

Γίνεσθε οίκτιρμονες

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF MERCY

AS A NEW TESTAMENT VIRTUE

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*Put to rest
what you thought of me.
While I clean this slate
with the hands
of uncertainty.
So let mercy come
and wash away
what I've done.*

'What I've Done'
- Linkin Park

Abstract

The virtue of mercy in its human form is referred to a number of times in the New Testament, but without a definitive discussion of its distinctive nature. God's own mercy is expounded at length in both the Old and New Testaments, including his paradigmatic mercies in the Exodus and the cross. However, the relationship between divine and human mercy is not immediately apparent.

In biblical Greek, mercy language consists mostly of the cognates of ἔλεος, οἰκτιρμός and ἰλάσκομαι. Their use in the New Testament can be categorised into similar themes or 'arenas of mercy' which illustrate the distinctives of merciful practice. These are the arenas of trouble, justice, finance, sentiment, and relationship. They reveal that mercy is a settled disposition of love which desires and attempts to meet the urgent needs of others, whether physical, relational, or spiritual. It acts with initiative upon the trouble it sees, and self-sacrificially with the resources it possesses. It is informed and motivated by God's own mercy in Christ, with its ultimate aim to promote or restore relationship.

This definition is distinctive when compared with other virtues such as compassion, love, grace and justice, and is a genuine, albeit finite, reflection of divine mercy. It sits in tension with the pragmatic egoism of Seneca, but finds substantial agreement with the loving mercy of Aquinas, and even more so with the moral order of O'Donovan. The key features of New Testament mercy can be identified as its analogical witness to divine mercy, its loving attempt to draw near to its object, its virtuous nature as a complex of character and action, and its pragmatic alleviation of suffering. These set apart the merciful person, ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος, as a distinctive New Testament conception.

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Introduction

Many of the grand themes of Scripture concern the divine virtues, as manifested in God's creative-redemptive plan to make and take for himself a people. Abstract concepts like love, grace, justice and mercy are thereby given rich definition in their divine form, but their correlative expressions in the character of God's people are often harder to define. In some cases the New Testament makes explicit the ethical transition from divine indicative to human imperative – such as the seminal passage on love in 1 John 4:7-16. In other cases, as with mercy, there is an assortment of descriptions and instructions suggesting a normative Christian attribute, but no overall integration of a discrete virtue to be fostered and practised in response to its divine counterpart.

This study aims to examine the virtue of mercy in the New Testament, identifying the attributes and works of the merciful person, ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος (Luke 10:37), and distinguishing these from similar and related virtues in their biblical and historical conceptions. Although this will necessarily involve a theology of mercy in relation to God's own character and actions, its primary concern is practical – how the Christian person may motivate, foster and practise mercy in their own life, based on biblical teaching. The focus will be on the volitional and behavioural nature of mercy, although some reference will also be made to its underlying emotive aspect.

The method of study will be firstly exegetical – building upwards from specific texts employing the language and themes of mercy, thereby deriving its semantics. It will also be theological – attempting to systematize mercy as a biblical theme and contextualize its divine and human expressions within the narrative of Scripture. Thirdly, it will be comparative – distinguishing the biblical virtue of mercy at each point from its ethical and conceptual alternatives.

The terming of mercy a 'virtue' of course assumes a certain ethical approach to the topic. We will use the term somewhat loosely in describing a settled pattern of behaviour described and

advocated in Scripture, although at points we will need to distinguish between differing conceptions of mercy using the technical language of virtue ethics. This is not to take away from the exegetical focus of our study, but to acknowledge that mercy is not merely a 'good work' in Scripture, but a complex of *actus* and *habitus* that describes a person's character and deeds, each implying the other to some extent. In ethical terms mercy represents a 'thick' moral concept that deals with both the moral agent and moral actions.

