

Wisdom from Above is Active Mercy

James 3:17, Ephesians 2:4-5,10

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Well, it's a great day to come together in the house of the Lord. I always love getting to share from the Word. I hope you all are doing well. I hope you got plenty of sleep last night. The weather outside just really lends itself to sleep--hopefully not during the sermon, of course. But speaking of sleep, a couple months ago, Heidi and I were getting ready for bed, and we have a bedtime routine. We like to pray together at night, and then we'll typically put on one of our favorite sitcoms. For us, Frasier is our show. We like to just put that on as we just kind of veg out and doze off. One night we have our show playing, and we get a knock on the door. We say, "Come in," and it's our little guy Josiah, who's eight years old. We hit pause on the TV, and he looks over at it. He asks, "Are you having a Bible study?" And we're confused, "No, what makes you think that we're having a Bible study?" He says, "Well, aren't you studying Ephesians?" So we look at the screen and it has the episode title and then "EP. 2". You know you're a pastor's kid when..... So I said, "No, buddy. We are not having this in-depth study of Ephesians chapter two. We are watching TV, wasting time. But I'm glad you assume the best about us."

All that to say, we are actually in Ephesians 2 today, but we're also going to be in James 3. So how does that work? Well, I'm so glad you asked. For the past few weeks, and then as you can see on the pre-sermon bumper, we've been talking about godly wisdom. And James points out these different qualities that we see in godly wisdom. And today we're going to be looking at this special pair that he puts together, and that is of mercy and good fruits. And as I was reading that and meditating on this passage, I felt that the Holy Spirit was guiding me towards Ephesians chapter two.

So if you'll turn in your Bibles with me, we'll read that together. Now, we're going to be a little weird here as we read that. Do you like to be a little weird every once in a while? Because I do. Although my worship team and family would say I'm a little weird all the time. But anyways, follow along with me, we're going to be in verse four, five, and then verse ten. Sometimes it's good to not read Scripture only in a linear way, but also spatially jumping ahead to where we can see connections that were there all along, but we may not have realized before. So let's follow along in Ephesians 2:4-5, and 10: "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..... For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

So here we can see the connection between mercy and good fruits. And before we get into it, let me just say a prayer for us so that the Holy Spirit can prepare us to receive His Word. Lord God, we're going to be talking about two very important things: mercy and good fruit. And I pray that You would be at work right now. Guide me as I preach, guide us as we take in Your Word, and may You transform us by the power of the Holy Spirit as we gather together this morning. In Your name we pray, Amen.

1. Wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits

--What is mercy? Undeserved kindness

And so when we're talking about mercy, that brings several notions to mind of what mercy could be. We often think of mercy in terms of forgiveness. You know, having mercy towards someone who has done us wrong. And that's certainly the case for what we see with God, because we did Him wrong. We sinned against Him, so He had mercy on us. He forgave us of our sins. But it's actually an even broader concept than that, because mercy simply boils down to undeserved kindness.

2. God is the model of mercy

A. His mercy was necessary because we were dead in our transgressions

And if we're going to understand mercy in the best possible way, we need to look to the source, because God is the source, He is the model of mercy. He is described in this passage we just read as being rich in mercy. And His mercy was made necessary because of our sin, because we were dead in our transgressions. We were dead. There was nothing that we could do to save ourselves. You see, a dead body can't just decide it wants to live. Yeah, dead bodies can twitch. They can move limbs. They might even look like they're staring at you. And then after you freak out and scream for a few minutes, you realize, oh, it's just dead. But it's not alive.

B. God's compassion

And so that's the same thing. There is nothing that we can do because our sin is just way too great. The only thing that can counter a great sin is an even greater mercy. And that's where God comes in. God, Who is said to be rich in mercy out of His great love for us. Now, I just want to fixate a little bit here on the love of God. God really, really loves us. And I don't know that we talk about that enough. I think sometimes we're afraid that we're not deep if we talk about God's love. Or we don't want to get sentimental or emotional or sappy or stuff, but I can't think of anything deeper to talk about than the love of God.

