

“Open Doors: Mercy Me and Thee”
Heb. 6:10; Luke 6:36; Matt. 25:35-40

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The theme for this week’s message, along with that companion Bible Study I have mentioned ‘once or twice,’ *“Time to Dream,”* by That’s right, Rick Warren... is MERCY. When I first gave thought to what this subject of ‘mercy’ had to do with ‘me,’ those two words stuck in my head: **‘Mercy Me.’** Now, that phrase may mean nothing to many of you... while some of you know exactly where I’m going. But in the lines of a song we’ll soon hear, *‘even if you don’t,’* I’ll tell you! “MercyMe” is the name of a popular Contemporary Christian music group, led by singer/songwriter Bart Millard. You may have heard of a movie a couple of years back, entitled “I Can Only Imagine.” Also the name of arguably their greatest hit song, both the movie and the music were based on the troubled, abusive relationship Millard had with his Dad growing up in Greenville TX.

The group was formed in 1994, in Edmond OK. It's name, "MercyMe," interestingly had actually NOTHING to do with the subject of MERCY. It originated during Millard's time as a youth ministry intern in Florida. Concerned that her grandson was always home whenever she called, Millard's grandmother would exclaim, "Well **mercy me, why don't you get a REAL job?**" I think that there have probably been those who said the same about ME...

But as I pondered just what **God** was laying on **ME** with regards to the subject of ‘mercy,’ that title kind of popped into my head. **“Mercy... Me... and Thee.”** OK, great... now I had a catchy sermon title. NOW WHAT? As these past few weeks have FLOWN by, I found myself at the end of this week asking the very same question: NOW WHAT? With all that has transpired in our state and nation this last month, I knew that my focus needed to be on what can be of value to us TODAY... right now... in this ‘current moment’ of CRISIS. Originally today’s message was to consider how the subject of ‘mercy’ related to our church’s ‘time to dream’ about the **future**. NOW, of course, we are MUCH more focused on the **present**. You know... as in, the GOD who is our ***‘very present help in trouble.’***

As I grappled with what to say with regards to mercy in this time of ‘trouble’... feeling woefully **inadequate** to find JUST the right direction to go... I thought about the video lesson for this week by Pastor Warren. Oh, what the heck. I’ve got this DVD resource... I sure am USED to

watching a computer screen these days... WHY NOT? And BOY was I glad I did. Let's just say that in his consideration of opportunities to SHOW mercy, he had me at the very first one: **"Look for people in a CRISIS."** Hmm... know anyone who fits this description? Try 'EVERY-body!' And as I listened to his presentation, I had that feeling that I have heard many people talk about with regards to messages that they had heard: *'I felt like he was talking directly at ME'...*

And so, for the next few minutes, I hope that we all might experience what we sang of earlier (a song also written by Bart Millard): the **'Word of God speak'** to us. May that sermon title not be merely a not-so-clever play on words, but apply to us all: **"Mercy... Me... and Thee,"** O Lord. [PRAYER] *[God of mercy and meaning, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.]*

In the midst of this national CRISIS, we as the faith community must... in the midst of 'sheltering in place,' 'staying at home'... being in 'isolation' as we 'take one for the 'QUARAN-TEAM'... give considerable thought to what OUR Christian witness is to look like. To that end of 'self-analysis'... NOT 'paralysis'... one could say that our greatest witness comes by **showing MERCY.** Mercy, which could be described simply as "Thinking of other persons more than myself." Or, simply, **"Service above self."**

I have three other words synonymous with this definition of 'mercy': **'Health Care Workers.'** (OK, could be considered two...) Regardless, if there is anyone who is 'thinking of other persons before themselves,' it would be those who are serving in hospitals, clinics, and parking lots all over the country. (And let's not forget those who are in the transportation industry who are working overtime to get healthcare products, food, and other essential supplies all over our land!) But particularly for those medical personnel who are battling the onslaught of this disease, we need to think of them in the same high regard we do our military... for they are just as much on the 'front lines' in their 'battle' against an unseen, but just as deadly, enemy. An enemy that would seek our destruction.

