



# Life of Christ

A study of the life and teachings of Jesus

## The Depth of Divine Mercy

—by Marc Turnage

Do you ever feel like we're living in a world of chaos, that things are just a runaway train charging forward? Jesus lived in a world like that. The Jewish people believed that their God was the only God, yet as His chosen people, they found themselves under the heel of Roman oppression.

The Jewish community of Jesus' day had developed a very devout faith formulated around the Old Testament. As they began to feel the weight of the chaotic world around them, they also started to identify themselves as a people by their adherence to God's commandments. Different Jewish groups interpreted the Old Testament in different ways—similar to Christian denominations today—but they also wrestled with the question, “Of the 613 commandments in the Old Testament, what's more important: the commandments about my relationship with God, or the ones about how I relate to other people?”

They were having internal debates on what the right interpretation of Scripture was and what the priority of The Commandments should be. They weren't necessarily arguing that one was important and the other was not, but which was the priority? At the same time, they also began to say, “This is who we are; and, this is how we're different from the world around us.”

In their world, people drew lines defining insiders and outsiders: “us” versus “them.” The idea of God's mercy was important within ancient Judaism. They believed it. They taught it as the central confession of the Old Testament: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness,” (see Psalm 103:8).

But even in our world of drawn lines and boundaries, we can also think, like them, “God is merciful to me and those who are like me, but I want

Him to bring the others in line. I want His judgment to rain down on those creating the chaos in my world.” It’s into that same world that Jesus of Nazareth steps. It’s into that world that He brings the messages we’ve been studying and discussing. When it comes to the depth of God’s mercy, Jesus explodes those lines and boundaries!

We see this in Matthew 5 when He tells His disciples that God causes His sun to shine on the good and the wicked, and He sends His rain on the just and the unjust. Jesus explains that God extends the blessing of the sun and the bounty of the rain on both righteous and wicked alike. Regardless of how we might judge someone, God still instructs us to be merciful, just as He is.

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The way Jesus frames God’s mercy can be offensive to us. We talked about the parable in Matthew 20 last week related to a call to obedience without thought of reward. Today, we are looking at it from the other side of the story, from the standpoint of the great depth of divine mercy.

In this passage, Jesus tells a parable about a householder who has a vineyard. It’s harvest time, and he needs all hands on deck. Early in the morning, he hires one group of day laborers for a denarius—a day’s wage. He subsequently hires three more groups of people later in the day. Finally, he hires the last group with only one hour of work left. When it comes time to pay the laborers their wages, he instructs the steward with, “Pay them out, starting with those who worked the least amount of time and work up to those who worked the most.” Those who only worked an hour got a denarius—a day’s wage. Those who worked all day thought, “Great! We’re going to get even more!” And yet, when their pay came, it was only a denarius, so they grumbled because of the householder’s generosity and mercy.

In response, the householder rebuked them, “I agreed with you for a day’s wage. You got what is yours, so go! But I’m going to do with mine what I like.” And what he wanted was for those who had worked only an hour—who had frankly been lazy through the day—to receive a day’s wage. That doesn’t seem right or fair! Let’s be honest! We hear the story and get irritated with the householder, but that’s the point. God is merciful, even to those we would not want Him to be merciful to. God loves those whom we would prefer to draw a line and accuse them with, “They’re on the wrong side of the line.”

In Luke 13, Jesus tells another parable about the depth of God’s mercy, about a fig tree:

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, “Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this big tree, and I have found none. Cut it down! Why should it use up the ground?” And he answered him, “Let it alone, Sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good! But if not, you can cut it down.”—*Luke 13:6-9*

Remember, Jesus is living in a world that is yearning for God’s redemption, which to them meant the removal of the wicked, especially the pagan Romans. Here, he tells this parable about a tree that is not bearing fruit, yet the vinedresser asks for mercy: “One more year! Give it time, and let’s see if it bears fruit. If it doesn’t bear fruit, then okay, cut it down.”

