

The Gift of Mercy

DAVE BAST

Jesus once articulated a principle we might call measure for measure. He once said: With the measure you use, it will be measured to you. He was talking about the gift of mercy; a gift that will come back to us in the same measure, or amount, that we offer it to others. Let's think about that together on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and this is a series, four parts; it could have been much longer, but we have just chosen to focus on four of what we are calling the unsung virtues or the mundane, down-to-earth gifts of the Spirit; things that don't seem, many of them, like they are gifts at all; like they are somehow inspired by the Spirit like the more spectacular things we read about in the New Testament; but nevertheless, there they are...right there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Kathleen Norris wrote a book some years ago. I think there was a series of lectures that she gave somewhere that then became a small, little book; and the title was: *The Quotidian Mysteries*. Now, quotidian is not an ordinary word, but it means down to earth...quotidian means everyday...

DAVE BAST

Everyday, right, yes; that is a great word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And these are, indeed, everyday virtues that pop up in the course of every day. So, this is the second of the four programs you mentioned, Dave. In our first program, we looked at the gift and virtue...and it is both...of hospitality; and now we are going to look at mercy; and coming up yet in this series are service and generosity.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, maybe it is worth just reemphasizing the point. We have tried to say this before, but the work of the Spirit in us...and this is the Spirit of God...the Spirit of Jesus...we are Trinitarian Christians...we believe that now is the age of the Spirit, when the Spirit does things in and through people; but they are ordinary things very often. They are not necessarily spectacular or supernatural; things that look like they are just sort of ordinary, everyday human qualities of the good person. It is really the Spirit behind that who is at work, and who sort of prompts this kind of behavior.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul talks about that in Romans 12. We looked at a piece of Romans 12 in the first program in this series on hospitality, but now let's listen to these verses from Romans 12, beginning at verse 4, where Paul says: For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,⁵ so in Christ, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.⁶ We have

different gifts according to the grace given to each of us; if your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

It is kind of interesting, that last one, Dave, and mercy is the focus of this program. All the other ones sort of make sense; you know, prophesy, well, if you are going to give prophecy, prophesy well; serve, serve well; teach, teach well; mercy, do it cheerfully.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There must be a reason why he changes it up a little bit on that last one.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we'll think about that, too; but, there it is, a wonderfully mixed gift. So, there are things in this list which every Christian would recognize and say: Wow, yes; you really need the Spirit to do that. To be a great preacher, that is really what prophesying means; you need to be filled with the Spirit to be a great leader, yes, that is a spiritual thing; but serve? You know, give? Show mercy...these more down-to-earth qualities. So, what does it mean to show mercy, or to be merciful? In one sense, I think it is pretty clear, it means to forgive people...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

When they have wronged you or done something to you. Mercy is the opposite of taking revenge.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we remember even the parable of Jesus: The unmerciful servant, which was a parable all about forgiveness. So, blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors. That little word *as*...and it is also just two letters in the original Greek. Neal Plantinga has said that is one of the scariest words in the whole New Testament. My sins being forgiven by God depends a little bit on my forgiving others? Ooh, the stakes are a little high there; but you are right; that is an everyday occasion where we show mercy, and in that sense, Dave, it is the opposite of revenge; which is probably why Paul goes on in Romans 12 to talk about exactly that just a few verses later.

DAVE BAST

¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸If it is possible as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath; for it is written, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary... (and then Paul quotes from Proverbs) "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; in doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The way you overcome evil with good is by being merciful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and of course, we connect it to the fact that that is how God treated us. None of us deserved forgiveness. We had offended God; we had ruined his shalom; we had vandalized his good creation and his peaceable kingdom that he had envisioned. We didn't deserve to be forgiven, but we were, by grace alone because God is merciful. So, go and do likewise. Be merciful yourself; and don't take revenge; that is the opposite. Vengeance can take many forms. It can mean literally going out and hurting somebody, but it can also mean more passive revenge, and that is that you refuse to forgive somebody. They are then stuck. Maybe

they really are repentant even. Maybe they want to be forgiven, but if you won't do it, it is just a way to keep them stuck; and that is revenge, too.

