

*MINISTRIES*  
*of* **MERCY**

*THE CALL OF THE JERICHO ROAD*

*Second Edition*

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P U B L I S H I N G  
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**PART 1**  
**PRINCIPLES**

## CHAPTER 1

# THE CALL TO MERCY

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29).

*Overview: Mercy to the full range of human needs is such an essential mark of being a Christian that it can be used as a test of true faith. Mercy is not optional or an addition to being a Christian. Rather, a life poured out in deeds of mercy is the inevitable sign of true faith.*

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### THE ESSENCE OF LOVE

The expert in the law came “to test” Jesus—to trap him (Luke 10:25). He was probably trying to get Jesus to say something negative about the law or to minimize its role in salvation. Jesus, on the other hand, is laying his own trap for the man, but his trap is a trap of love.

Our Lord asked the man for a summary of the Law, and he replied by articulating what many Jewish scribes and teachers believed, that all the rules of the Law hung on two principles. First, the Law requires a heart and mind totally submitted to and absorbed in God alone (Deut. 6:5). Second, it requires that we must meet the needs of others, with all the speed, the eagerness, the energy, and the *joy* with which we meet our own (Lev. 19:18). How staggering these principles are! They reflect both the holiness of God and the

fundamental debt we owe the one who gave us everything. Since he gave us all we have, we must give him all we are.

When the law expert provided this summary of perfect love and righteousness, Jesus replied: "Do this and you will live." What was Jesus' strategy? Why did he not say, "Receive me as your personal Savior" or something to that effect? Was he suggesting to the man that the way of salvation was by the performance of good deeds? No, not at all.

Instead, he had turned the tables on the law expert. When we look at the regulations of the Old Testament individually, we see many that are possible to keep. But if we look at the principles beneath the particulars and at the kind of life that the law is really *after*, then we see how we fail utterly to reach it. Jesus is pointing him to the perfect righteousness the Law demanded so that he could see he is powerless to fulfill it. He was seeking to convict the law expert of sin. Jesus says in effect:

My friend, I *do* take the law seriously, even more seriously than you do. Yes, you can be accepted by God if you obey the law perfectly, but *look* at the law! See what it is really after. If you can do that, you will live. But if you see clearly, you will realize that the righteous requirement of the Law must be fulfilled in some other way.

Jesus had the same purpose in his confrontation with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22). He was seeking conviction of sin, even as he "looked at him and loved him."

You know the commandments: "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother." "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth (Mark 10:19–22).

The rich young ruler claimed to have been obedient to the Law, until Jesus called him to give up all his riches and follow him. That was nothing more than an exposition of the first commandment. Jesus was asking: "Are you willing to lose *everything* if it is necessary to gain my fellowship? Will you truly have 'no other gods before me'?" The rich young ruler left in sorrow. Was Jesus being heavy-handed, unnecessarily demanding? No, not at all. The gospel is the gospel of the *kingdom*, and unless we give our hearts to Jesus as king, we have not given them at all. The ministry of mercy is expensive,

and our willingness to carry it out is a critical sign of our submission to the lordship of Christ.

### THE RICHES AND POVERTY OF GOD

So here too, in Luke 10, we see Jesus is seeking to bring the law expert to despair of any salvation through his own personal efforts. This time, however, he expounds the second great commandment, rather than the first. Why does Jesus find it necessary to do this? Because, to receive the mercy of God, we must all come first to the place where we despair of our own moral efforts. Nathan Cole, a Connecticut farmer converted in the 1740s, put it clearly when describing what happened to him under the preaching of George Whitefield. “. . . my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. By God’s blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.”<sup>1</sup>

The law expert should have responded in the same way. If he had said, “I see! How then can anyone be righteous before God?”, then Jesus could have replied, “only through the mercy of God.” And the mercy of God is simply this. We must see that all of us are spiritually poor and bankrupt before God (Matt. 5:3), and even when we put on our best moral efforts for God, we appear as beggars clothed in filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). Yet in Jesus Christ, God provided a righteousness for us (Rom. 3:21–22), a wealth straight from the account of the Son of God, who impoverished himself through suffering and death that we might receive it (2 Cor. 8:9).

