

## “Colors of Mercy”

*Lamentations 3:22-23, Psalm 23:6, Matthew 5:14 & 9:9-35*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Loving God, nourish us with your word like you nourish the earth. Prepare our hearts and minds like you send the rain to water the earth making it fertile. May your word move us to do your will like the seeds you provide that become fruitful. Amen

Mercy adds color to black and white perspectives. Jesus said: **Matthew 5:14 MSG “You are here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world.” Matthew 9:12 “I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.”**

Biblical mercy is God’s compassionate, undeserved kindness that withholds the punishment humanity deserves for sin and relieves human misery. Mercy is an attribute of God, linked to God’s steadfast love which is manifested through forgiveness, grace, and acting on behalf of those in need. Mercy adds color, awe, and wonder to life. Lamentations declares: **Lamentations 3:22-23 NLT “The faithful love of God never ends! God’s mercies never cease. Great is God’s faithfulness; God’s mercies begin afresh each morning.”**

Sacrifice for the Pharisees, the religious leaders, was viewing the world as black and white, right and wrong, so they practiced sacrifice to improve one’s purity. For the religious leaders, sacrifice is giving something up to atone for one’s sin. To lessen the amount of sacrifice one needed to perform, the religious leaders came up with a distorted system of rules to limit one’s uncleanness. These rules led to judgment, categorizing, exclusion, and avoiding people they perceived as unclean making their world black and white.

Jesus’ statement, “God desires mercy, not sacrifice” echoes the words of the prophet Hosea. God explains that Hosea’s marriage to a prostitute mirrors God’s love for us. We are sinful, rebellious people and God always has unconditional love for us, no matter what we do, regardless of how poorly we treat God. God has hesed, steadfast everlasting love, for everyone even when one repeatedly betrays God. Hosea’s marriage was colorful, not black and white.

God desires mercy not sacrifice. God values compassionate love, kindness, and grace far more than mere legalistic observance of religious rituals. God is urging us to prioritize helping people over strict adherence to the law. God desires an inward change of heart and authentic love for others rather than mechanical compliance with religious duties. Jesus commanded the religious leaders to repent, to change, to turn their views completely upside down, to live the inverse, compassion over rules, grace over judgment, love over piety, service over rituals, welcome over purity, acceptance over comparison, belonging over agreement, conversations over mandates, forgiveness over morality, mercy over sacrifice. True worship is merciful love of everyone as God mercifully loves us. God is asking us to treat others and ourselves as God treats us with infinite mercy. We are to bring the colors of mercy to our black and white world.

Matthew illustrates this good news: **Matthew 9:9-35 NLT “As Jesus was walking along, Jesus saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector’s booth. “Follow me and be my disciple,” Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed Jesus. Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with such scum?” When Jesus heard this, Jesus said, “Healthy people do not need a doctor, sick people do.” Then Jesus added, “Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.’ For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.” One day the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked him, “Why don’t your disciples fast like we do and the Pharisees do?” Jesus replied, “Do wedding guests mourn while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. “Besides, who would patch old clothing with new cloth? For the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before. “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine is stored in new wineskins so that both are preserved.” As Jesus was saying this, the leader of a synagogue came and knelt before Jesus. “My daughter has just died,” he said, “but you can bring her back to life again if you just come and lay**

your hand on her.” So Jesus and his disciples got up and went with him. Just then a woman who had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding came up behind Jesus. She touched the fringe of Jesus’ robe, for she thought, “If I can just touch Jesus’ robe, I will be healed.” Jesus turned around, and when he saw her he said, “Daughter, be encouraged! Your faith has made you well.” And the woman was healed at that moment. When Jesus arrived at the official’s home, he saw the noisy crowd and heard the funeral music. “Get out!” Jesus told them. “The girl is not dead; she is only asleep.” But the crowd laughed at Jesus. After the crowd was put outside, however, Jesus went in and took the girl by the hand, and she stood up! The report of this miracle swept through the entire countryside. After Jesus left the girl’s home, two blind men followed along behind Jesus, shouting, “Son of David, have mercy on us!” They went right into the house where Jesus was staying, and Jesus asked them, “Do you believe I can make you see?” “Yes, Lord,” they told Jesus, “we do.” Then Jesus touched their eyes and said, “Because of your faith, it will happen.” Then their eyes were opened, and they could see! Jesus sternly warned them, “Do not tell anyone about this.” But instead, they went out and spread Jesus’ fame all over the region. When they left, a demon-possessed man who could not speak was brought to Jesus. So Jesus cast out the demon, and then the man began to speak. The crowds were amazed. “Nothing like this has ever happened in Israel!” they exclaimed. But the Pharisees said, “He can cast out demons because Jesus is empowered by the prince of demons.” Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And Jesus healed every kind of disease and illness.”

