



## Fix Your Focus: Biblical Mercy

### Titus 3:1-7

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This past Wednesday, I saw a number of social media posts circling the interwebs that were naming the importance of kindness. Something about a TV show on Tuesday night where kindness was lacking? I don't know ... anyway, these social media posts proved their point, as many of them received responses that were lacking in the very kindness they proclaimed was lacking. It was irony at its finest.

Truly, kindness seems to be a lost value.

In our *Fix Your Focus* worship series, we are digging deep into the prophet Micah's words of instruction to a nation on the brink of exile. To the people Israel, Micah is offering a warning, if you don't cease and desist your transgressive ways, you will face the wrath of God in an extended period of exile. In the court of creation, the prophet makes clear that God has remained steadfast in offering divine support, but that the people of God have not held up their end of the covenant. They have not remained steadfast in their faithfulness to God, nor in the call to communal shalom with one another.

In the threefold statement of instruction, Micah speaks on behalf of God, offering, "The Lord has told you what is good. Have you not heard? But to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God."

Over the past couple weeks, we have taken a look at the first instruction of *doing justice*. Today, we turn to the second instruction of *loving kindness*. Before we can **love** kindness, we must first ask, what is kindness? What does Micah mean when using this word?

First, let me pick a fight with the translation. I'm not sure *kindness* is the right word.

The word that is translated in Micah 6:8 as *kindness* is the Hebrew word *hesed* (*kheh'-sid*). The word appears in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament nearly 250 times. Of those 250 uses, the word is translated as *mercy* 150 times. It is translated as *kindness*, or *lovingkindness*, about 80 times. It's important to define these terms in our attempt to understand what Micah is instructing.

While it seems that these two words, mercy and kindness, have a common meaning from their relatively interchangeable use for the singular Hebrew word *hesed*, in our modern English vernacular, mercy and kindness do not mean the same thing. Kindness is the word that we use to define that which was lacking last Tuesday – it is, as Merriam-Webster defines, "the quality

or state of being kind.” Helpful, right? ... Having broken the number one rule of defining a word, to not use its root in your definition, we must expand Merriam-Webster’s definition to include some help regarding the word *kind*. Doing so, the definition of kindness then becomes, “the quality or state of being sympathetic or helpful in nature, gentle, or considerate.”

It is perhaps too simple to say that kindness is being “nice;” but in a general sense, the way we speak about kindness today, is akin to being nice. It’s offering support, or comfort, or a general concern for the other.

Mercy, on the other hand, is quite a different word. Turning to Merriam-Webster again, *mercy* is defined as “compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power.” Mercy is not simply a way of relating between *any* two individuals – it is not offering simple niceties from one person to the next – the word *mercy* carries a component of power. The power aspect offers a distinct nuance.

When you scan through the Biblical text, you find this component of power in play when the word *hesed* shows up in the text. Regardless if the translators chose to use the English word “kindness” or “mercy,” there is a power at play in the use of the word *hesed*. For example, Genesis 19:19 reads, “Behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me this great *hesed* (or kindness) in saving my life.” This text shows a servant giving thanks that the one who has power over their life for saving their life. Another example can be found in Judges 8:35, which reads, “And the spies saw a man coming out of the city, and they said to him, ‘Pray, show us the way into the city, and we will deal with *hesed* (or kindly) with you.’” They had power over the man, and could have hurt him had he refused their request. One more example, comes from 2 Samuel 9:27, where King David is speaking to Mephibosheth, one of the prior king, King Saul’s, grandsons, saying, “Do not fear, I will show you *hesed* (or kindness) for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall always eat at my table.” David has power over Mephibosheth, and will deal with him kindly – or with *hesed*.

Because the word carries with it a power-component, the word *hesed* is also used whenever the Biblical text is talking about God’s relationship with humanity, because God has power over humanity. A couple examples include Genesis 39:21, which reads, “The Lord was with Joseph and showed him *hesed* (or steadfast love).” 1 Samuel 20:14 reads, “If I am still alive, show me the *hesed* (or loyal love) of the Lord, that I may not die.”

With our English understanding of the words today, the word *mercy* seems the best English replacement for the Hebrew word *hesed*. There is a power component at play when this word is used that our English words like *kindness* and *love* don’t pick up on.

So, returning to Micah – his second word of instruction in Micah 6:8 offers, in a better translation, “love *mercy*.” The prophet is saying that we are to love when a person of power shows compassion or forbearance toward those whom they hold power over. As the prophet offers in this invitation, this is not a new word of instruction, this is something the Lord has

already instructed us. In fact, it is something the Lord has already displayed for us – it is something God has already offered to us – mercy is part of the very nature of the Triune God.

