

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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God's Mercy and Nebuchadnezzar

Daniel 4:1-34

Prayer: *Father God, we do again thank you for your grace, we thank you for your goodness, we thank you for your mercy. And Lord, again I just -- we are here because of the mercy that you have bestowed on us, we're also here because of the lives that were given up by those who defended our country and we are thankful to you for them. We just again lift them up and continue to pray your grace on us and on our country as we again cherish the freedoms that we've been given. We don't know how long we're going to have them for but while we have them, we thank you and praise you for them. And Lord, this morning as we again use that freedom to open up your book, we pray for the grace and wisdom and the presence of your Holy Spirit. Guide us into this book, give us the grace and wisdom to understand it and again, make it of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we're looking at the fourth chapter of the book of Daniel and as we're looking at that book we notice a focus, a shift from Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the one who stood as

their adversary and that is Nebuchadnezzar. Just to refresh your memory about this man, remember, so far we've seen Daniel and his companions moving and they're moving from crisis to crisis. And in every case at the center of that crisis is Nebuchadnezzar. In chapter 1, we find him besieging Jerusalem. He attacks God's people and he overwhelms them and he takes the sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem and he installs them in the temple of his God. He butchers many and he kidnaps others including Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, bringing them back to Babylon. And the first crisis we encounter centers around their refusal to eat the king's food. God grants them all great health and appearance even though they eat only vegetables and that crisis is averted.

The second crisis in chapter 2 centers around the king's dream. See, Nebuchadnezzar had trained Daniel and his companions as wise men in Babylon and then in a fit of rage he orders all of the wise men of Babylon to be executed because they failed to tell him about this incredibly frightening dream that he's had. Well, when Daniel pleads for and receives the opportunity to tell him the dream and the interpretation, he relents and he acknowledges the superiority of Daniel's God saying in *Daniel 2:47*: "*Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.*" Then the king gave Daniel high

honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remind at the king's court.

Well, the third crisis in chapter 3 centers around the king's idolatry. He demands that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego all fall down and worship this 90-foot statue that he has erected and when they refuse, they're thrown into this fiery furnace. And there Nebuchadnezzar finds not three but four people walking in the midst of that furnace completely unharmed, and he says in *Daniel 3:27*:
And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God."

So three times Nebuchadnezzar directly challenges Daniel's God and three times he's shown the folly of that challenge and yet he still

doesn't change. Well apparently in Nebuchadnezzar's case, the fourth time was a charm because in the fourth chapter of the book of Daniel we have the testimony of the fully repentant and now fully convinced Nebuchadnezzar. This is *Daniel 4:1-3*, it says this: *"King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation."* This is not the gods of Babylon that Nebuchadnezzar is talking about and it's certainly not the wise men who failed him repeatedly and it most definitely was not that 90-foot tall idol that he was willing to execute Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over. In fact it was the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and the God of Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar was worshiping. Now all it took was God reducing him to the level of a beast for seven years.

Nebuchadnezzar starts out by describing yet another terrifying dream that he had. He has this vision in the dream of a magnificent tree. This is *Daniel 4:10-12*, it says: *"The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was*

visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it." Well, this vision is of this magnificent one-of-a-kind tree that was all powerful and all encompassing until, that is, until the messenger of God comes to cut it down. We're having mic problems? Excuse me one second.

Okay. So we're at this vision of a magnificent one-of-a-kind tree, all powerful and all encompassing, that is until the messenger of God comes to cut it down. And again, this is *Daniel 4:13-17*. It says: *"I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. He proclaimed aloud and said thus: 'Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it*

to whom he will and sets it over the lowliest of men."

