

## Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

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**I**n **Matthew 5:7**, Christ said that it is the merciful who shall obtain mercy. **James 2:13** states the same truth:

*“For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”*

The spirit of this beatitude and the passage in James is seen in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in **Matthew 18**. In that parable, a king is trying to settle an account of a servant who owed him an unfathomable debt. The servant begs to be released from his debt. The king has mercy on the man and forgives the debt. The forgiven servant then turns around and deals harshly with one who was unable to repay a much smaller debt owed to him. The parable ends with the unforgiving servant being chastised and imprisoned by the king.

Through these passages, it is clear the Lord expects His people to be merciful. He even goes so far as to withhold His own mercy from those who are unmerciful. It is the merciful who will obtain mercy, and judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. The servant of the king experienced this. Mercy was extended to him until he refused to extend mercy to another.

As Christians, how do we show mercy to others? The parable in **Matthew 18** provides one example. This parable was prompted by a question asked by Peter: *“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”* (**verse 21**). While the object of forgiveness in the parable is money, Christ's point wasn't about money. Christ illustrated the depth of mercy we should have towards our brethren for wrongs committed against us. This could be a hurtful action, an unkind statement, a poorly handled situation, or one of the many other ways people hurt and offend one another. These things happen often in any group of people, and the church is not excluded. Jesus' words show that mercy should be extended in those instances instead of taking offense or harboring resentment or hurt. Often, that's not easy. But it is important to remember that just as the king's servant was both lender and debtor, everyone has been both the offended and the offender at some time. And, again, like the servant, we all desire mercy from others towards us. Where we should differ is in extending mercy towards others.

Mercy is also about how we view people. Are we judgmental towards them because of their circumstances, their sin, their socio-economic status, their manner of speaking or dress, their political beliefs, or any of the things we tend to judge people by? Christ warned the Pharisees about such judgments. In **Matthew 23:23**, He tells them they had neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. Their lack of consideration for mercy is seen in **Matthew 9:13** and **Matthew 12:7**. In both passages, the Pharisees are critical of men who were with Jesus. In **Matthew 9**, it was the tax collectors and sinners Christ was dining with. In **Matthew 13**, it was His disciples who were plucking heads of grain to eat while walking through a field on the sabbath. In response, Christ quotes **Hosea 6:6**, *“I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”*

The Greek word translated “mercy” in these passages (as well as the Hebrew word in **Hosea 6:6**) means steadfast love. This is what the Pharisees were missing. They looked at those sitting with and following Christ with judgment, not love. They looked at their occupation and whatever other characteristics these people had that made them unsavory in their eyes — likely their poverty — and had no love for them. Part of Christ's point to the Pharisees was that these were people they should love, not judge.

James writes about this very same thing in **James 2** where he writes about not giving preferential treatment to wealthy people who come into their congregation compared to what they offer the poor man. James ties this directly into mercy and wraps this section when he says in **verse 13**, quoted above, that mercy triumphs over judgment. Through sin, it has become human nature to judge people: to judge them

by their appearance, to view them through the lens of our perception, and to seek judgment and retribution when wronged. But the Lord wants His people to have mercy as we have received mercy. Just as it is the Lord's choice to give mercy to us, and just as we are unworthy of His mercy, we also have to choose mercy over judgment, and our perception of people's worthiness for mercy cannot be part of that decision.

Does this person deserve my help? Does this person deserve my mercy? Do my brothers or sisters deserve me to look past what they've said and the offense they've given? Does this poor person who is in his place because of the choices that he's made deserve my help? Does he deserve of my love? Is this sister who may not be easy to talk to or struggling in her sin deserving of my attention? Those are not the right questions. The question should not be about them but about ourselves. Am I choosing for mercy to triumph over judgment?