

Thy Very Heart: My Heart Healed by His

~Hebrews 4–5~

Week five of series, “His Merciful Heart,” February 28, 2021,
Rev. Sam Ferguson

--The purpose of this series--

We are putting our tired, cold, and weary hearts before God’s great heart, asking God for healing and renewal.

Remember that our faith is far more than a set of ideas. It has an **affective center** where our hearts come in contact with God’s glorious heart.

Our approach for the rest of the series will be to put our hearts before the flowing stream of truth and love coming from God’s heart by turning to **Scripture**. Then we plead and **pray** that the **Spirit** would supernaturally make the truths we encounter take root inside of us.

--What we’ve studied over the last few weeks--

In **Matt. 11**, we saw that Jesus’ heart is **gentle** and **lowly**, and therefore we can run to him.

In **2 Cor. 11**, we saw that ultimate comfort is found in God’s presence, which we often experience through brothers and sisters in Christ.

In **Matt. 23**, we saw that God’s anger burns hot when that which he loves is threatened, but his anger burns slow and love flows naturally.

--Opening thoughts on God’s merciful heart--

In the climactic scene of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia comes to the defense of her condemned friend, Antonio. Portia knows justice isn’t on his side, so in a famous speech, she appeals to mercy:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
’Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes

The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Shakespeare lauds mercy in this soliloquy as “an attribute of God.” In the Bible, we find God upholding justice *and* bestowing the blessings of mercy, “which droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,” on the *undeserving*.

Mercy is an act of kindness on behalf of someone in need, especially when the giver is under no obligation to act.

Today, we are looking at mercy in terms of God’s motivation—the natural overflow of a deeply passionate and merciful heart. Moses even set God’s merciful heart before Israel as their surest hope:

Deut. 4:30-31. *When you are in tribulation ... in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice. For **the LORD your God is a merciful God**. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.*

--Jesus as our High Priest--

First let’s consider Jesus’ role as High Priest as set forth in Hebrews: Jesus stands between God and an unholy people, making us clean before him. The author writes that “[Jesus is] a **merciful** ... high priest” (Heb. 2:17).

Jesus then connects us to God so that we can receive more mercy: “Since we have a great high priest ... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:14, 16).

Jesus’ role as High Priest gives us a window into two important emotions driving God’s mercy: (1) compassion, (2) desire. God’s mercy arises out of his compassionate understanding of your plight, and from his deep desire to keep you close to His heart.

--Compassion for your plight--

There is something soothing to the soul when you are with someone who understands you. Compassion is born out of understanding. This is precisely what the writer of Hebrews is trying to tell us about Jesus as High Priest. He has personal understanding of our pain.

Heb. 4:15. *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

Heb. 5:2. *He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.*

Heb. 2:17-18. *He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

Jesus became like us, suffered like us, and was tempted like us so that he might become a merciful high priest.

The idea of Jesus being tempted is at times hard for us to grasp. The more perfect a person is, we assume, the less they feel temptation. But this is not the case. The more perfect a person is, the more they *endure* temptation and suffer from it. C. S. Lewis writes:

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of the wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later ... We never find out the strength of the evil impulses inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.

Jesus knows human weaknesses and loves. He knows what it is to be hungry and tired. He was at times astonished by beauty and distraught over pain. He had to live by faith and use the Scriptures to understand life. Jesus prayed, sighed, and cried out. He knows what it feels like to be human.

--His desire to keep you close to his heart--

When Aaron suited up for priestly duties, one of the last things he put on was the breastplate, which had twelve stones for each of the twelve tribes. **Exod. 28:29** says, “So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgement on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord.”

Priestly duties served a double purpose. First, they gave individuals a clean standing before God. More importantly, however, was that they made a way for re-union with God.

In Exodus, God delivers Israel from Egypt. As the story continues, God enters into a covenant relationship with Israel. The role of sacrifices for sins made an unholy people compatible with God.