Nebuchadnezzar has this dream and he's absolutely terrified. And so like he did in the past, he gathers all of his wise men together and again, once again they have no clue how to advise him. Again, Daniel is brought into a point where he has to go -- excuse me one second, let me just get this. We're having technical difficulties. Electronics. Like I said, Nebuchadnezzar is terrified of the dream, and so he's bringing in once again his wise men, his wise men have no idea and so once again he falls back on Daniel and Daniel's brought in after all the other wise men fail and his response to the dream is one of horror because he understands that God is predicting a future disaster for Nebuchadnezzar. This is the interpretation. This is what Daniel says in *Daniel 4:24*. He says: *"This is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will."* Well Daniel then gives the king the only hope that he sees for him to avoid this disaster. He tells him in *Daniel 4:27*: *"Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing*

righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."

Well now, considering all of the interactions that Nebuchadnezzar has had with Daniel's God, I mean, consider them in toto, I mean first of all, Daniel and his companions physically thrive by rejecting Nebuchadnezzar's food. Then his first terrifying dream is perfectly detailed and interpreted by Daniel. Next he witnesses this spectacular miracle of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's protection in the fiery furnace by seeing a Son of God walking in that fire beside them. You might expect that Nebuchadnezzar would pay close and particular attention to every suggestion that Daniel would make concerning this God. Well, the fact is Nebuchadnezzar did what the vast majority of folks do when they're facing the imminence of God's judgment. He did nothing. A full year later God's judgment fell. This is *Daniel 4:28*, it says: *All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months, he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven*

from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will."

Nebuchadnezzar thought he could avoid God's judgment, and for almost a full year, it appears that he did. And then in a single almost innocuous admission of pride, he finds himself pushed over the edge and into God's judgment, and from that point forward there was no going back. But you know, Nebuchadnezzar is a picture of us. For over 40 years now, I have been warning people that God's judgment is unavoidable and that he every one of us is going to stand before the throne of his judgment to give an account for our lives. And that according to Jesus's own words, the vast majority of people in this world are headed for an eternity separated from God forever in hell, and I can't tell you how many times I've quoted Jesus's own words in *Matthew 7:13*, he said: *"Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."* Jesus's words are the exact opposite of what virtually everyone thinks. I mean, the average man on the street thinks there is a super highway that's going to transport anyone who's got at least a shred of decency within him on to heaven when they die. And they think there's this tiny, crooked, narrow little

path that's reserved only for the Hitlers and the Stalins and the profoundly wicked that goes down to hell. Somebody's got things perfectly backwards. I can assure you it's not Jesus. I mean, in the face of overwhelming evidence that God's judgment is imminent, in the face of a direct prophetic judgment from Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar just shrugs his shoulders and goes about business as usual, but that's exactly what we do. I mean, I can't tell you how many times I have explained that faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone is what saves us from the terror of a godless eternity, and the response time and time again is crickets. I mean, I tell folks your good works are never going to be good enough and it's only by placing your faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross that you'll ever be able to stand before a holy God offering up Christ's righteousness instead of your own and that nothing to the throne you bring, simply on the basis of Christ's and God's mercy you cling. And you know what folks hear? They hear Charlie Brown. They hear blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, religion, religion, holy roller, Bible thumper. That's what they hear. And you know why they hear Charlie Brown? You know why they do nothing? God says in *2 Corinthians 4:3*, he says: *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* You see,

Nebuchadnezzar is well on his way down that six-lane highway to hell and God in his mercy directly intervenes in his life. I mean it was no doubt, a severe mercy. For seven years God reduced Nebuchadnezzar down to a raving lunatic crawling on all fours like a beast, but in the end his eyes were opened and he declared in *Daniel 4:1-3*: *"To all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation."* See, Nebuchadnezzar's declaring to all the world the mercies of God. God has spoken into his life, God has intervened in his life, God has demonstrated the mighty power and grace that he has.

We're just going to have to wing it. See, the enemy doesn't want this to go forward. He's very, very committed to messing it up.

