone in need!

It’s one church member taking another member to the nursing home to see an old friend – as I know some of you have been doing here!

It’s sawing wood and hammering nails and building ramps for disabled people at their homes!

It’s being a friend to someone in jail – sending cards and letters and letting them know they aren’t alone and they aren’t forgotten!

It’s taking a meal over to someone when they’re sick or have just had a baby!

It’s putting your arm around someone you know who’s going through a tough time and praying for them.

It’s all these things and more!

It's being God's Hands – Feet – and His Heart in the world!

Again, it's not very complicated!

And, the thing we have to understand about “this’ gift is that it's not flashy...

It doesn't get a lot of attention or generate a lot of excitement...

And -- with the exception of Mother Teresa -- very few people become famous for helping others!

But, it's the one gift the Church and the world can't do without!

*“Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus says...
“for they will be shown mercy” (Matt. 5:7).*

Now, true -- some may have the gift of mercy more than others.

Some may be attuned to the needs of those who are hurting more than somebody else.

But regardless...

All of us are called to act compassionately when compassion is what's called for.

Some years back a man named Doug Nichols went to India to serve as a missionary.

But, very early on – while he was still learning the language – he came down with tuberculosis and had to be put in a sanitarium.

Sanitariums in India are generally not good places to be.

This particular one wasn't clean and the conditions were difficult because there were so many patients there. But, Doug decided to do the best he could.

So, he took a bunch of Christian literature and Bible tracts with the idea of witnessing to other patients and the staff.

He tried passing out the tracts, but nobody wanted them.

No one would take his books either.

He tried sharing the Gospel – but because he didn't speak the language very well – he got nowhere.

And, it left him feeling defeated and discouraged.

It was a difficult time for Doug.

He was sick and lonely and feeling like an utter failure.

Most of all, he was disappointed that he couldn't share about Jesus.

Well, because of his tuberculosis, Doug would awaken every night at about 2 o'clock with a chronic coughing fit.

On one of these nights, Doug happened to notice an old man in the bed across the aisle.

He said the old man would roll himself into a little ball and teeter back and forth trying to get up the momentum to get up on his feet.

But, he just couldn't do it.

He was too weak.

Finally, after several attempts, the old man laid back down and wept.

The next morning Doug understood why.

The old man had been trying to get up to go to the bathroom, but just didn't have the strength.

So, he ended up going in his bed – making a complete mess and leaving a stench in the air.

Well, the other patients made fun of the old man.

Nurses came to clean up the mess and they weren't very kind to him either.

One nurse even slapped him and all the old man could do was lay there and cry.

Well, Doug says: *“That next night about 2 o'clock I started coughing again.”*

“I looked across the aisle and there was the old man trying to get out of bed once more. I really didn't want to do it, but somehow I managed to get up and I walked across the aisle and I helped the old man up.”

But, he was too weak to walk.

So, Doug said...

“I took him in my arms and carried him like a baby. He was so light that it wasn't a difficult task. I took him into the bathroom, which was nothing more than a dirty hole in the floor, and I stood behind him and cradled him in my arms as he took care of himself.”

“Then I carried him back to his bed and laid him down.”

“As I turned to leave he reached up and grabbed my face and pulled me close and kissed me on the cheek and said what I think was, ‘Thank you.’”

Doug said, *“The next morning there were patients waiting when I awoke and they asked if they could read some of the books and tracts I had brought.”*

“Others had questions about the God I worshiped and His Only Begotten Son who came into the world to die for their sins.”

He says that in the next few weeks he gave out all the literature he had brought and many of the doctors and nurses came to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior too.

Then he adds...

“Now what did I do?”

“I didn’t preach a sermon. I couldn’t even communicate in their language. I didn’t have a great lesson to teach them. I didn’t have wonderful things to offer.”

“All I did was take an old man to the bathroom...”

“And anyone can do that.”

Anyone can do that!

You see, mercy is nothing more than compassion in action.

And, compassionate action in love is what the cross of Jesus Christ is all about!

About God seeing our needs and meeting those needs – including our greatest need of all – which is for forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with Him.

Our part in it all...

(Whether you think you have this particular gift or not...)

Is simply to extend that same kind of mercy...

Out of the Great Mercy that's been shown to us!

Amen.