No one understood this more clearly than John Bunyan, who described his conversion in these terms:

But one day . . . this sentence fell upon my soul, “Thy righteousness is in heaven”; and methought withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God’s right hand; there, I say, as my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say to me “He wants my righteousness,” for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, “the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. . . . Oh! methought, Christ! Christ! there was nothing but Christ that was before my eyes. . . . Now I could look from myself to him, and would reckon that all those graces of God that now were green on me, were yet but like those cracked groats and four-pence-half-pennies that rich men carry

in their purses, when their gold is in their trunks at home: Oh! I saw my gold was in my trunk at home! In Christ my Lord and Saviour. Now Christ was all; all my righteousness, all my sanctification, and all my redemption.<sup>2</sup>

But the law expert resisted our Lord. He did not want to acknowledge that he was poor, spiritually bankrupt. It is clear that he felt the pressure of Jesus' argument, for soon we see him attempting "to justify himself" by asking, "who is my neighbor?"

What was he trying to do? He wanted Jesus to define the second commandment in such a way as to make its requirements reachable. Jesus responds with a parable that expounds the second great commandment. He shows us the extent and the essence of the love God requires.

We must remember this entire context of the parable of the Good Samaritan, or we can fall easily into the trap of moralism. Jesus is not telling us that we can be *saved* by imitating the Good Samaritan, even though he is clearly charging us to follow his pattern. Rather, Jesus is seeking to humble us with the love God *requires*, so we will be willing to receive the love God *offers*.

### MERCY IS NOT OPTIONAL

The parable describes a Samaritan who came upon a Jew who had been beaten and robbed. The Samaritan provided physical protection (from a new attack), medical help, transportation, and a financial subsidy. In short, he met his full range of physical and economic needs. The law expert called all of this activity the work of "mercy" (v. 37). This story can only have its fullest impact if we remember its purpose. Jesus' parable has been saved for a description of Christian love to our neighbor. Jesus' reply is to show us a man performing what many today call "social work."

Evangelical Christians today are by no means against helping the needy and hurting. Yet "social relief work" is generally looked at as a secondary duty. It is something we get to if there is time and money in the budget, after we are satisfied with our educational and evangelistic ministries.

This parable shatters that set of priorities. *Jesus uses the work of mercy to show us the essence of the righteousness God requires in our relationships.* By no means is this an isolated example. In James 2:15–16 and 1 John 3:17–18 Christians are charged to meet physical and economic needs among the brethren. This is not optional. If a

professing Christian does not do so, "how can the love of God be in him?" The striking truth is that the work of mercy is fundamental to being a Christian.

### **MERCY IS A TEST**

Both James and John also use the ministry of mercy as a test. The apostle John writes his first epistle to set forth the test by which a genuine Christian can be known. One of the tests of Christian love is the ministry of mercy. Christian fellowship must be characterized by the meeting of physical needs. "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18). Real love is expressed in deed as well as in word.

James concludes that a profession of faith unaccompanied by deeds of mercy shows that faith to be "dead," not genuine at all.

Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:13-17).

In Proverbs 14:31 and 19:17 we are told that to ignore the needs of a poor man is to sin against the Lord. So the poor and needy are a test. Our response to them tests the genuineness of our faith toward God.

No passage is clearer at this point than Matthew 25:31-46. This describes Jesus' examination of mankind on Judgment Day. He distinguishes those who have true faith from those who do not by examining their fruit, namely, their concern for the poor, homeless, sick, and prisoners. How can this be? Jesus, when he says, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me," is merely expanding on Proverbs 19:17 ("He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD"). He is also agreeing with James, John, and Isaiah (cf. Isa. 1:10-17) in saying that a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of mercy to the needy is the inevitable outcome and sign of true faith. By such deeds God can judge true love from lip service.

Imagine a wealthy older woman who has no heirs except a

nephew who is always kind to her. But how can she know if his kindness is just a façade? How can she know what his heart is really like? Imagine that she dresses up as a homeless street person and sits on the steps of her nephew's townhouse, and when he comes out he curses and threatens her. Now she knows his true character! So too, God is angry when we have one face for him and another for the needy. "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. . . . Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isa. 1:15, 17). So too, Jesus can say in effect, "I am the homeless person on your steps—how you treat her tells me what you are really like."

