

What Is Mercy?

In the last lesson, you learned all about judging. But judging is only part of the story. James tells us “*mercy rejoiceth against judgment*” (**James 2:13**), or better translated “...*mercy triumphs over judgement*” (**Weymouth**). Mercy could not exist without judgment – for without judgment, what is there to give mercy for? But still, mercy is greater than judgment because mercy overcomes and cancels out the judgment.

But what exactly is mercy? If you ask random church-goers they’ll tell you that love is mercy, that mercy is faith, and that grace is mercy. But none of those answers mean anything. They’re just using one word they don’t understand to define another word they don’t understand. When God said mercy, **He meant mercy**. Not love, grace, hope, faith, compassion, or pity; all those words exist in Greek and Hebrew and were frequently used. Mercy means mercy. Nothing more, nothing less.

As you discovered in the lesson on love, those other words may help to *describe* mercy, but they do not *define* it! It is certainly true to say that mercy *acts* compassionately! But that does not DEFINE mercy! So it would be wrong to say that mercy IS compassion! Compassion is compassion; mercy is something else! Showing compassion is merely something mercy *does*. So to continue our work in developing a Biblical dictionary, it is time to clearly DEFINE mercy.

Mercy is something very specific, and very simple to understand. We will find out what it is, not by reading dictionaries or commentaries, but by seeing how God used the word in the Bible. Along the way, we’ll learn what it is, how to give it and how to get it, who should get it... and who should not get it. That’s...

LESSON 31: WHAT IS MERCY?

If you put the things you learned in Lesson 30 into practice, you will very quickly run into someone telling you “you just need to be more merciful to that sinner!” – meaning you should ignore this person’s sins and just “live and let live”, and stop judging them. Firstly, as you will learn, that isn’t what mercy means at all.

Secondly, we need only go back to **James 2:13** again to see that mercy cannot exist without judgment! Everyone reads over that passage all the time, but study it carefully. How can mercy triumph over judgment... **if judgment never happened in the first place?** Unless you JUDGED someone, how can your MERCY triumph over that judgment? **And when could you ever have a chance to SHOW mercy, unless you had FIRST judged someone?**

Also, the first half of that **verse** says “*he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy...*” – **which underlines what you read in Matthew 7:2**. But again you have to ask, how can you show judgment WITH mercy, unless you first JUDGED!

I realize that after the last lesson, it may seem unnecessarily repetitive to beat this dead horse, but you will encounter great resistance and argument on this subject because the entire world believes judging is the

worst sin you can commit. They'll gladly forgive a homosexual ax-murderer before they forgive someone for judging them. And I mean that literally.

Back to the point, mercy obviously comes after judgment; and since it is clear that mercy overcomes or "defeats" judgment, it can only be the step we call forgiveness. So the simple definition is "**Mercy is the act of forgiveness**".

Unfortunately, the translators of the Bible muddied this problem by translating several different Greek and Hebrew words as "mercy" in English. To get a picture of the problem, suppose you were translating a document into German; and any time you encountered the words "love", "compassion", "mercy", and "pity", you translated them all into the same German word "Liebe" (love); you'd get an *idea* of what was said in the original document *but you wouldn't quite understand it correctly, because several similar, but different, words were lumped into one word!*

That happened with "mercy". About half of the NT references to mercy really mean mercy – the forgiveness of a sin, a debt, an offense, etc. The rest of the references are different Greek words which should have been translated as compassion or kindness. Most of the time this doesn't matter too much, since the words are similar in most contexts; but it does matter when it comes to judgment.

Why? Because you can show kindness without a judgment having been made; but you can **ONLY** show mercy **AFTER** a judgment! You'll see just how important that is later in this lesson. Meanwhile, there is a very important step that lies between judgment and mercy – repentance.

A PERFECT EXAMPLE

So with that opening, let's read a parable that lays out in detail the complete judgment process – and see where mercy fits into that process. The whole story is in **Matthew 18:21-35**. As usual, read it first so you have it in your mind as we go through it piece by piece. First, the subject began because Peter asked how often he had to forgive his brother's sins – and Jesus said not seven times, but 490 times (70x7). This is a context of forgiveness – mercy rejoicing against a judgment.

Peter said his brother had sinned against him; that was a judgment Peter made. Now he was asking how often he must forgive him. And this parable is Jesus' answer. **Verse 23** tells us who these characters are; the scene takes place in "the kingdom of heaven" – so "a certain king" in the kingdom of heaven can only be Jesus or His Father. In this place, we can know for sure by reading the last verse – **verse 35**. So this "King" is the Father.

And in **verses 23-24**, this king began to count up what people owed him, and found a huge debt owed by one servant. In other words, God found one of His servants – us – steeped in "10,000 talents" of sin. That's a lot. Naturally, we could never pay this weight of sin back, so He commanded us to be sold into slavery – this is slavery to sin, such as is mentioned in **John 8:34** and **Romans 6:20**. We were under a death penalty, to pay the law back for the debt we owed it.

But notice clearly what the exact process here was; this King judged his servant, and found him to be a sinner. So he sentenced him to be sold, along with his entire family and all his goods to pay it back. This is a stern sentence **and Jesus holds this up as an example of how He and His Father judge. But there's more!**

Back in **Matthew 18:26**, this servant "fell down and worshipped" and begged for patience, and a chance to repay the debt – and the Father, moved by compassion simply **FORGAVE** the debt – free and clear, no repayment necessary (**verse 27**). No penance or works were necessary to repay the debt, it was gone forever

(Psalms 103:12). This is an example of MERCY! Mercy, rejoicing or triumphing against that judgment! Because mercy canceled out – defeated – that judgment!

