

MERCY: AN ATTRIBUTE OF GOD, THE VIRTUE OF HUMAN PERSONS

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Abstract

There is no disputing the fact that mercy is one of the attributes of God among other attributes like omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotent, love, justice, infinite, eternal, etc. The Bible, Tradition, and the whole faith life of the People of God provide unique proof that mercy is the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God." In this research, the writer is poised to reiterate this fact that mercy is the attribute of God as well as to posit that the human person can be virtuous only to the extent that it can replicate this attribute. It is obvious as was also identified in this research that in today's world the philosophy of teeth for tat, "do me I do you God no go vex", injustice and unforgiveness reigns supreme. The research therefore recommended that there is the need for humanity to realize that they are created in God's image therefore should imbibe the attribute of mercy towards each other.

Keywords: Mercy, Attribute, Virtue

Introduction

Genesis 1:26 states:..."And God said Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." Human beings no doubt are created in the image and likeness of God hence the need to imbibe the attribute of mercy towards each other. By this we do not mean to say that we are competing with God in showing mercy, rather, we intend to emphasize the fact that there is something of God's nature in us that can make us live more peacefully with one another in our society today.

Suffice to observe that God does not just do merciful things sometimes, nor does He have a merciful "side" to His character, as a human being might have. On the

contrary, He is always and everywhere and at all times merciful. Everything He does is an expression of His Mercy and of all of His other attributes too, all at once. All of His attributes are eternally in action. But if, on the other hand, mercy is understood in the Biblical sense as functional, then, even though it is called an attribute, it first of all denotes the results of the infinite and eternal love of God in world history, and especially in the history of mankind's salvation. In fact, both *hesed* (mercy in the Old Testament) as well as *eleos* (i.e. mercy in the New Testament) signify active manifestations of God's love toward mankind. In the Old Testament the manifestations found their expression in the calling and directing of the chosen people, and in the New Testament they were in the sending of the Son of God into the world and in the entire work of redemption.¹

God is known to be a God of mercy and grace. Understanding gravity of mercy is often difficult for people as we tend to be a generation of "I'll get him for that" and "I hope they get what they deserve." Many have developed a nature of harsh criticism and want others to get what they deserve coming to them; especially to those they don't like their faces. God, however, is merciful to even the worst offenders, sinners, and law-breakers. This means that even though He knows of our guilt, He doesn't always mete out the desired punishment. To elaborate and give credence to this point, Romans 3:23-24 says:... "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Simply, we are all sinners and do not meet the standards of righteousness that God intends us to have. However, through His mercy and grace He provides a way for our sins to be forgiven through our acceptance of Christ Jesus - even though we don't deserve it. It is by grace (which in this case is God's free gift of forgiveness) that mercy is shown to us because He loves us and only asks that we accept his Son by faith.

The attribute of God which we wish to affirm in this article is 'Mercy' and it is closely related to God's 'Goodness'. Some see Mercy and Grace as being linked, like two sides of one coin. Grace being God's goodness positively bestowed on those who do not deserve it, and Mercy being God's goodness toward those in misery by withholding what they do deserve.

Before we attempt to better define God's "mercy" we should note some things. First, a synonym for "mercy" in the Bible is "compassion." Second, like all attributes, "mercy" is not a nature that has regard for or conditions toward the creature, it is an attribute of God within and of Himself, with no basis or regard for the creature or recipient. Third, "mercy" is not only a "feeling" or emotion that God has and is surely not a temporary mood, but it is also a power, an infinite and inexhaustible energy. Fourth, God's "mercy" is firstly directed toward Himself as He is tenderly affected toward Himself and constantly wills Himself to be most blessed, glorious and joyful. But we cannot fathom God's mercy toward us, much less toward Himself, so we will restrict our thoughts to His mercy toward His creation and His creatures, particularly mankind.

