

Rescued to Know Him: Mercy Made Known

Exodus 33:7 – 34:35

We spent the last two Sundays talking about the problem that every human being faces. We did this as we saw Israel sin in turning from God to the golden calf in idolatry, rebellion, and disobedience to God. Keep in mind that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they should learn from this story and be careful to make application to their own lives. Listen to 1 Cor. 10:6, 11-13.

I hope as you listened the last two weeks that your response went from “Israel is nuts” to, “I have those same tendencies”. I tend to make idols out of created things. I tend to defy God. My desires and impulses are all out of whack sometimes and aimed at the wrong things. I hope you were able to see yourself and humble your heart and acknowledge where you go wrong.

As a regular part of my devotional life I pray from the book of Common Prayer and every single day there is a prayer of confession for sin. Here's part of it: *“Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.”* This is not a daily prayer to beat yourself up with, but a way to honestly acknowledge the sin that you are battling against and confess it and rejoice in forgiveness.

And here's the thing. I do desperately want to change, and I think most of you do to. I don't want to wake up grumpy in the morning. I don't want to be short with my kids. I don't want to read into the motives of others and assume the worst of people. But it's hard and the sin seems to come so naturally!! And because it comes so naturally I don't want surface change. I want deep and lasting change. I want my heart to be rewired and remade so that my first reaction and impulse is one of love and not frustration. How in the world does that happen?

“The true way to improve and ennoble our souls, is, by fixing our love on the divine perfections, that we may have them always before us, and derive an impression of them on ourselves, and 'beholding with open face, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, we may be changed into the same image, from glory to glory.” – Henry Scougal

So, here's how that deep and motivation level change happens, but fixing our love on the divine perfections. He quotes this passage from Paul in 2 Cor. 3:18. Change happens as we see the glory of the Lord, the beautiful character of God, and that leaves a deep impression on our souls and remolds us into His image. Another author put it a bit differently but like this: *"Grace brings us to our senses, delivering us from the insanity of sin."* – Jonathan Dodson

We've spent the last two weeks doing a deep dive into the human problem of sin. Now, the rest of this story turns the page to highlight the character of God and specifically His mercy and grace. There's this incredible movement in the story that I want you to notice. The passage shows movement from God's plans to destroy Israel completely (32:10) to His statement that He will not go with them to the Promised Land (33:3) to His agreement to go with them (33:17) to his reinstituting the covenant and promising to do amazing things in them and through them (34:10). What causes this movement? Certainly Moses's intercession for Israel, but that intercession is based on God's mercy and grace. God's character.

The entire passage, including the interactions with Moses, highlights God's grace and mercy. And so, we spent two weeks talking about the human problem of sin and now I'd like to pivot, as the text pivots, and spend a couple of weeks gazing at God's merciful grace to sinful people. So here's what we will see in 33:7 – 34:35. **7**
Features of Divine Mercy that God has Made Known.

1. Personal (33:7-11)

Let me remind you of what happened last time. After Israel's sin God brings several judgments upon them. He sends the Levites through the camp to destroy those who instigated the idol worship and revelry in order to keep the other Israelites from falling back into idolatry. He sends a plague on the nation at the end of chapter 32. Then, in maybe the most severe blow yet, God tells Moses and the Israelites that He will not be traveling in their midst on the way to the Promised Land. Look at 33:3. He would still give them the land and He would send an angel to protect them, but they would not enjoy His presence because of their sin. The people know how bad this is because it strikes at the heart of their identity as the special chosen people of God. Look at verse 4.

God tells them to show signs of repentance and sorrow by taking off their jewelry and they do in verses 5-6. So, the story sort of stops right there with God still bringing judgment on Israel and the Israelites seemingly demonstrate some remorse over what has happened.

Now, Moses writes this little interlude here in verses 7-11 to help us understand the close and intimate relationship he had with God. These sort of meetings were probably taking place regularly ever since Israel had left Egypt. Look at verses 7-11. Notice again verse 11 where Moses is said to speak to God face to face. This isn't indicating that Moses saw God. Verse 9 makes it clear there was a tent in between them and we'll find out soon that Moses couldn't see God's face. But the point is important. Moses had a special and personal friendship with God. And, this relationship will prove vital for Israel's future as Moses intercedes for the nation. How did this friendship come about?

It came about purely because of God's grace and mercy. It's easy to forget how the book of Exodus began, but Moses had fled Egypt after killing a man and hidden in the wilderness for 40 years. God sought him out and Moses initially nearly refused to obey God to the point of God getting angry with Moses in chapter 4. But God has continued to be faithful to Moses and has, by His mercy, brought him into this close and personal relationship.