But there's more! In **Matthew 18:28** that servant, having been forgiven only moments before of an enormous debt – let's say a million dollars – went out and grabbed one of his fellow servants and demanded he repay a relatively tiny debt – say, one hundred dollars. **AND THIS WASN'T WRONG!** *This was following the example set by the Lord!*

But in **verse 29** the other servant *also* begged for mercy – the exact same mercy the first servant had just begged for and been given himself – the first servant refused to forgive him, **or even give him more time to repay the debt!** (**verse 30**). He denied mercy to his fellow servant and sent him to prison, the same fate which his Lord's mercy had saved him from.

Naturally, news of this got back to the Lord (**verse 31**), and **the Father revoked His mercy because the servant showed none to his own debtors!** (**verses 32-34**). The moral in **verse 35** is: this is how God deals with us, if we don't show mercy to our brethren. BUT!

Through all of this, **judging was encouraged!** But when we judge someone **and they repent and ask our forgiveness** *we should show the same compassion we expect God to show us!*

FORGIVENESS WITHOUT REPENTANCE?

...but what if he *doesn't* repent? Should we still forgive him? Back in that same parable, suppose when the servant who had been forgiven went out and grabbed his fellow servant who owed him money, **suppose that second servant said "how dare you judge me!! I'll pay you back when I'm good and ready – if ever!"**

Would the Lord have been angry with the first servant if he had the second servant thrown in prison THEN? Or back up a step more. God has come to all of us, indirectly, and said "you have sinned! And the wages of sin is death!" – and if you're still here, you must have said "I'm sorry Lord, have patience with me and I'll pay you all".

But supposing God had come to you and said "you have sinned!" and you spit back "I have not! And who made you God anyway?? I'll do whatever I feel like doing!" ... would God have forgiven your sins? Of course not. We are put here to learn to judge righteous judgment; to learn to judge like God judges, for in the future, judgment of the nations will be given to the saints of the most high (**Daniel 7:22**).

You just read how God judges us in **Matthew 18:21-35**, along with a command to judge others the same as He judges us... *"for with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged"* (**Matthew 7:2**). **If God won't forgive US without repentance, neither should we forgive those who sin against us without repentance.**

But another, much clearer command is found in **Luke 17:3-4**. Here again, Jesus says you must forgive your brother **but does He list any prerequisites for that forgiveness? In other words, must your brother DO anything BEFORE you forgive Him?**

Jesus says if your brother trespasses against you, **REBUKE** him! That's a sharp, stern condemnation! So if your brother steals from you, say something like "hey! You've stolen from me, now pay it back!" – and **AFTER** your rebuke him, there is an **IF!** Why does no one read that **IF?** Jesus **COMMANDED** you to rebuke your sinning brother, and **IF HE REPENTS, THEN** – and **ONLY THEN** – you should forgive him!

If you tell your brother he stole from you, and he says “well, I had every right to take it – you weren’t taking care of it! And besides, I needed it more than you do! How dare you judge me!” – **then there is not a single command in the Bible for you to forgive that rebellious brother! BECAUSE HE HAS NOT YET REPENTED!**

That’s a sharp departure from standard Protestant thinking. Yet it is exactly what the Bible says. Does God forgive people without repentance? What will God require of Israel before He forgives them? **1 Kings 8:46-50**. Did God forgive Bethsaida and Chorazin for their sins? Why not? **Matthew 11:20-24**. Will God kill everyone unless they repent? **Luke 13:1-5**. What must happen before your sins are blotted out? **Acts 3:19**. Are all men commanded to repent? **Acts 17:30**. If men do not repent, what will God do? **Revelation 2:5, 16, 21-22**.

Are there some people God will not forgive? **Nahum 1:3**. Will He forgive a guilty person who has not repented? **Numbers 14:18**. Does God enjoy killing sinners? What does He want? **Ezekiel 33:11**. Does God sometimes require PROOF of this repentance before He forgives us? **Acts 26:20**. What condition did John the Baptist put on baptism? **Luke 3:8**.

John had good reason to doubt the intentions of these Pharisees; to doubt the sincerity of their “repentance”. So John required fruits – proof – they had repented. Then he would have been happy to forgive them, or rather, to baptize them so that God would. These are all examples for us – to judge as God judges. God makes a judgment – says that someone has sinned, and such and such is the penalty.

Then when – IF – the person repents, God forgives them. Otherwise, He will “*by no means clear the guilty*”. And why should He? The whole point of repentance is to give a person a chance to do better next time. If they don’t believe they have done anything wrong *what’s the point of canceling the penalty for their sins?? They can’t do better next time because as far as they are concerned, they did just fine this time!*

This is our example. When you judge someone for sinning against you personally, IF they repent, you MUST forgive them – it may not be easy, but you must, if you expect God to forgive your sins, right? **Luke 11:4**. We forgive those who sin against us **in the exact same way as God forgives those who sin against Him**. It’s a simple, three step process:

1. Judgment – a sin has been committed
2. Sentencing – the penalty for that sin.
3. Here it forks,
 - 3a. IF he repents, forgive him. Or
 - 3b. If he doesn’t repent, don’t forgive him.

DON’T FORGIVE THE GUILTY

Some will say “Not forgiving someone?? That’s not Christian!” – so you can ask them “has God forgiven Satan?” They will surely respond with something like “well, God still loves Satan, but He has to imprison him for everyone else’s good” – and you can respond “exactly!”

