

Gifts to Build the Body By Jeff Strite

Romans 12:1-12:8

OPEN: I once read the true story of a preacher who was organizing an evangelistic outreach using small acts of kindness to demonstrate Christ's love. He phoned several neighborhood grocery stores and Laundromats for permission to do specific services.

On one call, the employee who answered the phone hesitated, then said, "I'll need to ask the manager, but first, let me make sure I understand: You want to clean up the parking lot, retrieve shopping carts, hold umbrellas for customers, and you don't want anything in return."

"Yes, that's right," the preacher replied.

After a few moments the employee returned to the phone.

"I'm sorry," he said, "we can't let you do that because if we let you do it, we'd have to let everyone else do it, too!"

(Ann Jeffries, Kansas City, KS Christian Reader, "Lite Fare.")

Now, isn't that odd?

Here's a church that was willing to show God's love to a grocery store, and the store won't let them do it because they're afraid they'll have to let other groups do the same thing.

Now why did that store respond like that?

Because NO ONE does stuff like that!

This church was obviously out for something... an ulterior motive. And the grocery store was right. The church did have an ulterior motive - they wanted to reach their world for Christ and the tool they were using was something called "showing mercy."

Paul writes: "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is... showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully." Romans 12:6 & 8

The first question that came to my mind was: what exactly IS mercy?

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Mercy is:

2 a : a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion (that's what God does)

3 : compassionate treatment of those in distress (that's what people do).

Basically, mercy is the act of getting your hands dirty helping others. Mercy is where a person visits the shut-ins, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked. This goes beyond "giving money" to these people. It's where a person who shows mercy by DOING the act of helping. And they do this act without expecting to be paid to do it.

Now-why should we be merciful?

Well, we should be merciful, because we serve a God who is a "merciful God."

"Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and MERCY for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; Deuteronomy 7:9 NKJV

David wrote:

- For the LORD is good; His MERCY is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations. Psalm 100:5
- Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His MERCY endures forever. Psalm 118:29
- AND in the most famous psalm where David tells us "The Lord is my shepherd", he ends the psalm with these words: "Surely goodness and MERCY shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever." Psalm 23:6

We serve a merciful God. But the verses I quoted only give us a small indication of what His mercy is like. In Ephesians 2:4-7 we hear these powerful words: "because of his great love for us, God, WHO IS RICH IN MERCY, made us alive with Christ EVEN WHEN WE WERE DEAD in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

When God saved us He showed us His immense and immeasurable mercy. And we become like God – we grow up to be like Him - when we learn to show His kind of mercy to others.

There's an example of God's kind of mercy in Mark 1:40-42. There we're told that a leper came to Jesus, and knelt before Him and said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean."

One preacher commented on this story by saying "The amazing part of this healing is how Jesus did it - Jesus TOUCHED him!"

You didn't touch lepers. They were unclean! If you touched them, you became unclean and no one wanted that! But Jesus TOUCHED this man.

ILLUS: Philip Yancey tells the story of Dr. Paul Brand who devoted his life to treating leprosy patients in India. In the course of one examination Brand laid his hand on the patient's shoulder and informed him through a translator of the treatment that lay ahead.

To Dr. Brand's surprise the man began to shake with muffled sobs.

Brand turned to the translator "Have I said something wrong?"

She questioned the patient and then replied: "No, doctor. He says he is crying because you put your hand around his shoulder. Until you came here no one had touched him for many years."
(Brian Mavis; sermoncentral)

You see, that is the reality that lies at the very heart of what it means to show mercy.
Mercy is the intentional touching of people who suffer.
It's the intentional "getting close" to folks who aren't ordinarily "touched"

ILLUS: A man was visiting a home for the retarded. For an hour he talked with a young woman named Mary whose body was covered with tumors. He put his arm around her and said "you really are a beautiful person."

"Thank you," she replied. "No one has ever gotten close enough to notice."

Mercy is getting close to people who hurt... and touching their needs.
This is the kind of mindset that drives those with the gift of mercy.
It's like 2nd nature to them... they do it instinctively.

These are the kinds of people who instinctively do what Jesus describes in Matthew 25: 35-40 "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Now, if you'll notice Jesus is NOT talking to the folks with the "gift of mercy".