Though we can get bogged down in the details of the laws, there is one crucial point: *God wants to be close to His people, and he is determined to be in relationship with them.*

Thus, we need to see this relational reality when Hebrews reminds us that the high priests are “appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin” (5:1). Picture Jesus, like Aaron, coming before God with names on his chest of his people—you and me. He bears these names in God’s presence as the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

God’s mercy in atoning for our sins through Jesus is in part motivated by his desire to keep us close to his heart. This is the overflowing motivation when God looks upon wayward Israel:

Hos. 11:7-9. *My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God...the Holy One... and I will not come in wrath.*

God desires his people, and not even sin will keep him from loving them.

--Application--

- (a) First, you may look at how your own life and wonder where God’s mercy is. All you feel is misfortune and misunderstanding.

To you I say: Don't look at your life in the present as God's testimony to his mercy. Look instead at the life of his Son. There, you see God himself entering into this life to share with you misunderstanding, abandonment, sorrow, and hurt. Let that suffering of Jesus stand as a witness to God's mercy.

- (b) Or you may look at the ways you've blown it in life and feel you've squandered God's mercy.

To you I say: God's mercy is inexhaustible. You cannot outrun it, for it's God's very nature. Because of Christ, your sin moves God to pity and more mercy.

--Mercy as motivation enough--

America is in a moment of profound and historical and social consciousness, wondering what to make of past sins and present pains.

What do you feel when you drive across an Indian reservation out West? Or walk through the historic black neighborhood in a southern city? Or ponder the tens of thousands of babies who will be murdered this year in the name of individual rights? What do you do?

As I watch how Americans engage (or disengage from) matters of pain and suffering, I am fearful of unhealthy motivations.

- (1) *Guilt and shame.* Here, engagement with the woes around us seems driven by an anxious and chaotic need to assuage guilt, atone for sin, or avoid being shamed.

There is a place for godly guilt leading to true repentance and change. But the Gospel is crystal clear that there is only one place for the atonement of sins, and that is at the foot of the cross.

- (2) *Pharisaical self-righteousness.* Here we find disengagement because one believes he has all the facts and has discovered incorrect worldviews or theories beneath social woes. These people are sure they're not a culprit, so they disengage.

There is a place for social and theological clarity. But this can too easily slip into pharisaical self-righteousness, where by being an expert in the details, one misses the larger point.

Into this moment I say: Is not the mercy of God motivation enough? Is not this fact—that God’s heart brims with compassion for all suffering and weakness and hurt known to man—reason enough for the church to care? Rather than getting bogged down in arguments about politics, can’t the church start looking at its neighborhoods and institutions and ask: God, what moves your heart? Move us, O God, with your heart of mercy!

What if God is asking us to be his mercy? What if Jesus’ command were to become ever truer in our church: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

--Study questions--

Read the lines from Portia’s speech in *The Merchant of Venice* a couple times over. What stands out?

Consider Lewis’ reminder that Jesus, because of his perfection, suffered temptation in the deepest of ways, yet also endured. How might this shape the way we cling to Christ when we face temptation and trials?

God’s compassion and his desire to keep us close to him are the sources of his mercy. Do you believe God is compassionate? Do you believe he desires you to be close to him? Pray and ask for greater belief in these truths.

What do we learn about God’s mercy when we study the OT story of God and Israel? What do we learn about ourselves?

Is there someone in your life who you feel *really* understands you? Are you able to walk with them as the both you walk with the Lord? Do you believe Jesus understands you most of all? Can you bring all things before him because of this? Is this truth shaping your prayer life?

--When time allows--

Here is a [free online version of Lewis’ classic, *Mere Christianity*](#). You’ll find the quoted portion on pages 77-78.

Have a taste for Shakespeare now? [Here’s *The Merchant of Venice* in full](#).

As usual, consider reading Tozer’s *The Knowledge of the Holy*. [Here is Chapter 18 on God’s mercy](#).