As we consider all of those who 'stand in harm's way'... including their families, who are also at great risk... let us be mindful of where such 'bravery' comes from. Those who feel called

to put themselves at risk to disease, and death, have had that call placed in them by GOD. It is something deep inside of them... a calling on their lives which is 'endowed by their creator.' In the words of Christ, to serve others is to ***"be merciful, as your Father is merciful."*** (Lk 6:36) Or, as one of His disciples would later say, ***"We love because he (God) first loved us."*** (1 John 4:19) There were three guiding principles that Pastor Rick suggested in order to show the type of mercy to others that God so freely shows us. Paraphrasing his language, those are simply: Offer SELF... Overlook SIN... Oversee what you SAY.

First and foremost, we must **OFFER SELF**. As Paul exhorts the Roman church, ***"I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God..."*** (Romans 12:1) Kinda like what Jesus said about 'being merciful just as my Father is merciful.' And two of the most >> important ways that you and I 'offer ourselves' is by giving to others our **TIME** and **ATTENTION**.

We all know just how 'expensive' this battle against 'CV' has been. Not 'merely' millions, or billions, but TRILLIONS are being spent in defense of our citizens, both medically and economically. But it is also the investment of time that we know to be so costly. TIME is that non-renewable resource that once we 'spend' it, we can never get it back. But as we look at the 'silver linings,' if you will, to this catastrophic event, may one of them be for us all to not forget how vitally important it is to take TIME to give others our ATTENTION. This whole ordeal has forced many families to take the time from their *formally* busy schedules to pay attention to one another. AND, it has separated families and friends, forcing us to be more creative in using our time to give attention to those we love. Right now, we're having to do so in less physically 'tangible' ways, but just as many students are engaged in 'distance learning,' let us continue to practice 'distance LOVING!' Using our phones and computers as electronic 'hugs and kisses' to fulfill God's command to, in Paul's words, ***"Look out for one another's interests, not just for your own."*** (Phil. 2:4)

The second one may seem a little odd to some. **OVERLOOK SIN**. Let me put it this way. Sometimes when we know that we are to be 'gracious' and 'merciful' to another, it's hard when all that we can see is what they are doing WRONG. That goes for our national leaders, on down to state and local, and even into our own homes. It can also affect how we relate to those we

are oft-times called to help, like Jesus mentioned in that passage from Matthew: ***“hungry, thirsty, a stranger, without clothing, sick, in prison.”*** How easy can it be to say, ‘Well, it’s their own fault. They got themselves in this mess, and they can get themselves out of it.’? OR, maybe it’s someone you know very well, but who has done something(s) to offend you, or hurt one you love. I really like the expression Pastor Warren used: *“You can’t look OUT for someone if you’re looking DOWN on them.”*

We need to be mindful of just who Jesus ‘looked out for’: lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors and lawyers (WAIT, did I say that?). Jesus ministered to the lowly, the outcast... the very people who could not repay him in ANY way. I have a brother in the Thursday morning Bible study who has quoted more than one time his favorite verse... one that this highly successful businessman most certainly lives by: ***“...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*** (Matthew 25:40) How we treat the ‘least’ among us... ‘warts and all’... is how we are treating Jesus. And ‘he who is without warts shall cast the first stone’...

The third one really doesn’t need too much explanation: **OVERSEE WHAT YOU SAY.** Particularly as our ‘social distancing’ and ‘stay at home’ time increases, so too do the opportunities to say something we will regret. The Apostle Paul, who surely knew the power of his words, wrote these words of advice to the church in Ephesus:

“Do not say harmful things, but say what people need -- words that will help others become stronger. Then what you say will do good to those who listen to you.” (Ephesians 4:29)

I have to laugh at that last phrase in this verse: ***“...those who listen to you.”*** Is that kind of like the statement, ‘I see our lips moving, but I’m not hearing a word you’re saying?’ It’s like I’ve said before: ‘People don’t care what you know ‘til they know that you care.’

So, if we are to show others the mercy that God shows us, we should be ‘careful’... ‘full of care’... to: Offer our SELF with TIME and ATTENTION; Overlook SIN of the least of these, members of Jesus’ family... and ours; and to Oversee what we SAY. As we do these things, the author of Hebrews assures us that ***“God... will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in helping his people.”*** (Hebrews 6:10)

BUT, even with this assurance... even knowing just how we are to be a better witness of God's grace and mercy to others... what about when WE JUST DON'T FEEL LIKE IT? When we are tired, discouraged, perhaps even a little scared about our circumstances...maybe even experiencing some doubt about how things are going to turn out... how can we summon the strength to be what God wants us to be? These are challenges that most all of God's faithful encounter at one time or another... sometimes MANY times... yes, even pastors...