Everywhere Jesus went he transformed people’s lives from black and white to color with swirling rainbows. Jesus brings everything together. Jesus’ mercy is healing all, mending every relationship, and bringing everyone into community.

The religious leaders labeled Matthew as unclean and a social outcast because of ritual impurity through daily contact with Gentiles and moral corruption due to his collusion with the oppressive Roman government which led to unethical extortion. Matthew was prohibited from public worship. Jesus knew that it was a religious violation to break bread with tax collectors, social outcasts, and misfits. It was scandalous for Jesus to call Matthew as a disciple.

The religious leaders condemned Jesus’ mercy and sought to teach Jesus about sacrifice. Jesus quotes from the prophet Hosea, “**God wants you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.**” Jesus instructs them to “**go and learn the meaning of this Scripture.**” Go, leave your narrow-minded, walled religion, judging ivory tower so you can be merciful to everyone. Go discover color. Go be a curious explorer who perceives God’s colorful energy.

But the religious leaders liked black and white, feared contamination of the holy by what they perceived as unholy, liked the control the sacrificial system gave them, wanted to earn their way, wanted to preserve their prestigious positions. Jesus teaches that mercy, grace and inclusion are the marks of a Christian not purity, rule keeping, or clean living. Avoid comparison thinking, I am better than someone because of something I do. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Do not be concerned with keeping rules, categorizing, and labels. Have no worries about getting dirty to help another. Jim Somerville preached “God desires mercy not sacrifice, in other words, God wants you to look on the suffering of a sinful world and feel the pain of its people. God wants that pain to become your pain until you have to do something about it, until you have to shuck off the robes of morality and dive into that dirty water to serve people. For that is what Jesus has done.”

While Jesus is sharing a meal with tax collectors and notorious sinners, a man comes to Jesus begging for his help. His daughter has died. He thinks maybe Jesus can bring her back to life. This man is the leader of the synagogue. It is remarkable that he visits Jesus in the house of a tax collector for sinners were not allowed in the synagogue. The leader of the segregating synagogue crosses over barriers to meet Jesus in a scandalous, career ending place, because he is desperate. He will do anything to save his daughter. All the rituals, traditions, rules, and regulations seem trivial compared to bringing his daughter back to life. This mirrors God’s mercy for the world. God is determined to not let rules, morality, purity, or anything stand in God’s way to welcome everyone home to God’s family. God sends Jesus to break laws for the sake of love. The religious leaders thought socializing with scoundrels diminished them and that touching the unclean made them unclean. God desires mercy not sacrifice. Love embraces everyone. The religious leaders taught if you touch a dead body you become unclean. Jesus took the hand of the dead lady and brought her back to life. To Jesus, one life is far more important than all the rules of the world. God invites us to drop sacrifices, drop rules, drop judgement, so we

can be merciful. God invites us to cross every barrier and welcome everyone into community. God is inviting you to let God's merciful light shine into your life transforming all to color.

The religious leaders labeled a woman unclean and taught that any contact with her would make a clean person unclean. This woman had faith in the opposite that God's cleanliness makes the unclean, clean so she touched Jesus' robe. Jesus encouraged and healed her. **Jesus healed every kind of disease and illness.** God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus brought the colors of mercy to everyone.

The Heart's Offering a poem by an unknown person based on Hosea.

*Not in the smoke of altars high, Nor rituals measured by the sky, Does the Creator find their plea, But in the breath of mercy, free. The broken heart, the gentle hand, Are better treasures in God's land. Than silvered vows or solemn plight, Mercy shines within God's sight. For what is gain with heart of stone? Or sacrifice on golden throne? If compassion lies outside the door, The offering is naught, or poor. Bring not the burnt offering of pride, With hidden faults you seek to hide. Just walk with kindness, know your Lord, And mercy shall be your reward.*

Paul describes mercy, not sacrifice this way. If we have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, we are nothing. If we give away all our possessions and if we hand over our bodies so that we may boast but do not have love, we gain nothing. Love, mercy, and kindness always come first, and last. Mercy is what God desires.

Maybe the first step to being merciful is to savor God's mercy, to affirm God's goodness, and to be grateful for God's steadfast love. Celebrate that you are fully, completely, and unconditionally loved by God. Drop whatever you are carrying, reach out, touch the hem of Jesus' robe, and be filled with God's mercy. Accept God's merciful love even if you do not think you deserve God's love. Share God's merciful love with everyone.

The palmist sings **Psalm 23:6 "Surely God's goodness and God's mercy will pursue me all the days of my life and I will live in the house of the Lord forever."** Go and learn what this means, God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus brought the colors of mercy to everyone. Amen