After all, His love is deep and wide, high and long. And yes, we cannot ignore the reality of sin. But that's what makes His love all the greater for us. Because our sin was great, yet His love was greater. So I'm going to talk about the love of God, if that's all right with you. And if it's not, I'm talking about His love anyway. He loves us so much. Think about the most love that you've ever felt for somebody, that you've ever had for someone. Think of the heights and depths that you would go to, to ensure their happiness, to ensure their safety. The sleepless, restless nights that you've had, burdened for them, when you've seen them hurting or in trouble, or after they failed or fallen.

Think of the joy that you experience whenever all is right between you. Think of the sacrifices that you would make, that you have made for them. And then you'll have a very rough picture of what the love of God for us is like. But multiply that by an incalculable number, and then you'll have it. And it is out of this great love that He has for us that His rich mercy comes from. He is said to be rich in mercy. Mercy is one of many gifts that God gives us. And whenever God gives gifts, He dumps it on us by the truckload. God is not stingy with His gifts. It's not like when I went to Chipotle the other day and asked for a steak burrito, and they gave me a few drops of steak. I'm like, "What's up, bro? That's less than you gave me last time. Come on now." If the Chipotle guy gave anywhere near an approximation of how God gives, he'd be giving me a 12 dozen cows worth of steak that you'd need all the tortillas in the world to cover up, because there ain't no covering that up, because that's how God gives.

He just heaps it on us. You could say that God is excessive, wasteful, overkill, too much over the top. And I say that in a completely positive sense. Nothing negative about that at all, because it is impossible to quantify the level, the depth, of His love and His mercy toward us. And His mercy is tied to the compassion that He has for us. All throughout Scripture, we can see the compassion of the Lord at play toward His people.

--He becomes "moved with compassion"

If we look in the New Testament at the four Gospels, we can see Jesus demonstrating compassion. And the compassion of Christ would work in this two phase process. The first thing is that Jesus would be moved with compassion. Now this word, the Greek word used to describe being "moved with compassion," refers to this burning, aching sensation of the innermost parts. Back in those days, it was thought that the lungs, the heart, and the liver were the center of the human affections. And so we relate to this idea to this day. We say stuff like a punch in the gut, we got hit in the feels, a lump in our throat, butterflies in the stomach. We can still relate to that idea today. And so Jesus could be said to be "hit in the feels" when He saw the people around Him who were broken, who were in need, who were diseased, who were lost and needed someone. Jesus was not this merely intellectual being

who was detached emotionally and didn't feel for us. He genuinely felt this anguish on our behalf. He could empathize and relate to us. That's why we call Him the sympathetic High Priest. He felt so deeply for us, more than we've ever felt for anyone.

--He acts out of compassion

But yet that's not where it stops, because every time Scripture talks about Jesus being moved with compassion, it is always followed by action. Not just stopping with the feelings and emotions, but doing something about it. Just look at what the Scriptures say. Jesus saw these crowds around Him who were like sheep without a shepherd, and so He had compassion on them. He was moved by compassion. And so He began to shepherd them. He saw these great crowds of people before Him as He was teaching, and He knew that there wouldn't be a Chipotle around for miles and miles. So He was moved with compassion, and made this big feast out of a few loaves and a few fishes. These two blind men came up to Him, desperate to see, and He was moved with compassion. He was stirred into action and miraculously healed them of their blindness, restoring their sight.

One of my favorite pictures of the compassion of God is found in the parable of the Prodigal Son. You remember the story: the son goes off, takes his father's inheritance, and he squanders it in the Middle Eastern version of Vegas. He gambles, parties, lives it up, and then it's gone. So then he comes crawling back to his father, hoping to get some work as a hired hand. And then here's what the father does. He sees him from this great distance, looming on the horizon, and he becomes moved with compassion, so joyful that his son, his youngest son, has returned. So then he does something that is beneath him. He actually runs toward his son. This is a man of elevated, respectable stature who was so wealthy and important, yet he demeans himself by running toward his son. He would have had to have lifted up his robe and tunic and would have looked pretty silly.