But here's the point: Nebuchadnezzar's declaring to all the world the mercies of God, and time and again we notice that God has spoken into his life, God has intervened in his life, God has demonstrated his mighty power and he's convinced Nebuchadnezzar of the error of his ways. Good for you, Nebuchadnezzar. I mean, looks like you got the mercy even though by all accounts you

certainly didn't deserve it. And it sure looks like most of us still get the judgment. Now, how can that be fair?

Well, this morning I want to look at "who," I want to look at who God gives mercy to; I want to look at "what," what God's mercy sometimes looks like; I want to look at "when," when God's mercy becomes judgment; and I want to look at "why," why all of this matters to us. Who, what, when, and why.

First let's look at the "who" of God's mercy. Let's go back to chapter 4 and let's just take a look at Nebuchadnezzar. Chapter 4 is the testimony of a man who I'm confident we're all going to see in heaven, and this is a man chosen by God to receive his mercy, to have his eyes opened, to have his heart of stone removed and a heart of flesh put in its place. So what did Nebuchadnezzar do to deserve all of that? Well, the answer from Nebuchadnezzar is the same as for us. He did absolutely nothing. God tells us in the most uncertain of certain terms who it is that receives mercy from God. This is what he says in *Romans 9:15*: *For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So that it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.* Now before we complain about the who that God's mercy is bestowed on, it behooves us to remember the what of what that mercy consists of because we often

mistake mercy as a right instead of as a gift. We often mistake mercy for justice. You see, justice is something every single person has a right to demand of God. Not so with mercy. Mercy is something that is always bestowed by the victor on the vanquished, by the powerful on the powerless. It is never something that anyone can command by virtue of their will or exertion. I mean, imagine the absurdity of making an unequivocal demand for mercy. I mean, the very fact that you're asking for mercy means you're in no position whatsoever to make any demands, but that's precisely what we do with God. I mean we demand the right to live our lives however we want without God's interference, with no thought or consideration whatsoever as to who God is and what a relationship with him consists of because deep down we feel entitled to God's mercy. God insists that while everyone is entitled to his justice, no one is ever entitled to his mercy. And we find that incredibly offensive. And woe to the God who decides to give mercy to whomever he decides to give mercy, I mean, how dare God bestow mercy on Nebuchadnezzar and not on me. God doesn't see it that way at all.

Jesus used a story to make clear the difference between his obligation to give justice and not mercy by giving us a parable, a story. In this case it's the story of the vine owners and the laborers. You're probably familiar with the story. It's in

Matthew 20, it starts out saying this: *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard."* I'm sure you know the story. The vine owner's looking for laborers, he goes out into the marketplace, and he grabs some first thing in the morning, he grabs some in the afternoon, and he grabs some just before closing time. And so at the end of the day he begins distributing the fair wage that he's promised to all those who had worked. And he begins by paying the ones who showed up at the last minute and he gives them a denarius. And just for argument's sake, let's say it's a hundred bucks. That's a fair -- it's a good wage in our day. It's a fair day's wage made even sweeter by the fact that they only worked a tiny portion of the day. And so the other workers see how generous the owner is with the late arrivals, and of course they assume that they're going to receive a far greater payday. When the owner gives them the exact same hundred dollar wage, they all begin to grumble: *"Saying, 'These last only worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'* But he replied to one of them, *'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.'*"

Well, we know for a fact that anyone who has a business here knows that if the EEOC -- that's the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission -- if they ever got wind of this, that vine owner is in trouble. He's probably going to be fined. And frankly most of us see this as unfair. But Jesus is making a point here, and if you substitute justice for the fair wage that everyone's entitled to that virtually every one receives and mercy for the generous wage that only a few receive, then you're starting to look at it from God's viewpoint when he says in verse 15: *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"* See, God readily agrees with us that every single one of us is entitled to justice. He will not agree that every one of us is entitled to mercy. In fact, he will insist that as long as he gives justice to all, he's entitled to give mercy to whomever he chooses. *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"*

