

Matchless Mercy for God's Heritage

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"Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."

Micah 7:18-19

On July 1, 1993, the foundations of the Heritage Reformed Congregations were laid. The denominational name was chosen in April of the following year. As we look back over the first decade of the HRC, we confess our sins, acknowledge the Lord's faithfulness, and look to our precious Savior for the unknown future.

The Sunday after the new denominational name was given, this sermon on Micah 7:18-19 was preached. We pray that God may continue to keep the HRC faithful to its real scriptural and Reformed heritage as we look forward to the decade to come.

Our young denomination has received a new name a name that includes the significant word, "heritage." Heritage is a biblical name; it occurs some thirty times in the Scriptures. Sometimes it refers to God as the heritage of His people, but more often it refers to believers as God's heritage. At times, it also refers to an inheritance, or to the riches God's children possess in Christ.

The name *Heritage* was chosen, I believe, for at least three reasons. First, to direct our attention to the real heritage of our former denomination which finds its

roots in the Dutch Second Reformation in the writings of such notable divines as Willem Teellinck, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Gijsbertus Voetius, and Alexander Comrie, as well as in the Reformation proper, in men such as John Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, and John Knox. In the North American context, that heritage has also been rooted both in English Puritanism, via William Perkins, John Bunyan, John Owen, and many others, and in American Puritanism, represented by Thomas Shepard, Thomas Hooker, and John Cotton. We desire to be true to this rich heritage insofar as it is true to the Word and Son of God.

Second, and more importantly, the name *Heritage* was selected, I trust, because deep within us we feel a great need to return to the founding watchword of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). Scripture is the real foundation of our heritage; yes, Scripture itself is our best heritage. Its inspiration, inerrancy, and authority must ever be our mainstay. What is not in accord with Scripture must be explicitly rejected.

The bare affirmation of Scripture's infallibility, inerrancy, and authority, however, is not enough for us. God gives us His Word as both a word of truth and a word of power. As a word of truth, we must trust in and rest our all upon Scripture for time and eternity. We must also look to Scripture as the source of the transforming powers used by the Spirit of God to renew us from within. That power must be manifested in our lives, our homes, our churches, and our communities. Other books may inform or reform us, but only one Book, the Holy Bible, can and does transform us, making us conformable to the image of Christ.

Finally, and most importantly, let us never forget that even Scripture is not an end in itself, but purposes to point us to *the* heritage of every true believer, Jesus Christ, and through Him, the Triune God. God Himself, in Christ, is ultimately who we have in mind when we ascribe the title "Heritage" to our churches. Our heritage is not so much a "what," as it is a "who"—the ever-blessed Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Psalm 16:5-6 says, "The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."

Now, this blessed Triune God will have a heritage in His living church. But how is this possible, when all have sinned and come short of His glory, when

sinners are by nature under the curse of the law and the wrath of God? How is it possible when everyone has a bad record, and worse, a bad heart? It is only possible, dear friends, because of the heart of God. God's heart is a heart of mercy; He delights in mercy — yes, matchless mercy. Let's look at that from Micah 7:18-19, which says, “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

This marvelous text speaks of "Matchless Mercy for God's Heritage." Let's look at this theme through three questions: Who is God's heritage? What is their inheritance? Who is like unto God?

Who is God's heritage?

God delights in all His attributes: love, holiness, truth, grace, omniscience, omnipotence, and all the rest. God and His attributes are inseparable. He preserves all His attributes untarnished; nevertheless, our text tells us that God takes special delight in His mercy. God "delighteth in mercy," Micah says.

Micah implies—and other texts in Scripture state even more explicitly—that God does not delight in executing justice as much as in manifesting mercy. God does not rejoice over the destruction of a sinner as He does over the salvation of the lost. His saving compassion moves towards the vessels of mercy, not toward the unbelieving and impenitent. As the Puritans often said, mercy is God's darling attribute. Mercy is God's Benjamin—the son of His right hand and the son of His sorrow, for mercy cost Him the sorrows of the Son of God.

