

**The Mercy of God**  
**Tim Henderson**  
**State College Evangelical Free Church - 6/20/10**

This year we've been studying some of the attributes of God, things that are true of his nature. Along the way I have been arguing that for a number of reasons we **need** to know what God is like. Some of you though may have wondered if we even **can** know what God is like.

Some who have been here, maybe even some who are here this morning may have thought it presumptuous for me to stand up here and claim to know what God is like.

If that's you, I just want to acknowledge that that is a valid question. I mean for crying out loud, how am I supposed to know what God is like? The finite can't grasp the infinite. If I were to sit in my office and try to reason out what God is like whatever I come up with and present to you should be highly suspect.

The only chance we'd have to know what God is like would come if he intervened in the world and made himself known

I think this is what CS Lewis meant when he said, "If Shakespeare and Hamlet could ever meet, it must be Shakespeare's doing."

C.S. Lewis was professor at Oxford in the mid 1900s. He was a brilliant man and an atheist. He did however come to believe in God later in life and subsequently became convinced that Jesus was God. He wrote that line in an autobiographical book called *Surprised by Joy* in which he described his inability to come to know God through sheer reason. He concluded God would have to reveal himself. "If Shakespeare and Hamlet could ever meet, it must be Shakespeare's doing."

He's saying that if Hamlet could somehow become sentient he could never look off the page and see his author. His only hope would be for Shakespeare to write himself as a character into the play and make himself known.

As far as I know Shakespeare never did that, but God did. He made himself known. He entered our world, wrote himself, as it were, as a character into the play so that those who would otherwise never have a chance to see his greatness, could know and delight in him.

These are not random musings on what I wish God were like, but rather is an attempt to relate what he has already revealed about himself to others who, in the bible, faithfully recorded what they experienced.

God spoke to his people, even took on human flesh and lived among us so we could know him. We can't know him completely but we can know him accurately and trust what he's told us about himself. So that's what we're trying to do.

Last week we talked about the justice of God. I have spoken with some of you who have pondered God's love of justice in himself and his subsequent love of justice in the world and it's let you wanting to engage in some aspect of the great struggle to bring justice to an unjust world.

I'd like to mention two resources to you. First is this Book, *The Revolution: A Field Manual* for changing your world. I read it a few years ago and it had a dramatically reorienting effect on my life. God used it to open my eyes to some things and reframe my understanding. Here's a quick snippet from the chapter on clean water.:

"A pessimist they say, sees a glass of water as being half empty; an optimist sees the same glass as half full. But a giving person sees a glass of water and starts looking for someone who might be thirsty." That's beautiful.

Keith bought ten copies for the church in the hopes that many of you would read it, and it might catalyze action in your life toward one of the many injustices suffered throughout the world. We just have one right now, the rest will be here next week. Anyone want this one?

Second resource you already have, in your bulletin is a list of a few organization each addressing different problems, with whom you might choose to partner, by giving to their work. If you think God is speaking to you about this, I'd encourage you to take a step, research one of these organizations, explore your role and consider investing in the work they are doing.

Last week was Justice, this week we're going to talk about his mercy and to do so we're going to be looking at Ephesians 2. In fact I'd like you to turn there and if you would, please stand with me in honor of the Word of God while I read you Ephesians 2:1-9

*Ephesians 2:1*

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature*

*and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

I’d like to show you three things here:

**We are desperate for mercy**  
**God is rich in mercy**  
**Everyone will see his mercy**

**We were desperate for mercy**

In this passage Paul is writing to Christian believers and he’s describing their life before knowing Christ. We’re all on a journey and we’re all at different places, but this is where we all start.

Look again at vv. 1-3

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*

It’s a bleak picture, so bleak that some of you might be tempted to dismiss it. You might be thinking, I wasn’t running around ice picking people to death, holding séances to Satan, and I wasn’t, or I’m not, as bad as he makes it sound.

Okay, but here’s what I see when I read it and think about myself. First, he charges that **we followed the ways of the world**. That’s absolutely true for me. I took my cues on what behavior was acceptable from what I saw on TV, or in the locker room. The general perspective on life is that you’re here to get all you can, that was instilled in me early on. I wasn’t a victim of it. I liked it. The view the world has and teaches is that life is all about getting yours. Didn’t feel bad about it, just how it was.

He also says we **followed the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** The spirit of the air, the prince of this age, those are terms the bible uses to describe Satan. Paul is saying we followed the devil, Satan. That's a little strong. So it made me wonder, alright, did I do that?

