Our God is Merciful

First in a November series, “Giving Thanks for God’s Character”

# Scripture: Psalm 145:8-21

# Key Thought: As we take communion, we give thanks for God's mercy.

# Intro:

Our world is changing so fast. I read this week that in 2011, 35% on US adults had smart phones. Now 81% do. Smart phones are replacing watches, newspapers, alarm clocks, old fashioned corded telephones and even TV’s as people watch streamed content on their phones. Websites must be optimized for the phone. People play games on their phones. The way smart phones are altering our relationships is even more significant, but less understood. They allow us near constant contact with one another. They keep us in contact with far more distant friends than ever before. And they open us to the temptation to alter our lives in some way simply to get more “likes” from the phone audience. I read that restaurants are being decorated with an eye to what makes a good background for Instagram shots. On top of all this, there is no question that phones are sucking up a very significant chunk of time from all of us, and even more so from younger people. In addition, smart phones are just one example of all the changes we are experiencing in our era.

Since this is the world we live in, it’s even more important that we have a good understanding of the God who doesn’t change. It is basic to our faith that we understand the nature of God. As we come more and more to know the character of God, we become more and more thankful and worshipful because of the personality and the attributes that we discover.

In this series of messages for the month of November, it is my intention to look at four of the key unchanging attributes of God which are pointed out repeatedly to us in the book of Psalms and elsewhere. These four attributes strongly shape our concept of God. They comfort us in our times of distress, and they guide us in our times of worship.

Today, especially since it is communion Sunday, I want to begin by talking about God’s character as a merciful God. In the Sundays to come we will think together about God’s steadfast love, God’s uprightness, and his faithfulness. Today’s topic, the mercy of God, is a characteristic of God that is so familiar to us that we take it for granted, but as far as I know, it is a uniquely Jewish and Christian understanding about God. It is not something the natural man expects of God. Rather it is a characteristic that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob revealed to us about himself.

# The gracious and compassionate God

## Character announced to Moses

From the beginning of his relationship with Israel he announced himself as the gracious God. When God wrote the ten commandments on the tablets for Moses the second time, God spoke to Moses about his own character. Remember that after Moses had received the 10 Commandments on the tablets of stone the first time, when he came down the mountain, he discovered that the children of Israel had made an idol and were worshiping it. So, Moses, in anger over the idolatry of Israel, smashed the tablets of stone that God had given him. Later, Moses returned to the mountain and God gave him the 10 Commandments again, carved on tablets of stone as at first. At this time, God spoke about his merciful character, a message which was so applicable to the reason why Moses was back for a second copy of the 10 Commandments.

 “Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." Ex 34:5-7 NIV

Every time we gather to take communion we remember again how God has revealed himself to be a God of mercy.

## Three Hebrew synonyms for mercy for emphasis (vv. 8, 9)

In our text for today, the psalmist talks a great deal about the character of God. He speaks of God’s goodness and righteousness in verse seven and then in verse eight uses three different synonyms and a descriptive phrase to describe the mercy of God.

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.
The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. Ps 145:8-9 NIV

As you might’ve guessed, two of these synonyms are the same words used by God in announcing his merciful character to Moses. I like the NRSV translation of verse eight.

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Ps 145:8 NRSV

The Psalmist included all three Hebrew terms meaning mercy to emphasize this hugely important aspect of the character of God. We, like Israel before us, tend to wander from God. So, unless God is merciful, we are all in deep trouble.

# The mercy of God makes a way

## Covenant of salvation (mighty acts v. 12)

But God’s mercy has made a way for rebellious people like us to come to God. It is important to note that the mercy of God is not just transient feeling,. It is not like us when we are in a good mood and then later in a bad mood and our graciousness goes away. No, God is always merciful. It is a characteristic of God that always determines his actions toward his people. He is always both just and merciful.

Many of you are aware that more than a century before Jesus was born (begun in third century BC completed 132 BC-Wikipedia) seventy scholars in Alexandria in Egypt translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. That translation was very important to the Apostles and they quote from it often. It was called the Septuagint after the 70 scholars. Today it is often known as the LXX for short. Many times the LXX translated the Hebrew word “hesed” which refers to “proper covenant behavior” (DNTT Vol. 2 p. 594) by using the Greek word “eleos” which means mercy. This is why the KJV frequently translated “hesed” as mercy. What this means for us is that the covenant love of God so often demonstrated itself as mercy that God’s covenant keeping love came to be described as mercy.

Psalm 103 portrays the character of God as mercy too.