I mean, can you think about it? That's how much God loves us if He's willing to lower Himself to come and meet us where we are. And so the father runs to his son. He embraces him, wraps his arms around him. He doesn't even let the son say, "Hey, can you hire me?" He doesn't let him talk. He puts a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet, puts a robe around him, and they have a barbecue with the fatted calf and celebrate that "My son was lost. But now he is found again." He has been restored.

C. His mercy has made us into a new creation

And that's what has happened with us, because we see the ultimate act of compassion--in that God looked upon us, dead in our transgressions with no hope. But yet He sent His one and only Son, the full embodiment and expression of the mercy of God. And He took the atonement upon Himself so that we could receive new life. And He has made us into a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come. Praise God.

3. We have been created to bear fruit

A. He has restored us to our original design to bear fruit

And so now we see that we have been created to bear fruit. And that's where we tie in to verse ten. We are called God's handiwork, which He had prepared for us in advance. Now worldly wisdom will tell us that all humans are basically good, there's an inherent goodness in all people. But we know that that is completely false because the Scriptures tell us that no one is righteous, not even one. That all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But we have all been created for good, because inherent in us are the blueprints for God's original design. Because every part of our being was masterfully crafted and engineered by God to worship and glorify Him, to bear forth His fruit. But then sin entered the world and forever corrupted that design until Jesus came and took us and rewired our programming. He hit the factory reset button on us, and now we are able to truly live as we were meant to. There are still bugs in the system. There are still kinks that we have to contend with because we're dealing with sin daily, it's a daily struggle. But yet the Holy Spirit is sanctifying us daily, further refining us to where we can more and more live as Christ intended us to live. And then there will be a day, when in glory we can 100% operate according to God's original design. But it's not too early to start bearing fruit because that's what we should be doing right now, bearing His fruit.

B. What is fruit? The evidence of a Spirit-filled life, produced by Christ-followers

And so what is fruit? What does it mean to bear fruit? Now, bearing fruit often gets confused with doing works. The two are very closely related, but they're not quite the same thing. Because you see, works are what we do, but fruit is who we are. Just look at the fruit of the Spirit. What is it? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are character qualities that define who we are because Christ has placed them there through His Holy Spirit. And these are character qualities that we are to be cultivating each and every day.

C. We bear fruit connected to Christ

And we do that by being connected to Jesus Christ. In John 15:4-5 Jesus is talking to His disciples as He's about to head to the cross. He says, "Remain in me, as I also remain in

you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

So you can see that fruit is the evidence of a Spirit-filled life. This is how we know that we are followers of Christ, because He is bringing forth these fruits out of us. And Jesus is very serious when it comes to the necessity of bearing fruit, because He says that any branches that don't bear fruit are going to be cut off and cast into the fire. In Matthew, He uses a similar illustration, but a little bit different. He's talking about whole trees that fail to bear fruit, and so they are chopped down and thrown into the fire. Now, this is not saying that God is saying if you don't bear enough fruit I'm going to revoke your membership. But what He's saying is, if you find that you are not bearing fruit in your life, I would rethink whether you are a member to begin with, because everyone who is in Christ is going to bear fruit. It's not going to be perfect. It's going to be flawed. There's going to be some good and bad all there together. But it's going to be happening by the power of the Spirit. And so it's so vital that we bear that fruit and that we are connected to the Vine.

I love peaches, that's my favorite fruit. When they're in season they're ripe, they're creamy, they fall right off the pit. And I wish I could take a branch and just put it in my office and just pick some peaches any time I want. But that's not the way it works, because a branch apart from the tree is just going to die. And if we are trying to do things apart from Christ, just like He said, without Him we can do nothing. So we have to be connected to the Vine, to the source of mercy, the source of good fruit, which is Jesus Christ.

4. To bear fruit is to be merciful

A. His mercy has changed us into a new creation so mercy is key to our bearing fruit

And to bear fruit is to be merciful. You see, just as God has fashioned us into a new creation from the richness of His mercy, so the fruit that we bear is a result of mercy. Mercy is key to our bearing fruit. And here's how we can see these two things coming together.

