



LESSON 7: "The Merciful" **Date:** _____

KEY VERSE: Proverbs 11:17 – "The merciful man doeth good to his own soul: but he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh."

INTRODUCTION

Did you ever play "Mercy" when you were a child? Do you remember weaving your fingers together with the fingers of your opponent in order to bend them until the loser cried, "Mercy?" (Sometimes the loser literally cried!) Maybe you represent a generation that cried, "Uncle!" in order to escape a headlock or be released from under the body weight of another child. (Frankly, it's unfortunate that "Uncles" have so long been associated with trauma and pain.)

It's one thing to play "Mercy" and "Uncle" in childhood innocence. It's quite another to play "Mercy" and "Uncle" in adult relationships. Unfortunately, our world is filled with more than a few people who chose to stipulate, rather than to negotiate, a relationship. Without real mercy life is a perpetual misery.

The book of Proverbs is filled with gripping comparisons. Studying the characters portrayed in the book of Proverbs is often done best through a study in contrasts. For instance, Proverbs contrasts the rich and the poor; the virtuous woman and the harlot; the wise son and the fool. Today we will contrast the character of the "merciful" and the "oppressor." We will see the difference between the person filled with "mercy" and the person filled with "cruelty."

Before we come to grips with the character of the merciful and the merciless in the book of Proverbs, let's look into Exodus 34 and remember that our God is a God of mercy. In Exodus 34, God instructs Moses to carve out two new tables of stone and meet him on Mount Sinai. As the Lord descends upon the mountain, in resplendent glory, to meet Moses, He begins to speak to His honored servant. Before re-

carving the Ten Commandments, God reveals Himself to Moses. He first reveals His name and then He reveals His attributes.

- Exodus 34:5-6b says, "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." With two wonderful names, God reveals that He is a promise keeping God (i.e., "The LORD" is His Covenant Name, Jehovah) and that He is a powerful God (i.e., "The LORD God" introduces the name "El" and speaks of strength).
- Exodus 34:6c-7 says that God is, "Merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."

It is important to notice that the very first attribute that God reveals before He re-chisels the Ten Commandments and ratifies The Law is His attribute of "Mercy."

Question: Why do you think it is especially meaningful and important that God reveals Himself as a God of mercy right before He re-gives the Ten Commandments?

Answer: Without the hope of God's mercy, the Ten Commandments would bring absolute hopelessness.

Because no one can play "Uncle" with God and win, everyone ought to rejoice that God is a God of mercy who is constantly "Keeping mercy for thousands." The people of God are to be people of mercy because God is a God of mercy (Ps. 103:8; 106:1; Jer. 3:12). The Christian who exhibits mercy is a Christian who exhibits the character of God. The book of Proverbs challenges the wise to be merciful!

- Prov. 3:3 – "Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart."
- Prov. 21:21 – "He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth life, righteousness, and honour."

Theme: The wise person is a merciful person. “The merciful man doeth good to his own soul; but he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh” (prov. 11:17).

Proverbs presents the merciful and the merciless (or cruel) as polar opposites. Let’s take time to acquaint ourselves with these two diametrically opposite characters. We will begin by looking carefully at the Merciless.

THE MERCILESS

Society has many names for this monster. Psychologists call this one a sadist. Business people call this person a shark. Sports enthusiasts say this person is “highly competitive.” In Proverbs, the merciless are portrayed as simply lacking compassion. They feel no sorrow when others suffer. They seem to be unable to empathize with others.

Pol Pot was a Cambodian revolutionary who led the Khmer Rouge armies to massacre over as many as three million of his own countrymen between the years 1976 to 1979. The atrocities of the Khmer Army are legendary. Seeking to force an agrarian, socialist-society on the people of Cambodia, Pol Pot displaced those who lived in the cities by forcing them to work as farmers in government-controlled labor camps. Boy-soldiers stood guard with machine-guns over once prestigious members of Cambodian culture. Educated men and women were forced to pull plows. Children were taken from their families and executed at the now famous, “Killing Tree,” in the killing fields.¹

Just as the world stood in horror at the atrocities of the holocaust, the world stood in horror as the merciless cruelty of Pol Pot’s government was exposed. Wouldn’t it be great to be able to know the character of the ruler who would commit such atrocities before giving him the power to proceed?

