

In Jesus' Steps

Disciples for Life

Unit 1: Who Is God?

Learning to know and love God for who He is, His character, attributes, and being.

Lesson 2

God Is Mercy

Day One

Mercy Defined

In *Lesson 1: God Is Good*, we learned God has a perfect character. Everything He does is right. We may not know how God is working behind the scenes of our lives, but we can be sure He is working out things for our good (Romans 8:28–29). If wrongs are not made right in this life, they will be in the next. All people will be judged, and all things will be brought to light (Romans 14:10–12; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

The second attribute or behavior trait we are going to study is mercy. Just like we say *God Is Good*, we also say *God Is Mercy*. As with God's other attributes (behavior traits), mercy is the essence (core, heart) of God. None of His attributes are more necessary than another.

Goodness and mercy are related. Since God is good, He has mercy on the people He has made. He cares about the needs of others. People have a sin problem, and God sent His Son to solve it. Mercy is not only feeling sad about someone's condition but acting to help.

1. Read Psalm 145:9 below and then fill in the blanks: The LORD is good to _____; He has _____ on all He has made.

The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. Psalm 145:9¹

God has compassion on all He has made. Compassion is similar in meaning (synonym) to mercy. It means God has deep sympathy and sorrow for people in pain and hardship. He desires to ease our troubles and move on our behalf. He works through our suffering to make us more like Jesus.

Another part of God's mercy is that He gives it freely. No one deserves God's mercy. We do not have a right or claim to make God help us. When God works in or around us, it is a pure gift.

A beautiful picture of God's mercy can be seen in Luke 15:11–24. This is the story of the Lost or Prodigal Son. The son asks his father for his share of the estate. The father gives him the money. Today, it would be the same as a son asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive.

¹ All Scripture is from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. All rights reserved worldwide.

Definition: *Prodigal* is an adjective describing someone who spends money or resources freely and recklessly; he is wastefully extravagant.

In the parable told by Jesus, the son leaves his father for a distant place and spends all his money foolishly in wild living. Afterward, he is alone and hungry. He took a job feeding pigs. However, this job did not provide enough for him to live on, so he was still hungry. He started to think about the goodness of his father. The men who worked for his father had plenty of food.

He made up his mind to go home and ask his father to forgive him. The son did not expect any kind of special treatment. He only hoped to work as a hired hand.

When the father saw his son walking toward home, he ran out to meet him. The young man admitted his sin against heaven and against his father. He told his father he was no longer worthy to be called his son. Instead of disowning his son, the father immediately had the servants bring a robe, a ring, and sandals. He then called for a feast to celebrate because “this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24).

The father in this story represents our heavenly Father. He allows us to go our own way but rejoices when we return to Him. The son did not deserve such a warm welcome when he returned to his father, and neither do we. But like the prodigal son, we receive our Father’s mercy and a celebration in heaven (Luke 15:7).

Louis Zamperini (1917–2014) is an example of a lost son. He was a tough kid who started his own gang. The group would get even with anyone who even looked at them in a wrong way. They would steal, destroy property, and fight other gang members. Louis' nickname was “Lucky Louie” because he mostly got away with his rebellion.²

When he was 15, his whole class wanted to compete in an interclass track meet. He did not want to, but also did not want to seem weak so he agreed to run. He ended up finishing last and thought, “Never again. Never.”³

A week later his brother talked him into going to another meet. He did a little better and with his brother's encouragement decided to be a runner. He continued to smoke and drink, but as his running improved, so did his desire for a better life. However, his better life did not include God.

Definition: *Mercy* is being good to people and helping them when they are in need, even though they do not deserve it.

The Bible is divided between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament is about the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament tells us that Jesus, the Messiah or Savior, is coming.

² Louis Zamperini and David Rensin, *Devil at My Heels* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2003).

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

The God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. God always was, always is, and always will be. He is the everlasting God and does not change (Numbers 23:19; Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). He is good to us and helps us, even though we do not deserve it. Thus, the one, true, living God of the Bible is merciful; He is mercy.