DAVE BAST

It is; and you know, the desire for revenge is strong, and it is not all bad, because somehow we feel when a wrong has been done, especially if it has been done to us, somehow that has to be put right. You cannot just laugh it off and say: Well, it doesn't matter, you know; that's okay; water off a duck's back; yes, you betrayed me; you stabbed me in the back; you stole something I love; you killed my child somehow through your negligence or through your... That isn't right; but here is the principle as Paul articulates it here: Don't worry; God is the one who will put things right in the end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is not that it won't be put to right, just you don't have to do it; trust God to do the right thing. So, right; we are called to be merciful because God is merciful; and principally, of course, that mercy was funneled through and channeled through Jesus and his sacrifice

We read about that in 1 Peter Chapter 2, where Peter writes:

²¹To this you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²"He committed no sin; no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats; instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, because it is by his wounds you have been healed.

So, there it is; the core of the Gospel. Jesus sets you an example.

DAVE BAST

One of the most beautiful expressions of the Gospel anywhere in the New Testament; and so, we forgive...we show mercy...because we trust in the God who judges justly and who also shows mercy to us, and who will put things right; and that is something every Christian has to do. It is not a gift in the sense that it is only for the select few who have been specially favored in this way. To be merciful in this sense is for all of us to strive for and to do; but, why then does Paul list mercy as a special gift of the Spirit? Well, maybe there is more to mercy than forgiveness, and that is what we will think about next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this, our second of four programs on what we are calling the unsung virtues and gifts...they are kind of both in the New Testament. Hospitality in the first program; we are looking at mercy on this one, and we were just saying, Dave, that where does mercy crop up most often, probably in our everyday lives? Sometimes it is in forgiveness, so we looked at that; but mercy also can come up at other times with a little bit...maybe sometimes not so common circumstances.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, I think if you try to unpack the idea of what does it mean to show mercy or to have mercy on another person, you inevitably are led to the idea of helping somebody when they are in need; of treating somebody, not according to what they deserve, but according to what they require. We can all be in that situation. There is a famous story from Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*; this is one of the classic expressions of mercy in all of world literature; but it involves a moneylender named Shylock who asks for a pound of flesh as the security for a loan that he gives; and then when the loan is defaulted on, Shylock insists: I am going to have my pound of flesh. It has kind of become a saying for exacting that legal thing, whatever it may be; and he is urged to have mercy, because mercy is the most beautiful quality. It drops down from heaven; it benefits both the one who receives it and the one who offers it. So, mercy, as we pointed out, means the opposite of seeking revenge or seeking the letter of the law. It means giving somebody a break; and there is a story, supremely, that Jesus told...one of his parables that illustrates the nature of mercy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is in Luke 10, and I think we have looked at the parable before on *Groundwork*, in a parable series. It is the Good Samaritan; and we all...I think many of us know the story very, very well. Some person whom Jesus, in the Greek of Luke 10, just calls *anthropos tis*, which means *some guy*. We don't know who he is...we have no idea who he is, whether he is rich, poor, Jew, gentile, Greek, Roman...some guy was traveling on a road and got mugged bad, and was left for dead. A couple of higher-up folks from the Temple passed by on the other side. They didn't want to help him; they would become ritually unclean if they did, and they were on their way to the Temple, so you couldn't have that; and then finally, of course, the antihero, the Samaritan comes by, and he takes pity on the man; he recognizes the anonymous man in the ditch as a neighbor, and he acts as a neighbor to him, and you know, takes him to a hotel and fixes him up, comes back, pays the bill, cleans up his wounds. So, he showed kindness. So, mercy can also tie in with one of the fruit of the Spirit that we looked at in our fruit of the Spirit series some while back on *Groundwork*, and that is kindness. You are just kind to somebody; not because you know them or because it is a family member or you are obligated in any way other than being a fellow image bearer of God...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, mercy can, in those extreme circumstances, reach out a hand to somebody who is really in dire straits.

DAVE BAST

And the first requirement for exercising the gift of mercy is to notice...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

To see; you don't pass by on the other side of the road like the priest and the Levite in the story. You actually stop and you look, and you become aware of the need of another person; and it is so easy, you know, to keep your nose to the ground and just look straight ahead of you and watch where you are putting your own feet; and you never look out more widely on a world of need...on people who are hurting in some way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, mercy and compassion work the same side of the street, literally, here. How often in the New Testament don't we read: And Jesus lifted up his eyes and saw the crowds...