See, that’s all you’re doing here. This person sinned against you. This doesn’t mean you have free license to steal from them, lie to them, kill them – it simply means they owe you a debt. You still have to love them, which as you just learned in the last lesson means you must not harm them in any way. **But sometimes love requires you to shun someone to show them their behavior is unacceptable.**

If you continue to associate with this person who has harmed you, whom who have rebuked and who refuses to make it right... you are tacitly accepting that person's behavior. You are condoning their sin by tolerating it. That doesn't help that person – it just encourages them to do the same, and worse, to someone else.

Does God ever tell you to shun anyone? **2 Thessalonians 3:14**. Should you avoid a brother who “walks disorderly”? **Verse 6**. Should you even refuse to eat at the same table as an idolatrous brother? **1 Corinthians 5:9-11**.

This is not the lesson on marking unbelievers and heretics in the church – we'll get to that in time. But there are times when God does not forgive people, and times when He expects us not to forgive them either.

HIS MERCY... FAILS?

I've said several times when a person repents, they receive mercy. This is true. However, there are times when you have a right to be suspicious of someone's “repentance”. Such as when they've repented over and over again and yet never actually changed. As an example, let's look at the history of Israel...

Start in **Judges 2:11-15**. Israel sinned, God punished them, and they repented. God promptly raised up a judge because He felt sorry for them, the judge delivered them from the punishment (**verse 16**). But they mostly ignored the judge, sinned, and as soon as the judge died they sinned even more (**verses 17-19**).

So God cursed them a bit (**verses 20-21**), and the cycle was repeated (**Judges 3:7-11**), they repented again (**verses 12-15, 30**). And then it was repeated again (**Judges 4:1-3, 23-24**). And again (**Judges 6:1-7**). But this time, God was a bit testy before He simply “forgave” them, He gave them a stern lecture (**verses 8-10**), but He did deliver them again, and in a particularly spectacular fashion (**Judges 7:1-22**), and eventually Israel was saved (**Judges 8:28**). And guess what? The cycle happened again! (**verses 33-34**).

The process of getting out of the punishment was much more complicated this time, and it isn't clear exactly what happened. Nevertheless, when it was over... Israel sinned again! (**Judges 10:6**). And God again punished them with slavery (**verses 7-9**). And Israel again repented! **Verse 10**. But how did God respond this time? Did He again give them mercy – which they had proven for nearly 400 years that they did not deserve, appreciate, or learn anything from? **Verses 11-14**.

God refused to forgive them, saying “go to your other gods, get THEM to save you!” Well, God, being the softy that He is, was touched by their efforts this time (**verses 15-16**), and did deliver them one last time. But this was basically the death knell of the judges period – after this, God put into motion a chain of events that led to them getting a king, which led to a completely new series of problems.

But without getting into that, 500 years of judges, kings, sins and captivities went by, with Israel repenting regularly and sinning even more regularly, God finally said something that simply doesn't fit with most people's idea of God; does God ever get tired of repenting? **Jeremiah 15:6**. Can a people's repeated repentance get so tiresome to God, that even if men God really liked such as Moses and Samuel interceded for people, God wouldn't listen? **Verse 1**.

What did they do to the prophets and teachers God sent them? **2 Chronicles 36:16**. And did it get so bad, that God would no longer forgive them, no matter what they said or did? Same verse, and **2 Kings 23:25-26**. Three generations after King Manasseh's sins, a great king repented for Israel, and while God briefly postponed the punishment **nothing he could say would change God's mind this time!**

Did God promise there would come a time when He would not listen to them? **1 Samuel 8:18**. Did God refuse to pardon Saul? **1 Samuel 15:24-29**. Did God refuse to accept Esau's repentance? **Hebrews 12:17**. What did Joshua say about God's forgiveness? **Joshua 24:19**.

MERCY IS NOT KINDNESS

If that's true, why does Psalms say over and over "*His mercy endures forever*"? Well, it doesn't. Not really. **Psalms 136** is translated from Hebrew and in Hebrew the word for mercy is *racham*. This word, used in verses like **Proverbs 28:13**, actually means mercy – the forgiveness of a judgment.

But the vast majority of times you read the word "mercy" in your OT, it was translated from a different Hebrew word, *checed*. This word was translated as "mercy" 149 times, as "kindness" 40 times, 30 times as lovingkindness, and as 9 other words a few times each. The problem being, every single time it should have been translated as "kindness". Just kindness. Not lovingkindness, or mercy or favor or pity, as it's also translated – just kindness.

Back to **Psalms 139**, unfortunately the OT mistranslates *chesed* most of the time, making understanding mercy in the OT difficult. *Chesed's* root word is *chasad*, which according to Strong's means "to be good, be kind". Not to be merciful, and not to forgive sins, repented-of or otherwise. So all of those Psalms that say "His mercy endures forever" should be translated "His KINDNESS endures forever". It makes much more sense in the context. Furthermore, you should be on your guard in the OT, for there are 149 "mercy's" that should read "kindness".

God used different words for a reason. When He meant forgiveness of sins – mercy – He said so. When He meant simply "kindness", He said so. He doesn't jumble mercy, kindness, love, compassion, and patience together in one big lump **because each word has a distinctly different meaning! Mercy is NOT love. Mercy is NOT kindness. Mercy is mercy!** It is important that you use the word God inspired, and not confuse it with other words. This is why we're building a dictionary as we go along.

It is of course possible to feel more than one emotion at a time, or to show someone mercy BECAUSE you love them – but love and mercy are not the same thing! Mercy means "the forgiveness of sins". And mercy is only shown to those who have repented. And those who repent do so only after they have been judged. It's a simple 1-2-3 of judgment, repentance, and mercy.

