

# KNOWING GOD

## STUDY 2: GOD IS MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS

*“The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity, and had no reason to expect anything but severity.”*

J.I. Packer

Mercy and grace are uniquely distinct from each other yet often work hand-in-hand. Mercy is most easily explained as someone not giving someone else what is deserved. Mercy is about restraint, a holding back on a punishment that is fully justified and fully appropriate. It is used when a negative consequence of an action is reduced or even eliminated. Grace, on the other hand, is all about an undeserved gift being given. Grace is utterly un-earned.

Grace and mercy are each related to the word “favour”. Consider the common English-language expression, “Do me a favour.” In what circumstances do we tend to use that expression? Many times, when we ask for a favour, we are begging for mercy. Other times, when we ask for someone’s favour, we are hoping for grace. Often, we are actually asking for both. God’s hand of mercy reaches into a human life and removes a penalty, even though that penalty is completely deserved. God’s hand of grace reaches into a human life and bestows a gift, even though that gift is completely undeserved.

### READ TOGETHER:

- **Ephesians 2:1-5 (NIV):** “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you 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. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But 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.”
- **Titus 3:4-5a (NIV)** “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”
- **Romans 5:20 (NLT)** “God’s law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God’s wonderful grace became more abundant.”

**Our Mercy-full God** (Ephesians 2:1-5) We see mercy at work in a courtroom when a robber is before a judge. When the judge grants a minimal sentence by requiring repayment of all that was stolen without any prison time for the offender, that judge could be described as “mercy-full”. A common Hebrew word that is often translated “mercy” carries an idea of bending or stooping in kindness to an inferior. In our picture of the judge and the criminal that is exactly what we see. The criminal is inferior, not in the sense of value but as a person with lesser power and authority. The judge – superior in power and authority – stoops low, so to speak, in kindness. It is a picture of empathy, of gentleness. But mercy is not simply an emotion. When someone’s heart is full of mercy or compassion, they can’t keep it in. Their emotions compel an action that is rooted in much more than a cognitive choice. Our perfectly holy God stoops toward us, in mercy, and offers life in Christ. The descriptions in verses 1-3 are quite bleak.

**DISCUSS:** *If you are a follower of Jesus, take a moment to carefully consider where you once were, according to these verses. Notice that, by our nature, we were each deserving of wrath. Spend some time together offering prayers of thanksgiving to our God who is “rich in mercy”.*

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**DIG DEEPER:** Consider doing a quick word study of the times “mercy” is used in scripture with a verb preceding it — show mercy, give mercy,... ([biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) is one of many great tools for such studies.) Discuss the implications of mercy being linked to action.

**Saving mercy** (Titus 3:4-5a) In the book of Judges there is a pattern that cycles through seven times, ending with the infamous battle of Samson vs. the Philistines. With every cycle, the pattern is repeated: blessing, sin, judgement, cries for mercy, deliverance, blessing. We can experience the same cycles, personally. Our actions and hearts often imply that we could do better than God is doing at running our lives. The mercy of God as He so often spares us the consequences of our foolishness. And His grace is always ready for us as soon as we are ready to admit our silly arrogance. We do not know the hundreds or thousands of times God’s mercy has stooped down into our mess and spared us pain and suffering — pain and suffering that our childish behaviour actually earned and deserved. Praise God that our salvation is not based upon any righteous deeds that we have done!

**DISCUSS:** *Quickly skim the book of Judges, observing the cycles of God’s people and their relationship with Yahweh. What do you notice about the circumstances that led to a transition in each stage of the cycle? What do you notice about their need for mercy and God’s response?*

**DIG DEEPER: Personal mercy** Think back over your own story of God’s cycle of mercy. Where are you in that cycle right now? Are you in the blessing stage? Then take a moment to praise God for the current blessings in your life. Is complacency sneaking into your life as you grow accustomed to abundance? Or is pride rising up as you begin to think you’ve earned the abundance you are enjoying? Share with others, as appropriate, where you are and where you want to be. Pray for each other.

**Amazing grace** (Ephesians 2:1-5) Back to the earlier courtroom scene— grace doesn’t leave that robber free to walk out of the courtroom; that’s mercy. Grace is when the judge decides to take the robber’s place in jail. And, even more. Grace is the judge saying, “Here’s \$2,000 from my personal account to help you get started with your new life.”

**DISCUSS:** *Share ways in which you have experienced God’s grace in recent days. Offer prayers of thanksgiving for our God of amazing grace.*

**DIG DEEPER: Hyper grace** (Romans 5:20) The original language says, basically — where sin abounded, grace hyper-abounded or super-abounded. In other words, we can’t out-sin God’s grace. There is no sin for which God’s grace is not greater. “Saying grace” is a phrase rich in history. Check out the etymology of the phrase. Consider this — We, of all people, as followers of Jesus and as people who have personally received God’s hyper grace, are invited to “say grace” far beyond a prayer before a meal. We are invited to “say grace” with our very lives, every minute of every day. *Discuss how we might “say grace” as a norm because we have received God’s grace as a norm.*

## RESOURCES:

- **Book:** Sharon Kohring, *Oh My God! Let Me Tell You About Him: A journey through the characteristics of God*
- **Book:** Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts*
- **Podcast:** The Bible Project, The Uniquely Biblical View of Grace, 2020, <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/series/character-of-god>