

Worship (37) Worship in the World 2 – Justice and Mercy

Where true Christianity has come, mercy has come. As Christianity swept through the Roman Empire, the gladiatorial contests were disbanded. Whereas the Roman Empire tolerated the killing of infants, this practice began to be eradicated as Christianity swept through. Even slaves were treated in a more humane way. Centuries later, William Wilberforce, a devout Christian, would see slavery abolished in England, and Abraham Lincoln, a Christian president, fought it in the United States.

Where Christianity is still unknown, women are still the silent victims of society – without a voice, only to be seen and not heard. The merciful concept of women being able to participate in society only came about in Christian nations.

Many non-Christian societies turned orphans over to slave labour or prostitution. Where Christianity has broken into a society, orphanages have appeared, aimed at loving, raising and educating orphans for the glory of Christ. Mercy has been extended to the orphan, where Christianity has come.

Hospitals are not unique to Christianity, but where Christendom came, the Christians' merciful care for the wounded, sick and dying, flourished. In many cases, simple things like hygiene and sanitation were unknown to many unbelieving nations and Christianity brought about much in the way of saving life through teaching hygiene and sanitation.

The concept of special help for those who cannot support themselves is a Judeo-Christian ideal. In many non-Christian religions, such people simply became beggars or outcasts or died of starvation. Human society has a history of being cruel and unforgiving. The mercy of a safety net for those who have fallen, through no fault of their own, is a Christian ideal.

Education, in particular literacy, has followed the church, as it has desired that the Word of God be read to people. In countries where the written Word was not important, there has been little or no effort to provide the tools of learning to the population. And such people remain locked away from the greatest treasure in the world – the Word of God. The mercy of 'literacy for all' has followed Christianity.

Having a justice system where you are innocent until proven guilty, where you cannot be condemned on the mouth of one witness, where you must have your day in court and have a chance to defend yourself, where judges will be impartial and judge for the good of the citizens – this is a mercy that comes from the laws of the Bible.

The idea of a society with freedom of religion is a Christian ideal. Go to Moslem, Hindu, Roman Catholic, and even Israeli (Judaistic) countries, and try and freely practice Christianity – you will be arrested, deported or worse. Where Christianity has come, the mercy of freedom of religion has come.

The notion of accepting refugees fleeing from persecution or hardship is also a Christian notion – being hospitable to the stranger.

Where Christianity has come, mercy has come. And where Christians go, mercy should follow. Part of the way we worship God in the world is by pursuing justice and mercy.

Why is Mercy Worship?

Mercy, as Jim Berg puts it, is God saving us from our miserable condition. When the world leaves you in your miserable condition, it is behaving like the world. It is not driven by mercy, it is driven by selfishness. Whether or not you caused your miserable condition, the world feels no obligation to help you – and they are behaving exactly like the sinful heart does.

So when mercy breaks in, it is an unexpected visitor in our world. It is displaying the attribute of God which He most loves to glorify when dealing with sinners – mercy. What attribute of God do sinners need more than anything else? Do we need wrath? Do we need omnipotence? No – we need mercy. And when Christians display mercy, we are displaying the heart of God to a world which knows only how to step on each other's heads to get ahead.

If worship is magnifying the glory of God through the lens of our entire being, then mercy must by one of the colours that the prism of our lives splits the white light of God's glory into.

In fact, when someone asked Jesus what it means to love my neighbour, Jesus went on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. And the Samaritan was a person who, of all the ones who passed the man, had the least reason to help him. And yet he healed him, carried him and put him up at his own expense. He showed mercy to him. And Jesus said – 'That's what it means to be a neighbour who loves his neighbour – to be merciful.'

The Bible is filled with commands to be merciful.

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 *If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, ⁸ but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs.*

Deuteronomy 15:10-11 *You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. ¹¹ For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.'*

Prov. 19:17; 21:13; 22:9; 22:22.

19:17 *He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed.*

So how are we to go about this matter of spreading mercy and justice?