God's behavior traits cannot be separated. He is always good, always merciful, always righteous, and always just. Sometimes it may seem that God's mercy and justice are in conflict or disagreement. They are not.

However, we can speak of a “holy tension” between certain subjects in the Bible. This means that although it *appears* there are two opposing views, they are kept in balance by God. We need to ask God to show us how to embrace views that seem incompatible (mismatched). There is always a divine solution to understanding and applying God's Word, the Bible. However, we must keep praying for wisdom and guidance. We must also wait patiently for the Lord's answer.

2. Read Psalm 78:38. Then list below the four ways God is merciful.

Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath. Psalm 78:38 (Iniquity is sin or wrongdoing.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Read Psalm 86:6–7 and answer questions 3–4:

Hear my prayer, LORD; listen to my cry for mercy. ⁷When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me. Psalm 86:6–7

3. Are you troubled and need to call out to God for mercy? Yes No (Underline One)

4. If you answered "yes" in question 3, write out your request to God in the form of a prayer. If you answered "no," write a prayer of thanksgiving for how God has shown you mercy.

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers to #3–4 with your team next week.

| —End Day One—

Day Two

Old Testament Mercy

God showed His mercy toward us in the beginning. Remember from *Lesson One* that after Adam and Eve sinned and caused people to be under a death sentence, God immediately promised to do something about this death sentence (Genesis 3:15). He planned to send His Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for sin.

Definition: *Justice* is the quality of being just, equitable, and morally right. *Justice* is the process of using laws to judge and punish crimes fairly.

5. Think about the next question and then answer: How does God's justice and mercy blend together perfectly in Christ's death on the cross?

God planned for Jesus to be born into a certain people group at a certain time in history. More than 2,000 years before Jesus' birth (about 2086 BC) God called Abraham to be the father of that people group or nation. Abraham's children and their children became the Hebrews. Sometime later they were called the Jews. The people or nation God founded through Abraham is named Israel.

Abraham was a descendant (offspring) of Shem, one of Noah's three sons. After the earth was populated through Adam and Eve's children, wickedness increased (Genesis 6:5–8). God could have wiped out the entire human race, but He showed mercy and spared Noah and his family. The rainbow is a sign of God's promise never to flood the earth and destroy all life (Genesis 9:13–16). It can also remind us that God is both *just* and *merciful*. He is always just and always merciful.

Adam and Eve had other children (Genesis 5:4) who most likely married each other. The Bible is not specific but since there were no other people, it makes sense. There was no rule against marrying a brother or sister at that time. Later, when God gave Moses rules and regulations (Law) for the Israelites and all people, it was forbidden (Leviticus 18:9). It still is.

Read Acts 17:26–27 and answer questions 6–8:

From one man (Adam) he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. Acts 17:26–27 (parentheses added)

6. All the people and all the nations came from how many people (v. 26)?

7. Where should all these people live (v. 26)?

8. Why did God make everyone from Adam, have them live over the whole earth, and mark their time in history, and the boundaries of their lands (v. 27)?

Remember, God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him (Genesis 2:7). Then God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep and He took one of Adam's ribs and closed the place with flesh. From this rib, God made Eve (Genesis 2:21–22). So, from one man, God made Eve and all the nations. Of course, Adam and Eve became as one, and through their union the whole earth became inhabited (Genesis 2:24).

Since all people have a common ancestor, it is interesting that people have unique physical characteristics. For example, why are there different skin colors? It has to do with genetics.

Definition: *Genetics* is the study of heredity, or how the characteristics of living things are passed from one generation to the next when they reproduce. Every living thing contains the genetic material that makes up DNA molecules. The basic unit of heredity is the gene.

Here is a quick example of skin color regarding genetics. If Adam and Eve were of a middle brown color, their genes would enable them to conceive children with a variety of skin tones or color. Dark skinned or very light skinned people only have genes to produce the same color.