Definition of Terms

Mercy

We can define "mercy" as that attribute of God within the Divine nature that disposes Him to be actively compassionate toward His creatures, in both withholding what is due or deserved, and in His ready inclination to actively relieve the misery of fallenness. Thus "mercy" presupposes sin! Since the wages of sin is death, and sin always brings some form of misery, mercy toward us takes on meaning only in light of sin. Since all of our misery, trials, suffering, pain, punishment, death exists as a result of sin (universal and personal sin, relief and rescue from it (i.e. "mercy") becomes active and meaningful only after the effects of sin are realized. God was gracious toward the angels before He created mankind, and He was gracious toward Adam and Eve before their fall, but now we benefit from both His mercy and His grace.²

Saint Thomas Aquinas defined mercy in general as "the compassion in our hearts for another person's misery, a compassion which drives us to do what we can to help him." Divine Mercy, therefore, is the form that God's eternal love takes when he reaches out to us in the midst of our need and our brokenness. Whatever the name of our need or our misery might be - sin, guilt, suffering, or death - He is always ready to pour out his merciful, compassionate love for us, to help in time of need.³ Mercy can also refer to the goodness or love of God shown to those who are in misery or distress.

Attribute

Attribute comes from the Latin verb *attribuere*, which is made up the prefix *ad*, meaning “to”, and *tribuere* meaning “give or bestow.” An *attribute* is a quality or characteristic given to a person, group, or some other thing. It also denotes an abstraction belonging to or characteristic of an entity.⁴ Something attributed as belonging to a person, thing, group, etc.; a quality, character, characteristic, or property. The British Dictionary defines attribute as a property, quality, or feature belonging to or representative of a person or thing.⁵

Virtue

The word virtue derives from Latin: *virtus*, meaning moral excellence. A virtue is a trait or quality deemed to be morally good and thus is valued as a foundation of principle and good moral being. Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting collective and individual greatness. The opposite of virtue is vice.⁶

Immanuel Kant, in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, expresses true virtue as different from what commonly is known about this moral trait. In Kant's view, to be goodhearted, benevolent and sympathetic is not regarded as true virtue. The only aspect that makes a human truly virtuous is to behave in accordance with moral principles. Kant presents an example for more clarification: suppose that you come across a needy person in the street; if your sympathy leads you to help that person, your response does not illustrate your virtue. In this example, since you cannot afford helping all needy ones, you have behaved unjustly, and it is out of the domain of principles and true virtue. Kant applies the approach of four temperaments to distinguish truly virtuous people. According to Kant, among all people with diverse temperaments, a person with melancholy frame of mind is the most virtuous whose thoughts, words and deeds are on the bases of principles.⁷

Understanding Mercy as an Attribute of God

The God of mercy calls for the following in Micah 6:8: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” These are words to all mankind. Mercy is offered to you and me alike. He has shown us what is good and answers what is required of us. Micah asks God in Micah 7:18, “Who is a

God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.”

This passage shows that God enjoys being merciful, and is still showing mercy today. One example of God’s mercy today is the remarkable story of the prodigal son. He demanded for his portion of his father’s wealth which he extravagantly wasted. His father sighting him from a distance on his return ran to welcome him. This was a typical example of what God did for all sinners and He is still doing for all who are returning from their sinful ways. Note, Luke 1:50 says:… “His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.”⁸

There are many references about God’s mercy throughout the Bible. For instance, in Genesis 37 through 45 we find the story of Joseph, son of Jacob. God’s mercy toward Joseph’s brothers after their betrayal is certainly evident in this story. Other illustrations are found throughout the prayers of King David in the Psalms. God’s mercy is endless and evident throughout the ages to the present.

Saying that He is a God of mercy is a minimized description of what He is willing to do. Remember, in the first section we said God offers a pardon even though He knows of our guilt. Paul gives a good picture of this in [Ephesians 2:1-10](#): “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions; - it is by grace we are saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:6-10).