The reason why we so deeply resent God's justice is because I believe we all know deep down that by God's standard of justice, we are all doomed. Again speaking of wages, God says in *Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death.* That's God's justice speaking. It's God's mercy that speaks the second half of that verse. It says: *But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Wonderful. But for most people that free gift of eternal

life extended by God is received with something even worse than hostility. It's received with complete indifference. Cue the crickets. I mean now, you might respond and say, well, how can God complain about our indifference when the god of this world has blinded our eyes? But God says how can you, with your blinded eyes, eyes that want nothing whatsoever to do with me, complain about God, giving a gospel message of mercy that you find irritating or worse to somebody else? I had this very conversation just last week. I was at the celebration of Shane's life talking with someone about the gospel, and they said at one point, okay, so Shane gets to go to heaven and all the other Shanes in the world who don't have what he had, they get to go to hell. I responded by saying in part, let's say that I am a passionate organic gardener and I live to just grow things organically and let's say I order a ton and a half of manure to be delivered to my home and somehow or other the address gets messed up and it gets delivered into the driveway of my neighbor. He's very unhappy. Now what I see as life-giving and nourishing, he sees this as a giant pile of manure. I told him, I said, this is how the gospel is viewed by folks. I mean those who have their eyes opened and the blindness removed by God's mercy, they see it as life-giving, they see it as nourishing. The rest of the world sees it as a pile of manure. I told him, I said, in fact that's how you see it. So why do you care if Shane got what you consider to be a pile of manure? Romans 9 says this:

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? See, what God's saying? God's saying as long as I give you justice, am I not free therefore to give mercy to whomever I choose? I mean, if I choose Nebuchadnezzar as a vessel for honorable use and I choose your neighbor down the street as a vessel for dishonorable use, well, neither Nebuchadnezzar nor my neighbor can accuse me of injustice. I mean, Nebuchadnezzar's never going to because he's received my mercy but my neighbor cannot as well because the justice he received was the only thing he was entitled to. Again, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" So the answer to the who, the who of God's mercy is it's reserved for God alone. Romans 9:15: I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

Now the "what," the "what" of God's mercy in Nebuchadnezzar's life is next. This is Daniel 4:30, it says: *And the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" While*

the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws. Sometimes God's mercy looks like anything but mercy. You know, Shane's muscular dystrophy was a devastating disease that took his life at the age of 24 having completely paralyzed him for years. But it was that same disease that put him in touch with Ben and Carissa and a community of people who view the gospel not as an afterthought but something you aim your life at. Is that a fair exchange? Was that God's mercy? I mean it's tough to answer that question right now when the pain of his loss is still raw, but ask me that question or better still ask Shane that question a thousand years from now. In the year 3016, God's mercy on Shane is going to be a lot more evident than it is today. That's exactly what happened to the blind man that Jesus cured over 2,000 years ago. You know, the disciples were convinced that this man was blind because somebody had to have sinned, either him or

his parents, and Jesus insists just the opposite. He says in *John 9:3*: *"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."* Now I remember the first time I read that, I was incredulous. I mean, Jesus plunged this man's entire world into darkness for his entire life just so that he could do a miracle by restoring his sight. How little I valued the glory of God. How little I understood God's mercy. You see, it was God's mercy in this man's blindness that caused Jesus to notice him as he passed him by on the street. It was God's mercy in his blindness healed that brought him to a confrontation with the religious leaders, and it was God's mercy in his blindness having him thrown out of the temple that brought him to this point in the gospel of John. *John 9:35* says: *Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who he is, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you." He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.* You see, if you don't see this as the most supremely gloriously important event in this man's eternity, well then his blindness will forever seem to be a curse rather than a blessing, an injustice rather than a supreme act of mercy. It's all a matter of perspective. Nebuchadnezzar suffered a grinding misery that reduced him to the level of an animal for seven years. I mean critics of the book of Daniel, they complain all the time, there's