He's talking to everybody.

He expects EVERYBODY to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick and imprisoned.

Because He is a God of mercy, He expects His people to be a people of mercy.

He expects ALL of us to find ways to become hands-on when it comes to helping others - to find ways to get our hands dirty. To touch the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.

Because it's often ONLY when we TOUCH those who are hurting that we become motivated to help them.

ILLUS: Back in the 1990's I read the story of a famous Pop Star who had visited a refugee camp in Bangladesh. It was basically a Photo-op to paint him as a compassionate artist.

He said "That 1st morning I must have washed my hands a dozen times. I didn't want to touch anything, least of all THESE people. Everyone in those camps was covered with sores and scabs.

I was bending down to one little child, mainly for the photographer's benefit, and trying hard not to get too close. Just then someone accidentally stepped on the child's fingers and he screamed. As a reflex, I grabbed him... forgetting his dirt and his sores. I remember that warm little body clinging to me --- and the crying instantly stopping. In that moment I knew I had much to learn about practical Christian loving.”

(Pop Star Cliff Richard in Reader's Digest Feb 1990 p. 199)

He touched the child... and it changed his view of that little boy.

And he learned - at that moment – what it is to show MERCY.

Now... what are some practical ways that you can show mercy to people around you?

1. I've always been impressed with the folks that help with Habitat for Humanity. They give of their time to build and refurbish houses for those who can't afford a home, and the home they create is not just a place to live. It's a NICE place for those in need.

2. Then there are the folks who volunteer at the local Emmaus Center. They provide food, shelter and job training for people who have no place else to go. They are worthy of our praise.

3. Then there are the folks who work for our Food Pantry. Just last week a volunteer came back from a distribution center with 1200 pounds of food. That which we couldn't use, we sent over to the Emmaus center to help feed the needy there. Every month we help out 50 to 60 needy families in our area.

4. Here in church, Doug Brown has found been doing the ministry of "TOUCH" letters. These are letters that are placed on the back table with post-it notes attached that tell who the letter goes to – people who are shut-in or sick or have other needs. The church is encouraged to write notes of encouragement to these people.

I just visited a lady this week who had received one of these "touch" letters and she told me how pleased she was to know how much people cared for her. In addition, she'd received a number of other cards and notes from people here..

ILLUS: Back at the first church I served I remember visiting a certain woman in the nursing home. It was very disconcerting to visit with her though. She'd suffered a stroke and the entire left side of face and body sagged and was immobile. And, when I visited with her she always cried. If I shared a sad piece of information she cried and if I shared something exciting from the church she cried. It made me uncomfortable sometimes.

One day I came in to visit with her and found her sitting at a small desk with paper and a pen writing something. I asked her what she was writing and she replied that she was writing notes of encouragement back to the members of her church.

Can you imagine that? She refused to allow her stroke and life in a nursing home to quash her desire to minister to the people she cared for at church.

Everyone can show mercy others.., all it takes is deciding to get our hands dirty.

But certain people have the GIFT of mercy.

How would you know if you have this “gift”? Well, someone put together observations they thought would apply to those with the gift of mercy.

- Deeply loyal to friends.
- In fact, they seem to have a need for deep friendships.
- Empathize with hurting people.
- The decisions they make are based on benefits to those in need.
- Deeply sensitive to loved ones.
- Tend to attract people in distress. They’re like a magnet for them.
- Desire to remove hurts from those in need.
- They tend to measure acceptance by the closeness of an individual.
- And oddly, they seem attracted to prophets – prophets are almost polar opposites in their gift.

Weaknesses

- They will tend to take up offenses for friends

ILLUS: A little explanation is necessary here. Jesus teaches us that if someone offends us we need to go and find a way to address that. And, if the offender is a Christian they need to come to us and make it right. Once that is done, the conflict is over. HOWEVER, if I am your friend and I take up your “offense”, I become angry or upset at the person who offended you. But if that person makes it right with you, and I don’t find out about it – I’m still offended for you even though you no longer are. That’s the danger of “taking up offenses” for someone else.