When the Lord takes away the guilt of sin, that it may not condemn us, he will break the power of sin, that it may not have dominion over us. If left to ourselves, our sins will be too hard for us; but God's grace shall be sufficient to subdue them, so that they shall not rule us, and then they shall not ruin us. When God forgives sin, he takes care that it never shall be remembered any more against the sinner. All who find pardoning mercy, cannot but wonder at that mercy; we have reason to stand amazed, if we know what it is. He casts their sins into the sea; not near the shore-side, where they may appear again, but into the depth of the sea, never to rise again. All their sins shall be cast there, for when God forgives sin, he forgives all.⁹

He will perfect that which concerns us, and with this good work will do all for us which our case requires, and which he has promised. These engagements relate to Christ, and the success of the gospel to the end of time, the future restoration of Israel, and the final prevailing of true religion in all lands. The Lord will perform his truth and mercy, not one jot or little drop of it shall fall to the ground: faithful is He that has promised, who also will do it.

Humanity has a lot to learn from this attribute of God. Bickering, personal vendetta and acrimony will be drastically reduced in our society if human beings may decide to emulate God. Remember humans are little "Gods" and are created in the image and likeness of God; therefore it beholds on humanity to crave for this virtue. For example, if mercy becomes our watchword in today's Nigeria, there will be no killings (political or ritual), militancy will become a thing of the past; there will be no kidnappings and embezzlement of public funds/resources will be no more and the Nigerian society will become a better place of abode for us all.

Properties of God's Mercy

- a. God's mercy is free. To set up merit is to destroy mercy. Nothing can deserve mercy, because we are polluted in our blood; nor can one force it. We may force God to punish us, but not to love us. I will love them freely says Prophet Hosea (14:4). Every link in the chain of salvation is wrought and interwoven with free grace. Election is free. He has chosen us in him, according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph 1:1). Justification is free since we are justified freely by his grace. Rom 3:24. Salvation is free.

According to His mercy He saved us (cf. Titus 3:3-7). Say not then, I am unworthy; for mercy is free. If God should show mercy to such only as are worthy, he would show none at all.

- b. God's mercy is an overflowing mercy; it is infinite. Plenteous in mercy. Psa 86:6. Rich in mercy. Eph 2:2. Multitude of tender mercies. Psa 51:1: The vial of wrath drops, but the fountain of mercy runs. The sun is not so full of light as God is of mercy. God has morning mercies. His mercies are new every morning. Lam 3:23. In the night his song shall be with me.
- c. God's mercy is eternal. The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. 1Ch 16:34. His mercy endureth for ever, is repeated twenty-six times in one psalm. Psa 136. The souls of the blessed shall be ever bathing themselves in this sweet and pleasant ocean of God's mercy. God's anger to his children lasts but a while, but his mercy lasts forever. Psa 103:17. As long as He is God, He will be showing mercy because His mercy is overflowing and ever flowing.
- d. God's mercy cannot be abused. Take heed of abusing the mercy of God. Suck not poison out of the sweet flower of God's mercy. Think not that because God is merciful, you may go on in sin; this is to make mercy your enemy. None might touch the ark but the priests, who by their office were more holy; so none may touch the ark of God's mercy but such as are resolved to be holy. To sin because mercy abounds is the devil's logic. He that sins because of mercy is like one that wounds his head because he has a plaster. He that sins because of God's mercy shall have judgement without mercy. Mercy abused turns to fury. If he blesses himself, saying, I shall have peace though I walk after the imaginations of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst, the Lord will not spare him, but the anger of the Lord, and his jealousy, shall smoke against that man. Deut 29:19, 20. We need to always bear this in mind that nothing is sweeter than mercy, when it is improved; nothing fiercer, when it is abused; as nothing is colder than lead when taken out of the mine, and nothing more scalding when it is heated. Nothing is blunter than iron, yet nothing is sharper when it is whetted. The mercy of the Lord is upon them that fear him. Psa 103:17. Mercy is not for them that sin and fear not, but for them that fear and sin not. God's mercy is a holy mercy; where it pardons it heals.