B. It starts with loving one another as God loves us

It all starts with loving one another as God loves us, because His mercy is born out of His love. And so loving one another is the first step if we are to start bearing fruit. Let's go back to the upper room. In John 13:34 Jesus says this: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know you are My disciples, if you love one another.” You can kind of see what's going on here. In Matthew He says everyone will know us by our fruit. And here He's also saying everyone will know us by the love that we have for one another.

And so if we're going to love one another, we need to see each other the way that God sees us whenever God looks down upon us. Yeah, he sees us warts and all. He knows that we've got issues. We've got problems. He knows the worst parts of every one of us. He knows the things that we think yet would never actually say out loud. We just sang this earlier: "My failures and flaws, Lord, you've seen them all, yet You still call me friend." You still call me son, daughter, brother, sister. You still call me Yours.

Isn't that incredible? You see, whenever God looks at us, we are perfect in His sight. Even though He knows that we are still grappling with sin and that we still need a lot of help. He sees us as being precious. We are valued. We are honored. He sees us as being called. He sees the name of Jesus inscribed on our hearts. He sees that we have been washed by the blood of the Lamb, and we are so valuable to Him. And so that is how we ought to see one another, as these precious beings. Not only made in the image of God, but being refined to more resemble Christ Himself. People who God loves, people who God has called His own. This is how we need to be viewing one another, as precious brothers and sisters in Christ.

C. Mercy comes out of our love for one another

And it is out of this love for one another that we can start to practice mercy with one another. Undeserved kindness. And you know, we don't all owe each other favors. We're not necessarily all indebted to each other. So we don't do acts of mercy to check off a box, but rather we are merciful to one another simply because we love each other. We are kind to one another, deserved or not. Having mercy for one another is seeing others in need. Look around you right now. Look ahead. Look behind, to your side. Come on. I don't see heads moving. Look around. There is not one person here that does not have a need of some kind. And I'd also say that there is not one person here who is in Christ who cannot help a need.

We are to be kind and merciful to one another. Mercy goes above and beyond, just as we said that the mercy of God was greater, it was rich, so our mercy for one another should be rich. And there are so many ways that we can practice this. You see, mercy is seeing that person who might be sitting by themselves off to the side, maybe in the back or something. And they don't have any connections, they don't have any relationships, but they're desperate for some. Mercy is leaving behind your clique, your group of buddies, and going to that person and saying, hey, my name is Danny. I don't think I've met you before. Welcome. I'm so glad you're here. You want to go grab lunch? Grab coffee?

In fact, right after the service this morning, we're having what we call "Bring lunch to church Sunday," where we just bring lunch from home or order takeout from DoorDash or something and just have a low-key time, a fellowship without all the steps that you have to

take for a potluck. Just a nice time to be able to start practicing mercy and kindness for one another. Having mercy for one another is signing up to take a meal to someone you don't know. You see someone's in need. They just got back from the hospital. They just moved, and they need a meal there. You don't know who they are.

You might have never even heard their name before. And let's face it, it's much more appealing to us to do something for someone that we know well than someone who we don't have a relationship with. But mercy is saying, "I'm going to take the time out of my day and give to this person. I don't owe this person anything, but I'm going to do it simply because I love them as a brother or sister in Christ. They may not have very many connections in the church and might be in need of some meals, so I'm going to do this so that I can bless them and be kind to them."

Mercy is looking at our children's workers who work so tirelessly, week after week, pouring into the children. And they're human. They get tired, they get burned out. They need rest. Having mercy is looking at these people and saying, "Hey, I want to help you out. I want to bless you by helping, picking up some of the slack, letting you have some rest, letting you take time to do some other things that maybe you've neglected for a while so that these children can be poured into because they need more godly influences in their life." And the list goes on and on, how we can be practicing mercy with one another. And it's so important that as we practice mercy, we are constantly reminding ourselves of what mercy truly is, because if we're not careful, we can end up thinking that we're practicing mercy, but we're really not.