Though Micah is writing some 650 years before the Incarnation of Christ, and therefore was picking up on God's mercy as displayed in the historical witness of the TORAH and the other prophets, as we reflect back on the witness of God's mercy in the Biblical text, we would be remiss not to look at how God's mercy is displayed throughout our sacred Word – both in the Old and New Testaments.

The story line of our faith – going back to the creation story in Genesis – is one of God's good work, followed by humanity's failure, followed up again by God's mercy in forgiving the sinful creation. It is always God's mercy that provides a new way – a new path – a new life – when we fail. Whether it's Adam and Eve in the garden, failing to be faithful to God, and God having mercy by letting them continue to live, even if it was out of the garden. The Israelites were led out of captivity in Egypt into the wilderness, where they complained against God, saying they'd rather be back in Egypt in slavery than wandering in the wilderness. God showed mercy, providing manna from heaven and water to spring up from the ground to sustain them, ultimately leading them to the promised land. Time and again, God's people Israel lacked faithfulness, and yet, God continued to provide for them. God has always remained steadfast to the covenant that was made with the created humanity, even when humanity did not remain steadfast to the covenant.

The psalmist laments this failure of faith. In Psalm 51, we hear the words of the poet David, as he writes, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new spirit within me."

It is this work of mercy – this work of creating in us a new heart and a new spirit – this work of giving us what we don't deserve – that Paul writes of in our scripture reading today in Titus. Paul is writing this letter to Titus, a student of the apostle, giving him instructions on leading the church. The opening instructions here in chapter 3 are to remind the members of church to be responsive to the civic leaders who govern them. This is not a blanket statement of nationalistic support, but a reminder of there being a proper way to engage in society – specifically as people of Christian faith. These first three verses run together, offering a call to be active, willing, and loyal to a duly constituted authority as healthy members of the greater community. Verse 2 states we are to speak evil of no one, to be gentle, and to show courtesy – to be kind – with one another. And we are to do this, knowing that, as verse 3 states, we too were once foolish, slaves to various passions and pleasures, disobedient, despicable, and hating one another. It seems Paul believes these are likely sins that will be found among others when we are engaging in the greater community. (No truer words have ever been spoken.)

Paul is naming how important our participation is in the greater community, because the witness of such kindness is generally lacking, and it is needed to be on display. And he makes clear, if we are a people of faith in Christ, redeemed by Christ, we should no longer be

exhibiting such malice toward one another – even when engaging with one another from a political perspective. Hate cannot blot out hate, only love can do that.

I think it's also important to name, because this text is often abused by Christian leaders to demand blind allegiance to governmental leaders, that Paul offers in other teachings, "such [governmental] powers are not to be obeyed when they are idolatrously opposed to the Creator."<sup>i</sup>

Picking back up in verse 4, we read, "But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Savior appeared, God saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to the mercy of God, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

God's mercy is on full display – the one who has power over us, the one who Created us, the one who is Lord of all – offers mercy to those who have transgressed God's will.

Mercy is not a *quid pro quo* offering. God's *hesed* is not offered because we have earned it, or given God anything for it. God's graciousness is not granted because of anything we have done to warrant it. It is given because it is the nature of God to be merciful.

Paul continues, saying, "The Spirit, which God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

Of all the ways God had previously offered mercy, what we find in the Incarnation is that Jesus is the mercy of God made flesh. In Christ, through Christ, because of Christ, God's mercy is cast in perpetuity through the faithfulness of the servant Lord.

At Christ's birth, he is proclaimed as the way God will show mercy. Mary sings in the Magnificat, "[God's] mercy is for those who fear Him in every generation ... [God] has come to help His servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Zachariah, having had his voice returned, offers in similar words when speaking of his son, John the Baptist, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Jesus, the Incarnate Lord, comes as an example of and an enacting of God's mercy.

Pope Benedict XVI once offered, "That which is wrong, the reality of evil, cannot simply be ignored; it cannot just be left to stand. It must be dealt with; it must be overcome. Only this counts as true mercy. And the fact that God now confronts evil himself because [humanity] are incapable of doing so – therein lies the 'unconditional' goodness of God."

Mercy is the faithfulness of God to show compassion to us, God's created, when we time and time again fail to be faithful to God. Mercy is God's sacrificial love, that offered an eternal act of forgiveness, acknowledging the persistent failure of humanity, not only in the past, but even in the time to come. Mercy is the undeserved offering of new life, of another chance, of unending support and strength.

This is mercy, and it is this mercy that Micah calls us to love. Next week we will look at what it means for us to love mercy today. What does it mean to have a love for mercy – the gracious withholding of prosecutorial power by those with power? How do we *love* mercy?

Mercy – mercy – it is the cry of broken, and it is the offering of God. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy on me. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Oden. *Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; First and Second Timothy and Titus*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.