The study will be divided into four sections. Section one examines mercy as a divine virtue exhibited in God's dealings with his people in the Old and New Testaments. We then discuss how the Bible generally moves from the divine attributes to those demanded of human beings in relationship with him. Section two comprises the exegetical basis of this study, establishing the language and semantics of mercy as a human virtue in the New Testament, and observing a number of distinct arenas or *sitz im leben* in which mercy language is employed. This leads to a working definition of mercy as a human virtue. Section three takes this definition and makes three comparisons. Firstly, against other New Testament virtues such as compassion, love, grace, and justice. Secondly, against the divine virtue of mercy itself, observing the limitations of this analogy. Thirdly, against conceptions of mercy found in three other particular accounts of mercy: Seneca, Aquinas, and O'Donovan. The final section recapitulates our definition of mercy in order to describe 'the merciful person' from a New Testament perspective – their works, their motivations, their character, and how these are fostered.

SECTION 1: MERCY IN GOD

The study of mercy as a human virtue is somewhat eclipsed by its more frequent appearance in Scripture as a divine virtue. Our investigation thus begins with a consideration of mercy in God's own character and action, since ethical instruction in the New Testament is grounded in God's prior initiative.¹ In line with the Bible's own progressive revelation of God, we will divide our consideration into God's mercy as manifested prior to Christ, and then in Christ. This division will also allow us to make some preliminary comments on how Scripture makes the transition from divine indicatives to ethical imperatives.

Mercy language in Scripture

In order to examine the concept of mercy in Scripture we will first set the lexical parameters of our study. The New Testament idea of mercy is rendered in Greek by a cluster of words comprising the cognates of ἐλεέω, οἰκτίρω and ἰλάσκομαι.² We will defer a detailed study of their semantics until Section 2, but each carries some sense of *showing mercy or compassion to someone in difficult circumstances*, suggesting both attitudes and actions of mercy.³ Louw and Nida also identify a related 'compassion' cluster of words, cognate to σπλαγχνίζομαι, which holds a sense of deep affection and compassion.⁴ This cluster overlaps with the mercy word-cluster at points (e.g. James 5:11), reminding us of the characteristic 'fuzzy edges' of semantic domains.⁵ However, in this study we are concerned primarily with mercy in practice, and will focus on the volitional rather than the

¹ This can be seen both at the level of specific argumentation, such as Paul's 'pivot' at Romans 12:1, and in the general logic of his epistles in moving from divine indicative to human imperative. See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Trans. J. R. De Witt; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1975), 253-55.

² 'Mercy, Merciful, Merciless', *L&N*, 751.

³ 'Mercy, Merciful, Merciless', *L&N*, 751.

⁴ 'Compassion', *L&N*, 395.

⁵ See Eugene A. Nida and Johannes P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament: A Supplement to the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992), 17.

affective side of mercy. Davies distinguishes mercy from compassion at this precise point, arguing that mercy ‘implies a value-laden volitional act for the sake of the other, but not a compassionate sharing in the suffering of the other.’⁶ We will follow this distinction by restricting our study to the mercy word-cluster as our basic vocabulary, although we will return to it later with some qualification.

Having limited the semantic range under consideration in Greek, we move to the Old Testament by making the assumption that the Septuagint was the Bible of the early church, given that New Testament authors predominantly use LXX wording in their Old Testament quotations.⁷ From the translation choices of the LXX we can then tentatively observe a Hebrew vocabulary for mercy,