1. Mercy Must Begin in the Local Church

One of the problems in rightly applying Old Testament Scriptures regarding mercy is that the church is not Israel. Israel was a nation. It was a country with civil laws given by God. These civil laws included caring for the welfare of all its citizens – the poor, the refugee, the orphan and so on. So you have to read Old Testament Scriptures in that light. Israel is a country under God, neglecting its civil responsibilities before the Lord.

Is the church a country with citizens? Where does the Bible say believers are citizens of? Believers are citizens of heaven (**Phil. 3:20**). Are we charged to take care of the poor of the world, the sick, the oppressed, and the widows of the world? No. We are a called out people, who are to display God's glory to the world, which will include mercy.

But what you find is that the Bible clearly teaches that mercy must begin at home, so to speak. Mercy is firstly to be something believers have towards one another.

Gal 6:10 *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

The good which is spoken of there is financial aid. And it is for all, but especially the household of faith. We have a good few examples of this in the New Testament:

Acts 6:1 *Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.*

Acts 11:29 *Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.*

Romans 15:26 *For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem.*

The church would take up collections to help the poor saints in other parts. When Paul teaches the Corinthians about giving, the context is a gift they were collecting for the poor saints in Jerusalem and Judea.

While we have no record saying the early church did *not* give to the unsaved poor – the Spirit chose to include records of the church's mercy on its own.

For that matter, Christ's own words are quite revealing –

Matthew 25:34-40 *Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ 'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'*

There are poor, destitute imprisoned Christians around the world. And Christ's reward is for those who showed mercy on His brethren – believers.

Mercy begins in the church - believers helping one another in their local churches and outside of their local churches.

Who are we to help? The New Testament gives us three categories of people who are to receive special attention in the form of mercy. Each group is one who does not have a means of support, or who has come to very hard times and requires additional support.

The first are the poor. That is, believers who are in dire straits.

James 2:14-17 *What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? ¹⁷ Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

1John 3:17-18 *But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

Now there is a qualification put on this, and it is:

2 Thessalonians 3:10 *For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.*

We are to assist one another when, through circumstances not to do with poor financial stewardship or reckless spending, circumstances such as medical emergencies which have eaten up funds, chronic unemployment due to discrimination in the workplace according to race or age or gender – here we are to help with physical needs.

The second category of people we are to have mercy on are widows. And not just any widows. Paul gave Timothy very specific instructions in 1 Timothy 5 as to who was to be supported (**1 Timothy 5:3-16**). She would have to be a widow who was childless, or with perverse children unwilling to help; she had to be sixty years old at least, one unlikely to remarry, a woman not given to adultery, but faithful to her husband while he was alive; if she was a servant of God's people and known for her kind, merciful works. And in our day and age, we would add, if she does not have adequate financial support in her pension and savings and so forth. The idea is someone who is worthy from a character point of view and clearly without help from a financial point of view.

The third category of people we are to support we find in **James 1:27** - *Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

The word 'visit' does not mean 'go and see on the odd occasion'; it means 'to help – to take care of.' Orphans are the only category of people that the church has a mandate to help who are not clearly believers. That's obvious, some of them will be babies, toddlers, children left destitute. And the church is to take care of them and raise them for the Lord. While we do not have to take care of unsaved widows or poor, we are not going to wait around to see if the orphans get saved before we help them. The implication is obvious – they are defenceless, and the church is to help.

The church has a fine history of opening up orphanages and children's homes. We immediately think of men like George Mueller. But it goes back much further. A man by the name of Aristides wrote a defence of Christianity to the Roman emperor, Hadrian, before the year 138. Listen to what he said of Christians: *'and they love one another; and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned, or afflicted, on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.'*

Mercy begins at home – the church taking care of its poor, its widows and orphans.

2. Mercy Goes Beyond the Church in Missions

‘Missions’ is mercy! To take the Gospel out, to tell people of a second chance with the Saviour, is an act of mercy. But how likely is it that we will take the message and nothing else? With the message of God’s mercy in salvation will come acts other acts of mercy.

