

A BODY OF DOCTRINAL DIVINITY BY DR. JOHN GILL

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Chapter 14

OF THE MERCY OF GOD

The Mercy of God differs, in some respects; both from the love and grace of God; from the love of God in its objects, and order of operation: in its objects; which, though the same, are regarded under different considerations. Love pitched itself originally on objects, in the pure mass of creatureship, as unfallen, though it continues with them in their fallen state, and through all the imperfections of this life, to eternal happiness; mercy supposes its objects miserable, and so fallen: in order of operation; for though they are together in God, the one as early as the other, yet love seems to work by mercy, and mercy from it; the objects being viewed as dead in sin, and for it, love stirs up mercy to quicken them with Christ, and in themselves; God, “who is rich in mercy, for the great love”, &c. (Eph. 2:4, 5). Mercy also differs from grace; for though all mercy is grace, because it is free, unmerited, undeserved; yet all grace is not mercy: much grace and favour are shown to the elect angels; in the choice of them in Christ; in the preservation of them from the apostasy others of their species fell into; in constituting Christ the head of them, by whose grace they are confirmed in the state in which they were created; and in their being indulged with the presence of God, and communion with him; they always beholding his face in heaven; all which is abundant grace, but not mercy; since they never were miserable, and so not objects of mercy. The things to be considered respecting this attribute, are,

1. The properties of it, which will lead more clearly into its nature, and the knowledge of it.

I. Mercy is natural and essential to God; yea, it is his nature and essence: hence he is often described as “merciful”, (Ex. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 116:5) indeed it is not to be considered as a passion, or affection in God, as it is in men; attended with grief and sorrow, with anguish and anxiety of mind for the party in misery; which become the more vehement, the nearer the relation is, and the stronger the love and affection is, bore to the object. Hence the stoic philosophers denied mercy to belong to good men, and so not to God; and, indeed, it does not, in such sense, unless by an anthropopathy, or speaking after the manner of men; since he is free from all passion and perturbation of mind. The Latin word “Misericordia” signifies, as one observes, having another’s misery at heart; but not a miserable heart, or one made so by the misery of another, especially as applied to God; with whom it is no other than a propensity of his will to help persons in distress, whether in a temporal or

spiritual way; and this is as essential to him as is his goodness; of which it is a branch: and therefore as God is essentially, originally, independently, and underderivatively good, so is he in like manner merciful. This is one of the perfections which are in some measure imitable by creatures; “Be ye merciful as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). The Socinians deny that mercy is essential to God, supposing that mercy and justice are opposite, whereas they are not, not even in men; a man may be just, and yet merciful, merciful and yet just: and not caring to allow justice to be essential to God, which they think they must grant, if mercy is; which would establish the doctrine of Christ’s satisfaction, and make that necessary which they do not choose to embrace. But though mercy is natural and essential to God, it is not naturally and necessarily bore towards, and exercised on every object in misery: for then all would share in it, that are in misery, even all wicked men and devils; whereas it is certain they do not; but it is guided in the exercise of it by the love of God; and is governed and influenced by his sovereign will; who “hath mercy on whom he will have mercy”, (Rom. 9:15, 18) just as omnipotence is essential to God, but is not necessarily put forth to do everything it could; but is directed and guided by the will of God; who does whatsoever he pleases.

