

## **The Qualities of the Spiritual Life (Mercy)**

Philip Gulley

When I was a kid, we lived about a mile from the dump. Some people lived even closer, including a kid named Bobby who lived right next to the dump with his little brother and grandmother. For some reason, Bobby got picked on a lot and he was always mad. He'd come up to our house in late summer and early fall, right when football was starting, and he'd play football with us. Somebody would tackle him and he'd come up swinging, ready to fight.

I remember one Saturday when he got mad at my brother Doug and hit him. And Doug didn't do anything. We were all yelling at Doug to hit him back, but he wouldn't do it. So we kicked Bobby out of the game and told him to leave. Afterwards, I asked my brother why he hadn't gone after Bobby, and Doug told me how he'd learned that week Bobby lived with his grandma because his parents had been killed and he figured Bobby had been hit enough in life. I was around 11, but that memory stayed with me because it's the first time I remember mercy. Of course, I had seen much kindness, and had been the recipient of kindness from my teachers, family, and friends. But mercy was different. Mercy was kindness extended when someone had every excuse to be unkind, every reason to settle the score and punish. But my brother was merciful, and I remember his mercy to this day.

Lately, we've been thinking about the qualities of the spiritual life.

So far, we've talked about *gratitude* and how gratefulness gives us a deepened awareness of God and a deepened appreciation for others.

We spoke about *reflection*, how regularly asking ourselves "What did I learn from that experience?" was an important element of the spiritual life.

We talked about *spiritual pacing*—being careful not to hurry through one experience so we can get on to something else we think might be more pleasant. Lee Edmundson had a better phrase for it, he called it *being present in the moment*. That's a finer definition, I think.

Today, I would like for us to concentrate our minds on the spiritual quality of *mercy*.

I want to define *mercy* as the compassion we extend to others when we have the power, and perhaps even a compelling reason, to be otherwise.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the book of Jonah, when Jonah, this grumpy prophet, is sent by God to tell the people of Nineveh—the one in ancient Assyria, not Johnson County—to warn them of their destruction. Jonah doesn't want to go, because he hates the people of Nineveh and will have to travel all the way to Nineveh, and by the time he arrives, God will be inclined toward mercy, and that is precisely what happened.

Jonah is furious and storms out of Nineveh where he sits in the sun, until God causes a plant to grow to give Jonah shade. Then God causes the plant to wither and Jonah laments the plant's death, wishing he were also dead. God says to Jonah, "I could have killed 120,000 Ninevites and you would have been happy. But instead I kill a plant and you're angry."

So there are two responses to mercy. The Ninevites respond to God's mercy by turning from evil. They repent. Which simply means *to turn*. Don't let fundamentalists ruin that word for you. It's a beautiful word. To turn. To turn toward something beautiful and good. This was Nineveh's response. While Jonah's response to mercy was to resent it. The story ends with Jonah sitting in the sun, stewing.

The great irony of this story, and it's one we see time and again throughout the Bible, is that Jonah was a prophet of Israel and should have been responsive to God's mercy, but wasn't. And Nineveh, this sprawling capital city of Assyria, the political and military rival of Israel, was thought to have been utterly resistant to God's goodness, but instead gratefully welcomed it and let it transform their lives.

Are you open to mercy? How willing are you to show mercy to others?

Let us think for a moment more about mercy. I know a woman who is full of mercy for others. She forgives others easily. She never holds a grudge. She embodies compassion and kindness. For everyone but herself. She lives constantly in regret, unable to forgive herself for things done and not done. She has an adult daughter who is self-centered and uncaring. Her adult son is loving and thoughtful. She raised them the same way, but blames herself for her daughter's conduct, asking herself, "What should I have done differently? What did I do wrong?" She is 80 years old, the picture of loving-kindness, full of mercy for everyone but herself.

Are you open to mercy? How willing are you to show mercy to yourself?

Her husband forgives himself, forgives his children, forgives his wife, is merciful to everyone, but is mad at God. He believed he and God had a deal, that if he honored God by going to church and loving and helping others, God would bless his life. But his health has failed, his wife is dying, his daughter is indifferent, and he feels God has abandoned him when he needs God most. I've spoken with him many times about what God does and doesn't do, but there sits the anger, cold and unmoving. So now, at the very time in his life he needs most to feel peace, needs most to feel loved, needs most to feel cared for, he is angry.

Are you open to mercy? How willing are you to show mercy to God?

Bobby, the boy who lived next to the dump, moved away the next year. Didn't hear anything about him for years. But last year, I was at an event and a woman introduced herself and told me she had a nephew who used to live in our town.

I asked her, "Oh, what his name?"

It turned out to be Bobby.

"How is Bobby?" I asked.

"He's very happy," she said. "He's married and has three daughters and he's very happy."

I was so glad to hear that. All the way home I thought of Bobby and mercy, and wondered if Bobby's life maybe began changing when we were all eleven years and my brother showed him mercy. There's just no telling.

And I guess that's my message to you this morning. That when we show mercy—to others, to ourselves, to God—there's just no telling what can happen.

Are you open to mercy? Mercy to others. Mercy to yourself. Mercy to God.