D. Two ways we get mercy/fruit wrong

--Sympathy without action

And there are two ways that we tend to get mercy wrong. The first is sympathy without action. And we actually saw this in James chapter two, when he's talking about the person who comes to someone's door, who is hungry and in need of clothing, and the person at the door simply says, "Go and be dressed and well-fed." And yeah, it sounds nice, but it's like, "Okay, but you didn't actually help me out." That serves no purpose. And we do the same thing today. "Oh, you have my sympathy." "My heart goes out to you." "I'm sorry for your loss or whatever." You might say, "Sending thoughts and prayers" or send the two hands praying emoji. "Sending good vibes." But yet you don't actually do anything to help. And what good is that?

I am so glad that that's not how God chose to have mercy upon us. Can you imagine that? Imagine God the Father up in heaven saying, "Man, that's just too bad that humanity is stuck in their sin, that they're headed for destruction, that there's no hope. I just feel for

them so much. They have My sympathy.” And so let's say He says to the Son and the Spirit, “Hey Son, Spirit, after I write this sympathetic post about humanity, let's go play golf.”

But we should be praising Him that that is not the extent of His mercy, because He acted upon His compassion. In the same way, we should not just throw platitudes as an excuse to get out of actually serving and extending kindness. Now, don't get me wrong, there are some times where all we really can do is pray and trust God. There are some situations that we really don't have the power to actually do anything tangible. But I would venture to say that more often than not we actually can do something. We can't help everyone. We can't solve all the problems that everyone has. We can't take care of everybody like that. We can't do everything, but we can do something. We can do something.

So let's follow our good feelings, our sympathetic feelings, with action and say, “How can I help you? What can I do to serve you?” And don't get me wrong, I don't want to diminish the power of prayer. Keep praying. Keep trusting in God to provide and bless and heal this person. But as you pray, as you trust in the Holy Spirit to empower the prayers that you send up to the Father, trust in that same Holy Spirit to do a work of mercy in you so that you can spread it to those in need. The two are working hand in hand, not either or, but both and.

--Works without love

The other way that we can get mercy wrong is focusing on the action part. Just worried about results. We're just doing things, getting this done, getting that done. But yet it's not coming from a place of mercy. It's not coming from a place of love. It ends up just being works, but you're not actually bearing fruit. Maybe you have this desperate need to be needed, so you feel like you've got to be doing everything for everyone, but you're not really doing it for the right reasons. Or maybe you have this misguided view of God as this harsh boss taskmaster who is constantly demanding that you perform and give Him results and is depending on you to get the work done.

If that's us, then we have lost sight of what it's all about, because we need to be producing that fruit by being attached to the vine, because then it just becomes dead works. And we see this in First Corinthians chapter 13 at the beginning, when Paul talks about trying to live the Christian life without love. He says this: “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” And that sounds like the most selfless, humanitarian thing that you could ever possibly do. But if it's not coming from a place of love and mercy, it is nothing. And that's why we need to be rooted in Christ, connected to Christ. That's why we need to cling to Him. We need to call out to Him, to depend on Him. To make it a non-negotiable that Jesus is not simply going to be a big

part of our life, but that He is going to be our life, that He is going to be our everything. That is how we bear fruit. That is how we practice mercy, brothers and sisters.

E. We show mercy in response to unkindness

And then there's the other thing that we haven't quite touched upon yet, and that is showing mercy to those who have wronged us, who have done evil toward us, who have hurt us. And these can often be the most difficult people to have mercy toward. You see, worldly wisdom would tell us to give that person a taste of their own medicine. Give it back to them. Tell that person, "You're dead to me." Lash out at that person. Get even. But that's not what Christ tells us. Christ tells us to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who persecute us. Not to take matters into our own hands and repay evil for evil, but to repay evil with good. To treat them with love, with mercy, with kindness.