2. Mercy being essential to God, or his nature and essence, nothing out of himself can be the cause of it; for then there would be a cause prior to him, the Cause of himself, and that would be god, and not he: the misery of a creature is not the cause of mercy in God; who is not to be moved and wrought upon as creatures are; being a most simple act, and having no passive power to work upon; besides, was this the case, all must partake of mercy, since all are miserable; which they do not; see (Isa. 27:11) nor are the merits of the creature, or works of righteousness, the cause of mercy; these are opposed to each other in the business of salvation, (Titus 3:5) nor are those to whom mercy is shown, more deserving than those to whom it is not; and oftentimes less deserving, or more vile and sinful; see (Rom. 3:9; Eph. 2:3; 1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Tim. 1:13). Nor are even the merits of Christ, or his obedience, sufferings, and death, the cause of mercy in God; for they are the fruits and effects of it, and flow from it; it is “through the tender mercy of our God, that the dayspring from on high hath visited us”, (Luke 1:78) that is, it is owing to mercy, that Christ, who is meant by “the dayspring from on high”, became incarnate, obeyed, suffered, and died, in our room and stead, and wrought out salvation for us. The mercy of God arises from the goodness of his nature, from his special love to his people, and from his sovereign will and pleasure; who, as he loves whom he pleases, and “is gracious to whom he will be gracious”; so “he has mercy on whom he will have mercy” (Ex.

33:19).

3. The mercy of God is infinite; as his nature is infinite, so are each of his attributes. His “understanding is infinite”, (Ps. 147:5) and so his knowledge, wisdom, justice, holiness, and goodness, and likewise his mercy; it is so in its nature, and in its effects; and this appears both by bestowing an infinite good on men, which is Christ, who is the gift of God, and owing to the love, grace, and mercy of God; and who though, as man, is finite; yet, in his divine person, infinite; and as such given, (Isa. 9:6) and by his delivering them from an infinite evil, sin: sin, as an act of the creature, is finite; but objectively, infinite, as it is committed against God, the infinite Being, (Ps. 51:4) and therefore is not only infinite with respect to number, (Job 22:5) but with respect to its object, and also with respect to punishment for it; the demerit of it is eternal death; and this cannot be endured at once, or answered for in a short time; it is carried on “ad infinitum”, without end; and therefore spoken of as everlasting and eternal. Now mercy has provided for the forgiveness of sin, and for the deliverance of men from the punishment of it, and from being liable to it (Heb. 8:12).

4. The mercy of God is eternal; the eternity of mercy is expressed in the same language as the eternity of God himself; and, indeed, since it is his nature, it must be as eternal as he himself is; see (Ps. 90:2, 103:17) it is from everlasting, as his love is; which is to be proved by the instances of it, called his “tender mercies”, which “have been ever of old”, or from everlasting, (Ps. 25:6) the council and covenant of peace were in eternity; in which the scheme of reconciliation to God was formed, and the method of it settled, which supposed them enemies, and so considered them as fallen creatures, and objects of mercy: and, indeed, the covenant of grace, which was from everlasting, is a superstructure of mercy, (Ps. 89:1-3) and since mercy is from everlasting, not anything in time can be the cause of it; not the misery of the creature, by the fall of Adam, nor works of righteousness done after conversion; nor the obedience and sufferings of Christ; things in time: and the mercy of God is to everlasting, in its fruits and effects; it is kept with Christ, and for him, the Mediator of the covenant; into whose hands are put all the promises and blessings of mercy; called, therefore, “the sure mercies of David”, (Ps. 89:24, 28; Isa. 55:3) even temporal blessings, which flow from the mercy of God, are new every morning, and are daily continued; and spiritual ones always remain; the mercy of God never departs from his people, notwithstanding their backslidings; and though he chides them for them, and hides his face from them, yet still he has mercy on them (Ps. 89: 30-33; Isa. 54:6-10; Jer. 3:12,14). Hence,

5. The mercy of God is immutable, as he himself is, and his love also; and

therefore the objects of it are not consumed, (Mai. 3:6) it is invariably the same in every state and condition into which they come; it is, as the Virgin Mary expresses it, “from generation to generation”, without any variation or change (Luke 1:50).

6. It is common to all the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Spirit; for as there is one common undivided essence, of which each equally partakes, the same divine perfections and attributes belong to them, and so this of mercy: mercy is ascribed to the God and Father of Christ, (1 Peter 1:3) and to our Lord Jesus Christ; not only as Man and Mediator, but as the true God and eternal life; to whose mercy we are to look for it, (Jude 1:21) and to the blessed Spirit, who helps the infirmities of the saints, “and makes intercession for them with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26).

