

Ash Wed 2020 – Feb 26 – Our God is... Merciful

Pick one of your family members or friends. Think of some of the things (characteristics) about them. Besides their personality, you might think of some things like their height, their hair, their style, the things they are good at, etc. As we list those, see how often the characteristics we have aren't essential. You might lose your hair; some of you have. But your hair doesn't make you who you are. You can lose it, or cut it, or color it. It's not essential to your identity or your existence. You may have run fast when you were 17. I ran sprints then. But several years back we set a distance on the church field. The rest of the family watched on. Simeon and I ran. He finished first. (Only by a little!) I've lost some speed. You might feel, as you age, that you've lost some of your looks. Wives, this is a good time to give your husband a little nod indicating "Yep, you have hubby." Husbands, just smile. Good natured ribbing is healthy in a relationship. Then, deeper than having a little fun with that fact, let it sink in: it's true that you have lost some youth, or some hair, or some ability, but that doesn't define you – it doesn't change who you are. Husbands, now would be a good time to lean over to your wife and let her know: her beauty has changed too, because it has only increased through the years. And if you mean it not as mere flattery but as how you truly feel, then though you've lost other qualities as you've aged, you've gained some wisdom along the way.

We, people, have many characteristics that are non-essential – they can change; they can be lost. They don't define you. You are still *you* with or without them.

God is different. His characteristics / His attributes are essential. He is holy. You cannot take that attribute away. If you did, He would cease to be God. His attributes define Him. He is eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful. His attributes are who He is.

So as we meditate these evenings of Lent, let's marvel at just how awesome of a thing we have our eyes set upon as we dive into His characteristics. Today we get to see how... **"Our God is... Merciful."** [Bible verse- EHV Exodus 34:6-7]

5/6th. What do you think? If you're talking about completion percentage for a Quarter back, that's over 83%. Awesome. (That's never been achieved for a season in the NFL – Drew Brees has come closest 74.4%.) If your Hitting percentage in volleyball or batting average in baseball/softball is .833 - 5 out of every 6 times a hit or 5 out of every 6 points scored for your team, that's awesome. Right? If you get 5/6th of the history facts correct for the test, how did you do? You're not in the A range, but depending on the grade scale you're average or above, and you're not anywhere near failing.

Now make the jump. How about when we come to what someone holds to be true about God? You might know and believe God is eternal [BV Habben slides]: always existed, always will. Check. He is holy [BV]: no sin; no flaws. Check. [BV] He is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present. There is nothing beyond His ability, nothing He doesn't know, and you can't go anywhere to escape Him. Check, check, check.

But knowing accurately 5/6th of the characteristics about God doesn't always mean you know God at all. If God's *mercy* is missing, if one doesn't have the truth of what His mercy is – what God in His mercy does –, a person may have the other 5 out of 6 of the characteristics about God correct that we are going to talk about in this Lenten season, but still not know God. Let that sink in.

An example. Someone may know correctly God is holy, but if he / she thinks the solution to sins is to do a lot of good things in order to win God's favor back, does that individual know God? [Gal.5:4] They only have a false god then.

So we see tonight the essential nature of God's mercy. And we see how if you and I would not know His mercy, we would not have God at all. So say an "Alleluia!" that He has brought us to know Who He is & what He – in His mercy – has done to save us. [insert "mercy" Bible verse] It took His mercy.

Even someone who states correctly God is *loving* [BV] may not really have God at all. Again, let that really sink in. Someone may have correct the concept that God must be loving, and yet still not know who the True God is (or believe in what God has done to save us).

Let me give you an example. I heard recently the interview of an elite, present-day NFL player. And I don't want your mind to get sidetracked by who it is. (If you want to know, ask me after the service.) I'm mentioning the individual's superstar status only so that we grasp: a lot of people are hearing this kind of a description and message. The YouTube promo clip for his blog interview has over half a million views. If you catch the interview sometime, when they talk religion, you'll hear a lot that is an attempt to express Christianity's view. But the individual's description isn't accurate. What comes out of all that is: he dismisses the need for Jesus and faith in Jesus. He sadly doesn't know God [BV John 5:23b]. With that wider backdrop, here's his words I want you to chew on. He said:

"I don't know how you can believe in a God who (would) condemn most of the planet to a fiery hell. What type of loving, sensitive, omnipresent, omnipotent being wants to condemn most of his beautiful creation (referring to people) to a fiery hell at the end of all this?"