When people with the same color genes (or skin color) moved to different or faraway locations, the gene pool became smaller. This would be true of other characteristics such as height, weight, and facial features. As they married people from their own villages, there would not be as many varieties and differences in skin color and other characteristics.

The Bible tells us, and genetics supports, that God is the creator of only one race, the human race. We are all descendants (offspring) of Adam and Eve. No matter the slight physical differences, we are one people. Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, Adam, and death through sin, death spread to all people because we all sinned (Romans 5:12).

Since we are one people, one race, and all sinners, we all need forgiveness. God, in His goodness and mercy provided the perfect solution: Christ Jesus. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16). Our forgiveness and salvation is found in no one else (Acts 4:12).

9. Read and meditate (think deeply) on Lamentations 3:22–25. How is God's mercy (compassion, forgiveness, and goodness) new every morning for you?

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him. Lamentations 3:22–25 (Portion means inheritance share in the Promised Land.)

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer to #9 with your team next week.

Louie Zamperini continued to run. He liked the recognition running brought him and did not want it to stop. Louie not only trained fanatically, but soon he began to apply himself to his schoolwork. He did not want poor grades to disqualify him from participating.

God was good to Louie. He helped him become a championship runner. Two times Louie was the NCAA mile champion record holder. When he was 19, he went to the 1936 Olympics.

On September 29, 1941, Louie joined the army. The United States fully entered World War II when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He trained and was assigned to a bomber crew on a B-24. After flying missions for a couple of years, his plane went down in the Pacific. Three men survived and Louie became the captain or leader of the life raft.

Another leader, with even greater responsibility, was Moses, who would lead the Hebrews to freedom from Egypt. He was used by God to bring the Israelites out of captivity and into the Promised Land (about 1446–1406 BC). God's mercy was great to both Moses and the people. For a full account of his life, read the book of Exodus in your Bible.

God gave Moses rules and laws for the children of Israel (descendants of Jacob, whom God renamed Israel). These regulations were given to help them live holy lives. The word *holy* is defined as being set apart for God's purposes. All people should be holy because all people have been created for His purposes.

The law or rules revealed how difficult it was for humans to set themselves apart for God's use. It showed how prideful, selfish, and sinful a person can be. However, the law also illustrated or made known God's continuing favor and mercy.

Remember, Adam and Eve only had one commandment and they failed to keep it. The Israelites were similar to the first humans. They failed to keep God's law and sinned.

God knew they were not able to keep or follow the whole law. Therefore, God set up a system of sacrifice to pay for the people's sins. He used Moses to set it up and teach the people about it. The sacrificial system pointed the way to Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Definitions: *Sacrifice* in the Old Testament is the offering of physical items to God through a *priest* to express loyalty, thanksgiving, or the need for forgiveness. *Priests* were people chosen to offer the sacrifices and perform other religious duties.

When people offered sacrifices to God, they were to give their best material goods (animals, bread, oil). These outward gifts were signs of the people's inward love for God. The sacrifice (gift) represented a surrendering or a giving of one's whole self to God.

Read Isaiah 29:13 and answer questions 10–11:

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught." Isaiah 29:13 (Heart in this verse means mind, spirit, and emotions.)

10. What did God want from the Israelite people in the Old Testament?

11. What do you think God wants from people today?

The sacrificial system was complex, and so we will review only one part, the giving of a burnt offering. The burnt offering required the blood sacrifice of a perfect bull, ram, goat, lamb, dove, or pigeon. Blood is a symbol of life because the life of every creature is in its blood (Leviticus 17:14).

Animal sacrifices were offered to God before Moses introduced them. But they were not offered in an organized way. God planned the sacrificial method so sins could be forgiven, and relationship restored. The system not only pointed to Jesus as the perfect sacrifice but temporarily helped with people's sin problem.

12. Read Leviticus 1:4. What outward sign showed a person's sins being transferred to the burnt offering?

You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you. Leviticus 1:4

Recall from *Lesson One: God Is Good*, the word, *atone*, means to bring together as one those who were enemies. Biblically, it is what Christ accomplished by His death and resurrection. We were enemies of God; however, Christ's death brought us peace with Him.