Thomas Watson put it so beautifully: "The Scripture represents God in white robes of mercy more often than with garments rolled in blood; with His golden sceptre more often than His iron rod. The bee naturally gives honey, it stings only when it is provoked, so God does not punish till He can bear no longer. Mercy is God's right hand that He is most used to; inflicting punishment is called His strange work (Isa. 28:21)."

What a person delights in, he usually becomes proficient in. That is certainly the

case with God. God is proficient in showing mercy to all men in a general way through His beneficent nature, but He particularly excels in showing mercy in a saving way, says Micah, toward "the remnant of his heritage" in passing by their transgression and pardoning their iniquity.

But what is the saving mercy of God? God's saving mercy is His sovereign, gracious pardon toward guilty sinners and compassion toward miserable sinners. Mercy makes things right for sinners through justification, and keeps things right within them by sanctification. Mercy pities them in misery, relieves in affliction, comforts in distress, and counsels in difficulties.

On whom, then, does God exercise His saving mercy? On believers. God's mercy flows from His own heart to every sinner who comes to Jesus by faith (John 3:36). That faith, of course, is itself a receptive gift of God and not a meritorious work of man (Eph. 2:8-10). There is no competition in Scripture between *sola fide* (faith alone) and *sola gratia* (grace alone). God views mercy in contradistinction to all merits and works. Mercy is the free gift of God.

Those believers are elect believers. God's mercy showers on all the elect, for only the elect come to Jesus by saving faith. Indeed, God's mercy cannot fail for His people, for it is ratified from eternity in the Trinity's counsel of peace, or covenant of redemption. The Father's covenant is sure; the Son's blood is sure; the Spirit's application is sure—therefore, mercy is sure.

God's free mercy and His electing love are best friends. Election preaches that God delights in mercy. God thought of mercy from eternity. He planned mercy before anyone needed mercy; He chose fit objects for mercy from eternity. He selected them entirely out of His own good pleasure without any merit in them. The heart of mercy is that God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy (Rom. 9:15). If God had sent into the world a gospel full of conditions and human merit, it would have been no gospel to anyone, for no one but Christ can fulfil the conditions of God's justice.

Those believers are also needy believers. Sinners who, like the publican, cannot live without mercy are the recipients of mercy (Luke 18:9-14). Sinners who can find no reasons in themselves to be recipients of mercy but yet cry out, "Give me Jesus, else I die," shall never perish. God's mercy is always overflowing to every

needy believer. His vial of wrath drips, but His fountain of mercy runs. His anger lasts a moment, but His mercy endures eternally. Believers shall bathe themselves eternally in God's ocean of mercy, without ever diminishing its abundance.

Dear friend, are you, too, by grace, a believer and a recipient of mercy? Have you experienced that God delights in mercy, and that therefore everything that transpires in your life has mercy at its core? Can you concur with Thomas Watson who wrote: "There is no condition, but we may spy mercy in it. In all afflictions we may see some sunshine of mercy. That outward and inward troubles do not come together is mercy. Mercy sweetens all God's other attributes; it makes His Godhead appear amiable and lovely. His mercy in election makes Him justify, adopt, glorify; one act of mercy engages God to more"?

Truly, God gives His people a vast inheritance of mercy. Our text richly opens up that inheritance for us.

What is their inheritance?

The heritage or inheritance of believers is, Micah tells us, justifying mercy, sanctifying mercy, and eternal mercy. Let's consider each of these briefly.

(1) *Justifying mercy* is expressed in two ways in verse 18. First, God is a God "that pardoneth iniquity." That expression in Hebrew literally means that God "lifts up" iniquity. He lifts it up by lifting it off our shoulders and placing it upon Christ's. As Isaiah says, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa, 53:4). And by carrying our sins as sinless Savior, Christ takes our sins away, pardons them, and buries them. He's the scapegoat for us, who takes our sins upon Himself, and pays their full price, delivering and forgiving us. Through Christ, Numbers 14:18 is fulfilled for us, "The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression."

