

God is Merciful

(Luke 15:11-32)

Introduction

We've been learning about God's attributes. An *attribute* is a character trait or quality about someone.

What are some of things that we've learned about God already?

- God is **great creator**—He created the whole universe! We know that there is a God because we see what He has done. We see the wonderful things which He has created.

The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)

- God is **holy**—He is without sin; He is perfect in every way.
Who is like you among the gods, O LORD—glorious in holiness, awesome in splendor, performing great wonders? (Exodus 15:11)
- God is **just**—He always does what is right and fair.

He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He! (Deuteronomy 32:4)

We've been learning about God's attributes, and today, we'll talk about one of my most favorite things about God: He is **merciful**!

Have you ever done wrong and not gotten the punishment you deserved? How did you feel?

One time I was driving along and I looked in my rear-view mirror and saw flashing red lights and then I heard the siren. I quickly slowed down. In my mind I was thinking of all the excuses I *could* make. But I knew there was no point in trying to defend myself. I knew I'd been speeding and that I deserved a ticket.

Then, unexpectedly, the officer said he wasn't going to give me a ticket! He said I was free to go! So, I very slowly pulled away and as I carefully drove home, I praised God for His mercy! I deserved that ticket, but God put it in that policeman's heart not to punish me! I love to receive mercy, don't you?

Mercy is not getting what you deserve.

Opening Prayer

Father, thank You that You are a God of mercy—You don't give us what we deserve. We deserve to be punished for our sins, but instead, You extend forgiveness to us and then You forget all about our sin! Give us grateful hearts as we consider what it means to us that You are merciful. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Memory Verse

Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Lesson

During the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were the religious leaders of the Jews. They thought it was terrible that Jesus showed kindness toward sinners. They thought they were better than most people because they strictly kept the *Ten Commandments* and all the rest of the rules. They thought that God shouldn't forgive people that they considered horrible sinners. It made them angry and resentful to hear Jesus teach that God wanted sinners to come to Heaven. So, one night after dinner, Jesus told them a story to show them God's kind of love for us.

Luke 15:11-12

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. (12) The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

In Bible times, the oldest son always inherited two portions of the father's estate while the other brothers got only a single portion. Usually the sons would have to wait until *after* the father died to get their inheritance. But in this story, the younger son didn't want to wait for his share of the money. He wanted it NOW! He was eager to leave home and do what he wanted, even if it was wrong!

So, the father gave the younger son his part of the money. How good this father was to his younger son! He was willing to give his hard-earned savings to his son even though the son didn't deserve to have it until after his father's death.

The love of the father in our story is a picture of God's love for us: He willingly lets us enjoy all that belongs to Him. Can you think of some of the things God has given you? (He's given us good health, a loving mother and father, a warm bed, enough food to eat, etc.)

Why is He so good to you? Is it because you deserve it or because you have earned it in some special way? No, God loves you because that is just the way He is. "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8), and you are His treasured creation.

When the younger son asked for his portion early, it showed that he was self-centered and had no respect for his father.

Luke 15:13

"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living.

The son had disregarded his father's love and care and decided to go his own way. How foolish! God's Word says that you and I are much like that son. God has been very good to us: He has provided for our needs and given us many things to enjoy. Yet we, too, go our own way (Isaiah 53:6) and waste what the Father has given us.

We often do things that displease God. Can you think of ways we displease God? (We speak rudely to our brothers & sisters, talk back to our mothers, get cocky at school with our teachers, and so forth.)

Often you and I are much like this son — foolishly going our own way, disregarding God's goodness and love. The younger son said *good-bye* and headed to a faraway city. There, he started spending his money very foolishly—on wild parties and anything he thought would make him happy. He had lots of friends who enjoyed the parties he paid for, too! But, soon the son would have to suffer the consequences of following his own sinful heart.

One day his money bag was completely empty! All of a sudden, people he thought were his friends didn't come to see him anymore. He was all alone. And he was in big trouble. He had no money to buy food or to pay for a place to live. This was awful!

Luke 15:14-15

"About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. (15) He persuaded local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his field to feed the pigs.

At last he found a job taking care of pigs! But, according to the law God gave to Moses, pigs were unclean animals and the people were forbidden to eat pork (Leviticus 11:7, 8). They were not to eat bacon, or hot dogs, or ham sandwiches. Jews would not even touch pigs. For a Jew to stoop to feeding pigs was a great humiliation.

Luke 15:16

"The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him, but no one gave him anything.

He was so hungry all of the time, he started thinking about eating the pig's food if it had been offered to him. For this young man to eat food that the pigs had touched was the lowest possible thing the listeners of this story could imagine. This son had truly sunk to the depths of society.

Luke 15:17

"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!"

One morning the son thought, 'I'm starving to death while the people who work for my dad have plenty of food to eat!' So, he decided to leave his job feeding pigs and return home.

The younger son is like many us who want to be free to live as we please. He had to hit bottom before he came to his senses. It often takes great sorrow and heartbreak to cause people to look to the only One who can help them.