WHY MERCY FAILS

Why does God's mercy fail? **Jonah 2:8**. [note: *mercy* here is actually *kindness*]. Does God take away His mercy from people? **Jeremiah 16:5**. [This time, *mercy* is translated from *racham*, which actually *does* mean mercy]. Sometimes, after you sin repeatedly or show clear evidence your heart is not in the right place, does God demand proof that you have indeed repented? **Matthew 3:7-8**.

John KNEW these Pharisees were the same sort of people who had been sinning, repenting, being forgiven, and then sinning again for 1,500 years. And he KNEW their repentance, even though they SAID they repented, and might have even meant it on some level, would not be genuine! So he demanded FRUITS – WORKS to prove they really HAD repented!

At best their repentance was motivated by fear of the coming wrath of God – the plagues of Revelation. Getting baptized out of hope that God will save you from the last plagues is not repentance; it's simply self-interest. While it might scare you into righteousness for a few years, it will never produce true conversion because you didn't repent from the heart – only from fear of plagues.

That's why churches built on prophecy always fail to produce much fruit – the membership is there for the wrong reasons. They're there because they fear boils, earthquakes, and flying scorpions – and because they love the mystery and excitement of Revelation. They're not there because they love righteousness. That's why I teach, relatively speaking, very little prophecy. If you have made it this far in this course, it's probably because you love truth; because understanding the nature of God excites you. Not just because you are "*fleeing the wrath to come*".

HOW TO TEST REPENTANCE

But many will say "but God told Peter even if his brother sinned against him 490 times (70x7), and repents, he **MUST** forgive him!" (**Matthew 18:22**). And that is true! But what is repentance? Seeing your works and hating them, and stopping them. So if someone comes to God and says "I repent of stealing" – while their hand is **AT THAT VERY MINUTE** in the cookie jar – then **IT ISN'T REPENTANCE!** And if God **KNOWS**, by a person's acts the repentance is a **LIE**, it doesn't count as repentance at all!

God **IS** patient, and will forgive people over and over again; but the more chances they have, the less willing He is to forgive them for the same old sin. The more He tries to teach you – and the more you rebel – the more He will have to see actual **PROOF** you've changed before He forgives you. Why did Paul receive mercy? **1 Timothy 1:13**.

Paul received mercy because he was ignorant; this ties back to grace again, for where there is no law, there is no sin (**Romans 4:15**). On the other hand, when someone knows the law and repeatedly rebels, can there be a sacrifice to cover their sins? **Hebrews 10:26**.

If someone tells us they repent, we should give them the same benefit of the doubt we expect God to give us – on the other hand, if we have a serious, plausible reason to doubt their repentance, we have God's example to ask for proof of that repentance before we accept them as a brother again.

All of the examples from the past few pages show you there are times when you should forgive your brother immediately – and times when you shouldn't forgive him at all. And if he stubbornly refuses to repent, God even commands you to shun him. Not necessarily those in the world – God doesn't hold them to as high a standard, nor should you, they're under a different covenant. But for those in the church, you have a right to demand they not sin against you, and if they do – a right to demand repentance.

MATTHEW 18 – RESOLVING CONFLICT

This is the final answer on how to deal with conflict among brethren in the church. There is no more important scripture in the Bible on this subject. We already read the last half of the chapter, which gave us the example of implementing this command; but now it's time to read the command itself in **Matthew 18:15-18**. There are three plain steps there:

1. If your brother sins against you, tell him (rebuke him, as **Luke 17:3** says). If he hears you and repents (**Luke 17:4**), great! You have your brother back!
2. If he won't listen, take one or two witnesses with you; **mutual** friends, if possible. They will tell you if you are out of line, or confirm you if you are not. Either way, they provide a legal witness for the fact that he won't hear you.
3. Take it before the church. This doesn't mean the *ministry*, **but the entire church**. Remember what you read earlier in **1 Corinthians 6:1-5**. This is the entire congregation sorting this out.

And then if he doesn't listen, he is put out of the church **and everyone there knows exactly why**. No closed-door meetings or quiet dismissals of members for "ministerial reasons". If a person sins, and they won't listen when you tell them one-on-one, then gradually their shameful sin will be exposed before first, two more witnesses, then the entire congregation if they refuse to repent. This is a powerful motivation for a person to be reasonable in the first two steps.

Again, this doesn't mean the minister announces this person has committed a certain sin, and will be asked to leave the group; this means the person's sin will be announced *by the person wronged*, and then the two witnesses will tell their version of what happened at the second meeting, and the alleged sinner will also tell his side. Then the entire congregation will judge – and if they are all seeking truth, they should all "*be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*" (**1 Corinthians 1:10**).

Of course, the whole church being perfectly joined together is an ideal that rarely if ever happens, but it's what we work towards. This process is identical in both the Old and the New Testaments, for example compare what you just read to **Deuteronomy 17:2-7**.

There are many tie-in scriptures, this was God's plan from the beginning – but practically no one deals with problems this way today in any church. In fact, I'd dare to go so far as to say that NO ONE deals with their problems this way.

THE FIRST STEP

Most people have heard the scripture "*A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver*" (**Proverbs 25:11**). Everyone loves it because it sounds flowery, says nothing, and doesn't quite make sense. You'll find most "favorite verses" are like that. But if you read the CONTEXT, you'll find it is talking about step one of **Matthew 18**'s resolution.

