Two Roads Lesson 6: Just Mercy

The Road Less Traveled: Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy. Matthew 5:7

Read: I Samuel 24-26

God is a God of mercy. If you glance at a Bible concordance for the word “mercy” and look up the references, you will see that most of its uses are from those requesting God’s mercy. And we do need it, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23) But God wants us to extend mercy as well. In Hosea 6:6, God tells Hosea: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” The prophet Micah also speaks of God’s desire for us to be merciful: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. 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) We don’t deserve God’s mercy, but He gives it freely. Likewise, we should extend mercy to those who don’t deserve it.

A great example of God’s mercy to man is in the story of the Paul. Prior to the apostle Paul’s ministry, he murdered Christians. He called himself a blasphemer and a violent man, deserving of death for his sins. But God showed him mercy because he acted in ignorance and unbelief. (I Tim. 1:13) He also had abilities God wanted Paul to use in service to God—his focus, tenacity, and endurance. Paul immediately gave up his perceived calling to take on the calling God had for his life upon his recognition of his mistaken ways. As Paul received mercy, he extended mercy to others.

An example of man showing mercy to man is in the story of King Saul’s relentless pursuit of David. King Saul wanted to kill David because he knew David had been anointed King over Israel instead of his son, Jonathan. Saul had been picked by God to be the first King over Israel, but because of Saul’s disobedience, God chose “a man after His own heart” to replace him. (I Sam. 13:14) God anointed David to be king while Saul was still reigning.

Saul’s pursuit of David lasted several years. On two occasions, David had the opportunity to kill Saul. Most of us would think he would have been right to do so. After all, he had already been anointed King over Israel. But through many of David’s Psalms, we find David pleading for God’s aid and mercy for himself against his enemies. But we also find that David places his enemies in God’s hands and asks Him to deal with them. (See Psalms 52, 54, 57, 59) So, when he had the opportunity to kill Saul, he did not take it. He knew God had appointed Saul as King, therefore he felt that God should be the one to end his life: “As surely as the Lord lives, the Lord himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed.” (I Sam. 26:10-11). David showed mercy to Saul as the Lord had shown mercy to David by protecting him.

God has shown each of us mercy in that He sent His son to die so that we might be set free from sin. James writes that we should speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (James 2:13) The law that gives freedom is the law that frees us from sin—the law of Christ. And as Jesus says, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36)

While Christ’s blood keeps us free from sin, most of us aren’t like David, people after God’s own heart. Most of us withhold mercy because we focus on the wrong done to us, or because we think the person doesn’t deserve it, or because we want to get revenge, or because we simply don’t like the other person due to prejudice, envy, or a host of other reasons. Bryan Stevenson, the author of the book, “Just Mercy”, tells his story of defending men on death row who had been wrongly convicted of crimes they didn’t commit. Through his successes and failures, he came to recognize that the accusers of the men he defended were just as broken as the men he defended. He also recognized that we are more than our brokenness:

There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can’t otherwise see; you hear things you can’t otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.” (Stevenson, “Just Mercy”, 2015 Trade Paperback Edition, page 290).

The apostle Paul describes our broken humanity as stored in “jars of clay”. (II Cor. 4:7) Our great God gives us His mercy and His forgiveness so that it will shine through our jars of clay. This is so that we will recognize that the power of mercy and forgiveness is from God and not ourselves.

We are all facing the death penalty, a penalty brought on by Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. Through God’s mercy, He provided a way for us to escape the death penalty and to embrace eternal life with Him. God can turn the pain of our brokenness into purpose for our lives. I can imagine that the apostle Paul had many regrets over his past behavior, but he took God’s energy and turned his pain into the purpose of spreading God’s message.

God extends his mercy to us just as we are. The song “Just As I Am” captures the beauty of this gift. I like Travis Cottrell’s version of the song “Just As I Am,” particularly this verse:

 I come broken to be mended,

I come wounded to be healed,

I come desperate to be rescued,

I come empty to be filled,

I come guilty to be pardoned

by the blood of Christ the Lamb

And I’m welcomed with open arms

Praise God, just as I am.

Mercy paves the way for the road less traveled.