

## Mercy!

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy is forever.”  
~ Psalm 106:1

In the New Church we’re taught that “the essence of mercy is love” (AC #3063). And we call the Lord’s love in relation to ourselves *mercy* because He continues to love every single person in the universe even though He is fully aware of all our failings, including our selfish and worldly loves, our stupid, wrong ideas **and** our bad behavior. In fact, another definition of mercy in the New Church is “love grieving” (AC #5480), because the Lord sees how needy and miserable we really are, and as He loves us He grieves for us.

Mercy in our teachings is also associated with pity (AC #2129:4), especially in the letter of the Word (Isa. 63:7-9, e.g.) for the same reason, namely, that the Lord feels “sorry” for us and every moment of every day does everything He can to free us from our sad condition.

This isn’t easy. For one thing we’re a pretty stubborn lot, and while the Lord can *provide* for us He will not compel us, and so whether we receive the *benefits* of His mercy or not is up to us. Furthermore we know that real mercy sometimes involves punishment (AC #587:2), which seems completely counter-intuitive, but may be necessary as a means of restoring order so that we can receive the blessings He offers us.

### How Mercy Works

In order to appreciate the Lord’s Divine mercy it may be helpful to compare it to the mercy we feel or experience in our relations with other people. In that case we can relate it to all the other teachings we have about genuine charity toward the neighbor, one of which is about forgiveness. Forgiveness isn’t the same as mercy, but it’s a related concept, and the way it works is the same as the way mercy works. We read,

“It is thought that when sins are forgiven, they are wiped away, or washed off, as filth by water. Sins, however, are not wiped away, but *removed*; that is, a person is withheld from them when he is kept in good by the Lord; and when a person is kept in good, it appears to him as if he were without sins, and thus as if they had been wiped away. A person also can be kept in good, so far as he is being reformed...” (NJHD #166).

The point here is that while we can *offer* forgiveness even for the very worst of evils, a person can’t really *receive* it until or unless he shuns and rejects those evils as sins. It is the same with mercy. *So we may not recognize or think that the Lord is having mercy on us* while we are suffering with some disorder, but in fact His mercy is all-embracing, it’s just that the disorder prevents our appreciation of it because while we’re in that state we’re actually *opposed* to it and, consciously or unconsciously, we fight against it.

So when it comes to our spiritual life and salvation the Lord explains that there is no such thing

as a ticket to heaven by “mercy apart from means.” This expression [repeat] is used a number of times in the Writings for the New Church, referring to a fairly commonly held belief that we are – or can be – saved and go to heaven through the pure mercy or grace of God, without first cultivating a heavenly life. They say that they *start* with salvation and *then* begin a new life, but the truth is that salvation, that is, spiritual health and wellbeing, is really **a result** of the new life.

This idea of salvation “by mercy without means” is actually called “the fiery flying serpent” of the church (mentioned in *Isaiah* 14:29), and we’re told that there are three reasons why it is so bad: first, it does away with religion, that is, the importance of living according to the rules; second, it induces a false sense of confidence and so a lack of commitment to the principles of heavenly life; and third, it makes *the Lord* responsible for all who go to hell, since, if He could save everybody by pure mercy *He would*, and there would BE no hell (DP #340).

This last point is especially interesting because, in fact, some religions, and some even within the Christian tradition have come to exactly that conclusion. They say that because God *is* pure love and mercy He couldn’t possibly allow anyone to “burn in hell” for all eternity just because of a few bad decisions we make in the short time we live in this world. But all this is based on a misunderstanding of what hell is, and how the Lord really works with us. The truth is that mercy is always administered by means of wisdom, that is, truth, and it is received in a life according to order, that is, according to the truth (see HH #522ff).

#### Divine Mercy Illustrated in Human Affairs

So now let’s consider how the Lord shows us His mercy. Again, this is illustrated by His teachings on charity (see AC #6180) explaining how WE can be truly charitable toward *one another*.

Obviously we can’t do it by just giving everybody what they want – even if doing so might relieve some short-term suffering – if, for example, we know that doing so could lead eventually to even greater suffering. So in keeping with the whole doctrine of charity what we have to do is promote the **good** we find in others, and not the bad. The only true peace and blessing we can have comes in the context of an orderly life, in other words, a life according to the rules.

But of course it can be difficult, certainly challenging, to know for sure exactly what response to any disorder is best. Take as a simple example somebody caught speeding on the highway, or parking in a “no parking” zone. Technically, the officer involved has every right and responsibility to write up a ticket, but is it necessary for the offending person to pay the full price? What’s the point of the exercise? Clearly it is to deter that behavior in the future. So if the person is a repeat offender the answer is probably yes. But almost everyone in such a case will plead for mercy, and if it is a first offense, or a really good excuse is offered, the officer might waive the ticket and just give a stern warning, or a judge might reduce the fine. In that case everyone can walk away feeling good – provided the offender reforms.

Other cases can be very much more complicated, and so a great deal of humility is required to determine the most effective way to support the long-term welfare of any person or group. A case of adultery, for example, or some other outrageous or offensive behavior might prompt an immediate response of ostracism or punishment, in keeping with the principle of shunning evil, including the evil a person or group has clearly adopted as OK. The Ku Klux Klan comes to mind. It’s pretty obvious that this organization stands for some hateful things, but can we say

that everyone affiliated with that group is hateful? Perhaps they are simply misguided. There was a story circulating not so long ago about a man who befriended a Klan member and carried on a long dialog with him that led eventually to his complete rejection of all the hate and a very positive effort on his part to improve the thinking of other Klan members. What the man needed was to be heard, to be understood, and to be respected for the GOOD that was in him.