A great preacher, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, commented on Matthew 25 to his congregation nearly 150 years ago:

I fear there are some Christians among you to whom Christ can say no such thing ["Come thou blessed . . . inherit the kingdom" in Matt. 25:34]. Your haughty dwelling rises in the midst of thousands who have scarce a fire to warm themselves at, and have but little clothing to keep out the biting frost; and yet you never darkened their door. You heave a sigh, perhaps, at a distance; but you do not visit them. Ah! my dear friend! I am concerned for the poor but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in the great day. . . . I fear there are many hearing me who may know [now] well that they are not Christians, because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudging at all, requires a new heart; an old heart would rather part with its life-blood than its money. Oh my friends! enjoy your money; make the most of it; give none away; enjoy it quickly for I can tell you, you will be beggars throughout eternity.<sup>3</sup>

## **MERCY IS NOT NEW**

The Bible's teaching on the ministry of mercy does not begin with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Man's first "mission" was to subdue and have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). Genesis 2:15 restates this commission in terms of "tending and keeping" the garden of God. The concept of man as a gardener is highly suggestive: a gardener does not destroy nature, nor leave it as it is. He cultivates and develops it, enhancing its beauty, usefulness, and fruitfulness. So God expects his servants to bring all creation under his lordship. Science, engineering, art, education, government are all part of this responsibility. We are to bring every dimension of life, both spiritual and material, under the rule and law of God.



Obviously, there was no “ministry of mercy” *per se* before the Fall of man, since there was no human suffering or need. But it is clear that God’s servants at that time were as concerned with the material-physical world as with the spiritual.

After the Fall, the effects of sin immediately caused the fragmentation of man’s relationships. Man becomes alienated from God (Gen. 3:10). As a result his relationship with other human beings is shattered (vv. 12–13), and so is his relationship with nature itself (vv. 17–18). Now sickness, hunger, natural disaster, social injustice, and death dominate.

The first act of mercy ministry immediately follows the Fall: God clothes Adam and Eve with animal skins (Gen. 3:21). Many have pointed out that this action represents the covering of our sins by the work of Christ, but that is surely not the only reason for God’s action. Man now needs protection from a hostile environment. By God’s action, Derek Kidner says, “Social action could not have had an earlier or more exalted inauguration.”<sup>4</sup>

Even before the giving of the law to Moses, God made his will known concerning the ministry of mercy. Job, who lived in an early pre-Mosaic age, knew that the righteousness God requires includes providing food, shelter, and clothing to the needy (Job 24:1–21; 31:16–23). In fact, Job tells us that he did more than simple social service. “I was a father to the needy; I took up the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth” (29:16–17).

When God gave the law to Moses, he was constructing a believing community in which social righteousness was as required as personal righteousness and morality. Individual Israelites were forbidden to harvest all their produce, so the poor could glean from the fields for free (Ex. 23:10–11). Israelites were told to give to the poor until his need was gone (Deut. 15:8, 10), especially if the poor man was a kinsman or a neighbor (Lev. 25:25, 35–38). The priests gave to the poor out of the tithes to God (Deut. 14:28–29).

God’s law required that the poor be given more than just a “handout.” When a slave was freed from debt and servitude, he was not to leave empty-handed, but had to be given grain or livestock so that he could become economically self-sufficient (Deut. 15:12–15).

These laws given to Moses were the basis for the thundering of the later prophets, who denounced Israel’s insensitivity to the poor as breaking covenant with God. They taught that materialism and the ignoring of the poor’s plight are sins as repugnant as idolatry and adultery (Amos 2:6–7). Mercy to the poor is an evidence of true heart

commitment to God (Isa. 1:10–17; 58:6–7; Amos 4:1–6; 5:21–24). Finally, the prophets predicted that the Messiah, when he came, would be characterized by mercy to the poor (Isa. 11:1–4; 61:1–2).

### THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR

Jesus chose Isaiah 61 as the text for his first sermon. To prove he is the Messiah, he points out that he preaches to the poor (Matt. 11:1–6). Our Lord, in becoming a human, literally “moved in” with the poor (2 Cor. 8:9). He was born into a family that at his circumcision offered pigeons (Luke 2:24; Lev. 12:8), the offering prescribed for the poorest families. Jesus lived with, ate with, and associated with lepers and outcasts, the lowest classes of society. He taught that all humans are spiritually bankrupt (Matt. 5:3) and are spiritually in rags before God (Isa. 64:6). Because he gives his salvation riches to the spiritually poor, so we should do good to the wicked and the ungrateful, even to our enemies.

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:35–36).

We see the words of Jesus and the prophets reflected in the teaching and practice of the early church. Christians are to open their hands to their brother as far as there is need (cf. 1 John 3:16–17 with Deut. 15:7–8). In the church, wealth is to be shared so generously that much of the economic distance between rich and poor diminishes (cf. 2 Cor. 8:13–15 with Lev. 25). James (2:1–23) follows the prophets and the Lord in teaching that true faith will inevitably show itself through deeds of mercy (Isa. 1:10–17).

Christians are charged to remember the poor (Gal. 2:10) and widows and orphans (James 1:27), to practice hospitality to strangers (Heb. 13:2), and to denounce materialism (1 Tim. 6:17–19). Although believers are to give their first and greatest aid to the needy within the church, mercy must also be shown to all people (Gal. 6:10). All of these teachings are direct echoes of the Old Testament revelation.

Not only do all believers have these responsibilities, but a special class of officers—deacons—is established to coordinate the church’s ministry of mercy. This shows that mercy is a mandated work of the church, just as are the ministry of the Word and discipline (cf. Rom. 15:23–29).

## CHRIST, OUR MODEL

How can we draw into sharp focus all the teaching of the Bible concerning the ministry of mercy? By looking at Jesus Christ! First, he is the true Adam (Rom. 5:14–21) who is subduing all creation to God (Heb. 2:5–8; Eph. 1:10). Second, he is the true High Priest (Heb. 4:14–16) who can give mercy to all in need. Third, he is the great Deacon (Rom. 15:8) who identifies with the poor (2 Cor. 8:9) and pours himself out in costly service (Mark 10:45).

Because we are united to Christ, every believer is a deacon, who is to wash the feet of others in humble service (Matt. 20:26–28; Gal. 6:10). Every believer is also a royal priest, whose sacrifices to God include deeds of mercy (Heb. 13:13–16). Christians are also now a “new Adam,” seeking to bring all creation into subjection to the Lord (Matt. 28:18–20; 2 Cor. 10:5).

## CONCLUSION

During the past two decades, Christians have been exposed more and more to the biblical teaching that every believer is a minister. Although most Christians are not polished preachers and apologists, yet every Christian is to be a witness. Although most Christians are not skilled psychologists and counselors, yet every Christian is to be a people-helper. Sermons, seminars, and books have been pounding these concepts into our consciousness for years.

However, in at least one realm, the ministry of mercy, laypeople are still consigning ministry to the “experts.” In fact, the church herself has almost completely conceded this work to secular agencies and authorities. Many Christians cannot clearly define this duty, though they may have good understandings of the ministries of evangelism, education, worship, teaching, and fellowship.

Most of us have not come to grips with the clear directive of Scripture that *all* Christians must have their own ministry of mercy. We must each be actively engaged in it ourselves.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways does our mercy to the needy reflect the love of Christ?
2. Before we are able to give mercy, what needs to happen in our lives? Do you see where change in your own life is needed? Describe that.

3. On what scriptural bases (Old or New Testament) is the necessity of mercy established?
4. Why is it that we tend to think of mercy as an option?
5. In what ways is Christ our model for mercy?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nathan Cole, "Spiritual Travels," *William and Mary Quarterly* 7 (1950): 591.

<sup>2</sup>John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. John P. Gulliver (London: Bradley, 1871), 59.

<sup>3</sup>*Sermons of M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1848), 482.

<sup>4</sup>Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 161.