Let me list some ways the church takes mercy to the world:

- [Providing basic human needs of food, clothing and shelter. Whether it has been mission centres for homeless, feeding schemes for famine struck countries, or simply old clothes for people in need, it is meeting basic needs. **Prov. 3:27-28.**
- [Providing medical care - Christians who bring with their message necessary medicines, vaccinations and lessons in hygiene and disease prevention.
- [Education. Particularly helping people gain reading and writing skills, so that the Word of God is no longer a sealed book.
- [Disaster recovery – when an area has been affected by an earthquake, a flood, hurricane or violent storm, drought, famine – Christians arrive with the Gospel and with aid.
- [Visitation ministries to people in hospitals and old age homes. Such people are often not mobile and some have few or no people to visit and encourage them. It is a mercy just to bring cheer to them, with the Word of the Gospel.
- [There is also mercy on those who have brought their miserable condition on themselves. Prison ministry would be one of the ways we take mercy to them. By going and bringing the Gospel, and possibly useful items, to them, we show them mercy.
- [Crisis counselling and recovery programmes are a form of mercy to those people who are given over to drugs, alcohol or perverse lifestyles; people who have had abortions or are considering them; people in families where abuse is rife; people who have been abused physically or sexually.
- [The last one I will mention is perhaps the hardest one, because the ones we seek to have mercy on cannot ask for it. That’s because they have not been born. As our country has followed suit with the rest of the world, allowing unborn humans to be murdered because the mother wishes it, we have massive blood on our hands as a nation.

Proverbs 24:11-12 *Deliver those who are drawn toward death, And hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. ¹² If you say, "Surely we did not know this," Does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?*

Proverbs 31:8-9 *Open your mouth for the speechless, In the cause of all who are appointed to die. ⁹ Open your mouth, judge righteously, And plead the cause of the poor and needy.*

This would be opposing abortion in lawful public forums. It would be persuading mothers not to go through with it – being available to counsel crisis pregnancies, available to refer people to adoption agencies, possibly being willing to adopt children ourselves.

So you can tell there is huge scope for mercy missions to the unsaved. In our community, these things are needed, and I encourage you to consider them. But here is the important thing to remember:

Mercy Missions Must Remain Accountable to the Local Church

What would we do if one of our missionaries stopped sending prayer letters for months on end and refused to respond to our calls and emails? After consulting with their sending church, we would drop them – because missionaries are to be accountable. And so mercy

missions does not split off from the church, and become some kind of social ‘wing’ operating on its own. Even if individual members of a church do prison work, or soup kitchens or hospital visitation, the idea is to ask the church for prayer and resources and accountability, so that in the multitude of counsel there can be the best possible implementation of mercy missions.

We are not to be unequally yoked in our mercy missions.

One sad trend in Christianity lately has been the tendency to join hands with the unsaved, when it comes to mercy work. So Christians enlist the help of Moslems, Hindus, Roman Catholics, or just rank unbelievers, when it comes to helping with food parcels or fighting abortion or drug addiction and so on. Now, if something is a venture which unbelievers have begun, and you believe you could be involved, then with counsel from your spiritual leaders, you could possibly get involved and still have a viable Christian witness. But what should not happen is Christians initiating some kind of mercy mission and then linking arms with unbelievers so as to have more money, more political clout and so forth. **Second Corinthians 6:14** still stands – *be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers*.

3. Mercy Missions Must Proclaim Christ, Not Aim to Save the World

As mentioned earlier, all ‘missions’ is mercy. But we must make sure we always present people with the biggest mercy. Filling a man’s stomach is a mercy; saving a man’s soul is a bigger mercy. Mercy missions must proclaim the ultimate mercy – Christ’s death for sinners. If I asked you what you would prefer which would you choose? I can guarantee you that souls in hell would a thousand times over choose the Gospel message over bread, or blankets or beds.

Our mandate is to preach the Gospel to every person – not to change the living conditions of everyone on planet earth.

We should take note of two things which Christ said in different contexts which bring balance to our understanding.