Characteristic of God's Mercy

God's mercies are:

- a. **Great** – Num. 14:18; Isa 54:7

Isaiah 54:7 "For a short time I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you.

- b. **Rich** – Ephesians 2:4-5 *4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even though we were dead in transgressions, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you are saved.*

- c. **Manifold** – Ne 9:27; Lam 3:32

Nehemiah 9:27 Therefore you delivered them into the hand of their adversaries, who oppressed them. But in the time of their distress they called to you, and you heard from heaven. In your abundant compassion you provided them with deliverers to rescue them from their adversaries.

- d. **Plenteous** – Ps 86:5, 15; 103:8

Psalm 86:5 Certainly O Lord, you are kind and forgiving, and show great faithfulness to all who cry out to you.

- e. **Abundant** – 1 Peter 1:3 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,*

- f. **Sure** – Isa 55:3; Mic 7:20

Isaiah 55:3 Pay attention and come to me! Listen, so you can live! Then I will make an unconditional covenantal promise to you, just like the reliable covenantal promises I made to David.

- g. **Everlasting** – 1 Chron 16:34; Ps 89:28; 106:1; 107:1; 136:1-26

1 Chronicles 16:34 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good and his loyal love endures.

- h. **Tender** – Ps 25:6; 103:4; Lu 1:78

Psalm 25:6 Remember your compassionate and faithful deeds, O Lord, for you have always acted in this manner.

- i. **New every morning** - Lamentations 3:22-23 *The Lord's loyal kindness never ceases; his compassions never end. They are fresh every morning; your faithfulness is abundant!*

- j. **High as heaven** – Ps 36:5; 103:11

Psalm 36:5 O Lord, your loyal love reaches to the sky; your faithfulness to the clouds.

- k. **Filling the earth** – Psalm 119:64 *O Lord, your loyal love fills the earth. Teach me your statutes*

1. **Over all his works** – *Psalm 145:9 The Lord is good to all, and has compassion on all he has made.*

Manifestations of God's Mercy

God's mercy has a threefold manifestation in the Scriptures. First, there is a **general mercy** of God, which is extended not only to all men, but to the entire creation. The Lord is good to all, and **His mercies are over all His works** (Psalm 145:9 NASB). Second, there is a **special mercy** of God, which is exercised toward all mankind, both believers and unbelievers alike. ...for He causes His sun to rise on **the evil and the good**, and sends rain on **the righteous and the unrighteous** (Matthew 5:45 NASB). Third, there is a **sovereign or electing mercy** of God, which is reserved for heirs of salvation, the members of the covenant, the children of God. That is the focus of what follows. We should never think that "mercy" is a recent attribute of God, that justice and judgment characterizes the God of Israel and the Old Testament, while mercy and grace belong to the God of the Church and the New Testament.

In fact, the OT has four times as much to say about His mercy as the NT. The stories of the OT are all stories of His "mercy" like this one from Exodus 34: "And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone. And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and **proclaimed the name of the Lord**. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, **The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,...**" (Exodus 34:4-7 KJV).

The simple presence of this passage alone is a proof of God's mercy. This is the second time God has met Moses on Sinai to give him His commandments. When Moses came down the first time, the people were engaged in worshipping the golden calf and rank immorality. But here we are at the mountain again, awaiting the revelation of God. The fact that these rebellious sinful people are not destroyed and that God would meet Moses again on their behalf is proof that God is merciful. But beyond that, He defines His very Name and nature as being "**merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,**

keeping mercy for thousands.” We can read what Jeremiah wrote: It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness (Lament. 3:22-23).