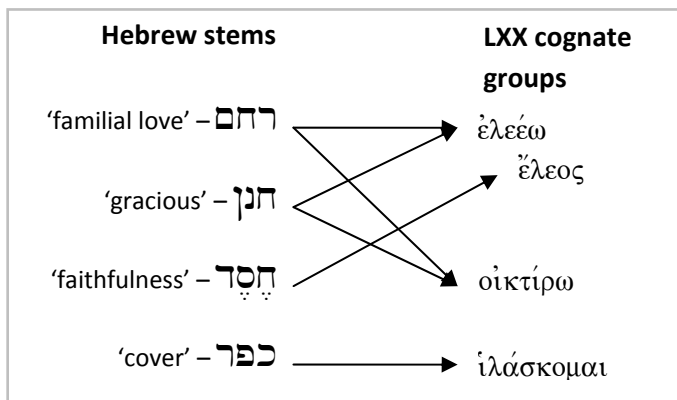


Figure 1 - Hebrew vocabulary for mercy

illustrated in Figure 1. The cognates of both ἐλεέω and οἰκτίρω tend to translate the corresponding parts of speech of the Hebrew stems רחם (‘familial love’) and חנן (‘gracious’).⁸

However, the noun cognate ἔλεος is also the most common translation for

חסד (God’s covenantal faithfulness). Cognates of ἰλάσκομαι translate derivatives of the Hebrew stem כפר (‘cover’), including the important Old Testament terms כָּפַר (‘to atone’), and מִצְדָּתָהּ (‘mercy

⁶ Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Cambridge: SCM Press, 2001), 232.

⁷ S. E. Porter, ‘Septuagint’, *DNTB*, 1104. We also find Jesus portrayed as making grammatical distinctions from the Old Testament based on LXX wording (Mark 7:6-7).

⁸ R. Bultmann, ‘οἰκτίρω’ and cognates, *TDNT*, 5:159-61; R. Bultmann, ‘ἐλεέω’ and cognates, *TDNT*, 2:477-487. For example, the verb רָחַם is translated ἐλεέω (19x) and οἰκτίρω (12x), the noun רַחֲמִים by οἰκτίρμος (28x) and ἔλεος (7x), and the adjective רַחוּם by οἰκτίρμων (12x) and ἐλεήμων. ‘רחם’, *TDOT*, 13:439. Similarly for חָנַן. ‘חָנַן’, *TDOT*, 5:24. The LXX thus suggests a semantic domain of mercy words in Hebrew corresponding to that in Greek.

seat').⁹ Without unduly restricting their semantic range, these terms and their LXX translations will guide our examination of God's mercy in the Old Testament.¹⁰

God's mercy in the Old Testament

The *par excellence* case of God's mercy in the Old Testament is his self-revelation to Moses, anticipated in Exodus 33:19 and enacted in 34:6-7. Coming immediately after the Exodus and the institution of the Mosaic covenant, we find here an historical nexus of revelation, redemption and relationship that produces the credal basis for Israelite faith going forward. Whereas Old Testament theology is most often a recollection of God's *acts*, these passages are an abnormally clear declaration of some of God's essential *attributes*.¹¹ And they are awash with the language of mercy. The anticipation, Exodus 33:15-23, includes a number of elements: Moses' appeal for Yahweh to accompany Israel to the promised land, Yahweh's positive reply, Moses' request to see His glory, and finally Yahweh's promise to do so. It is this promise (v19) which includes the first statement of his character:

¹⁹ 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 (ἐλεέω/יָרַח) on whom I will have mercy (ἐλεέω/יָרַח),

and I will have compassion (οἰκτίρω/חָנַן) on whom I will have compassion (οἰκτίρω/חָנַן).¹²

⁹ J. Hermann, 'ἰλάσκομαι', *TDNT*, 4:302-310. The related LXX word ἵλεως is excluded here because, while frequent in the LXX, it tends toward the act of forgiveness and the emotion of pity and so goes beyond the scope of this study. It is also virtually absent from the NT. F. Büschel, 'ἵλεως', *TDNT*, 4:300.

¹⁰ Carson's warnings against over-emphasizing root and technical meanings are well taken. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996), 28-29; 57-59. Here we are making only a general observation of LXX translation patterns in order to map between Greek and Hebrew semantic domains, which are by nature associative rather than definitive. See Nida & Louw, *Lexical Semantics*, 18.