Well, I was a pretty big Motley Crue fan in high school and they had pentagrams and such on their albums, was I a devil worshiper because I listened to Motley Cru? Well, no, Vince Neil, Tommy Lee and the rest are a mess to be sure, but I don't think Paul pointing to anything to childish and iconic as guys in leather and eyeliner marketing themselves to a rebellious youth culture.

So, looking past the 80s metal scene I think Paul may have had more in mind something like this: Jesus called Satan a liar and the father of lies. Anyone know his chief lie? Both to himself and to the world?

Be God, Fallen Angel, where? Is 14, Ez 28

Is 14, 13

*You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. 14 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."*

Initial longing, thing that broke him, desire to be God. Same things he plies Eve with.

Gen 3:4 e talks to Eve. So, what's God been telling you? Can't eat from that tree or we die.

*"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. 5 "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God"*

That's the chief lie. You can be God, independent, autonomous, you can reign , you can rule.

You will be like God. I never wore black leather and eye makeup. Can't remember drawing upside down five pointed stars. But I am absolutely guilty of wanting to be my own God. From my earliest days I have liked the idea that it's all about me. The chief lie of Satan found a home in my heart. In that very significant way I did follow him. 2 for 2.

Keep going: Have I lived to gratify the cravings of my sinful nature, following its desires and thoughts? Without going into any details there, 3/3.

Our universal bent towards selfishness, self-worship and self gratification if left unchecked that is really dangerous. Good news it often is checked, fear of punishment, social mores, our own limited abilities alter our behavior. Our badness gets restrained. But when those restraints break down our enormous capacity for evil begins to show itself. Have you guys read about the famous Stanford prison experiment? Who knows what I'm talking about?

Two week experiment conducted at Stanford University in 1971. 24 college students. All screened to make sure they had no psychological problems, criminal past, medical issues. Randomly assigned roles as either prisoners or guards. Converted a dorm building to a prison and basically let nature take its course. It was a disaster 14 days, cut short.

*The experiment quickly grew out of hand. Prisoners suffered **sadistic** and humiliating treatment from the guards. By the experiment's end, many showed severe emotional disturbances.*

*A riot broke out on the second day. The guards volunteered to work extra hours and worked together to break the prisoner revolt, attacking the prisoners with fire extinguishers without supervision from the research staff.*

*Guards forced the prisoners to count off repeatedly as a way to learn their prison numbers, and to reinforce the idea that this was their new identity. Guards soon used these prisoner counts as another method to harass the prisoners, using physical punishment such as protracted exercise for errors in the prisoner count. Sanitary conditions declined rapidly, made worse by the guards refusing to allow some prisoners to urinate or defecate. As punishment, the guards would not let the prisoners empty the sanitation bucket. Mattresses were a valued item in the spartan prison, so the guards would punish prisoners by removing their mattresses, leaving them to sleep on concrete. Some prisoners were forced to go nude as a method of degradation, and some were subjected to sexual humiliation, including simulated homosexual sex.*

*Several guards became increasingly cruel as the experiment continued. Experimenters said that approximately one-third of the guards exhibited genuine sadistic tendencies.*

Six days into the 14 they had to abort it. It had descended into a Lord of the Flies chaos. Most of the guards were upset when the experiment concluded early because their experiment with sovereignty, their reign of terror ended prematurely.

These weren't particularly bad people. They were normal students, screened to weed out the "bad" ones, and randomly assigned their roles. But when the restraints were gone, Ephesians 2:1-3 flowed like wine; hearts were revealed.

Going back to myself I was, what Paul calls, "Dead in our transgressions." That means that I could not and would not move toward the God who made me to delight in him. Why would I? I want to be my own God, call the shots, pursue pleasure on our own terms. Why would I move towards a holy God who disapproved of the selfish or perverse, or hurtful decisions I was making, and who had the temerity to insist that He was God? I was a rebel and as such I was under his wrath. Which by definition means I was in desperate need of mercy.

I didn't know it- dead people don't know much- but I needed him to intervene and break me from the stupor of self worship. I needed mercy.

BTW, I still do. It would be great if I could critique my foolish youth from a distant mountaintop of wisdom and righteousness. I need mercy daily. I don't know your list, mine includes pettiness, quickness to anger, selfishness. When I'm angry, I'm so sure I'm right, every time. It's only later when I calm down that I am ashamed that again my behavior was unjustifiable. When I'm tempted to do some wrong, it just makes so much sense, but after I'm liker, really, seriously? And I have to again drink the bitter humility of asking for mercy and forgiveness.

Any of that resonate with your past or your present? Every one of us enters the world and move through life with a bent towards selfishness, self worship and self gratification. When the restraints are removed there's not telling the depths to which we will sink. Because our nature is to rebel we are under his wrath and desperate for mercy.