Jeremiah wrote this after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and his powerful army. Amazingly the prophet sings a song that extols the mercies of God even as he sits among the ashes of the holy city. After sin upon sin, for generation after generation, judgment upon judgment, yet God's mercy toward His people continues. God's mercy has many facets. It is eternal and everlasting, great and abundant, faithful and unchangeable, sovereign and free. We are told in Romans 9:15 that He says to Moses, **“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”**

His mercies transcend our loftiest thoughts. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him (Psalm 103:11 KJV). Like all attributes, God's mercy is seen best in Jesus Christ and His cross. He is the spiritual “mercy-seat” of God. We are “vessels of His mercy”, regenerated by His mercy... **But God, being rich in mercy**, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, **made us alive together with Christ** (by grace you have been saved), Eph. 2:4-5 ...and we are saved by His mercy... **He saved us**, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, **but according to His mercy**, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, Titus 3:5. We should acknowledge our desperate condition and be humbled like the tax-gatherer who cried “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” Luk.18:13 But all of us who receive His mercy have a calling to display it toward others. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). We are to love mercy as God loves it and delights in showing it, especially toward those in need, (like all of us).

Besides, Romans 6:1 says...“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound. Therefore humankind should not take the mercies of God for granted to continually live in disobedience to His injunctions and wickedness. Invariably, the God who is infinite in mercy is the same God who will recompense all according their works. His mercies endures forever will not extend to pardoning someone whose actions and lifestyle is not in conformity with the biblical prescriptions (Rev. 20:15).

Conclusion

The same God of mercy is the same God who is described as a consuming fire. He who refuses to pass through the door of my mercy must pass through the door of my justice and when sinful souls bring all of God's graces to naught, then He will be angry with them, leaving them alone and giving them what they want. It is not His intension to punish any man but our sins has separated us from His mercy (Isa 59:1-2). In short, Jesus longs to pour out upon us the fullness of His merciful love, but unless we repent of our sins and trust in Him, He cannot do so. Those who are stubbornly unrepentant to the bitter end will fall into the hands of Divine Justice.

The entire humanity needs to imitate God in showing mercy. As God is the Father of mercy, show yourselves to be his children, by being like him. The sum and definition of religion is, be rich in works of mercy, be helpful to the bodies and souls of others. Scatter your golden seeds; let the lamp of your profession be filled with the oil of charity. Be merciful in giving and forgiving. Be ye merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. Finally, we are to sing of the mercies of God. Let's do so to His glory; singing of His mercies entails that as His children we must be His good ambassadors then the virtue of our human person would have been guaranteed.

Note: God's holiness and righteousness are not and cannot be overshadowed by His mercy. They are in perfect balance - *Numbers 14:18 (NET)* "The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in loyal love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children until the third and fourth generations."

The benefits of mercy are enormous to enumerate but this paper stands to recommend that humanity should rather imbibe the nature of our heavenly Father than our temporal father whose thoughts and imaginations are evil on daily basis.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.thedivinemercy.org/news/Mercy-is-Gods-Greatest-Attribute-70>
- 2 <http://www.allaboutgod.com/god-of-mercy.htm>
- 3 Saint Thomas Aquinas in Robert Stackpole, *Jesus, Mercy Incarnate*, (London: Marian Press, 2000), 112.

- 4 www.vocabulary.com/dictionary
- 5 Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged Digital Edition (William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 2012).
- 6 Carr, D. The Cardinal Virtues and Plato's Moral Psychology (*The Philosophical Quarterly*, 38(151), 1988), 186-200
- 7 Immanuel Kant in Peterson, C., & Seligman, M.E.P. *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. (London: Oxford University Press 2004).
- 8 Gregory Vlastos, The Unity of the Virtues in the "Protagoras", (*The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 Mar., 1972), 415-458
- 9 Stanley B. Cunningham (2002), Review of Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in (*Moral Philosophy, Dialogue*, Volume 21, March 1982), 133-137

Most of the sources in this research were drawn from the Holy Bible and from different versions.