The first is recorded in three of the gospels – Matthew, Mark and John – where Mary anoints Jesus’ head with oil and Judas complains, saying, ‘This perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor.’ It looked like Judas was really into mercy missions, but John actually tells us he was a thief and had his hand in the bag. But Jesus’ response is interesting: **John 12:8** *‘For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.’*

If nothing else, Jesus is saying this – ‘You will never eradicate poverty. There will always be an opportunity to give to the poor. You have limited time with Me – she has thus chosen wisely as to how to use her money and resources.’ There are always going to be physical needs around us. But people will not have limitless opportunities to receive Christ. As it is said – Him they will not always have. They must hear the Gospel, not only receive alleviation from temporal circumstances. Remember Christ’s words to the crowd that followed Him in **John 6:27** *‘Labour not for the food that perishes but for the food which endures to everlasting life’*.

The second statement Jesus made which is relevant to our view of mercy missions is when a young man came to Jesus and said – ‘Lord, I will follow you, first let me go and bury my father.’ We know from Jewish customs, his father was not dead, but was ageing and dying, and he probably wanted the share of his inheritance. And Jesus says, *‘Let the dead bury the dead, you come and follow Me’*. He did not mean – ‘Cut off ties with your family.’ He did not mean ‘Let your family take care of itself.’ He meant – ‘There are enough resources amongst the unsaved

to take care of the pressing needs. The spiritually dead are able enough to bury their physically dead – they don't need believers to help them. You follow me'.

In much the same way – the unsaved are capable of burying their dead, so to speak. They have their welfare states and UIF and feeding and clothing and housing schemes, and state funded education and literacy schemes, and state-run and private hospitals. The world does not need us to meet their social needs. The dead are capable of burying their dead. What they need is that we follow Christ in His call to preach the Gospel.

'Mercy missions' has a built-in danger. It is that we focus on it and lose the Gospel. It can happen quite naturally. Even the hostile critic of Christianity is warmed by kindness. People admire and appreciate physical help, medical assistance, and other forms of help and comfort. And so while you are doing work for Christ, you are actually sometimes gaining favour with men, instead of losing it. It's hard, when you are doing this, not to yield to the temptation to not bring up the Gospel. Because the Gospel offends – it will turn those smiles into frowns. It will cause people to say your mercy was manipulative. It will cause your admirers to turn into hecklers. The offence of the cross is opposite to the heroic feeling you have when you are doing mercy work. And we have to work hard to keep them together. We proclaim Christ's mercy in salvation simultaneous to performing acts of mercy.

We should be instructed by looking at the history of certain Christian organisations such as the YMCA or the Salvation Army. Originally begun as evangelical, Gospel-preaching missions that included mercy to the destitute, they have now become universally known for their social work and almost unknown for their preaching.

The Gospel must never be forgotten.

'Mercy missions' is part of the Gospel call. It starts at home. It then goes out from the local church as part of missions proclaiming the mercy of Christ in salvation, and preaching it in word and deed. Let's close by reading God's promises to His people when mercy is the order of the day in **Isaiah 58:6-14**. Notice what God promises to do for His people when they give themselves over to mercy.

Isaiah 58:6-14

Is this not the fast that I have chosen:

To loose the bonds of wickedness,

To undo the heavy burdens,

To let the oppressed go free,

And that you break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;

When you see the naked, that you cover him,

And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the morning,

Your healing shall spring forth speedily,

And your righteousness shall go before you;

The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;

You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'

"If you take away the yoke from your midst,

The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

¹⁰ If you extend your soul to the hungry
And satisfy the afflicted soul,
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness,
And your darkness shall be as the noonday.

¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually,
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones;
You shall be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

¹² Those from among you
Shall build the old waste places;
You shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach,
The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.

¹³ "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,
From doing your pleasure on My holy day,
And call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the LORD honorable,
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,
Nor finding your own pleasure,
Nor speaking your own words,

¹⁴ Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD;
And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,
And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.
The mouth of the LORD has spoken."