7. Mercy is displayed only in and through Christ; God out of Christ is a consuming fire; it is only in him God proclaims his name, “a God gracious and merciful”; he is the mercy seat, and throne of grace, at which men obtain mercy and find grace; he is the channel through which it flows, and through whom it, in its effects, is conveyed to the sons of men: they are right who cast themselves not on the absolute mercy of God out of Christ; but upon his mercy, as displayed in him, as the Publican did (Luke 18:13). In a word, it is represented, as great, large, and ample, and very abundant; we read of a “multitude” of tender mercies; and God is said to be “rich” and “plenteous” in it; as will appear more fully by considering the objects and instances of it (Ps. 103:11, 51:1; 1 Peter 1:3; Eph. 2:4; Ps. 86:5).

II. The objects of mercy may be next observed: and that this may appear in a plain and clear light, it will be proper to remark, that the mercy of God is general and special: with respect to the general mercy of God, all creatures are the objects of it; “the Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works”, (Ps. 145:9) there is not a creature in all the earth but partakes of it; hence says the Psalmist, “The earth, O Lord, is full of thy mercy!” (Ps. 119:64) even the brute creation, the mute animals, share in it; it is owing to mercy that they are preserved in their beings, (Ps. 36:5, 6) and that a provision of food is made for their sustenance; and who sometimes are in great distress, and when they cry to God he gives them their food, (Joel 1:18-20; Ps. 104:27, 28, 147:9; Job 38:41). All men, good and bad, partake of the providential goodness and mercy of God; he is kind to the unthankful and unholy, and makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Luke 6:35; Matthew 5:45). He preserves and supports all men in their beings, and so is the Saviour of all, and especially of them that believe, (1 Tim. 4:10) and gives them the necessaries of life, food and raiment, and all things richly to enjoy, both for convenience and

pleasure: yea, even the devils themselves partake of mercy, in some sense; for though God has not spared them, so as to save them, and not condemn them; yet he has given them a kind of reprieve, and reserved them to the judgment of the great day; so that they are not yet in full torments, as their sins have deserved; and as God punishes none more but less than their sins require, this may be reasonably supposed to be the case of devils, even hereafter.

As to the special mercy of God, none are the objects of that but elect men, who are called “vessels of mercy”, (Rom. 9:23) because they are filled with it, even with all spiritual blessings, which flow from it, and which are bestowed on them according as they are chosen in Christ, (Eph. 1:3, 4) and so particularly regeneration, which is according to the abundant mercy of God, they are favoured with, being the elect of God, (1 Peter 1:2, 3) and these, as they are redeemed by Christ, share in the special mercy and goodness of God; and therefore are under obligation to say, with wonder and thankfulness, “the Lord is good; his mercy endures for ever”, (Ps. 107:1, 2) and especially, being effectually called by the grace of God, they appear to be the objects of mercy; then they who “had not obtained mercy”, did not know their interest in it, nor actually enjoyed the blessings of it, “now have obtained mercy”; are blessed both with knowledge of interest in it, and with the open possession of the blessings of it (1 Peter 2:10). These are described sometimes by them “that call upon” the Lord, to whom he is plenteous in mercy, (Ps. 86:5) by “them that love him, and keep his commandments; to whom he shows his mercy”, (Ex. 20:6; Neh. 1:5; Dan. 9:4) and by them that fear him, and towards whom his mercy always is (Ps. 103:11, 13, 17).

Not that calling upon God, love to him, and observance of his commands, and the fear of him, are the causes of his mercy to them, since that is prior to all these, and is the cause of them; but these describe the persons who openly, and manifestly, share in the mercy of God, and to whom the effects of it have been applied, and who may expect a continuance of it, and larger discoveries and displays thereof to be made unto them; as well as they show that the mercy of God is special and distinguishing, and yet that it is not limited to any family or nation, but is enjoyed by all that love and fear the Lord in every nation (Acts 10:34, 35).