¹¹ Brueggemann observes that most Israelite testimony to Yahweh consists of finite verbs describing his action, not adjectives describing his character. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 213.

¹² All scriptural quotations in this study are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version.

In the subsequent chapter Yahweh fulfills his promise, and in revealing his glory makes a fuller declaration of his character:

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming,

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate (οἰκτίρμων/חַיִּיחַ) and gracious (ἐλεήμων/רַחֵם) God, slow to anger, abounding in love (πολυέλεος/רַחֵם) and faithfulness,

⁷ maintaining love (ἔλεος¹³/רַחֵם) to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

It is highly significant that the revelation of God's glory is not to be *seen* in God's passing, but to be *heard* in his proclamation. As Ryken asks, 'For what is the glory of God? It is the weightiness of his being, the totality of his perfections.'¹⁴ And it is precisely God's compassionate mercy which is declared at this greatest of Old Testament theophanies. Of course the declaration itself does not detail the nature of divine mercy – but it is supplied from the context. The attributes of Yahweh proclaimed here have just been demonstrated in the redemptive events of the Exodus.¹⁵ Firstly, the Exodus is an expression of *divine pity and compassion*: 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.' (Exodus 3:7). Second, it is an expression of *covenantal faithfulness*. God says these are 'my people' and his activity in Egypt is a 'remembrance' of the Abrahamic covenant (Exodus 6:5). Some go further to argue that God is *obliged* to show mercy because of his covenant

¹³ The LXX expands on the MT here, with δικαιοσύνην διατηρῶν καὶ ποιῶν ἔλεος εἰς χιλιάδας.

¹⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005), 1041.

¹⁵ See John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 454.

commitment, and that he does not show mercy outside of covenant relationship.¹⁶ However, the covenantal warning of Exodus 34:7 and its echo in the curses of Deuteronomy 28 suggest that mercy is by no means an unqualified obligation on God's part. Furthermore, the immediate context of Exodus 33-34 is Israel's first of many apostasies (Exodus 32), which speaks to the *lack* of covenantal obligation on God's part and thus the ultimate independence of his mercy. Craigie makes this point when he says, 'Even when Israel's sin had exhausted the covenantal category of mercy, still the loving mercy of God reached beyond the broken covenant in its promise and compassion to Israel.'¹⁷ So thirdly, God's mercy is a *long-suffering graciousness*, a steadfast love that operates despite broken relationship.

This is not to say that God's mercy is merely reactive – a knee-jerk response to his people's covenant failures. To the contrary, the establishment of the covenant itself can be seen as arising from God's mercy. God chooses to set his affection on the insignificant nation of Israel (Deut 7:7), and so the Exodus is a work of mercy which establishes a people for God (Deut 7:8; Cf. 4:31; 13:17; Hos 2:19). The corollary is that God's judgment is a withdrawal of mercy which disestablishes his people – often invoking the very language of Sinai in reverse (Isa 47:6; Jer 13:14; 21:7). Fourthly then, God's mercy is *elective*.¹⁸ Exodus 33:19 bears out this sovereign selectivity: 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.' This is why mercy is at the heart of God's character – it is the revelation of his unconstrained sovereignty. Childs notes the use of the same Jewish idiom at the other great Exodus theophany – 'I am who I am.' (Exod 3:14) This 'testifies by its tautology to the freedom of God in making known his self-contained being.'¹⁹

¹⁶ E. R. Achtemeier, 'Mercy', *IDB*, 3:353. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 126.

¹⁷ P. C. Craigie, 'Mercy', *EDT*, 761. Cf. William J. Dumbrell, 'Paul's Use of Exodus 34 in 2 Corinthians 3', in *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox* (eds. P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson; Homebush West: Lancer, 1986), 184.

¹⁸ For a more thorough exploration of the elective nature of God's mercy in Exodus 33:19, see John Piper, 'Prolegomena to Understanding Romans 9:14-15: An Interpretation of Exodus 33:19', *JETS* 22 (1979): 208-210.