The penalty for sin is death. God, in His mercy, gave people a way to avoid the death penalty. He allowed a person's sins to be transferred to an animal. The animal was killed instead. However, this was not a permanent solution. Animals could not remove all sins for all time. Plus, they could never be a perfect substitute (stand-in) because animals are not human.

13. Read Hebrews 10:1. Could the animal sacrifices take away a person's sins forever (make them perfect)? Yes No (Underline One)

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Hebrews 10:1

Human sacrifices cannot take away sins either. We are sinful and not perfect. An imperfect person cannot atone for the sins made against a holy and perfect God. Plus, God set up rules against human sacrifice and killing another human being (Genesis 9:6; Leviticus 24:17; Deuteronomy 12:31).

Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). He is both human and divine. He alone could atone for the sins of an individual and of the human race.

14. Read Hebrews 10:8–10. Who sacrificed His own body to take away sins once for all?

First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"—though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Hebrews 10:8–10

God did not force Jesus to give His life for you and me. Jesus went to the cross willingly. He wants all sin to be forgiven. Jesus wants our broken relationship to be reborn in God's love. He wants all of our broken or faulty relationships to be reborn in God's love.

—End Day Two—

Day Three

Nations and Individuals

15. Read Micah 7:18. God does not stay angry forever but delights to show _____.

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. Micah 7:18

God is merciful to nations and to individuals. God is in control of the universe and decides who receives mercy and when it is given. God is good to people even though they do not deserve it. However, God has the right to choose who receives His acts of mercy and when they are given.

16. Read Exodus 33:19. Who does God have mercy on?

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Exodus 33:19

God wanted to have mercy on an evil city named Nineveh (pronounced NIN-uh-vuh). He called the prophet Jonah to go to the city and preach against it because of its wickedness. Instead, Jonah ran off and jumped on a ship heading in the opposite direction. Jonah may have been afraid for his own safety with the Ninevites, but there was also another reason. In the final chapter of Jonah we will learn the prophet's underlying motive.

The LORD sent a great wind and everyone on the ship was in danger. Jonah knew this storm was from God and told the sailors to throw him overboard. They did. The people on the ship were saved and Jonah was swallowed by a huge fish, most likely a whale. From the belly of the fish, Jonah cries out to God for mercy and promises to do what the Lord has commanded. The fish vomited Jonah on the seashore.

Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh. For three days Jonah warned the people of God's judgment. They believed the message was from God and did not try and hide their sins. The king and the people urgently called on God and gave up their evil and violent ways. They were hoping and praying for God's mercy.

Read Proverbs 28:13 and answer questions 17–19:

Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13 (Confess is to agree and come clean. Renounce is to give up.)

17. Are you trying to hide secret sins from God? Yes No (Underline One)

18. If you replied yes in #17, will you confess and renounce your sins? Yes No (Underline One)
19. If you answered no in #18, what is keeping you from confessing and giving up your sins?

The LORD saw how the Ninevites turned from their evil (repented) and He had mercy on them. He did not bring destruction on them. But Jonah was not pleased, and he became angry.

Read Jonah 4:2 and answer questions 20–22:

He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah 4:2 (Relent is to give up or lessen a harsh intention or cruel treatment. Calamity is an event causing great and often sudden damage or disaster.)

20. What was the real reason Jonah did not want to preach against Nineveh?
21. How does Jonah describe God?
22. If there is someone or some group of people that you prefer would be judged and not receive mercy from God, please explain your situation.

Jonah did not want the Ninevites to be forgiven. Therefore, he was disobedient. He rebelled against God and tried to go his own way.

Jonah knew God better than most people of his day. He was God's prophet. God gave Jonah words to speak to others. He knew that if the Ninevites repented (turned from sin), God would have mercy on them. So Jonah kept unforgiveness in his heart against the Ninevites, and disobeyed God.