Dear friend, is Jesus also your scapegoat? Have you experienced, by faith, His justifying mercy for your own unworthy soul?

Second, Micah tells us that God "passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage." The expression "passeth by" or literally, "passeth over," signifies movement. The identical word is used in Exodus 12:23 of Israel's deliverance from Egypt: "For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth

the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the LORD will pass over [or 'pass by'] the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you." How can God do this—how can He pass over sin? God passes by His people's transgressions because divine justice did not pass by Christ, but fixed and poured itself upon Him. For Christ's sake, God has justifying mercy upon every believer, pardoning iniquity and passing by transgression.

(2) *Sanctifying mercy* is expressed in three ways in our text. First, "he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy." Literally, Micah says, "God does not make strong His anger for ever." God is justly angry with the sins of His people; He hates their sins with perfect hatred. Sin is so contrary to His holy nature that He cannot but show indignation against it. And yet, because that indignation is poured out upon Christ and borne by Him, God does not retain His anger against believers—not in the area of sanctification and personal experience, either.

Dear believer, when you slip or backslide, and bring guilt upon your own conscience, fly directly to Christ with all your sin and the sense of divine anger you feel. Confess your sin, forsake it, and seek for its forgiveness only in Christ, for God delights in mercy in Christ. As you trust Christ and God's promises in Him, you will experience that God does not retain His anger but will enable you to experience daily, sanctifying cleansing, so that you can say with Isaiah 12:1, "O Lord, I will praise thee; though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me."

Second, Micah says, God "will turn again, he will have compassion [literally, pity] upon us." We often feel we have sinned against the Lord too often to remain a recipient of mercy, but Micah says that God so delights in mercy that He will turn again." God will turn once more to you, repenting believer; He will grant you one more look of love; one more glimpse of the way of salvation through the blood of Christ; one more promise from His Word, convincing you of His peace that passes all understanding. He will turn His reconciled countenance in Christ Jesus to you, and you, like Peter, will weep bitterly that you have so sinned against Him and yet weep in joy for His awesome forgiveness.

Blessed be God that He turns again! If He did not turn again, you and I would only grow harder and colder. Because He turns again, our hearts may again be

broken, healed, and comforted. Because He turns again, His work in you shall never fail, never die. Because He turns again, your repentance is intensified, your hope is encouraged, your love is enflamed, and you receive inward strength to persevere in faith.

Because He turns again, you experience His compassion and pity, for Christ's sake. You experience, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13). As Christ had compassion upon the fainting multitude, upon Jairus, upon lepers, and upon the handicapped and blind, so God has compassion upon all those who mourn over their soul's pitiable condition and take refuge in His Son with all their sins, confessing their unworthiness before Him, resting upon mercy alone.

Third, Micah says, "he will subdue [literally, trample or suppress] our iniquities." He will take away the tyranny of sin; he will sanctify us and renew us. This is sanctification indeed! Sin subdued is the next greatest blessing to sin pardoned. Wherever God pardons sin, He will also subdue sin—here on earth, partially; in heaven, perfectly. The same grace that casts sin behind God's back puts its foot upon the corruption of the believer and tramples sin in the dust.

But what a struggle the battle between the flesh and the spirit ignites! The flesh will seize every opportunity to reestablish its dominion in the soul. Flesh wants grace out of the way; it wants to rule the heart and have sin carry the day as before. Flesh blinds our eyes to the reality of sin; it deadens our conscience; it dulls our spiritual affection. We need the sovereign grace of God every bit as much to subdue our sins as we need it to pardon our sins.

(3) Finally, Micah also speaks of *eternal mercy*: "And thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." The Dutch annotations say, "Our sins shall not be looked upon by God, but shall be put in everlasting oblivion, covered, unregarded, and sunk away for ever." Those who have sins forgiven and subdued while they live, shall have them drowned when they die. God promises, "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins" (Isa. 43:25).

Blessed, eternal mercy: forgiveness of *all* your sins, dear believer! What an inheritance! Were there one sin left between God and your soul, you could never

enter into God's presence with eternal joy.

