

# Lord, Have Mercy

BY LEA PARDUE SLATON

Hosea paints the beautiful picture of a tenderhearted God who is full of mercy toward the children of Israel. More than mere pity or sympathy, mercy means that we follow God's lead in feeling others' hurt, knowing their fears, and allowing them to become part of us and change our hearts.

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Lord, have mercy! I have heard my grandmother exclaim this on numerous occasions, usually in response to someone's foolishness, like her nephew, Jimmy, sticking a piece of chalk up his nose. Or in response to the Alabama Crimson Tide losing a game. Lord, have mercy. She meant that she loved these people no matter what their situation, and even if she couldn't forgive that fumble in overtime, God could! Have mercy.

Of course, mercy is about more than football games. It is much more than mere pity or sympathy, and even more than forgiveness. Mercy means that we make a compassionate connection with someone else. We understand their thoughts. We feel their hurt. We know their fears. They become part of us and something changes in our hearts.

The prophet Hosea paints the beautiful picture of a tenderhearted God who is full of mercy. The children of Israel, God's children, had repeatedly abandoned God, following instead the god *du jour*. They had forgotten their sacred, loving relationship with Yahweh. God, they believed, had every right to wipe them out completely, for such an act would have been entirely in keeping with the ancient law that allowed parents to have rebellious sons stoned to death. But God said:

I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.

*Hosea 11:9*

God felt compassion. It wasn't that God did not have the power to destroy. No, God simply did not have the heart for it. Have mercy.

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God's response says much more about the divine nature than the nature of the people. God sets the standard for mercy. We see that standard clearly in Jesus Christ, who was asked again and again to give some healing, blessing, or teaching—some

mercy. In Matthew, two blind men cry out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (9:27). Or hear the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, in Mark: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" (10:47). Or in Luke, ten lepers plead, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (17:13). And, what does Jesus do? He follows God's lead. He sees people in terrible need and something stirs in his heart. Have mercy.

In the book of Hosea, God's heart aches, but God doesn't stop there. God takes action. Through the prophet, God calls the people back and promises to heal their disloyalty:

They shall again live beneath my shadow,  
they shall flourish as a garden;  
they shall blossom like the vine,  
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

*Hosea 14:7*

God saw the people's brokenness and desperately wanted them to be reconciled and to flourish as a garden.

That's mercy for you! It is not based on our actions, thank God! Mercy is undeserved. And that's the whole point. God's mercy is for everybody, regardless.

We are called as God's children to be the hands and arms and faces of this mercy in our very unmerciful world. People can and do answer this call. Helen Prejean, the nun whose ministry was featured in the movie *Dead Man Walking*, comes to my mind. Sister Helen cares for the families of murder victims, as well as for the murderers themselves on death row. The movie tells about her work with Matthew Poncelet, who raped and killed

a teenage girl. She believes that, in spite of the terrible, cruel crime, he is still a child of God. Disrespectful, arrogant, and full of hate, Poncelet is not a likeable character. But, he finally confesses to her his responsibility in the murder. As he waits in his cell for the midnight of his execution to come, Sister Helen tells him: "I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you." That is mercy. When you can look in the eyes of a self-professed killer and be the face of love, that's God-given mercy.

Merciful living is God's standard, and so, especially today, it goes against the world's usual standards, which insist that we stand up for our rights, no matter what. The usual standards make us feel that by showing mercy, we show weakness. People will take advantage of us. Give them an inch, they'll take a mile. But, you know what? Most of the time, it is none of our business how someone responds. We do not hand out mercy with contingencies. That's between the other party and God. Our business as Christians is to live mercifully regardless of how someone responds.

By grace, we have received God's mercy ourselves. Through that grace, we are called to give freely of mercy because it has been freely given to us. God has withheld harsh judgment from us. Frederick Faber's hymn, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*, reminds us,

There is no place where Earth's sorrows  
are more felt than up in heaven;  
there is no place where Earth's failings  
have such kindly judgment given."

That is mercy.

Mercy is work. It certainly doesn't come naturally to me. Sometimes when I read the newspaper, I wonder why I even bother to think about mercy in the midst of such overwhelming violence and just plain meanness. I bother because mercy is a grace that sets me free from anger, revenge, hatred, and bitterness. It reconnects me to God as well as other people. As one of God's children, I bother because I want to feel closer to God.

Like most of you, I received many emails after the horrible events of September 11. Mercy seemed far away and foolish in most of those notes, expressing our immediate, all-too-this-worldly reactions. But I received

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one prayer that opened my heart to the possibility that somehow, we can practice mercy even in such dire circumstances. Pray with me this prayer by an anonymous prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck:

Oh Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill but also those of ill will. But do not remember the suffering they have inflicted upon us; remember the fruits through which we brought thanks to this suffering, our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this; and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.

Have mercy. Amen.

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