That former youth pastor and singer I mentioned earlier, Bart Millard, spoke of a time when HE was really struggling. His 13 y.o. son was having a particularly bad time with his diabetes, and Millard shared his struggle with a friend, who reminded him of that O.T. story of Shadrack, Mishack, and Abendego. Those three guys who, despite the threat of being thrown into a fiery furnace for their belief in God, would not deny God. (Better to experience an earthly flame than an eternal one!) Those faithful servants of God KNEW that 'even if' God did not spare them from that fiery trial, God would ultimately save them from the penalty of an earthly death. They WOULD be shown **mercy**. No matter what. And they were.

And so, as an Affirmation of the Faith that we are to have in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I would offer to you this song written by Millard... entitled "Even If." May it serve as a reminder of God's mercy... TO us and THROUGH us... that no matter what trials we may face... even if we don't get the answer we want... our HOPE is in God alone...

[FYI, below are the lyrics to the song sung as an 'Affirmation of Faith']

"EVEN IF"

(V. 1) They say sometimes you win some...Sometimes you lose some
And right now right now I'm losing bad. I've stood at this mic time after time
Reminding the broken it'll be alright But right now ...oh right now I just can't
(Pre-Chorus) It's easy to sing When there's nothing to bring me down
But what will I say When I'm held to the flame like I am right now
(Chorus) I know You're able and I know You can save through the fire with Your mighty hand
But even if You don't My hope is You alone
(V. 2) They say it only takes a little faith To move a mountain
Well good thing A little faith is all I have right now
(Pre-Chorus) But God when You choose To leave mountains unmovable
Oh give me the strength to be able to sing 'It is well with my soul'
(Chorus) I know the sorrow and I know the hurt Would all go away
if You just say the word But even if You don't... My hope is You alone

(Bridge) You've been faithful, You've been good all of my days
Jesus I will cling to You Come what may
'Cause I know You're able...I know You care
(Ending) It is well with my soul; It is well it is well with my soul!

CHARGE

Working on my sermon Saturday, I heard Barrie let out a little 'WooHoo' in the next room. So, of course, I had to go see what she was so excited about. It was a Duet with Kristin Chenouweth & Trishia Yearwood. "Because I Knew You" (from the popular stage musical "Wicked"). Here's a few of the lyrics of that song I'd like to share with you:

*I've heard it said That **people come into our lives for a reason**
Bringing something we must **learn**
And we are **led To those who help us most to grow**
If we let them And we help them in return
Who can say if I've been changed for the better?
Because I knew you, I have been changed for good."*

While this may be a secular song, it certainly contains some spiritual truths. That indeed God does bring people into our lives for a reason... those from whom we can learn, and help us to grow... if we will have the humility to let them. People to whom we, in turn, are to show the mercy of God. By the grace of God, may we strive every day... TODAY... to make a difference in the life of another. For there is no greater thing that we can do than for someone to be able to say of us, because of you, I have been changed for 'GOOD'... Because of you, I have been changed 'For-**ever!** As we seek to be God's 'agent for change,' let us rest assured that we do NOT labor alone. That the Spirit of the Living God...

'BONUS MATERIALS'

Below are some of the lyrics to two other songs by Bart Millard and MercyMe. They both relate to the pain we experience in life, and the One who heals us from that pain... both in this life and in the life of the world to come.

"The Hurt and the Healer"

It's the moment when humanity Is overcome by majesty
When grace is ushered in for good And all our scars are understood
When mercy takes its rightful place And all these questions fade away
When out of weakness we must bow And hear You say It's over now

Jesus come and break my fear; Wake my heart and take my tears
Find Your glory even here (When the hurt and the healer collide)

"I Can Only Imagine"

Surrounded by Your glory What will my heart feel
Will I dance for You Jesus Or in awe of You be still
Will I stand in Your presence Or to my knees will I fall
Will I sing hallelujah Will I be able to speak at all...
I can only imagine ...I can only imagine