

God's Gracious and Merciful Nature

Joel Stephen Williams

What is mercy? What is grace? They are often defined as “unmerited favor.” The definition of one of my teachers was, “Grace is getting what you need instead of what you deserve.” Grace (*charis*) is defined by Frederick William Danker as “a beneficent disposition toward someone” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd edition, 2000, 1079; see Eph. 2:5, 7, 8). Mercy (*eleos*) means “kindness or concern expressed for someone in need” (*Ibid.*, 316; see Eph. 2:4).

Our God is a gracious and merciful God, who revealed his nature to Moses: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exo. 34:6). Moses later declared, “The Lord your God is a merciful God” (Deut. 4:31). Again in Hezekiah’s day Israel was reminded, “The Lord your God is gracious and merciful” (2 Chron. 30:9).

Ezra continued the theme: “You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Neh. 9:17). Many similar statements are found in the book of Psalms and in the prophets (Psalm 103:8; 114:4; 116:5; 145:8; Isa. 30:18; Jer. 3:12; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

The theme of God’s grace and mercy is continued in the New Testament and is maybe best known in the writings of Paul,

who wrote, “God, who is rich in mercy . . . made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5). “He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy” (Titus 2:4). The apostle Peter told Christians, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:10).

Frank Stagg explains that God’s mercy and grace are a part of his eternal, divine nature: “Grace is never the expression of a passing mood in God; it is God’s characteristic attitude towards man, and it is not awakened by anything good in man . . . In grace God grants favor, but not favors. God’s favor does not imply favoritism. It knows no ‘double predestination’ (i.e., some predestined to salvation and some to damnation), nor does it know an arbitrary salvation imposed without moral change or imposed without faith” (*New Testament Theology*, 1962, 84).

Because God is gracious and merciful, we are called to be the same way. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). According to William Barclay this requires more than feeling merely pity for others. It is even more than sympathizing with other people. It is more like trying to get inside their skin and trying to

understand what they are going through, experiencing things like they do and even suffering like they do. He suggests that if we would try to understand people in this way, it would make a lot of things related to being merciful and gracious much easier.

If we would be more understanding of others, we would often find it easier to be forgiving. Barclay quotes an old French proverb, “To know all is to forgive all.” Maybe that exaggerates it, but the more we know, we would probably understand better and be able to forgive more and more easily. Also, we should remember what God has done for us in Jesus Christ? Did not God come to earth in human form in Jesus Christ? Now God can say—literally—I am not only merciful by means of my very nature and actions, but I am merciful because I have been there by your side as a human being, and I understand.

God, who is infinitely greater than we are, came calling on human beings in the form of Jesus. As Barclay put it, God “came to men, not as the remote, detached, isolated, majestic God; but as a man. The supreme instance of mercy, (*chesedh*) is the coming of God in Jesus Christ” (*Gospel of Matthew*, 1956, 1:100).

Similarly Scripture declares, “Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17).