no historical record of this ever happening to this great king but history seldom records things that kings look on as disgraceful, and God turning Nebuchadnezzar into an animal was just that, it was disgraceful, but it was exactly what Nebuchadnezzar needed. As such it was evidence of God's mercy. Again, *Daniel 4:34: At the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.* I think seven years is a small price to pay for an understanding of God's mercy that will last for eternity. So it is for every single person who bears a severe mercy. I mean Shane's only been in heaven for a few weeks now. The man born blind has been there enjoying the presence of Christ for over 2,000 years. Now the question is do you think he thinks of his blindness as a blessing or a curse, as a sign of God's justice or a sign of his mercy? To be sure, I know Shane questioned the fairness of a disease that struck him so viciously. And I'm sure he wondered how in the world could such an awful thing be viewed as God's mercy? Because you see, it's almost impossible to be stuck here living in the present and have the ability to see what a severe mercy will accomplish for us in the future, but it's nonetheless just as real.

We consider Paul's view. He was repeatedly beaten and starved and

stoned, abandoned, and eventually beheaded. He said this of his life in 2 Corinthians 4:17, he said: *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* Paul had that split screen vision that could view God's mercy from the perspective of earth and heaven simultaneously. Would that we would have that vision as well, because it's easy to see God's mercy perfectly backwards. To see blessings as curses. You know, I look at my own life and I marvel, I just marvel at God's mercy towards me. You know, every time I pray for my children, I'm struck with how often I reacted to Jan telling me that she was pregnant, as if I'd been cursed rather than blessed. See, I had this deal with God, and we wouldn't practice birth control and God would limit my family to what he saw fit. Well, it eventually became obvious to me that God's vision and mine didn't really line up. Now we had no money, we had extremely limited resources, we were stretched I thought over and over again to the max and God would say, "I have another gift for you." I mean today, next to my salvation, I think of my children as the greatest gift God ever gave me. I shudder to look back and think of how ungrateful and how upset I was when he first sent them. I mean what astounds me is that God never loved me less in spite of my ingratitude and

thanklessness. See, sometimes we misread God's mercy to us. We see blessings as curses and sometimes we see curses as blessings.

Can I tell you that winning the Powerball is not necessarily a blessing? I mean neither is there a guarantee that a promotion or windfall or sudden turn of good fortune is of necessity a blessing. It all depends on where the blessing is leading you. You know, I once heard a very well known evangelist describe what happened the first day that he really, really heard the gospel. He was in high school. He said that very same day the most popular and by far the prettiest girl in the entire school, a girl who had never even given him the time of day before passed him a note, and the note said that she was interested in inviting him up for a getaway weekend. Well again, by God's mercy, he was able to see this for exactly what it was. That was a curse. That wasn't a blessing. So how do we know if we are experiencing God's mercy or some other form of blessing or curse? Well, sometimes as with Nebuchadnezzar or Shane or the man born blind, we have no choice, we just have to trust. But when we do have a choice, we have to ask, where is this leading? I mean oftentimes that will tell you right off the bat whether it's a curse or a blessing. The evangelist knew right off the bat that this blessing was not a blessing, it was a curse. Well, a promotion, a windfall or some other good fortune, not necessarily so. But here's where your heart must inform your

wisdom. God says in *Matthew 6:33*: "*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*" But you know, you seek the kingdom first with your heart. And if you view this command of God as an obligation, something that I have to do as opposed to a joy, as a rule as opposed to a commitment of the heart, then you will never understand from God's perspective the difference between a blessing and a curse.