So what do you see mentioned here that is true as far as characteristics of God? Is God loving? Yes. Sensitive, compassionate? Yes. God is omnipresent and omnipotent too. And, The Lord doesn't take any delight in condemning people to hell [BV]. He doesn't 'want to' 'condemn most of his beautiful creation to a fiery hell at the end of all this.' Right?

So would He? Jesus is the one who said: "wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it" (Matthew 7:13). Will it happen that *many* will be condemned? That's God's truth.

And it is possible for *that truth* of God to stand, and for God to also be loving. Another clear truth of God. The one truth does not negate the other.

This NFL player is undoubtedly not alone in experiencing a struggle in meshing – bringing together – a God who loves with the truth that He must punish sin also. But let's look to God for the answer. There is an answer. But we can't make up our own. We end up making a god of our own fashioning if we do that. But look: Our God has an answer. Our God is the answer.

People's struggle in some cases doesn't seem to be as much about denying *what's true about us*. Say a person admits their wrongs. But the person thinks God is going to somehow welcome them to His presence in eternity without any need for sin to be dealt with, without a need for the punishment/penalty to be paid.

What's the issue? Why doesn't that work? It's a denial of one of God's characteristics. Absolute justice is also God's character. That means: he can't sweep sin under a rug. He still sees it. He must address it.

And going at it directly from the topic tonight, that would also really be a redefining – or defining away – of what *mercy truly is*. Even those who think of God as "merciful" or "loving" may be all mixed up in reality and not really have "mercy" correct at all.

The problem of trying to have – make a claim or demand for – "mercy" while ignoring God's justice is... you remove the need for Jesus' work. Here's one definition you'll see used for mercy [pp]: Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Yes, that's true! Anndddd... how is it possible for God to extend that to us and have His justice still upheld? Someone had to take our punishment – take our place to make payment for our sin.

Mercy always comes at a cost... The recipient is given what He doesn't deserve. But the only way that is possible is the giver must sacrifice something or suffer some loss. Is it sacrificing the time to come to one's aid? Is it paying the expense to repair / remove the damage the other one caused? That's mercy. And the greatest ever is God's. The greatest ever is Jesus.

In this Lenten Season we'll again hear Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. [BV] You'll notice, He never asked for the Father to give up His character. He asked if there was a way possible for God's justice to be upheld without having to suffer what He knew was ahead for Him. But He prayed: Your will be done. He did not request Justice to be side-stepped. God can't do that. Just defines who He is, just as much as Love defines Him. The answer to how those two can be brought together, in reply to the plight of us sinners is: His mercy.

And we see that right here: [show cross visual, with Holy & Loving / Just & Merciful intersecting]

We heard Him tonight say, “The Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (26:2). He didn’t deserve the punishment He went on to face. But He willingly went on to take it. Why? Mercy. In order for us to not get what we deserved, He took what we deserved for our sin. He stood in our place. He took God’s just punishment of hell that our sins deserved.

And so He can give – gift – us what we don’t deserve. And He does gift forgiveness, a right standing and life in heaven to all who trust: His work in my place is my only Way to God. Thanks you Jesus for your mercy!

Treasure the truth: Our God is Merciful.

- Psalm 130 “O Lord, let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness. Therefore, you are feared (trusted/honored).”
- Lamentations 3:21-23 “This is the reason for my hope. By the mercies of the Lord we are not consumed, for his compassions do not fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.”
- Micah 7:18-19 “Who is a God like you? ... You delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”
- Psalm 103:11-14 “Yes, as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him. As distant as the East is from the West so far has He removed our sin from us.”

Mercy... High as the heavens, wide as the skies, huge as the mountains, deep as the sea – these comparisons give us a glimpse toward (but who could fully understand) the greatness of God’s mercy. It is immeasurable.

And think of what this means for all aspects of your life:

“He acts in mercy to rescue us from our wretched plight as captives to sin, death, and hell; as well as He acts day by day in the same mercy to preserve our life and rescue us from a thousand perils, even perils we are not aware of.” (Grace Abounds, p.113)

So when things change in your life – your health, your abilities, etc – know one thing won’t change. God won’t change. His Mercy is at work for you – in all circumstances, at all times. Dear Christian, say: Alleluia! Amen.