The LORD was merciful to Jonah in two ways. First, He had Jonah swallowed by a big fish. This spared the prophet from the storm and certain death, and it also helped him to repent of his disobedience. He went to Nineveh and preached against the people's sin. Second, the LORD helped Jonah work through his own unforgiveness. Jonah did not want compassion for these cruel enemies. Most likely he preferred revenge. God listened to Jonah and then explained how He had made and cared for this nation (Jonah 4:7–11).

God made all people. Yes, He even made those people we consider enemies. He loves them and wants them to turn from their evil ways. God also desires for us to have a merciful heart. We cannot do it on our own. We need to ask God for a merciful heart. Ask Him now.

Action Step

23. Who do you need to show mercy to?

24. What good act will you do for this person(s) you named in #23, even though that individual does not deserve it?

25. Explain what good act you did in #24, and how it worked out:

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer to #25 with your team next week.

After Louie Zamperini survived his plane crash into the Pacific, he noted the time and location. He then took an inventory of their supplies: six fortified chocolate bars, eight half-pint tins of water, and *no knife*. He was extremely upset about the survival kit *not* having the most important item—a knife.

Being in 65 million square miles of salt water gave Louie time to think. He considered the possibility of divine intervention in his surviving the crash. He did thank God for saving his life and prayed. He meant his prayers but did not really understand God or talking with Him. In fact, his prayers sounded more like bargaining with someone:

“Answer my prayers now, and I promise if I get home through all this and whatever is to come, I’ll serve You for the rest of my life.”⁴

Drinking salt water is deadly, so instead the men caught rainwater in the canvas pump cover. In addition to water, they needed food. They were able to do some fishing, but this attracted the sharks. Many times they were in danger with the larger ones, but they were able to put the smaller ones on their own food chain. Louie used the screwdriver end of the pliers from their survival kit to kill the smaller sharks. The only edible part was the liver. Louie had learned in his survival course that eating raw shark would make them sick.

It was difficult to catch enough water and food, so most of the time they were thirsty and hungry. One day an albatross landed on Louie's head while he was asleep. He caught it and wrung its neck—though he received injuries to his hands from its sharp beak.

Finally, after 47 days adrift, they saw a group of islands. One island with two trees seemed to be moving toward them. But no, it was not an island. It was a boat with two masts.

⁴ Louis Zamperini and David Rensin, *Devil at My Heels* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2003), 99.

They had drifted about two thousand miles and landed in Japanese territory. One of the three original survivors had died and was buried at sea. So, the Japanese blindfolded Louie and Phil and took them ashore to prison cells.

The Japanese had to carry their prisoners because after so much time at sea, they were unable to walk. Louie weighed 67 pounds. He had lost nearly 100 pounds.

At first the Japanese treated their prisoners well. They gave them generous portions of rice and soup. Of course, their stomachs were not ready for big portions. They could only digest a little at a time. The Japanese also asked a lot of questions and were amazed at their tale of survival. They showed an interest in Louie's running career, especially his time at the Olympics.

But the good treatment did not last. After a few days they were taken to another island and thrown into separate cells. Louie was seized with fear (claustrophobia) as he landed in a cell the size of a dog kennel. He writes:

“All my life I had kept my emotions tightly in check when it came to my own troubles, but I could no longer help myself. I broke down and cried.”⁵

Read Psalm 86: 3–5 and answer questions 26–29:

. . . have mercy on me, Lord, for I call to you all day long. ⁴Bring joy to your servant, Lord, for I put my trust in you. ⁵You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.
Psalm 86:3–5 (David wrote this psalm.)

26. How does David describe God (v. 5)?

27. Who does David put his trust in (v. 4b)?

28. In what area of your life do you need God's mercy?

29. Write a prayer to the Lord of mercy and ask for His help.

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer to #26–29 with your team next week.

God has mercy on nations and individuals. He is particularly merciful with people who call on Him and turn away from sin. When we call on the Lord, He *will* help us to obey Him and repent. We do not deserve His help, but because He is merciful, He responds to our prayers.