DAVE BAST

Saw the multitude, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The leper...whoever it was. You start by seeing, that is step one; step two in mercy is empathy. You see the person as not so different from yourself, and you would want a hand if you were in that circumstance, wouldn't you? So, you empathize with the victim.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, I mean, just everyday, ordinary situations. You are driving along the highway and you see a woman standing outside with her car on the side of the road with a flat tire; and you think, oh, that could be my daughter—that could be my wife; or there is an elderly person in your church whose yard needs raking, and you think, well, that could be my mother or my grandmother. So, it is that seeing ordinary, everyday need and then identifying with it and thinking: This is not the stranger; this is not a person...they may not

look like me, but they are a human being and I am in a position to do something to help.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, you see, you empathize, and then you move in and you help. Now, we could probably point out, you know, wisdom also calls for a certain level of prudence. There are some circumstances which we have encountered where our stopping to help might make matters worse...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We might endanger others or ourselves. So, it is not as though, you know, every time you see something you just automatically stop and hop out of your car. I mean, you have to be wise and prudent; but in general, you know, you do what you can, which would genuinely help; and of course, sometimes there are forms of help people offer that actually hinder. So again, you know, you are smart about all of this, but...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the impulse is, that could be me; that could be my grandma; that could be my daughter; and so, do what we can to help. Make the emergency call, stop, do whatever we can, because again, mercy is all about seeing and empathizing and then doing what you can to alleviate some kind of suffering.

DAVE BAST

And it doesn't have to be a big thing. There are creative ways of having mercy on people; as you said, Scott, we do have to use our heads here, too, as well as follow our hearts. There is a wonderful balance, I think, that we all need to strike between head and heart; but I remember visiting...I have a thing about churches, especially old churches; especially cathedrals...and visiting some of the great cathedrals in England, where in the Middle Ages the monks would stand in the choir and chant the offices, or maybe it was an abbey church somewhere. There were seven canonical hours, as you know, during the course of the day, when monks were required to show and pray. The tough ones were in the middle of the night, and in the choir stalls where they would stand, somebody installed little wooden benches that were called *misericords* in Latin, from the Latin word for mercy; and I love that as a small picture of what mercy involves. It is giving somebody a break; it is helping them stand up, you know, when they are tired; it is lending a helping hand. That is what mercy really means.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and again, I love that example, Dave, because it is just a little thing...just a little bench to lean on when you are tired so you don't fall over on a marathon church service for the monks. That is a lovely example of just little things; and that is sort of what God wants to see in us above all. Even in the Old Testament, like in Hosea 6:6, God makes clear: I desire mercy not sacrifice. Even though sacrifices were a big deal in ancient Israel, and they were important, but they didn't mean anything if the person offering the sacrifice wasn't merciful in his or her everyday life; and Jesus certainly exhibited that all over the place in the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; that was one of his favorite verses, and he especially quoted it against the Pharisees, because the Pharisees were people who were very religiously observant. They offered all the sacrifices; they went to the umpteenth point of the law in order to be correct in their sacrifices, but they didn't have mercy on people. They devoured widows' houses, Jesus once said of them. You know, they extracted what people didn't have. They were cruel; they were mean; and God is much more concerned with us being merciful than he is with the punctiliousness of our religious observances.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and again, it is something that we are all called upon to do. It has to be something that is common to all of us, to be merciful; and to do it well is indeed an endowment of the Holy Spirit. So, in conclusion, we will think about a few practical implications of all that, and we will do that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

[0:18:01.5-] You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are thinking about mercy, and how and why to show mercy; and first, Dave, we can think a little bit as we conclude this program about the how of it. The Apostle says to show mercy and then do it cheerfully...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is the only one of the things in Romans 12 that he listed an attitude behind it. I wonder why...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Maybe because sometimes we offer mercy grudgingly...

DAVE BAST

Right.

Scott Hoezee: Maybe it makes us grumpy: I don't really want to forgive that person. It is more fun to stay mad at her. Maybe that is why cheerfulness and attitude counts as much as what you say and do.

DAVE BAST

You know, it is interesting that attitude does matter with these ordinary, everyday gifts that we are talking about; and we saw in the last program, where we talked about the gift of showing hospitality, one of the New Testament passages says: Do it, and don't do it grudgingly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, don't grumble about it.