Now, I want to be very clear here. This is so easy to get wrong and to corrupt. Showing mercy to those who have wronged you does not mean that you just suddenly become okay with everything that they did, that they're justified in their actions against you. Showing mercy does not mean that things just go back to normal. There may be a trust that's broken. Having mercy does not mean that you need to force yourself to be in abusive situations and endure that, and just take it. There have been dangerous teachings saying, well, you need to act in submission, you need to stay. You need to suffer for the cause of Christ. You need to turn the other cheek. And I want to tell you that this is dangerous, harmful and completely unbiblical.

Yes, we are to turn the other cheek. Jesus told us that. But I wonder if we don't all know what it means to turn the other cheek. You see, back in those days, a slap in the face wasn't really considered an act of physical violence. It was more condescending. Kind of like my wife often just gives me this condescending pat whenever I'm not having one of my bright moments, "Okay, honey." That's kind of like what that was like in the ancient world. And so whenever Christ is telling us to turn the other cheek, he is saying, "All right, you've insulted me? Sure, go ahead, because I know where my worth comes from. I know where my honor comes from, and it's not from you. It is from my Father in heaven who has designed me, who has created me, who has changed me, who has filled me, who has strengthened me. And I am precious in His sight. And there is nothing you can say, nothing anyone else can say that can ever take that away from me."

And so you see, turning the other cheek is not passivity. It's not being a doormat, but rather it's an act of defiance as we believe in our identity in Christ. Yet we can still be kind and merciful, blessing those who curse us, doing good to those who persecute us. Because that's what Christ did for us. It was our sin that made it necessary for Jesus to go to the

cross and to pay the penalty for our sins, to make Him suffer. It was because of our transgressions that He endured what He did. The sorrow, the shame, the humiliation, the pain. And what did He say upon the cross? He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And by his active mercy that He has done for us. So he has given us the strength to be merciful to one another, deserved or undeserved. Strangers, or those who have wronged us. We can have the strength to be merciful and to bear fruit.

F. Center on Christ

You see, it's really quite simple. Sometimes we can make church so difficult. We can make it so complicated. But it's really so simple. If we would simply center on Christ, if we would pattern everything around Christ. Depending on Him, looking at Him as the source of everything. That we would be all the better for it because Christ gives us everything that we need. You see, when it comes down to it, it's not about our programs. It's not about our traditions. It's not about our innovations. It's not about our theology. All these are important things, but it's about Christ. And it is through Christ that we can truly live as He intended for us to live. Center on Christ, because He gives us everything that we need.

Three ways to center on Christ

1. Look to Christ

And so I want to challenge you to center on Christ. And there are three things that we can do starting right now to center on Him. We can look to Him, cling to Him, and love like Him. Look to Christ as our example Who modeled for us what it is to have mercy, to be kind to everyone around, undeservedly so.

2. Cling to Christ

Cling to Him. Grasp ahold of Him. Don't let Him go. Depend on Him. Remember what He said, that we can do nothing apart from Him. So make it, like we said, non-negotiable that Jesus is going to be our life. Cling to Christ.

3. Love like Christ

And then love like Christ. See one another the way God sees us. We are not perfect, yet we're still called to love each other because Christ loved us. He had mercy upon us, and in the same way, we are called to love the way God did. That wild, massive, powerful, love. He can give us a little bit of that love so that we can have that same love for one another. And it's interesting that James, in his own way, has pointed out these two identifying marks of true Christians. Our fruit, and our love, or our mercy. So may we truly bear fruit, and may we

truly love with mercy, brothers and sisters. And then we can live as God intended for us to live from the very beginning.

Lord God, we come before You and we confess that we are inadequate. We can't do any of these things without You, Lord God. We can't just try with our own strength and bear fruit because it's going to fall flat. So, Lord, would You cause us to recognize our need for You, to depend on You, to desire You, to seek after You earnestly. In a dry place where there is no water, Lord, may You be our heart's cry and satisfy our souls, Lord God. May we be connected to the Vine, so that we may flourish and bear all these things that show the world that we belong to You, Jesus. May we center on You, Lord God, because as James has shown us at the end of chapter three, it all points to Jesus Christ. So, Lord, we worship You. We come before You and we say it's all about Jesus. Not unto us, but unto You be all the glory, all the honor, all the praise. Amen.