

Chapter 14 – The Mercy of God

Extract from Book I, Chapter 16 A Body Of Doctrinal Divinity, By Dr. John Gill D.D.

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The mercy of God is a most precious and awe-inspiring attribute of His divine nature, distinct in some respects from both His love and His grace. Though they are closely related, mercy differs particularly in its *object* and in its *operation*.

Love is set upon its objects as they exist in the original state of creation—unfallen and pure. Even when these objects fell into sin, divine love did not depart from them. It remained steadfast throughout their imperfections and sorrows, bringing them at last to eternal joy. Mercy, however, takes a different view. It supposes its object to be fallen, miserable, and helpless. It looks upon the creature in distress and acts out of compassionate resolve to bring relief.

Though all these attributes coexist eternally in God, love appears to move first, stirring mercy into action. As it is written:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us... hath quickened us together with Christ...” (Ephesians 2:4–5, KJV).

Mercy is distinct from grace. While every act of mercy is a demonstration of grace—being entirely unmerited and free—not all grace is mercy. The elect angels, for example, were recipients of immense favour. They were chosen in Christ, preserved from apostasy, and made secure in holiness. They are honoured with the continual presence of God, ever beholding His face. This is profound grace, yet not mercy—for mercy applies only where misery exists, and these holy angels were never miserable.

I. The Nature and Properties of Mercy

1. Mercy is Natural and Essential to God

Mercy is not an added emotion stirred by suffering, as in mankind. God is impassible—He does not suffer distress or change. Yet He is called merciful throughout Scripture:

“The LORD God, merciful and gracious...” (Exodus 34:6, KJV)

“But thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful...” (Nehemiah 9:17, KJV)

“Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful” (Psalm 116:5, KJV).

Mercy, then, is not passion but a divine readiness of will to relieve distress. As His goodness is eternal and essential, so too is His mercy. Hence we are commanded:

“Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:36, KJV).

Though the Socinians denied mercy as an essential attribute—fearing it would also necessitate essential justice, and thereby affirm the necessity of Christ’s satisfaction—the Scripture affirms both. Justice and mercy are not at odds, even in man, and certainly not in God.

Yet divine mercy is not indiscriminately extended to every creature in misery. It is governed by God’s sovereign will:

“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (Romans 9:15, KJV).

As omnipotence is essential to God but not exercised in every moment, so mercy belongs essentially to Him but is applied sovereignly.

2. Mercy Has No External Cause

Nothing outside of God can move Him to mercy. To suppose so is to imagine something prior to God—an impossibility. The misery of the creature is not what causes mercy; otherwise, all miserable beings would receive it—which is plainly not the case:

“It is a people of no understanding: therefore he that made them will not have mercy on them” (Isaiah 27:11, KJV).

Nor are good works the cause of mercy:

“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5, KJV).

Even the obedience and sufferings of Christ are not the cause of mercy, but its fruit. His incarnation was not the cause of mercy, but the evidence of it:

“Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us” (Luke 1:78, KJV).

Thus, mercy arises from God’s own nature, His special love for His people, and His sovereign good pleasure:

“I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy” (Exodus 33:19, KJV).

3. Mercy Is Infinite

All of God’s attributes are infinite, for they flow from His infinite being:

“Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite” (Psalm 147:5, KJV).

Mercy is infinite in its nature and in its effects. The greatest gift of mercy is Christ Himself—who, though truly man and therefore finite in His human nature, is also the infinite Son of God:

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given...” (Isaiah 9:6, KJV).

Moreover, sin, though finite in human action, is infinite in its offence, being committed against an infinite God:

“Against thee, thee only, have I sinned...” (Psalm 51:4, KJV).

Mercy, then, has provided a way for the forgiveness of such sin:

“For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness...” (Hebrews 8:12, KJV).

4. Mercy Is Eternal

Because God is eternal, His mercy must also be so. It is written:

“Before the mountains were brought forth... even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (Psalm 90:2, KJV);

“But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting...” (Psalm 103:17, KJV).

His covenant of grace was framed in eternity, and mercy was foundational to it:

“Remember, O LORD, thy tender mercies and thy lovingkindnesses; for they have been ever of old” (Psalm 25:6, KJV).

Even when His people backslide, His mercy is not withdrawn:

“If his children forsake my law... Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him” (Psalm 89:30–33, KJV).

5. Mercy Is Immutable

Just as God changes not, so His mercy is constant:

“For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Malachi 3:6, KJV).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, understood this when she said:

“And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50, KJV).

6. Mercy Belongs to the Triune God

Mercy is common to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is called:

“The Father of mercies” (2 Corinthians 1:3, KJV).

Christ is the visible manifestation of mercy, and the Holy Spirit ministers mercy to the saints through His intercession:

“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities... maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26, KJV).

7. Mercy Is Revealed in Christ Alone

Outside of Christ, God is a consuming fire. But in Him, God reveals Himself as:

“The LORD God, merciful and gracious...” (Exodus 34:6, KJV).

Christ is the true mercy seat, the throne of grace, the channel of divine compassion. Therefore, the penitent sinner cries out with the publican:

“God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13, KJV).

Scripture speaks of the multitude of His tender mercies, and describes Him as rich and plenteous in mercy:

“For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him” (Psalm 103:11, KJV).

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1, KJV).

II. The Objects of Mercy

The mercy of God may be considered under two aspects: general and spe-

cial. His general mercy extends to all His creatures. As it is written, “The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works” (Psalm 145:9, KJV). Even the brute creation is not forgotten. The psalmist affirms, “The earth, O LORD, is full of thy mercy” (Psalm 119:64, KJV).

Not only are animals sustained by divine mercy, but all men also—good and evil alike—partake of it. He “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good” (Matthew 5:45, KJV). Even devils are not yet in full torment but are reserved unto judgment, which may be considered a kind of temporal restraint by mercy.

Yet it is His special mercy that is most wondrous, for it is reserved for the elect—“vessels of mercy” (Romans 9:23, KJV). These are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, and are recipients of the blessings of regeneration, salvation, and adoption.

As the apostle declares: “Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:10, KJV). This mercy is shown to those who love and fear God—not because of their works, but as a sign that mercy has already been applied to them. As it is written, “His mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50, KJV).

III. The Instances of Mercy

1. **Mercy appears in election.** Though election springs from God’s love, it presupposes a plan of mercy. The elect are appointed not unto wrath but unto salvation.

2. **Mercy is evident in the covenant of grace.** It is a covenant built upon mercy, filled with mercy, and administered through mercy.

3. Redemption itself is a glorious manifestation of mercy. “In his love and in his pity he redeemed them” (Isaiah 63:9, KJV). The sending of Christ, His obedience, suffering, and atonement—all proceed from the tender mercy of our God.

4. The forgiveness of sins is an act of mercy. David pleads, “Have mercy upon me, O God... according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies” (Psalm 51:1, KJV). This forgiveness is promised in the covenant: “I will be merciful to their unrighteousness” (Hebrews 8:12, KJV).

5. Regeneration, too, is ascribed to mercy: “According to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope” (1 Peter 1:3, KJV). It is an act of mercy that brings the spiritually dead to life, opens blind eyes, and rescues sinners from the pit.

6. Eternal life flows from divine mercy. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5, KJV). It is to this mercy that believers look, as Jude exhorts: “Looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 1:21, KJV).