Jesus once told a story about the kingdom of God and how we relate to it and he said this in *Matthew 13:44*, he said: "*The kingdom of heaven like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*" Well, you know, Jesus is describing somebody stumbling on a treasure of infinite worth who then gathers up everything he owns in order to acquire that treasure. Now, just picture this, you're a farmer, you're probably a very poor farmer, you're an itinerant farmer, and you rent fields, and you rent the field and you start digging in that field and all of a sudden up pops the Angolan star. Now that's a raw diamond that was discovered last year that's as big across as a credit card, and it weighs 404 carats and it's valued at about \$20 million. Okay. So you're digging in this field and the Angolan star pops up and you know exactly what it's worth, and so you quickly re-bury it. Then you go about cashing in everything you own in order to raise the

money to buy that field. Now are you sad? Are you disappointed? You say I have to get rid of all my stuff. You can't give it away fast enough because you know what you're getting is of so much more value. See, the key phrase in Jesus' parable is the phrase "in his joy." He says: *"Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."* You see, when you finally fully get the kingdom, you get the joy that goes with it. You begin to see your life in comparison to the treasure you found and you begin to understand the joy of giving everything you could possibly get your hands on to receive it. And when you have that kind of joy, you're in a perfect position to judge the "what" of God's mercy. You learn to discern the difference between blessings and curses. You ask: Will it glorify God? Will it advance the kingdom? Will it give me greater opportunities to tell the world about God's mercy? See, the "what" of God's mercy is oftentimes shrouded in mystery because we're rooted in time. God's mercy is timeless. So in the end, it really all comes down to trust. You know, Nebuchadnezzar and the man born blind and Shane, they didn't get to choose what mercy God gave to them, but they did all get to choose to trust and they chose that because God gifted that trust to them.

Thirdly, there's the "when" of God's mercy. That is when God's mercy turns into judgment. Every single day that we live, every single breath that we breathe is a gift of God's mercy, but it's a

mercy that's not infinite. It has limits. *Hebrews 9:27* says: *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* Nebuchadnezzar is told that God's judgment in his life was imminent. He was told it by somebody who had all the qualifications you could possibly want. He'd seen Daniel's truth again and again and again. He just chose to ignore it. But you see, his ignorance didn't forestall God's judgment. Same is true for us. God in his mercy doesn't whisper to our country that judgment is coming. He is shouting it from the rooftops. I mean he's on TV pleading, he's on the radio reasoning, he's on the Internet 24 hours a day, seven days a week speaking to anyone who will listen and he does it through his people. Hopefully he does it through you.

So to recap, the "who" of God's mercy is something that God reserves for himself. *"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* The "what" of God's mercy is oftentimes a mystery. Things that may appear to our eyes as cursings may be blessings, and things which we are certain are blessings may turn out to be anything but. It takes wisdom to discern what is what and the state of your heart will largely guide that wisdom. Do you value that treasure hidden in the field more than anything? Is it your joy to purchase it? The "when" of God's mercy is now, because no one is guaranteed tomorrow. *Isaiah 55:6:*

"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near."

And finally the "why" of God's mercy. Why does all of this matter to us? Well, it matters because you, you are the link between God's mercy and someone who is deaf and blind and stumbling towards a Godless eternity. There's a reason why you have the friends, the neighbors, the relatives, and associates that you do. God has placed you strategically just like he's placed Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We have the privilege and the obligation of speaking God's mercy to folks who cannot either hear it or see it. And that, too, is a blessing in disguise. You see, it forces us to realize that all of God's mercy received is by virtue of God's miraculous grace. None of us is capable of breaking through the fog that surrounds every single person outside those doors, but God doesn't ask us to do that. He simply asks us to preach the good news so that he can do the hard work of causing eyes to see and ears to hear. That's not an obligation; that is a privilege. That is our joy. *Romans 10:13: For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the*

good news!" Let's pray.

Father God, I do thank you for your grace, I thank you for your mercy. I thank you for all of those things that you've given us, none of which we deserve. And Father, as recipients of that mercy, I pray you would give us the urgency to spread it around, to speak the truth, to just simply preach the gospel, to realize it has its own power and that your Spirit will make of it what he will. Give us the grace and the courage to do just that, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.