And here's the point I want to draw your attention to. While you and I are certainly not Moses, God's mercy is a personal mercy for each of us. He has been gracious to you and to me. And it's this personal mercy to Moses that puts Moses in the position to plead with God on Israel behalf and to plead with God for God's mercy to be put on display.

2. Displayed (33:12-17)

Here's what I mean by this. God's mercy and character is always meant to be put on display before the world. God intends to go public with who He is. Moses seems to grasp this and so he pleads with God on this basis. Look at verse 12.

Moses is probably referring back to 32:34 when he references God telling him to bring this people up. He's talking about the current situation where Moses will lead the people but God will not go among them. He's also referencing Exodus 3 when God promised to go with him to the Promised Land. God basically gave

Moses a special status in chapters 3-4 as His spokesperson and Moses has enjoyed that favor throughout the story. Based on that favor, he makes two requests. Look at verse 13.

First, he wants to know God's ways. He wants to know what God is going to do in the immediate future and with the people. Things were left a little but unknown when God said He wouldn't go with them and the people removed their jewelry in mourning. What's going to happen now? He wants to know God's plans because to know God's working and actions is to get a glimpse at God's character. Moses's heart here is to understand God better. But he doesn't stop with his own request and desires. He wants the entire nation included in this knowledge of God and mercy. Look at the end of verse 13.

So God agrees to go with Moses and Moses responds by highlighting why His presence is so important. Look at verses 14-16. Verse 16 is really the key to the whole thing. God's character, and in particular, His mercy and grace, are meant to be put on display. We saw this last time in 32:12 and we've seen this throughout the book of Exodus.

Israel is shown mercy and made God's covenant people so that they can represent Him and put His glory on display before the nations. Honestly, this is one of the things that's so disheartening about the public witness of the church today. Now, there's a tension here, no doubt about it. There's a sense in which we can't pursue the world's approval and there's the reality that we will never get it. The world around us will always view our beliefs and lifestyle as odd and often backwards. That's true. The gospel is offensive to the unbelieving mind. But, the problem with many, many Christians today is not the world's rejection of our beliefs or lifestyle. The problem is not the gospel, it's the vessel that carries the gospel. We are just bad witnesses to God's grace and mercy. We're just jerks.

Let me remind you of this important passage in 1 Peter 2:9-12. We are God's people, why? Look at verse 9. We have received mercy in order to put that mercy on display. But Peter goes further and gives more explanation on how our status as God's people ought to bring God glory. Look at verse 11. We do not give into the desires and passions of the unbelieving world around us, instead look at verse 12.

Our conduct, or way of life is honorable. It's beautiful and attractive in outward appearance. And then notice how Peter understands the tension and addresses it in the rest of verse 12. There will be times when our good is spoken of as evil. No doubt about it. In a world that believes love is love it's considered immoral to clearly articulate why God's good design for human beings is life long monogamous marriage between one man and one woman. However, when you make that case, you can do it in a way that is honorable. And, beyond making that case, the rest of your life is so filled with good deeds that even those good deeds are noticeable to the world around you. Look at the rest of verse 12.

And so, getting back to Exodus 33, God's mercy is meant to be put on display through His people and God continues to show mercy to His people in order that that public display may happen. Look at verse 17. God agrees to go with the people and Moses seizes on this act of mercy to dive deeper into God's character. And this is our next feature of God's mercy.

3. Sovereign (33:18-19)

Look at verse 18. In some ways we are getting to the high point of the book here with this request. Moses has seen God's work throughout the book and has watched Him deliver by His sovereign hand, destroy His enemies, be patient with His people, judge His people in jealous and righteous anger, and respond graciously to Moses's request that He go with Israel to the Promised Land.

He's seen this amazing God work and reveal Himself and Moses is intrigued and wants to know more. He knows God but wants a closer experience with Him. We'll find out later that Moses's essential request is to see God's face. God responds in verse 19.

He tells Moses that He will make all His goodness pass before Him. He isn't going to reveal all the depths of His character to Moses, but He will make nothing but goodness pass before Moses. Which, if you think about it, what else could God show to Moses? There isn't any badness to show. God's character is nothing but beauty and goodness. This word carries the idea of "the best things." The beauty will be the proclamation of His name, which has been the name that God has been revealing throughout the book, going back to the Burning Bush.

And God's revelation of Himself comes because God is sovereign. It is His nature to show mercy, but He does it on His terms and His timetable. He will reveal Himself to Moses because He decides to.

The fact that God's mercy is shown by His sovereign choice makes it even more beautiful. God is under no obligation to show compassion or grace. He's under no constraint to do anything and so, when He does, it's purely because of His beautiful goodness. This only increases our wonder and awe that we have been the recipients of God's mercy.

This brings us to a good stopping point. We'll continue to unfold the features of God's merciful character next week.