The book of Proverbs takes time to expose the character, conduct and catastrophe of the cruel man for all to see his blemishes before they are bruised by them.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pol_Pot

THE CHARACTER OF THE MERCILESS

Proverbs 12:10 says, “A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.” In essence, the cruel or merciless man shows no value of life. Unlike the righteous man who values the life of his beast because it is life given by the Creator, the cruel man pretends to show “tender mercies” while practicing cruelty. Like a doctor who takes the Hippocratic oath to “do no harm” while maintaining an abortion practice,² the cruel man may be respected in society and destructive to those with whom he draws close.

Question: Other than the abortionist, can anyone think of other well-respected professionals who pretend to be kind while showing cruelty?

Answers: There are attorneys who approach witnesses with kind words and evil intentions. There are coaches who seem very nice to the members of the team but turn their back to the injuries their team members experience. There are politicians who give warm and engaging speeches as they turn against the innocent and oppressed.

THE CONDUCT OF THE MERCILESS

Fundamentally, cruel, merciless individuals bring oppression upon others. Because they have no regard for the Creator of life, they have no fear when they make the lives of others miserable.

1. *They oppress the poor (Prov. 14:31).*

Proverbs 14:31 says, “He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his maker.” “Oppression of the poor” happens when a skilled negotiator takes advantage of an inexperienced buyer or seller. “Oppression of the poor” happens when a dictator imposes his will upon a society and brings personal property under state control. When a person exerts power in a manner that takes advantage of those with less power—they demonstrate a spirit that is merciless. The playground bully can grow up to become the penthouse oppressor. The merciless oppress the poor.

² https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/greek/greek_oath

2. *They build themselves up by taking advantage of others (Prov. 22:16).*

Proverbs 22:16 says, “He that oppresseth the poor to increase his riches, and he that giveth to the rich, shall surely come to naught.” The second part of verse 16 often brings confusion. How is it possible for the one who “giveth to the rich” to “come to naught?” Just ask those who invested with Bernie Madoff!³ Or perhaps consider the “social-climber” who reaches for another rung on the ladder by trying to impress those who live at the top. How often will a man or a woman make a foolish purchase in order to impress the wealthy or to keep up with the Joneses? (No offense to Harvey.)

Let’s not forget, Proverbs 22:16 says, “He that oppresseth the poor to increase his riches...shall surely come to naught.” New warnings about financial schemes perpetrated on the elderly, the young, or the financially insecure are posted daily. Why? Because our world is filled with those who would mercilessly take advantage of others.

3. *They have no compassion for others (Prov. 22:22).*

Proverbs 22:22 says, “Rob not the poor, because he is poor: neither oppress the afflicted in the gate.” The gates of the Old Testament cities were often filled with beggars. It would be impossible for us to imagine the condition of the beggars who lived in ancient times. Those who are cruel not only treat the poor with contempt but they willingly steal from them. Like the bully who steals the skinny kid’s lunch or the goon who takes the homeless man’s grocery cart—the merciless show no compassion on others.

THE CATASTROPHE OF THE MERCILESS

The merciless find themselves subject to God’s law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7). There is a payday someday! Proverbs 11:17 says, “The merciful man doeth good to his own soul: but he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh.” Isaiah 13:9 warns, “Behold, the day of the

³ http://www.forbes.com/fdc/welcome_mjx.

LORD cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it.” Pol Pot’s suspicious death came one night before the Khmer Rouge planned to turn him over to an international tribunal and remains suspicious. Bernie Madoff’s new home is a prison cell. There is a catastrophe awaiting the merciless.

Transition: Now that we have seen the character, conduct, and catastrophe that God says is in store for the merciless, let’s see the contrast that is depicted in the book of Proverbs as we focus on...

THE MERCIFUL

When you find the word, “merciful,” or “mercy,” in the book of Proverbs, you should be aware that there are actually three different Hebrew words that could have been used to describe the character of the merciful.

- The Hebrew word, “*Chanan*,” speaks of graciousness demonstrated by showing pity. This kind, affectionate, spirit is spoken of twice in Proverbs (14:21 and 31).
- The Hebrew word, “*Racham*,” is found only in Prov. 12:10 and 28:13. It speaks specifically of God’s tender love and mercy. The kind of unmerited compassion that He shows to His people.
- The Hebrew word, “*Checed*,” speaks of kindness, loving kindness or goodness. This word is the most frequently used word to describe the merciful in the book of Proverbs.

Let’s answer two common questions: 1.) How can a person be merciful, 2.) What happens to a merciful man?