⁵ Ibid. 120.

—End Day Three—

Day Four

New Testament Mercy

Mercy is being good to people in need, even though they do not deserve it. God *is* mercy. God is so good to undeserving people—He sent His perfect Son to die for our sins.

Jesus embodies (in visible form) God's mercy. Jesus *is* mercy. Jesus' perfect sacrifice ushers (guides) us into the New Testament. The New Testament or New Covenant means that animal sacrifices no longer pay for our sins. That was the *old* way. Jesus is the *new* way. He died on the cross for you and for me. He delivered us from sin.

Read Ephesians 2:1–7 and answer questions 30–35:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ²in 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 (Satan). ³All 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. ⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:1–7 (parentheses added)

Definitions: *Grace* (v. 5) is God's love in action to undeserving people. The height (pinnacle) of God's *grace* is Jesus Christ. *Heavenly realms* (v. 6) can also be translated heavenly places or the heavenlies and is defined as the whole spiritual world or sphere and its activities.

30. Were you dead in your wrongdoing and sins at one time (v. 1)? Yes No (Underline One)

31. Who were you following when you were *not* following Jesus (v. 2)?

32. Like every sinner, what do we deserve from God (v. 3)?

Note: The faster we train to see sin in ourselves, the faster we will have mercy on others. Self-righteous people look on other people's sin, but not their own. When we recognize all the wrong things we have done, we judge less and forgive more.

33. Fill in the blanks from vs. 4–5: *But because of his great _____ for us, God, who is rich in _____, ⁵made us _____ with _____ even when we were _____ in transgressions—it is by _____ you have been _____.*

34. God raises up believers with Christ. Where are believers seated, that is, what is our spiritual position or place (v. 6)?

35. Why does God raise up believers and seat us with Christ in the heavenly realms (v. 7)?

The God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. In His mercy, God planned for Jesus to take the wrath (anger, rage, fury) that we rightly deserve. Jesus willingly laid down His life for you and me. Mercy is Jesus on the cross. God is mercy. Jesus is mercy.

People can be without mercy. We can be uncaring and cruel. Louie experienced this lesson firsthand. He writes:

“The rations were so horrible that I had constant diarrhea and dripped mucus from my rear end. Flies got into the mucus and laid their eggs. Some nights it was so bad that I had to curl up in the back of the cell with my naked butt over the hole, leaking. I’d think I had it under control, then five minutes later it would start again, making sleep impossible.

“Most people never understand how bad life can be for prisoners of war because no survivor talks frankly and in detail about these horrible experiences from the banquet dais (platform).

“I could tell from his groans that Phil suffered similarly two cells away, but the guards did not allow us to talk. Any attempt meant suffering a swift kick or poke with a sharp stick. They also beat us regularly. My new life was no new life at all. Better to starve me or send me out to sea again on the raft. At least dying that way would allow me some dignity.”⁶

Louie did not know from day to day whether he would live or die. The torture from the guards continued, and life seemed unbearable. Whatever kind of faith he had on the raft disappeared through worry, doubt, and fear. Strong faith looks at God and not circumstances, no matter how horrific or heart-wrenching the situation.

More than two years later the war ended. Japan officially surrendered on September 2, 1945. Louie and Phil had survived and were rescued by American forces. They were delivered.

⁶ Ibid. 120–121.

—End Day Four—

Day Five
Kinds of Mercy

There are many ways God is merciful to us. He comforts, corrects, delivers, forgives, guides, heals, loves, supplies for our needs, etc. (and so on). As a child of God, we are to be merciful to others in various ways also. We will look at two examples: (1) Loving and forgiving your enemies and (2) Helping or supplying someone in need.

Jesus completed the most merciful act in history by dying on the cross for our sins. This is a one-of-a-kind act of mercy by our all-merciful God. It cannot be repeated. However, the story of the cross and what it means can be retold. We can share about Christ's sacrifice so others may glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Not everyone may be happy to hear about Jesus. A person hearing about the Savior may even become your enemy. Or you may have an enemy for other reasons. Loving and forgiving your enemies is one kind of mercy.

