

Mercy on Whom He will Have Mercy

By Elder David Pyles

Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. – Rom 9:18-19

Unfortunately, there are a significant number of Christians who will object to principle conveyed in this text. They seem to think God is under obligation to treat all people the same. Their position is not only unbiblical, it is also blatantly unrealistic. Anyone beholding the real world should readily see that God is not committed to a policy of treating all people equally.

Even more remarkable is the fact that those who object to the principle in this text reserve to themselves the very rights they deny to God. For example, if someone were to dent their car or break their window, they would reserve the right to forgive the damage, but would also reserve the right to press for reparation. This scripture simply says God has the same rights. It is His prerogative to forgive one man while holding another man to account.

There is no injustice in this. The text does not say God will have justice on whom he will have justice, and injustice on whom he will have injustice. Rather, it asserts His right to give or withhold mercy as He pleases. All men can be justifiably condemned as sinners, but, thankfully, it is the prerogative of a sovereign God to forgive. He is under no obligation to do this for anyone, much less must He do it for everyone. Besides, it would be senseless to call it “mercy” if God were somehow obligated to show it.

Jesus Christ evidently considered this to be an important principle because He made it the subject of His first sermon (Lk 4:16-27). When He finished teaching, His audience was so angry that they attempted to cast him off a cliff. While most men give “lip service” to the sovereignty of God, some of them obviously do not truly submit to it.

Jesus taught another important lesson on this subject in His parable of the laborers (Mt 20:1-16). Here, some of the laborers were paid exactly what they deserved whereas others were given more than they deserved. The conclusion intended by this parable is clear: The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23) and this is exactly what some men will receive, yet God can and will bless others with far better.

The scriptures plainly teach how to identify the recipients of this mercy. They are the ones who believe on Jesus Christ and follow Him. The mercy they receive is not payment for this obedience. Such ideas would contradict the very meaning of “mercy.” Rather, their belief is itself the product of Divine mercy administered to their hearts (Jn 6:44-45, Eph 2:8, Php 1:29 & 2:12-13, etc). This conclusion is corroborated by personal experience. All true Christians will happily profess with Paul: “*But by the grace of God I am what I am...*” (1Cor 15:10-11).

As for those He “hardeneth,” this is not because He does anything to worsen their already wicked condition, but because He leaves them to their own thoughts and actions, or because He shows them kindness while knowing they will react to it in abusive ways. A sovereign God can leave some men to themselves and to the consequences of their actions, while overruling other men and moving them in a right direction they would not have otherwise taken. “*Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.*”