Read **Proverbs 25:9**. If you have a problem *debate it with your neighbor privately!* That's step one! Most people today, rather than confronting the person who wronged them, will complain to everyone else on Earth about it; is that what this scripture recommends?

What does God think of gossiping (tale-bearing in the KJV)? **Leviticus 19:16**. [Note this verse is the immediate context to **verse 17**, which we discussed a few moments ago; because **verse 17** is also describing step one – commanding you not to tolerate your neighbor's sin without saying something about it].

Did Paul tell the church to refuse to give money to young widows? **1 Timothy 5:11-12**. Why? **Verse 13**. What does gossiping do? **Proverbs 16:28**. Should you avoid gossipers? **Proverbs 20:19**. If gossiping is eliminated, does most trouble go with it? **Proverbs 26:20-22**. What do the righteous do when they have a problem? **Proverbs 11:13**.

So, it is clear now that God hates gossip. So back to **Proverbs 25:9**, debate your cause with your neighbor privately, and don't tell ANYONE about it unless he refuses to hear you! Why? **Verse 10**. Because if you have a problem with me, that you haven't confronted me about, and you tell it to a righteous friend, he will say "have you told him this??" and you'll say "well, no, I, uh..." and he'll say "I don't want to hear this! Talk to me *after* you've talked to him about it, or take your gossip somewhere else!"

Talking about someone's sins against you before you've talked to them about it will earn you SHAME in a Godly nation "*and your infamy will not go away*". So handle step one PRIVATELY!

...But also handle it sanely, and reasonably; what is a huge offense to you, may have been completely innocent on his part, or he may be ignorant of how it affected you. So **verse 11** tells you "*A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver*" – which, now that you know the context, simply means to

be *tactful*. You don't need to jump down his throat until you KNOW he won't listen to you. And all of this makes a lot more sense out of **verse 12** – being tactful is being “*a wise reprover upon an obedient ear*”.

You have to be in control of yourself, not ranting and raving at someone who has no idea why you're angry. But he also has to be truly willing to hear you and change if he's wrong; this system works perfectly only when there is both “a wise reprover” AND “an obedient ear”.

And that leads us back to **verse 8**, still the context, where it warns you not to rush off to condemn your neighbor until you are sure you're not the one who's wrong; otherwise, you'll tell your neighbor he sinned against you, he'll explain he didn't, you'll refuse to listen to him and so you'll go to step two and bring witnesses, and then you'll look like an idiot in front of everyone when “*your neighbor has put you to shame*”.

THE SECOND STEP

If you and your neighbor cannot work your differences out privately, there is only one reason: **Proverbs 13:10**. One of you – or both of you – is too proud to listen to reason. Both the accuser and the defender have to be willing to change if they're in the wrong. When you rush off to accuse your neighbor, you need to be aware that if it turns out you're the one who wronged him, you need to be able to swallow that and apologize, not only for the first sin, but for making a big stink besides.

With the second step, you are in a position where neither of you can convince the other so you're in a deadlock. If left unresolved, this will mean you glare at each other in church, avoid each other, start a “family feud” between your friends, and all sorts of problems; or, you could both pretend this never happened, sweep it under the rug, hug, and pretend to be friends.

The problem will appear to be resolved, but in fact it will be just under the surface festering, waiting for a new excuse to pop up and next time it will be harder to resolve. Does God like “solving” problems that way? **Proverbs 10:18**. “Hiding hatred with lying lips” is what the majority of the world does every day when they pretend to be pleasant to people they loathe. God calls those people fools.

Next you need witnesses. Actually, their function is a combination of arbiter and witness. As an arbiter, if one of you is obviously in the wrong – and in most cases, at *least* one person is – these witnesses can listen to the argument for a time and then add their views, which, if he is sincere, should make the person they condemn pause and rethink their position. And they may well condemn both parties, if both have behaved childishly.

If this step succeeds, these witnesses are also bound under the command “*discover not a secret to another*”. If the problem is solved, there is no need to tell anyone else about it. But if their arbitration fails, they are witnesses for step three, and proof the first two steps were followed correctly.

As a witness, they are there to gather evidence of the “crime” – although that may be an overly dramatic label for the problem, which might be as simple as one neighbor dumping his garbage where his neighbor can smell it. Or it might be a personal offense, or an actual crime.

But regardless, the purpose of this process is to avoid taking a brother to court “*before the unbelievers*” (**1 Corinthians 6:1-7**). The church should be strong enough to deal with these problems internally. And that's what step two is about. Everything God does requires witnesses (**2 Corinthians 13:1**). You yourself count as one witness, but you need one more to make two (**John 8:13-18**), and three witnesses make a much stronger case (**John 5:31-37**) [Jesus, John, and the Father made three].

Naturally, if you take your best friend with you, that's not going to count as much at the trial as taking "*the least esteemed in church*" (**1 Corinthians 6:4**). The more impartial, the better the witness is. This witness can go to your homes, and view the situation and see who is to blame – and then report his findings to the church in step three.

This process existed in the Old Testament. Examples such as **Deuteronomy 17:8-12, 19:15-21** are common. Often step one is implied; then "two or three witnesses" are brought – step two. Then step three goes before the judges God placed over the congregation. God had warnings for these judges in **2 Chronicles 19:6-10**.

THE THIRD STEP

At this point, all privacy is lost, and "*them that sin, rebuke before all*" (**1 Timothy 5:20**). Why? "*that others also may fear*". The context of this is specifically elders who sin (**verse 19**), but at step three it applies equally to all who refuse to hear and repent in the first two steps.