HOW CAN A PERSON BE MERCIFUL?

1. *By diligently reading and applying God’s Word (Prov. 3:1-4)*

Proverbs 3:1-4 says, “My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: So shalt thou find favour and good

understanding in the sight of God and man." In Proverbs 3:1 we learn that the foundation for a merciful lifestyle is found by faith in the living word. When man's heart is conquered by God's word verse 2 assures "long life, and peace" which is accompanied by "mercy and truth" (verse 3). Here we find a wonderful chain that is anchored to the Word of God. The "mercy and truth" of verse 3 is built upon the "commandments" of verse 1.

Psalms 119:165 says, "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them." Merciless cruelty cannot coexist with peace, and peace cannot be known outside of God's law (Is. 48:22).

2. ***By treating all men equally (Prov. 14:20-21)***

Proverbs 14:20-21 says, "He that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he." Whether it be poverty, sickness, ignorance, race, ethnicity, or social status, the merciful will show mercy to all. Those without a heart of mercy will find someone they consider to be "beneath them" upon which to pour out their cruelty.

A story is told of a mother who once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "It would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask."

"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

Question: Can anyone think of biblical principles that should always lead to a spirit of mercy?

Answer: Principles like: Forgiveness, Grace, Generosity, Love, Kindness, etc.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A MERCIFUL MAN?

The book of Proverbs presents at least five precious promises for the merciful:

1. ***The merciful does good to his soul (Prov. 11:17).***

Prov. 11:17 says, "The merciful man doeth good to his soul." Exercise is good for the body, mercy is good for the soul! Food feeds the outer man, mercy feeds the inner man. Giving mercy to others may cost you very little, withholding mercy may cost you much.

2. ***The merciful is happy (Prov. 14:21).***

Prov. 14:21 says, "He that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he."

Question: Why is it true that the merciful man knows happiness?

Answer: The merciless man lives with regret, a guilty conscience, and finds few friends in his future.

3. ***The merciful maintain relationships (Prov. 16:6).***

Prov. 16:6 says, "By mercy and truth, iniquity is purged." Keeping record of wrongs will lead the record-keeper to lose friends.

4. ***The merciful will find life, righteousness, and honor (Prov. 21:21).***

Proverbs 21:21 says, "He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth life, righteousness, and honor." Priceless treasure is promised to the truly merciful.

5. ***The merciful will always prosper (Prov. 20:28).***

Prov. 20:28 says, "Mercy and truth preserve the king: and his throne is upholden by mercy." God preserves and protects the one who displays mercy to others. Because of the great status of the King, He may find it very hard to show mercy on the lowly. God promises that He will preserve and protect the King when He is merciful. Nevertheless, God's promise is that while the merciful King may appear weak to His subjects, He is strong and protected by God.

CONCLUSION

There are two times that God uses the deepest and most passionate word for mercy in the book of Proverbs. The first usage speaks of the hypocritical mercy of the cruel. The second usage speaks of the holy mercy of God. Let's consider these two verses:

- Proverbs 12:10 says, "A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."
- Proverbs 28:13 says, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy."

If you would know God's loving mercy, you must honestly confess your sin. Might it be that you need to confess the sin of cruelty? Might it be that your wife, your husband, or your children has seen little by way of mercy about you?

Around the time of the Korean War, Kim Joon-gon had seen 2,000 out of 20,000 people on Chunnam Island murdered by the Communists. They dragged him and his family outside their village where Kim's father and wife were beaten to death and Kim was left for dead. When he revived and sought safety at an acquaintance's house, he was turned over to the Communists. Only the sudden appearance of an American ship off the island coast saved him this time, for the Communist soldiers hurried away to the battle. Kim hid out in the countryside until the South Korean army captured the island. The Communists who had killed his wife and father were arrested. Because it was wartime, the police chief had authority to execute without a trial. But as the chief prepared to kill the men, Kim pleaded, "Spare them. They were forced to kill." The police chief showed great surprise. "It was your family they killed! Why do you now want to spare their lives?" Kim replied, "Because the Lord, whose I am and whom I serve, would have me show mercy to them." The Communists were spared execution because of Kim's plea. News of his action spread among other Communist supporters in the area. When Kim later climbed a mountain to preach to Communists hiding out, he was not killed. Many of the Communists became Christians, and when Kim finally left the island there was a flourishing church of 108 members.

What might the ministry of mercy to one another bring to our church?