DAVE BAST

So, don't show mercy grudgingly or in a grumbling spirit either: Oh, I gotta do this. You know, I don't want to, but you know, if I don't I'll get it from God; or something like that. No, we need to have a spirit of gladness, of joy, in reaching out in help to others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, it is nice if you give a homeless person or somebody at your door some money, but if you do it just to make them go away, that is not exactly the heart of love and mercy that God is looking for on the inside; and we shouldn't do it condescendingly or in some way that calls attention to ourselves for having done it. All of those are attitudes that can kind of curdle the milk of human kindness here.

DAVE BAST

Here, my little man; accept this gift of benefaction from me! There is a verse in Romans 12...we read a good chunk of Romans 12 earlier in the program, but we didn't read verse 3, where Paul introduces this whole thing about the gifts by saying: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So when we show mercy to people, it is not like, oh, this is such a big deal. I am being so good. I am so great in doing this for you. Aren't I amazing? Instead we should think this is not such a big deal. I am nobody important. I can easily do this for you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me of a character in a Dickens novel, I think *Martin Chuzzlewit**, a man named Pecksniff, who was always forgiving people, all over the place, but he always did it to make them feel bad. He would forgive people who didn't need to be: I forgive you; and the idea was, because you deserved to be forgiven because you are a rotten person. That is not exactly what Jesus wants us to do; and indeed, Jesus talks in the New Testament about what we could call good momentum—getting things going the right way; that measure for measure idea, Dave, that you mentioned at the top of the program, and you read that in Luke 6, where Jesus says:

³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. ³⁸Give, and it will be given to you: a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

DAVE BAST

I love that image there that Jesus uses of grain that has been harvested, and it has been winnowed so the chaff has been removed; and then, how much are you going to get? And you could hold up a little container, or maybe you hold out your cloak or something, and a little bit of grain is poured in; but Jesus says if you are a merciful kind of person—if you are a generous kind of person—if you are a hospitable kind of person, you are going to get a whole bunch. I mean, they are going to open the sluice gate and the grain is just going to pour out, and they are going to pack it down so that you take it home with you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You almost wonder if Jesus in this case was thinking about one of his great, great, great, great, great grandmothers, Ruth. We did a series on the book of Ruth, where Boaz was generous to Ruth and gave her, not just the grain that she gleaned, but he made sure she went home with a bushel basket full of grain. That was the measure that Boaz gave to Ruth, and Boaz got plenty in return, in that story and ultimately in history, becoming a great, great grandfather of Jesus himself. So, Jesus might have been thinking about the story of Ruth and the generosity of literal grain in that story.

DAVE BAST

So, if Jesus is right here, and I don't think either one of us would want to try to contradict Jesus, either here or anywhere else, you kind of get what you give; and that is the way God operates. It seems really quite fair in a sense. We talked earlier about forgive one another as we have been forgiven...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You know, that line from the Lord's Prayer; and it is only right and fair. If you have a spirit that is so harsh toward others...if you are so severe...if you are so judgmental that you just won't forgive someone because it wouldn't be right, you know, they would get away... Well then, maybe that is how God will choose to treat you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this doesn't mean...let's point out something theologically important, maybe it is obvious...but this doesn't mean that we are saved by what we do. No, we are saved by grace alone; but as is so often true in the New Testament, Dave, in the words of Jesus, but also all over the place in Paul, doing this, being merciful, forgiving as we have been forgiven...it is not about earning our salvation, it is about showing that, in the grand scheme of things, we get it. We get it! This is how God operates, and he has left us an example. By *not* living that way, it kind of shows we don't get it. Again, it is that parable of the unmerciful servant. He had been forgiven a million-dollar debt, and on his way home right after that happened, he threw somebody in jail for fifty cents that he owed him. He didn't get it. So, we show that we get it; that grace is where we live; mercy is our very life; and our doing likewise just shows that we understand that.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; so, if you have ever needed a helping hand, if you have ever needed to have an apology accepted, if you have ever needed a loan, if you have ever needed any kind of help in any way, the truth is, in life we will get what we ask for; and what we are asking for is what we are already giving to others. So, think about that the next time you see somebody by the side of the road.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We hope you will join us again next time as we discuss the spiritual gift of service. Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com. Share what *Groundwork* means to you. Tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

***Correction:** The audio of this program misstates the common title of Charles Dicken's novel as Matthew Chuzzlewit. The correct common title is *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which is shortened from its full title *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*.

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