Now the whole church judges this problem. In the Old Covenant God expected very little of the people. Civil authority was given to the judges and religious authority to the priests who together worked on judging cases the people couldn't resolve amongst themselves (**Deuteronomy 17:8-12**). The people were left to listen to whatever the priests and the judges (or later the kings) would decide – and then bound to obey whatever they said.

But in the New Covenant, God puts much more responsibility on every individual Christian. We are being groomed to be kings and priests (**Revelation 5:10**), so the entire congregation is now given the job that was only given to the priests and the judges/kings in the OC – **1 Corinthians 6** is the classic passage about our modern responsibility to judge between our brethren.

If you want to sit in church, do nothing but listen to what the preacher says, obey his edicts, and "pay, pray, and shut up", then the OC is for you – you might as well just join any modern Protestant church. But if you want the NC, along with that knowledge, understanding, and reward comes much greater responsibility.

With that said, this controversy is now brought before the entire congregation. They all have a chance to offer their views, *but even more important than their opinion is their understanding!* Most churches deal with all problems in secret, involving as few people as possible; this desire to "protect the privacy" of the disputants has several deadly side-effects:

1. The privacy always fails anyway – partially, at least – and gives rise to rumor, gossip, and busybodies spreading true, semi-true, and outright false stories about all involved. We are naturally curious, and the desire to know what happened leads to speculation, surmise, and guessing about what happened – which is always far worse than what actually did happen.
2. Someone caught committing some serious sin, who is reprimanded behind closed doors by the ministry, then shows up to church later as if nothing ever happened. Besides the aforementioned rumors, this causes many to say "well, he did it and HE got away with it, so why shouldn't I?"

When problems are dealt with publicly, yes, it shames the person who sinned. Is a sinner feeling shame a bad thing? **Psalms 35:26, Psalms 83:16-17**. What does a person who refuses to hear in steps one and two deserve? **Proverbs 13:18**. Did Paul shame people in the NT? **1 Corinthians 15:34**.

Why does God command us to suffer that shame when we sin? **Jeremiah 3:24-4:2**. That shame encourages us to change, and more importantly – firmly cements the event in our mind, to encourage us never to sin again.

3. But even more importantly, is there another reason? **Deuteronomy 17:13**. Notice that is the context of the passage about judging between brethren. This final point is most important of all; when everyone knows how sin is dealt with, **everyone knows their sin will be dealt with the same way** *“and all will hear and fear” to do the same thing!*

Dealing with a problem in secret robs the entire church of a chance to see God’s judgment and justice done! Yes, it’s embarrassing to the person who sinned *but that should be a lesson to them not to sin again*. And a lesson to everyone else that when they DO sin, they should repent at step one next time! *“And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you” (Deuteronomy 19:20).*

When children grow up in such a church they learn judgment and justice is applied equally to everyone. They see impartiality and learn righteousness and they learn to expect these things from brethren – and they learn that the minister’s kids are judged under the same rules as they themselves are.

That is the goal – to teach righteousness in the church, righteousness to its children, set a righteous example for this evil world, and ultimately to teach everyone to *“henceforth commit no more any such evil”*. The bottom line of all of this is in **1 Corinthians 11:31-32**. If the sinner had judged himself, and gone to his brother and repented before his brother came to him and rebuked him, **he would not have been judged by the church or by God!**

And the Bible commands you to do just that – **Matthew 5:23-24**. If you go to pray to God, and remember there that your brother has reason to hate you, because you sinned against him, GO! Repent to him, before you pray again, because as long as you know you have wronged your brother, *God won’t hear you anyway (John 9:31).*

THE THIRD STEP FAILS

But what if, after this third step, the person still won’t listen? Well, **Matthew 18** tells us *“let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican”*. Why? **2 Thessalonians 3:14**. If he won’t hear you, the witnesses, or the church, then separate yourself from him *so that he can be ashamed!*

If he is put out of the church, and some of the brethren go around secretly and lend him a comforting ear, **they are enabling his sins. They are helping him not to be ashamed! And fighting the purpose of God! And as they have helped him not to feel ashamed, so they will bear some of the shame from his sin before God.**

A case in point is in **1 Corinthians 5**. A man was deep in sin, and rather than mourning, the church was proud of themselves for putting up with his sin! (**verse 2**). More on that later. First, notice in **verse 4** that **when they were ALL gathered together**, this man was to be put out. Not an announcement by the ministry that “Brother John was excommunicated for lewdness this week – don’t ask”, but step three of **Matthew 18** – *all* the church judging this man!

And why were they supposed to do this? Because they hated this man? **Verse 5**. No! For his own good! SO THAT his spirit might be saved *in the day of the Lord Jesus!* Now, there were also benefits to the church as Paul says in **verses 6-7**. The church needs to be kept clean, and at times that means getting rid of sin-riddled members who won’t let anyone correct them.

The point of all this though, is that this sort of behavior cannot be tolerated from a brother – because toleration is condoning. It’s one thing when it’s someone in the world (**verses 9-11**). It’s something else when it’s someone who considers himself your equal, your brother in Christ – and yet commits an obvious sin and refuses to repent.

When you part company with this man, as a group, and shame him – it gives him something to think about. And sometimes, it actually helps him learn the truth in this life – even after step three “fails”. There is probably a reference to this man in the second letter to the Corinthians, in **2 Corinthians 7:8-12**. Particularly the last verse, referring to the sinner and the sinned-against. It seems this man repented from **2 Corinthians 2:5-7**. And when he repented, Paul commanded the church to forgive him.