Still, it's tricky. We all know this. And sometimes we just have to cut people off – or even prosecute them for their bad behavior, always hoping, of course, for reformation and a restoration of order. After all, we know that as long as anyone lives in this world he (or she) has the opportunity to grow and change, but once a person dies and enters the spiritual world it's all over, and the only way for evil to be kept within limits is through fear and punishment. So again, if we really care about other people, if we really feel mercy and compassion for them, we will do what we can in this world to help them avoid that fate.

### The Difference Between Mercy and Grace

Now curiously – or so it may seem at first – our New Church teachings make a significant distinction between mercy and grace. You've all heard the Christian hymn, "Amazing Grace:" the first two stanzas go like this:

Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound	T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear
That saved a wretch like me.	And Grace, my fears relieved.
I once was lost, but now am found;	How precious did that grace appear
T'was blind but now I see.	The hour I first believed.

It's a lovely song, and it certainly relates to our theme of the Lord's mercy, pity and compassion. But the focus in the hymn is on faith, not charity, and so it illustrates the difference between the two things. Grace has to do with believing in the Lord; mercy has to do with loving Him. Grace has to do with understanding ("...now I see"); mercy has to do with the will, that is, *feeling His love* as a result of our cooperation with Him (see AC #981:2 & #2412). Are we saved by grace? No, not really, but it's a start! We have to have faith in the Lord before we can receive His merciful, loving help to overcome our natural, moral and especially spiritual failings.

So in pleading for – or praising Him for His grace we are actually acknowledging and focusing on the truths of His Word, which require some considerable effort to understand, whereas in pleading for or praising Him for His mercy we are acknowledging and focusing on His amazing love. But remember, grace and mercy, like faith and charity, can only really be experienced in conjunction with each other (see Psalm 85:10).

### Feeling the Effects of Mercy

So far we've been talking about what mercy LOOKS like, now let's give some thought to how it FEELS, that is, what it's like to be on the receiving end of true mercy.

Here, not only the teachings but the *experience* of forgiveness can be illustrative. Let's say you have said or done something offensive, whether deliberately or not. We've all been in this position! And we all know how profoundly gratifying and freeing it is to know that the offense has been forgiven. But how do we know this? How do we get to this place?

Well, one way we know it is that the person we have offended *tells us*, and he (or she) tells us in such a way and in enough detail that we can be fully satisfied that the nature of the offense has been recognized and set aside. Someone just saying, “I forgive you,” often doesn’t help because you’re left unsure of whether your specific misdeed has been processed and dropped. But explaining builds a bridge of understanding and affection that really puts the issue behind you both. Plus, it informs you for the future and helps you do better. (In the same way simply saying, “*I’m sorry*,” often doesn’t cut it, because the person you’ve offended may not be sure you understand why you should be sorry. But again, an apology with an explanation really clears the air.)

Another way we can experience how mercy feels is to simply bask in the bright sunshine of a warm spring day – coming soon! That sunshine is a reminder of the Lord’s all-encompassing, penetrating love for all people, and it’s always there for us, though at times obscure; we just have to turn – like the earth itself turns on its axis – to face Him more directly to receive it, and also try to remove the mental clouds that obscure its effect on us.

When we receive *undeserved* or *inappropriate* mercy we may feel that our misdeeds have been vindicated, or at least accepted, which does nothing for our actual wellbeing. (Think of the spoiled child: since he believes he can do no wrong he grows up utterly self-centered.) But when we have been granted *true mercy*, in keeping with a genuine desire and commitment to improve – even if it involves being criticized – we can feel genuinely relieved, not only because the stress in some *relationship* has been relieved but even more because we know that the misdeeds are really behind us, removed, as the Writings say, from having any real effect in our lives.

This is how the mercy of the Lord can affect us when we really “get it,” only in this case it’s not about any worldly concerns, it’s about our eternal lives. We are humbly, deeply, mindfully and emotionally thankful to the Lord for the love He shows us by gently lifting us out of our selfish loves into an ever better, more rewarding, more heavenly way of life.

#### The Peace and Blessing of Offering – and Receiving – True Mercy

In conclusion, as we reflect further on this topic it will be useful to remember WHY the Lord is so merciful towards us, and that is because we are ALL so desperately needy, so pathetically unregenerate! (AC #5042). This being the case, it is pretty obvious that if we want to be created in His image and likeness we have to cultivate a similar disposition in ourselves, not getting angry or upset about the evils we see around us but feeling sorry for them and having compassion because “they know not what they do.” If we can do this without feeling arrogant or superior, knowing how needy we all are, the Lord will be able to fill every one of us – both givers and receivers – with the incredible peace and all the blessings mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount that we read together as our recitation this morning (Matt. 5:3-12).

Truly, let us “give thanks to the Lord, for **He** is good! For **His** mercy is forever.”

Amen.

Lessons:     *Joshua* 3-4: selections  
                   Children’s talk on Crossing the Jordan  
                   *Psalm* 123:3-4 & 130, *Heaven and Hell* #521-522