- Can become possessive
- May tolerate evil to avoid hurt or danger
- Can fail to be firm
- Tends to lean on emotions rather than reason in making decision
- They can defraud others
- They can react badly to God’s purposes in others’ lives
- May fail to show deference to those in authority
- Tend to cut off insensitive people.

The gift of mercy is a powerful gift. It reflects that we understand the Mercy God has shown to us.

ILLUS: Years ago Bill Hybels made a comment about that thought:

“I would never want to reach out someday with a soft, uncallused hand – a hand never dirtied by serving - and shake the nail-pierced hand of Jesus.”

Now, why would Hybels make that connection? Why would he link the condition of our hands... with the condition of Christ’s hand?

Because it was in that “nail-pierced hand of Jesus” that we obtained OUR Mercy

Mercy is showing love to people that aren't all that lovely and desirable.
Mercy is showing love to people who are hard to love.
Mercy is showing love to folks who aren't attractive/popular/fun to be around

But that's kind of how we must have looked to God when He saved us. You and I must not have looked all that lovely and desirable God when God touched us.

Colossians 1:21 says that at one time you and I "...were alienated from God and were enemies in (our) minds because of (our) evil behavior."

Ephesians 2:1-2 says we "... were dead in (our) transgressions and sins, in which (we) used to live when (we) followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient."

And that "(we) were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world." Ephesians 2:12

We were not all that pretty and desirable to God.

We were enemies and dead in our sins.

But Romans 5:10 comforts us by saying "... if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

It's by the nail scarred hands of Jesus that we have received MERCY.

Jesus came down out of heaven. Do you understand the significance of that? He came down to our world and faced the struggles and pains and temptations that you and I encounter every day. He didn't have to do that! And when He came down, He touched us when we weren't touchable. And when He touched us He saved us and changed us.

CLOSE: How do we KNOW when we've mastered this concept of showing mercy?

We know we've mastered it when it doesn't matter if we get the credit for what we do. Just as long as God gets the credit.

As Jesus said: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works (pause and wait for the congregation to fill in the blank) and glorify your Father who is in heaven"

One church youth group understood this and taught their youth minister a powerful lesson.

ILLUS: David Stone (a preacher from Louisville, KY) related how he used to have a special outing for his youth when he was a youth minister. He'd read about Jesus washing His disciples' feet

and then send them out in groups, for a period of 2 hours, with instructions to minister to the people of Louisville, as they think Christ would have.

One group went out and bought ice cream cones and took them to a retirement community where several of their congregation lived and delivered the dripping cones to their door.

Another group went to a self service gas station and pumped gas for the patrons.

Each group returned and then shared what they had done and there was a spirit of joy and excitement as they realized they had done something for others and for God.

One group, however, arrived about 15 minutes late. When asked what they had done, they replied that they had gone to their arch rivals, the Baptist Church (they competed heavily in church basketball and other activities). They asked what they could do, and so they were allowed to sort the children's library - which took all of 45 minutes.

Then they asked what else they would be allowed to do.

"Well," replied the Baptist preacher, "we do have a shut-in that needs her yard raked. She's needed done for some time now, but we haven't been able to get anybody over to her home." So the youth went, raked her yard, shared in a prayer circle at her request and then she said these words: "I am so glad I belong to the Baptist Church, it's so nice to know that they care so much for me that you kids would come out and help me."

At that, Stone exclaimed: "Well, you did tell them you were from 1st Christian, didn't you."

"No," they replied, it never occurred to us. We were just so excited about serving God that we forgot all about that."

At the beginning of the sermon I had a series of graphics posted on the overhead about how people who have the 7 gifts listed in Romans 12 might react to a person being in the hospital:

1. The Prophet: "What is God trying to tell you through this illness? Is there some sin you have not confessed yet?"
2. The Server: "Here's a little gift. I brought your mail in, watered your plants and washed your dishes?"
3. Teacher: "I did some research on your illness and I believe I can explain what's happening."
4. Encourager: "You were so wise to go see the Doctor when you did. Can you imagine much worse it would have been if you had waited?"
5. Giver: "Do you have any insurance?"
6. Organizer: "You just relax. I've assigned your job to 4 others at the office."
7. Mercy giver: "Do you need another pillow or blanket? More water? Would you like me to put you on the prayer list?"