That’s all God is after – repentance. As soon as that happens, God is merciful. Until then “*it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (**Hebrews 10:31**). In this case at least, it looks like the process worked out well, because the man repented, was accepted by the church again, and went on with his Christian life. But the bottom line of step three is laid out clearest in **Proverbs 22:10**.

BUT WHAT IF...

The process is simple; you tell your brother his fault alone. If that doesn’t work, you take one or two friends with you. If that doesn’t work, you take it to the church. If that doesn’t work, you shun the man.

But what if you have no church? Or what if you can find no friends to go with you? Or what if the person who wronged you is not a part of the church? The first step is valid no matter what – you don’t need a church to “*debate your cause with your neighbor himself*”, to “*go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone*”. Anyone can do that **and everyone should**.

But **Matthew 18**, while it applies to everyone, was specifically written to the modern church. Where there is no church, or the person you’re dealing with isn’t a NC Christian, the second step is greatly weakened, and the third doesn’t apply at all. You could take worldly friends with you for step two, but they could hardly “judge righteous judgment”, since they themselves are not righteous, nor do they understand God’s judgment. So they would probably be worse than useless in most situations.

Still, you follow what you can; if you tell your neighbor his fault and he won’t listen, and steps two and three do not apply, then you have to decide whether this person who is under, at best, the OC can be expected to understand that he has sinned against you. If not, then you have to let it go. Accept that he is deceived and “knows not what he does” and move on with your life.

If however you do think it is something well within his grasp, say, stealing \$2,256 from you, then hold it against him; let him know that he has wronged you, and until he makes it right you will have no dealings with him, and “*let him be as a heathen man and a publican to you*”. You might find out that having no further dealings with him was \$2,256 well spent. Or you might just shame him enough to repay you, and you will “*regain your brother*”.

Again, remember your limitations; refusing to associate with someone you consider an unrepentant sinner will not kill this person; it will not block a sincere babe in Christ off from contact with God. It will only deny them the dubious pleasure of your company.

If you’re wrong, don’t worry – they can find a hundred churches within a ten minute drive that will accept them no matter how they act. But if they want to associate with a true brother of Christ, there are standards they should have to live up to.

WHY NOT FORGIVE?

It’s important to understand that when I say “hold it against him”, and “do not forgive him”, it doesn’t mean you walk around all day long stewing over how this person wronged you, and how much you hate him. It’s foolish and unhealthy – physically and spiritually. Just accept that he has wronged you, will not be your

friend until he changes, **and move on with your life and forget about it. LET IT GO!** What does God command you to do? **Proverbs 24:19-20.**

God says “*fret not yourself because of evil men*”. So don’t obsess over the jerk who stole from you, or the person who slighted you, or the man who hates you! **MOVE ON!** But neither should you be their friend, and pretend it never happened and tell them that you and God love them just as they are! For in the same chapter, what does God say? **Proverbs 24:24-25.**

If you go to those evil men, thieves, adulterers, slanderers, and say, “you are righteous”, you will be *cursed*, and nations shall abhor you! And that’s *EXACTLY* what you are doing if you forgive an unrepentant sinner, or pretend he is still your brother in Christ while he rebelliously flaunts the law of God!

But if you **REBUKE** those men, you shall be a delight to God, and **BLESSED BY HIM FOR IT!** So not forgiving someone doesn’t mean harboring bitterness and resentment in your soul, and consciously or unconsciously running their crimes against you through your mind over and over and fretting over their judgment, as I’ve seen so many do. **LET IT GO!** It is not your **JOB** to punish them! Nor is it your concern how or when it happens (**Romans 12:19**).

All this simply means that you deal with their sins against you – you turn the other cheek. It does **NOT** mean you pretend this never happened! It does **NOT** mean you will call the man who slapped you your brother in Christ before you rebuke him and he repents!

God never *once* commands you to forgive someone without repentance. And He never **ONCE** forgives anyone without repentance! He may *overlook* their sins through grace; but He never *forgets* their sins until those sins are “*confessed and forsaken*” (**Proverbs 28:13**).

So someone who covers his sins, denies they exist, and resents you judging him – he won’t receive mercy. Only those who CONFESS and FORSAKE their sins get mercy. The rest are not forgiven by God, and should not be forgiven by us.

Christ did **NOT** promise to forgive you of sins of which you have not repented. Remember, repentance means to **CHANGE** and **STOP** the sin. And if you don’t **STOP** those sins of which you are aware, you cannot be cleansed (**Exodus 34:6-7**).

God will not clear, or forgive the guilty – unto the third and fourth generation! Talk about holding a grudge! And yet He is a merciful God? How does that make sense? How can a God who won’t forgive someone also be a merciful God at the same time? **Psalms 86:5** answers.

God is merciful to those who call on Him; does that mean He is merciful to everyone who calls Him “Lord”? **Matthew 7:21-23.** What must you do to call on God – and therefore, to receive mercy? **2 Timothy 2:19.** To whom does God show mercy? **2 Samuel 22:26.**

But as I said, this does not mean those whom you don’t forgive occupy a festering sore of hatred in your heart, a bitterness which you carry with you and use to spite these men. When you’ve judged them, and they’ve rejected you *let it go*. “*Fret not yourself because of evil men*”. You’ve said what you have to say, done all you could do, and now it’s in God’s hands. They need never cross your mind again.