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The image of bearing fruit and harvesting, in both Jesus’s parables and the Bible as a whole, often reflects judgment. Yet this particular story is saying, “God’s not ready to judge because He’s merciful. Today is the day of God’s mercy, and the day for us to be merciful, as well.”

One of the challenges we often face—even within the Church—is that on the one hand, we know God commands us to love sinners, even our enemies. But then we also have this other idea of God’s holiness, righteousness, and coming judgment. How do we balance this? That’s real tension!

In Jesus’ mind, judgment was coming, and judgment will come, but today is not the day of judgment. Judgment is not for you or me, but it is God’s domain—way above our pay grades! God will be the judge because He is the Just Judge, and the Just Judge of the world will judge justly. We can never forget that. Today is the day of His mercy, and therefore we need to be the conduits of that mercy. That doesn’t mean we have to condone those who do not bear fruit, but it does mean that we need to be merciful and not bring the sword of judgment with us wherever we go.

One final parable Jesus tells in Matthew 13, again using the imagery of harvest during the harvest period. Interestingly, He picks this image of a wheat harvest because John the Baptist had used this image to describe his immediate expectation of the coming Redeemer, the coming Judge in his thinking. Notice what John says, “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor. The ax is already laid to the root of the tree” (paraphrased from Matthew 3).

John was looking for an immediate redemption that would bring redemption for the righteous and judgment on the wicked. Jesus, however,

disagrees with John's timeline, because for Jesus, today is the day of God's mercy, and God wants everyone to come to a knowledge and walk in obedience to Him. So, He tells this parable, found in Matthew 13:24-28:

The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away, so when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servant said to him, "Do you want us to go and gather them [meaning the wheat]?" But he said, "No, lest gathering the wheat, you root up the weed along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

In this parable, Jesus combats an ideology we see with John the Baptist that is yearning for redemption for the righteous—"our group"—while expecting judgment and vengeance upon those who are outside of our group. Here, Jesus essentially says, "No, now is not the time. Let them grow up. The harvest time is when the separation will come."

Jesus sees today as the day of God's mercy. Now is the period of God's mercy, and He is merciful to all of us, sinner and saint alike. Righteous and unrighteous, we all benefit from the rains that fall and the sun that shines. In this day and age, even as chaotic as it feels and as out-of-control as it seems, we cannot afford to draw "us-versus-them" lines—not if we're going to reflect the depth of God's mercy.

We want God to be merciful to us, even in our deepest, darkest despair. But the same God who pulled you out of the pit also wants to do the same for that person you may not understand, you may not agree with, or you may not even like. As followers of Jesus, we cannot afford to ignore the depth of God's divine mercy. Instead, we need to reflect on it and be challenged by it.

**Question** How are you internalizing Jesus' challenge to be merciful just as your Father is merciful? Do you "grin and bear it," or are you allowing the Holy Spirit in you to bring your heart's desire in line with His Heart's desire for all to be saved by grace?

**Prayer Starter** Jesus, I want to obey You, and yet sometimes my desire to obey Your commands directly clashes with my anger towards others who, in my opinion, make stupid decisions and do foolish things. I feel \_\_\_\_\_, and I want \_\_\_\_\_, but I choose to submit my will and my desires to You today. I give you my hurt, my anger, and my frustration over \_\_\_\_\_. I invite You to forgive me, heal me, make me whole, and give me—through the power of Your Holy Spirit—a fresh compassion for others who don't see things the way I do. I invite You to be patient through me with others, so that they can experience Your love for them.

**Family Chat** Can you think of a person who is “mean” to you or doesn't treat you fairly? How should you pray for them?

**Take Action** Wrestle with God until your heart, your thoughts, your words, and your choices change.

**Challenge** Meet with your life group and talk through both the questions you've answered this week and the challenges you have faced (or are still facing!) as you follow Jesus. Be honest about what's worked for you, as well as areas where you may have missed the mark.