Let us never rest when there are any sins between God and us. Let us press on, every day seeking fresh applications of this mercy of mercies—the forgiveness of all our sins.

Forgiveness is matchless mercy—necessary, great, sure, free, and eternal mercy, and leads believers to cry out with amazement, like Micah, "Who is like unto God?"

Who is like unto God?

Micah becomes bold. He challenges the false gods of heathen lands all around. "Who is like unto God?" he asks. "What other god lifts up the burden of sin, passes by transgression, turns again to unworthy sinners, tramples upon sin, and casts sin behind His back forever, burying it in the bottomless ocean of His grace? Where is there a god like unto this God—a God who takes care of His heritage that they shall never perish, a God who loves them so profoundly because of His eternal, purchasing, preserving grace? Where is there another god who sees and sympathizes with every sorrow and care of His children?"

How applicable Micah's exclamation is yet today: "Who is like unto God?" The question is rhetorical. There is not, of course, any other like unto God, not Moloch, Baal, or Ashteroth; not the god of self-righteousness, the god of materialism, or the god of this world (cf. Isa. 40:18). What can any god other than Micah's God do for us in that hour when flesh and heart fail?

If there is no God so merciful as Micah's living God, why should we not bring all our sins to Him? Why should we not, like the prodigal, arise and return to our Creator-Father? Dear believer, should we not cry out, "Let this ever be our God—the God whom we believe in, the God whom we know and worship, adore and love! 'Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee' (Ps. 73:25).

Let's close with a few applications. Dear believer:

(1) Consider the greatness of God's mercy in showing saving mercy to such a person as you. Were you the most virtuous, the most gifted, the most honest, the most worthy? Oh, wonder of wonders! The Lord laid hold of you, stopped and

turned you, and brought you to know His mercy in Christ. He lays hold of the polluted publican; He singles out the wandering prodigal. He regenerates, and brings them to repentance and faith in Christ. He lifts the poor out of the dunghill, and sets among princes. If you consider that the accumulated guilt of your and my soul would be enough to sink an entire world into perdition is not our salvation a vivid proof that God delights in mercy? "*Who is like unto God?*"

(2) Consider the greatness of God's ongoing mercy by meditating on how you have been toward the Lord after you have first tasted His mercy. How unbelieving, how proud, how fainthearted, how selfish, how ungrateful, how unfaithful! Should we not be ashamed? Have we not sinned against the merciful heart of the Father, against the merciful blood of Christ, against the precious comforts of the Holy Spirit, and yet, has the Lord ever spewed you out of His mouth? Have you ever been disowned by Christ? Has not the mercy which once flowed to you in the early hours of your new birth continued to flow ever since like a surging, ever-widening river, bursting its banks? Why? Because God delights in mercy; and what He delights in must come to pass. Nothing and no one can stop His hand of mercy, or say unto Him, "What doest Thou?" "*Who is like unto God?*"

Does the mercy of God work within us a great love to God, and admiring, reverential thoughts of Him? Does it confirm for you that true religion resides exclusively in mercy? Does it provide fresh strength and encouragement for new obedience?

(3) Let mercy be your delight. If God delights in mercy, and you are His child, shouldn't you delight in mercy? Shouldn't you be merciful to the guilty, the poor, the ignorant, the lonely? Do not be the first to cast a stone at the adulterous woman, for your Master did not condemn her. "Who is like unto God?" Are you like Him in mercy?

Mercy ought to run through your entire character since you are an heir of mercy. Never say of another, "I can't or won't forgive," for in so saying, you condemn yourself. If you don't forgive your brother his trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you. How can we, with one hand stretched out against our brother, lift our other hand to God and pray the publican's prayer?

Are you not yet a true believer in Christ? Then I'm afraid that you don't truly believe that God delights in mercy. In fact, you probably have many objections against His mercy. You perhaps ask questions like these:

If God is merciful, why do so many go lost? Remember this: The fact that God delights in mercy does not tarnish His justice. Those who persevere in rejecting the gospel and living impenitently shall justly go lost. Of all the lost that shall throng the corridors of hell, not one has received more than the due reward of his deeds (Luke 23:42).