### **God is rich in mercy**

Into the morbid scene of v1. 1-3 enters this:

*4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.*

**But**, Despite this, in contrast to it, going against your expectations, flipping everything on it's head. . .

God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ.

Verse 1, 2 and 3 is the set up for judgment. You'd expect v 4 to say, so God let the hammer fall and reigned down judgment.

Martin Luther said, "If I were God and the world had treated me as it has him, I would kick the vile wretched thing to pieces."

But that's not what God does. Our passages says, **but**, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ, even when we were dead in our sins.

Real mercy is always a shock. It's not what you'd expect, sometimes it's jarring to see.

Picture God in a brothel.

When God looks at a little girl sitting on a dirty mattress  
he burns with rage for the wrong she has suffered  
and moves to restore her because he is and loves justice.

Then he turns his gaze to the pimp who has enslaved her  
He burns with rage for the wrong he has committed  
He pours his wrath on the back of his crucified son  
And moves to restore the pimp because he is and loves mercy.

We want mercy for the girl and justice for the pimp.

But as we defined it last week he brings justice for the girl, restoring her to wholeness and shalom.

And he extends mercy to this dirtbag who doesn't deserve it.

Yeah, that's the point of mercy, you don't deserve it. If you did deserve it it wouldn't be mercy.

Mercy is what love looks like when it encounters the undeserving. The pimps deserve wrath, and some will receive that to be sure. But some, those who turn to Jesus will receive mercy. God has been pleased to extend mercy to undeserving sinners like you and me. Mercy is what love looks like when it encounters the undeserving.

Mercy for the pimp, may upset your sense of justice. It may feel wrong. But it's really good news because more often than we'd like to admit we are the pimps in the story. We are the rebels who need mercy. The better you get to know

yourself the more you'll find it true. We need mercy. And as nonsensical as it is, he gives it away.

Guys, he's rich, he's loaded, he's super wealthy in the currency of mercy. He has plenty to spare and he gives it away generously. He's rich in mercy.

To share that wealth cost him everything. It costs him to do so because his judgment must be satisfied. He's just so the wrongs need to be made right and the penalty paid. That's why Jesus died. In order to be just and merciful to sinners, someone had to absorb the wrath of God. Jesus suffered and died taking the wrath deserved by pimps and you and me so that God could extend us mercy instead. For the pimp to go free, the pure had to be crucified. The cost of mercy for you, was the murder of the Son of God.

It's just totally insane. But it's true.

We all need mercy, God is rich in mercy and finally,

### **Everyone will see his mercy**

Just real quick look at vv. 6,7.

*6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*

The phrase, "In order that" tells us why he did it. Why create the world, why allow sin to wreck it all, why suffer and die so terribly?

So that, in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

He did it so that for the next hundred billion trillion years an undeserving people could bask in the greatness, and glory, and mercy of God.

This isn't just the reason he wrote himself *into* the story  
It's the reason he wrote the story.

Before time existed there was a trinity of persona who knew and loved each other, completely, needed nothing. They could have spent all of eternity delighting in one another. But if they had chosen that then there would have been aspects of their greatness they could never express. God could never have

been merciful because neither the Father, Son nor spirit would ever have occasion to receive mercy.

They choose to create an audience so that people who don't deserve to see the show, could see it anyway. But not only that the plan was that these people in the arena who inexplicably get to behold and delight in this incredible God, also get invited to leave the stands and come down to the stage and join in the party. They get to be not just witnesses of the greatness, but they get to join the dance. Listen to Jesus on this point in John 17

John 17:20

*"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

John 17:24

*"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*

The world exists so undeserving people can see, experience, and delight in his glory. Even if we had never sinned, to be created and invited to community with God is an act of condescending grace. But then to have sinned, and not be obliterated, but invited again and at the cost of crucifixion, that's beyond reckoning. God is merciful. For all eternity when the full extent of that is seen we'll praise him for it. It's why he made the world.

**So, what should we do about it?**

Three things. First, take it. Don't hid in the corner, and sulk in your shame. Take the mercy. You need it, and he is rich in it.

Second, Love him. Adore him, give him your praise, obey him, orbit around this fantastic merciful God. He made the world so you could. He is the soul satisfying, life giving heart of it all. Drink up.

Second, emulate him. Be merciful. Even when it doesn't make any sense. Especially when it doesn't make any sense. Listen to Jesus. This is from Luke 6:27ff. We'll give Jesus the final word.

*6:27 "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

*6:32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. 35 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. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*