III. The instances of mercy, to the objects of it, are many and various.

I. It appears in election: it is, indeed, a controversy among divines, whether election is an act of love or of mercy: I am inclined to be of the opinion of those who take it to be an act of love, and not mercy; as God chose literal Israel, because he loved them, (Deut. 7:7, 8) so spiritual Israel are first beloved, and then chosen, (2 Thess. 2:13) “electio praesupponit dilectionem”; but then, though the decree of election flows from love, and not mercy;

yet God has in it decreed to show mercy; he has resolved within himself, saying, "I will have mercy, and will save"; and therefore in this decree he has appointed them not unto wrath, which they deserve, but to obtain salvation by Christ; which supposes them fallen creatures, and so objects of mercy; for the decree of election may be distinguished into the decree of the end and the decree of the means: with respect to the end, the glory of God, men were considered as unfallen, in the pure mass out of which God designed to make them for himself: but with respect to the means, redemption by Christ, and faith in him, the Redeemer, and sanctification of the Spirit; here they were considered as fallen creatures; and so, with propriety, those chosen ones may be called vessels of mercy.

2. The covenant of grace is a display of the mercy of God, as before observed; it is built upon mercy, and built up with it; it is stored with it, and is full of it. Mercy called Christ to engage in it, and set him up as the Mediator of it, and came before him with the blessings of goodness: the provisions of Christ, as a Redeemer and Saviour in it; of forgiveness of sins through his blood; and of reconciliation and atonement by his sacrifice; and of regeneration and sanctification by his Spirit, are so many displays of mercy.

3. Redemption itself is a single instance of the mercy of God. Mercy resolved upon the redemption and salvation of the elect; being viewed as fallen in Adam, and as sinners, mercy provided a Redeemer and Saviour of them, and laid their help upon him; mercy called Christ to undertake the work of redemption, and engaged him in it; mercy sent him, in the fulness of time, to visit them, and perform it; mercy delivered him up into the hands of justice and death, in order to obtain it, and it is most illustriously glorified in it; "mercy and truth have met together", (Ps. 85:10) yea, Christ himself, in his love and pity, has redeemed his people (Isa. 63:9).

4. The forgiveness of sin is another instance of the mercy of God, to which it is frequently ascribed (Ps. 51:1; Dan. 9:9; Luke 1:77, 78). God has promised it in covenant, as the effect of his mercy; "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness" (Heb. 8:12). He has set forth Christ, in his purposes, to be the propitiation for the remission of sins; and has sent him, in time, to shed his blood for it, (Rom. 3:25) and it is the mercy of God, which is the foundation of hope of it; and encourages sensible sinners to ask, and through which they obtain it (Ps. 103:8; Luke 18:13; 1 Tim. 1:13).

5. The mercy of God is displayed in regeneration, to which that is ascribed in (1 Peter 1:3) and it is wonderful and special mercy, to quicken a sinner dead in trespasses and sins; to enlighten such that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death; to deliver from the bondage of Satan those, that are led captive by him at his will; to snatch them as brands out of the burning, and

save from everlasting fire; to bring men out of a pit, wherein there was no water, no relief and comfort, and in which they must otherwise die; and to reveal Christ to them, and in them, the hope of glory; and give them a good hope, through grace, of being for ever happy. These are some of the great and good things which God does for his people in the effectual calling, having compassion on them.

6. Complete salvation, and eternal life itself, flow from the mercy of God; he saves, “not by works of righteousness, but according to his mercy”, (Titus 3:5) and when he shall put his people into the full possession of salvation, then they shall find and obtain mercy in that day, even in the day of judgment, when they shall go into life eternal; and therefore are now directed to look unto the mercy of Christ for it, (2 Tim. 1:18; Jude 1:21).