If God is merciful, why is there an unpardonable sin? Let's turn that question around: If we grasp even a small portion of the heinousness of sin, the wonder is that there is only one sin that is unpardonable! God could have made a long list of unpardonable sins; instead, He reduced that list to one: that person who wages war against the Holy Spirit and completely sears his conscience so that it makes it impossible for him to seek for pardon. Don't misinterpret God's mercy—no one has ever sincerely cried for mercy in vain.

If God is merciful, why do I feel that God can't have mercy upon me? That could be due to any number of reasons, such as a faulty view of God; fears you've sinned too much in the past; fears you're still sinning too much in the present; a conviction that there simply is nothing special about you for God to notice you and save you, etc. At any rate, your feelings in this matter are not to be trusted. God's Word is better than your feelings. You may be a filthy sinner, but He declares that He delights to wash and dine with black sinners. You may have repeatedly offended Him for forty, sixty, even eighty years, but His arm is still not shortened that He cannot save. He has strength for the weak, wisdom for the foolish, righteousness for the unrighteous.

Are you a lost sheep bleating on the mountains of your sins? The Good Shepherd hears you and will reach you. Don't allow your thoughts to run contrary to the gist of the gospel, yes, to the declarations of heaven. God is able and willing even to save rebellious sheep such as you are—sheep who have nothing left but the publican's prayer: "God be merciful (literally; be *full of mercy*) to me, the sinner."

I must proclaim most freely that which God has most delight in: mercy. His mercy endureth for ever! I would let this pulpit ring with mercy! No heart is too

hard for God to reach; no beggar too bankrupt; no sinner too steeped in iniquity.
Who is like unto God?

Friend, the very fact that you and I are still alive after all we've done to provoke God is irrefutable proof that God is a merciful God. Why do you still keep your distance from Him? However grossly you have offended Him, He is ready to forgive. He will hear your prayers, even when they are feeble and broken. He says to you still: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isa. 45:22).

Finally, let us admonish each other not to abuse God's delight in mercy. We must never fall into the antinomian spirit which abuses mercy by saying that if we let sin abound, grace will abound the more. Sin is never a trifle with God. It is always deadly fire. Calvary is a sacred place—a place that we may never abuse at whim. How shall we minimize sin when our Savior died to save us from it? Do not trifle with sin because God is merciful. Rather, because God is merciful, let us flee from sin and flee to Calvary. There is no other place of divine mercy on the face of the earth. There, at Calvary, cling to the horns of God's altar that are dripping with the blood of Immanuel—the blood in which mercy and justice meet and kiss each other. Say with a poet:

*If Thou hadst bid Thy thunders roll,
And lightning's flash to blast my soul,
I still had stubborn been;
But mercy has my heart subdued,
A bleeding Savior I have viewed,
And now I hate my sin.*

God has nailed every other door closed, but the door of Calvary and of the empty tomb. The dying, living Immanuel is our only and sufficient hope. The open door of the gospel proclaimed to you is sprinkled with the blood of Jesus on every side—on the lintel and the two side posts. And written on that door, you can find: "Whosoever believeth in the Lord Jesus Christ shall never perish, but have everlasting life."

Yes, there is another door—a bloodless door, a door that leads to death. On that door is written, "He that believeth not shall be condemned." To be without Christ

is to be without mercy.

"Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near" (Isa. 55:6). And don't be discouraged as you seek God and the graces of repentance and faith. There is not one word in the entire Bible to discourage poor, guilty, coming, repenting, believing sinners. God's throne of grace is open; God's house is open; God's heart is open. He delights in mercy-matchless mercy. "*Who is like unto God?*" This is the heritage of sinners who trust exclusively in Christ for salvation. May it be the heritage of every one of us as the Heritage Reformed Congregations-now, in future decades and generations, and forever. Amen.