

“MERCY, ME?”

Based on Matthew 18:21-35

One of the kids asked me the other day, “Mom, how would the world would work if we didn’t have money?” “Well,” I said, “I suppose we would have to learn to share a whole lot. We would trade items: ripe tomatoes from the garden for sewing a zipper into a pair of pants.”

Waxing philosophically, I continued. “In some ways, it might be like the Bible says. Everyone would have to think about what they are really good at in life,” thinking of Paul’s sermon about talents and gifts of the Spirit. “God has given everyone a special knack at something. If we were to really craft our skill, and then share it with others around us; and they likewise, sharing their talent with us, we could survive quite nicely. A fresh apple pie for bookkeeping. Gardening for babysitting. Carpooling to work for a sandwich at lunch.”

“It’ll never work, Mom” was the answer when I had finished my little sermonette! “Probably right,” I thought to myself. “But it’s nice to think sometimes, that it could.”

Here’s the disturbing reality. By Biblical standards, the idea of communal living, sharing and growing, should work. We’ve

all heard of small clusters of families, living together, often away from the prying eyes of the world, working out lives with such ideals. In fact, as I understand it, at the heart of Communist based political theory, is the principal that everyone in a country works together for the common good of all.

But history has shown us, that given time, somewhere along the way, things change. The “All for one, and one for all” ideal shifts. A few voices begin to carry more weight than others. Greed rears its ugly head. The satisfaction of controlling others by force or by threat looms over the vision of what was intended. The seeds of discontent sprout. King’s Arthur’s round table, with no beginning and no end and no head, changes into a pecking order of ‘who’s in charge’ and ‘who is to follow.’ We have seen this happen to countries. But it can happen in our families. It can happen in the workplace. It can even happen on the pickleball court, the book club, and if we are not careful, in our churches as well. Fairness and kindness become fickle friends.

As does mercy. Mercy. You need it when you need it. And when you need it, you need it now. Not tomorrow. Not after a committee meeting. Not after you’ve had a chance to sleep on it. A situation has arisen in your heart, that is causing you great strain, grief, or shame, and you need relief. Now. You beg, you plead, you cry out: to those you love, your closest friends, God, “Help me. Forgive me. Have mercy upon me.” If you are fortunate, you find that grace, that kind word from a friend, that listening ear in the coffee shop. The weight is lifted, or released a little from your shoulders, and you can see the rest of your day with greater clarity. Mercy.

“Ah,” says Jesus. “Now how does it work when the shoe is on the other foot? When it is your turn to be the listening ear, the voice of forgiveness or the touch of kindness, do you respond with the same mercy?” “Of course,” you might quickly say. “I’m a good Christian, I follow the example of Christ.” But what about when the mercy you are asked to give is towards someone you are angry at, don’t care for very much, disagree with their views on things. Are you still able to give mercy? Are you able to set aside your

first reaction, and listen with care?

The servant was not. It was fine when he was on the receiving end of kindness and grace. But an entirely different matter when he was asked to respond in kind.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ (v32-33)

Why was mercy not shared? Because of greed? Because of control? Because of a need to hear one’s voice above all other? The servant was thinking “It’s about me!” and God is whispering, “No, its about us!” “There is only one ‘I’ in this world, and it is Me. Remember when I spoke to Moses in the desert?

“I am who I am.”
~Exodus 3:14

My friends, one of the things about making our way through this earthly life, is grappling with the truth that it is not about you and it is not about me, it is about us, whether that ‘us’ is a gathering for worship, a gathering around a table for a meal, or gathering around that pickleball court for a game. We live in a world that says ‘YOU’ are the most important thing in this world and we live with a faith that challenges us to live lives centered around “US”. We’re going to get it wrong sometimes. We are going to struggle with it. But we are not to stop trying to live to this ideal. We are to push back against those things of the world that would tell us it is not worth the effort. Because Christ says it IS worth the effort.

In fact, our parable is even stronger at its conclusion.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”
(v35)

Here is the hard truth. Mercy is not an option. Whether you want to or not. Whether you feel like it or not. Whether you are angry or not. Mercy towards another is NOT an option. Here is another truth. This is hard heart work. Plain and simple. It will take a lifetime to accomplish.

So where do we rest our thoughts at the end of the day? Where do we turn in our moments of struggle on this matter? What does the Lord require of you?

“To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

~Micah 6:8