Remember: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16). Jesus willingly died for His enemies. He died so we could be forgiven.

Read Luke 6:27–29 and answer questions 36–37:

But to you who are listening I (Jesus) say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Luke 6:27–29 (parentheses added)

Definitions: To *bless* another person means speaking well of them and praying to God for their good. To *curse* another person means speaking badly of them, criticizing, or insulting in an angry manner.

During the time of Jesus, slapping a person on the cheek was a physical way of cursing or insulting them. When Jesus commands us to offer the other cheek, He is teaching us *not* to hit back or get even (retaliate). He is also *not* teaching people to remain in dangerous situations.

36. Jesus commands us to: _____ our enemies, do _____ to those who _____ you (v. 27).

37. Jesus commands us to: _____ those who _____ you, _____
for those who _____ you (v. 28).

Read Luke 23:34 and answer questions 38–39:

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34

38. Jesus was nailed to the cross by His enemies and asked God the Father to _____ them.

39. Did Jesus practice what He preached about loving enemies? Yes No (Underline One)

Loving enemies and forgiving them is difficult. It does not come naturally. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with supernatural love for those who insult or hurt us. Even praying and asking God for help may be difficult. We may want to cling to our hate. It is so much easier to hold a grudge (persistent ill will) than to humbly let it go.

40. Read and meditate (think deeply) on Luke 6:32–35. How will *you* apply these verses to your own life?

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. ³⁴And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."
Luke 6:32–35

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer to #40 with your team next week.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone, Jesus replied seventy-seven times. Some Bible translations say seventy times seven. In other words, we must forgive a person over and over again.

Although we must forgive without limit, Jesus does not mean for us to place ourselves in danger. He was not saying you should accept physical or emotional abuse. If you find yourself in a harmful situation, pray for God to lead you through it. If possible, you should remove yourself from the threat.

After Jesus told Peter to forgive without limit, He told them a parable (a story with a moral lesson). He told them about a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One man was

brought to the king who owed him 10,000 talents (millions of dollars). The man did not have the money.

The king ordered the man, his family, and all he had to be sold to repay the debt. The man begged for mercy. The master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go. When he left, this servant found another servant who owed him a hundred denari (a few dollars). He demanded he pay the money owed. The servant also fell to his knees and begged for mercy. But the servant who had received mercy, refused and had his fellow servant thrown into prison.

Read Matthew 18:31–33 and answer questions 41–42:

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³²“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’” Matthew 18:31–33

41. Why did the master call the servant wicked (vs. 32–33)?

42. Is God like the merciful master who forgives our debts (sins)? Yes No (Underline One)

The parable ends with the master sending the wicked servant to jail. He was to be tortured until he could pay back all he owed. Jesus then says, *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* Matthew 18:35

Louie Zamperini had no interest in forgiving anyone. After the war and his release from his captors, he had recurring nightmares about prison camp and revenge. In order to control his anger and dull the pain and memories, he turned to alcohol.

Louie fell into depression and self-pity. He blamed God and yet, he also knew in his heart that he had not kept his promise on the raft. Although Louie had promised to serve God, he had not given God much thought in the prison camp or in the year after his rescue. When he did think about God, it was in a negative context; he hated religion and God.

Louie married but continued to drink. This caused problems, and the marriage was failing. His wife's name was Cynthia; she was pregnant with their second child when a new neighbor moved into their apartment building. It was September 1946 when the neighbor invited them to church and to a revival meeting with Billy Graham.

Louie refused to attend, but Cynthia did go and accepted Christ as her Savior. Finally, at her urging, Louie agreed to go. He did not trust Jesus as his Savior at the meeting. But now his anger was replaced by fear. His nightmare changed that night: Louie saw one of the prison guard's face and Satan's face as the same.