Luke 15:18-19

"I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, (19) and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.""

The son realized his sin was against God and his father. Recognizing that you have sinned is the first step towards making peace with God. By telling this story to the Pharisees, Jesus was trying to get them to see that there was hope for them if they would only grieve and agonize over their sins like the son in this story.

Luke 15:20

"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him."

In this story, the father watched and waited for his son to come back home. He missed his younger son very much. Every day he looked down the road. He was waiting with open arms, ready to greet his son if he returned.

In the same way, God's love is patiently looking for us. He will not force us to turn from our sins, come to Him, and ask Him for forgiveness. But, He is constantly waiting for us to come to Him.

Luke 15:21-24

His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' (22) "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. (23) And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, (24) for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began."

The father was so excited, he ran to meet his son! He hugged him and kissed him even though his boy was probably smelly and dirty and ragged and didn't deserve to be kissed at all!

The father told his servants to bring his son new clothes and sandals and a ring of his own. Then the father threw a big party to celebrate. Even though the younger son had been foolish and selfish and wrong, his father still loved him and forgave him!

Luke 15:25-26

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, (26) and he asked one of the servants what was going on."

Meanwhile, back at home, the older brother was bitter and angry at his younger brother for wasting his portion of their father's estate.

Luke 15:27-28

'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.' (28) "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him,"

The older brother refused to go to the festivity. He didn't think the father should give his foolish brother a ring and a party. He didn't think his father should welcome his brother at all!

Luke 15:29-30

"but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. (30) Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!"

In this story, the father forgave because he was filled with love for his son. But, the older brother refused to forgive because he thought it wasn't fair. The older brother's anger and resentment towards his younger brother made him just as lost to the father's love as the younger brother had been.

Luke 15:31

"His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours."

The father encouraged him to rejoice on behalf of his younger brother. He said, "*All that I have is yours.*" The father wasn't going to take the older son's inheritance away from him. He still had the double portion that was his by birth right, even though the younger son had already spent his single portion. The father was just glad the son had come home where he belonged.

Luke 15:32

"We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"

In Jesus' story, the older brother represented the Pharisees, who were angry and resentful that Jesus wanted sinners to come to Heaven. After all, the Pharisees must have thought, "*We have done so much for God*".

The father in this story was merciful, just like our Father in Heaven is with us. The older brother was not merciful; he was judgmental and unforgiving. Jesus told this story to show us God's kind of love.

Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount,

Matthew 5:7

God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

What does that mean to you? God will be merciful to you if you forgive others and show them kindness even if they are wrong.

The merciful unselfishly reach out to help others in need. They don't look down on others or condemn them. God is merciful towards us; He doesn't keep track of the wrong things we do. And since God is merciful and forgiving towards us, even when we do wrong, God wants us to show mercy and forgiveness towards others.

It's important to learn that forgiveness isn't complete unless you also forget all about the sinful thing that was done. When God forgives us, He forgets all about the wrong things we do.

Hebrews 8:12

I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.

To truly forgive someone, you must also forget all about the wrong done to you. Let it go, like water under a bridge.

Jesus tells us to do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. Sometimes people do wrong things to us. But we can be kind and forgive them, even if they don't deserve to be forgiven. And, once we forgive them, we need to forget all about it. That is being merciful, just like Jesus!

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for Your great mercy and forgiveness! We love You, O Lord! Help us to show Your kind of love towards others. Help us to show mercy and forgiveness to others, even when they don't deserve it. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Learning Activities

Craft Corner

Make a pigpen from craft sticks. Have students cut out pink pigs from construction paper. Use strips of brown paper to be straw. Label each pig with a sin that led the young man to the pig pen.

Game Center

Use the following review questions in a time of discussion or a game of your choice:

1. What did the father do to show mercy and forgiveness?
(Welcomed his son when he came back home. Celebrated his son's return with a party. Forgave his son for the wrong things he had done.)
2. How do you think the son felt before he saw his father? (Sorry for the wrong things he did. Worried that his father would not accept him.)
3. When is a time you have felt like the son before he saw his father? What happened?
4. How do you think the son felt after he saw his father?
5. Showing mercy means showing more love or kindness to a person than he or she expects or even deserves. What are some ways kids your age can show mercy and forgiveness to others?

(Forgetting about the time when your brother or sister took your bike without asking. Accepting someone's apology.)

6. How has God shown us His mercy and forgiveness?
7. Who are people to whom you can show mercy and forgiveness?
8. When is a time when someone has forgiven you? Why? How did it feel?
9. When is a time you needed to forgive someone? Was it easy or difficult to forgive him or her? Why?
10. When are times when it might be difficult to show mercy and forgiveness?
11. Why is it good that God is merciful?
12. How would your life be different if God were not merciful?
13. Is there someone who has been mean to you? How would you like that person to treat you? If someone is mean to you, you have a choice. You can either be mean back, or you can ask God to help you be merciful to that person.

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