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;
 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Psalm 103:8-12 NIV

God’s mercy toward us is especially active in sending us salvation, the most amazing of God’s “mighty acts” mentioned in Psalm 145:12, and among the greatest of his benefits mentioned in Psalm 103, the benefits that we are not to forget.

In the NT, Zachariah, John the Baptist’s father, understood the connection between the mercy of God and God’s sending of salvation. Zachariah praised God because he looked forward to the coming Messiah who would be a “horn of salvation,” which means a victorious leader bringing salvation. Zachariah continued by saying that God’s purpose in doing this was:

to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant… Luke 1:72 NIV

Zachariah’s son’s job was to be:

to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God… Luke 1:77-78 NIV

The phrase translated “tender mercies” in NIV is an idiom for a feeling of mercy. The word translated as “tender” refers literally to the bowels. It is a feeling from one’s gut. If we were to translate this with an English idiom we might write, “because of God’s heart of mercy.” The conclusion we come to is that God has made salvation available through Jesus because God has a heart of mercy. It is part of his nature.

## Upholds us even though we are undeserving (v. 14)

This heart filled with mercy means also that God comes to us especially when we are bowed down. If God in his mercy reaches out to us when we are sinners, how much more does his heart go out to us when we are in need in some way! So, the Psalmist continues:

The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. Ps 145:14

What a great promise! When we stumble in the way; when we are bend under the loads of life, then also God reaches out to us in his mercy to lift us and help us by his grace. His heart of mercy means that God is especially listening for the cry of the needy.

## Draws near and answers prayer (vv 18, 19)

The Psalmist continues with the same thought.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.
 He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.
Ps 145:18-19 NIV

It is the mercy of God that calls him to draw near to those who are broken-hearted, who are weary and heavy laden, who have been wounded in the struggles of life’s journey.

# Our Response

## Accept (vv. 15,18,19)

Since God’s character is not in doubt and since God is always merciful; all that remains is to ask how we will react. What is our response to God’s merciful character? Psalm 145 helps us with this, if we are listening. Because God is merciful, David says,

The eyes of all look to you. Ps 145:15 NIV

The response we need is to look up; to implore God for help. Like those in the wilderness who had been bitten by the serpents were able to look at the bronze serpent Moses was instructed to make, and they would be healed; so, we can look up to our Maker and find

grace to help us in our time of need. Heb. 4:16 (NIV)

Because God is merciful, we call on God in prayer and God draws near to us. David records God’s promise:

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.
He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.
Ps 145:18-19 NIV

We open our hearts to God’s mercy looking to him for help. Sometimes the help of God comes in a different form than we had imagined, but God always sends help.

So, we look to God first for our forgiveness from sins, taking full advantage of the similar situation to that which first caused God to proclaim to Israel that he was a merciful God who forgives sin. We need God’s merciful forgiveness.

As the prophet Joel wrote, using two of the key words for God’s mercy,

“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”
Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Joel 2:12,13 NIV

But we do not stop with calling out for forgiveness. We continue to call out to God, to cry out to him for merciful help for our many other needs.

When we use the expression, “the mercy of God,” we are referring to that which is so vast that the word vast does not begin to describe it, for we are talking about that which has no limits anywhere, that which has its center anywhere and its circumference nowhere. (A. W. Tozer in The Tozer Pulpit volume 5 p. 51)

For example, in Psalm 86:16, David the psalmist calls out to God and pleads that in God’s mercy God would rescue him from an arrogant earthly enemy.

We need to remember that it is God’s mercy that keeps us every day. God’s mercy upheld us and guided us before we responded to him. And we will never get to the point where we cease to need God’s mercy.

God blesses us because of his abundant mercy, the mercy which he has bestowed upon us and not because of any of our goodness. I do not believe that heaven itself will ever permit us to forget that we are recipients of the goodness of God and for that reason I do not believe that you and I will ever be permitted to forget Calvary. (A. W. Tozer in The Tozer Pulpit volume 5 p. 55)

## Praise (v. 10)

When we do remember how much we need God’s mercy for all our needs, we will burst forth into praise as the psalmist speaks about in verse 10.

All your works praise you, Lord; your faithful people extol you. Ps 145:10 NIV

## Tell (v. 11)

And as we praise God we will also tell other people of all he has done for us. This was important to the psalmist as well. He spoke about how the people who received God’s mercy would tell others.

They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Ps 145:11-12 NIV

# Conclusion

Certainly, we live in a rapidly changing world. The smart phones that most of us keep close to us even when we sleep are but one sign of how rapidly things in our world are changing. But praise God, his mercy remains the same. His mercy is available to you and me as we call out to him for forgiveness and for help in our time of need.

I close with a poem by Michael Quoist called “Sin” from Prayers p. 135