But that requires faith. Faith that God will make it right. Faith that you won’t go hungry because this man stole from you. Faith that he will “get what’s coming to him” in God’s good time. But mostly, faith that it really doesn’t matter. A few thousand dollars more or less won’t mean anything a hundred years from now. Whether you behaved yourself in a fashion that reflects well on God, will – **Proverbs 24:29.**

When you properly understand your responsibility to judge sinners, and when you have learned to love your enemies, you'll find this gets very easy. You won't walk around stewing over the problems **because you've dealt with them.**

The reason people hold grudges, rehash arguments, complain to each other, gossip and gripe, is that **they are telling themselves and everyone else things they should have said to the sinner. When you learn to "Debate your cause with your neighbor", you won't be walking around rehashing conflicts in your mind because it will have already been said.**

Much more about that in the next lesson.

TOLERANCE IS NOT LOVE

Now let's clear up some misconceptions. People today believe "loving your enemies", "being merciful", and "forgiving people's sins" means ignoring, tolerating, and condoning those sins. The best simple example of that comes from the Bible, naturally, in **1 Corinthians 5**. We've referred to this chapter many times to make several different points, but now we're going to address the primary point of this chapter.

Start in **verses 1-2**, do you notice anything odd about this verse? Skip over the sin itself in **verse 1**, and focus on Paul's rebuke in **verse 2**; "*And in place of feeling sorrow, you are pleased with yourselves*" (**BBE**). Why would they feel proud of themselves for having this sin in their midst? The rest of the verse answers that they were proud *because* they had not put him out of the church!

Why would that make them proud? **Because they were so "loving" they could overlook this person's sin!** That's why in **verses 6-7**, Paul told them "*your glorying is not good*", and "*a little leaven leavens the whole lump*", and directed them to put this person out of the church (the situation having already progressed to step 3 of **Matthew 18**, since at least two witnesses had already sent their testimony to Paul (**1 Corinthians 1:11**)).

I've personally witnessed this same problem in many modern churches; they are *proud* of how many sinners are in their church. Because it means they are *merciful, tolerant, and loving!* As you know now, it means nothing of the sort; but that's what they believe, and why they are proud of themselves.

Don't misunderstand, they never love the SIN! They always deplore that. But they say "the sinner is growing; he's trying to do better" – even if the fruits show the exact opposite. They are proud of themselves for being able to "love the sinner, not the sin"; in fact, it means they are MORE loving than God is, for God won't tolerate such things around Him!

Paul said they should be ashamed of themselves for putting up with such sin and letting it leaven the church, but they were glorying that they were more "loving" than others, in that THEY were "spiritual" enough to tolerate this sin, and love this sinner who was "coming along".

The fact is, they were not loving the sinner by allowing him to continue in his sin unchecked; they were hating him (**Proverbs 13:24**). They were breaking the command of God not to allow a brother to sin without rebuking him (**Leviticus 19:17**), so they were bearing sin for him.

So tolerance is not love. If you love someone, you will get them to depart from evil.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

So why is mercy misunderstood? There are obvious reasons which go without saying, but the reason I want to point out stems from a subconscious misunderstanding of **Matthew 7:2**; I've had people say to me "I'm

glad God doesn't judge me the way you do!" or "I would be terrified to judge people like you – how would God treat my sins??"

Matthew 7:2 says "...with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged...". The point was clearly that if you judge someone, they repent, and you don't forgive them – God won't forgive you (**Luke 11:4**). But the world – without ever putting it in these words – believes if they don't judge sinners for their sins, God won't judge *them* for theirs.

That tolerant church in Corinth was pleased because they put up with an adulterer in their midst; and according to **Matthew 7:2**, because *they* tolerated the adultery of others, therefore God should tolerate *their* adultery! Because THAT'S how they judged others, so that's how God should judge them! Right?

No, of course not. God judges according to law; right and wrong don't change for you, me, or even for God Himself. But what changes is the *punishment* for wrongdoing!

Remember the process goes like this:

1. Judgment: "You have sinned by doing ____."
2. Sentencing: "The penalty of that sin is ____."
3. Repentance: "I'm sorry, I'll never do it again."
4. Mercy: "Very well, you are forgiven", or in some cases "The sentence is reduced to ____."

The judgment is based on law, and will never change, for God's law is eternal. The sentencing is also prescribed by the law already; **Romans 6:23**, and most of Exodus through Deuteronomy. So that won't change either.

But repentance, explanation of mitigating circumstances, these things can modify the *sentence* of the sin, but they never change *whether or not a sin was committed*. The mercy can only lessen (and sometimes eliminate) the penalty for the sin.

But when people resist judging, when they violently cast you out of their church for condemning their worship on Sunday, all the arguments they use revolve around **trying to change or eliminate the judgment itself**, denying that the sin exists, that it matters, or that you are qualified to tell them about it.

None of those things are negotiable; and God certainly didn't intend for the scriptures about mercy, kindness, love, pity and compassion to be used as hammers to beat judgment into a different shape, so that judgment becomes a bruised and battered shadow of its former self.

In this way, modern churches have, like the Pharisees before them, passed over "judgment, mercy, and faith", even as they loudly proclaim their faith and parade their tolerance of sin before all, calling it mercy. Yet they pass right over true mercy, trampling it in the mud along with the judgment they despise so much.

Today, we pull that judgment out of the mud a bit and wipe it off; but when Jesus returns, judgment will be riding a white horse before the armies of heaven, "*To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him*" (**Jude 1:15**).

This work is completely non-denominational and is meant to fulfill Christ's great commission to "*preach the gospel to every creature*" (**Mark 16:15**). **This publication is not to be sold**; "*freely ye have received, freely give*" (**Matthew 10:8**).

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Nathaniel Burson
10758 Hwy 155 South
Big Sandy, TX 75755

Questions@TheSimpleAnswers.com

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