Remarkably, Cynthia talked him into going to hear Billy Graham the next night. Although he was fighting and making excuses throughout Dr. Graham's talk, at the end he decided to follow Christ. The next morning when he woke up, he realized he had not experienced any nightmares.

In his autobiography, Louie reminded new believers that God does not give out a *steady* diet of happiness. There can be difficult and trying times. Louie went through a period of sadness, doubt, and painful self-examination and explains:

“The Christian life is not easy. You'll always get a guy who stands up and says, ‘Ever since I became a Christian, my life's been a bowl of cherries.’ I've always turned to that guy and said, ‘You know what you need? You need Christ. Christian life isn't about a bowl of cherries. It's a struggle, and that struggle keeps you dependent on Him.’”⁷

Although Louie had forgiven the Japanese, in 1950 he felt it was important to forgive his former captors, face-to-face. He knew they were imprisoned at Tokyo's Sugamo Prison and made plans to go. God provided the funds in a variety of ways. God even moved strangers to give for this trip of mercy and forgiveness.

When he arrived in Japan, Louie was allowed to tell his story to hundreds of war criminals in Sugamo Prison. Afterward, he invited them to become Christians. Close to sixty percent raised their hands. Finally, Louie's former guards were invited to speak with him. A group of them came forward. Not everyone decided to follow Christ. One who did said:

"I don't understand how you can come back here and forgive us. Your Christianity must be real, but I don't understand it."⁸

Jesus taught valuable lessons through parables. As mentioned earlier, parables are simple stories that teach moral or spiritual lessons. Another valuable lesson appears in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a good example of helping someone in need.

In this parable Jesus told the story of a traveler who fell into the hands of robbers. They took all his possessions, stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and left him half dead. Later, two men passed by and did not stop to help. Both were religious leaders.

When a Samaritan (person from Samaria) came to the place and saw the man, he had pity on him. He bandaged his wounds, put him on his donkey, and took him to an inn (lodging for travelers). He paid for the innkeeper to feed and care for him.

Read Luke 10:36–37 answer questions 43–44:

⁷ Ibid., 246.

⁸ Ibid., 264.

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" ³⁷The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Luke 10:36–37

43. When Jesus said, *"Go and do likewise,"* what does He mean?

Action Step

44. Pray and ask God for someone that *you* can help. Write about *your* experience and how you showed mercy by helping someone. It may be a few days or more for God to reveal who you are to help and the opportunity to accomplish it. Share with your team when it happens.

45. Memorize Luke 6:36: *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Accountability: Be prepared to share #44–45 with your team next week. It may be a few days or more for God to reveal the person you are to help. Share with your team when it happens.

46. Read and meditate on 1 Peter 1:3–5 and Ephesians 2:4–7. What are some ways God has been merciful to you in Christ Jesus?

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Peter 1:3–5

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:4–7

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answer to #46 with your team next week.

God was merciful to Louie in many ways. He supplied needs, delivered, corrected, comforted, forgave, guided, and healed. After his Japanese trip of forgiveness, Louie wrote:

"I knew that I had finally come full circle. Except for continuing to tell my story and spreading the Word, a great part of my life was over: the delinquency, the running, the war, the imprisonment, the drinking, the nightmares, the greediness, the desperation and the unhappiness. I was completely satisfied with my test of forgiveness and more than ready to move on."⁹

God was also merciful to the cruel guards. Through Jesus they were offered forgiveness and a new life. In Jesus, the undeserving guards were supplied needs, delivered, corrected, comforted, forgiven, guided, and healed.

God is merciful to you and me. Through Jesus we are offered forgiveness and a new life. In Jesus, the undeserving (including you and me) are supplied needs, delivered, corrected, comforted, forgiven, guided, and healed.

Lastly, in God's great mercy He gives eternal life in Christ Jesus His Son. No one deserves such a perfect and joyful future. However, God in His goodness has made a way for us to be with Him forever in peace, comfort, and heavenly bliss.

—End of Day Five and Lesson Two—

Next—Unit 1: Who Is God, Lesson 3: God Is Love

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⁹ Ibid., 266.