¹⁹ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1974), 596.

Exodus 33-34 is thus rightly seen as 'axiomatic to Israel's understanding of God.'²⁰ It is quoted and alluded to frequently in the Old Testament, in both narrative and cultic contexts (e.g. Num 14:18; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Nah 1:3; Neh 9:17; Jon 4:2 etc). This gives the οἰκτίρων/ἐλεήμων (רַחֲמִים/חַנּוּן) pairing a 'stereotyped character' that goes beyond their individual lexemes.²¹ Their rhetorical effect is to invoke God's Exodus and Sinai mercies as the programmatic basis for hope in new contexts such as foreign invasion and the exile (2 Kings 13:23; 2 Chr 30:9; Isa 30:18). Even where they appear as individual lexemes or their related terms (e.g. רַחֲמִים),²² their meaning has the sense of an appeal to historical precedent (e.g. Dan 9:18), which finds its ultimate grounding in Exodus 34:6. In conclusion then, we take God's mercy in the Old Testament as being self-consciously grounded in the Sinai theophany and its Exodus context, expounded in terms of his compassion, his covenant faithfulness, his longsuffering grace and love, and his elective sovereignty.

God's mercy in Christ

While Sinai and the Exodus function as the Old Testament pinnacle of God's merciful activity, the New Testament reveals them to be themselves only a type of God's broader plan for the world. The true antitype is found in the cross and resurrection of Christ, as testified by numerous passages which re-affirm God's character and activity of mercy in the New Testament (e.g. Luke 1:50-78, Eph 2:4-5, 1 Pet 1:3 etc). Most pertinently, in Romans 9:15 Paul invokes the οἰκτίρω/ἐλεέω formula of Exodus 33:19 in his defence of God's righteousness in election. He laments the failure of the Jews to recognise the epitomization of God's elective mercy in Christ, observing that 'Theirs

²⁰ Richard J. Gibson, 'As Dearly Loved Children: Divine and Human Emotion in Early Christian Thought and its Hellenistic Context' (PhD thesis. Macquarie University, 2005), 89.

²¹ Piper, 'Prolegomena', 210. Nida & Louw point out that 'A combination of verbal signs is never the same as the meanings of the individual lexemes... there are also meaningful syntactic and rhetorical relations.' Nida & Louw, *Lexical Semantics*, 18. This is particularly important for the topic of mercy where related lexemes are used not just in combination but in a creedal formula.

²² Mark L. Y. Chan, ed., *Mercy, Community, & Ministry* (Singapore: Eagles Communications, 1993), 28.

is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.’ (Rom 9:4) The theophanic revelation of God’s mercy in Exodus 34 is repeated before their very eyes in Jesus Christ.²³ In fact their recalcitrance is itself taken as a corollary of Exodus 33:19 – ‘he hardens whom he wants to harden’ (Rom 9:18). The New Testament thus confirms the elective nature of God’s mercy. ‘It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.’ (Rom 9:16; cf. Titus 3:5).²⁴

It is also a mercy of covenantal loyalty or faithfulness which Paul defends, arguing that the promissory word of God has not failed (Rom 9:6). He points out instead that God’s Old Testament promises were global rather than national (cf. Rom 11:32), providing a way for all unworthy sinners to be forgiven (1 Tim 1:13-14). The revelation of God’s glorious mercy to Moses is now extended to all people (2 Cor 3:18).²⁵ It is Jesus’ role as a merciful (ἐλεήμων) high priest that enables him to make atonement (ἱλασκεσθαι) for all sins (Heb 2:17). Romans 3:25 even pictures Jesus as the ‘mercy seat’ or ‘sacrifice of atonement’ (ἱλαστήριον) that enables redemption via substitutionary blood.²⁶ Thus God’s mercy in the New Testament is primarily found in the global gift of salvation in Christ (1 Peter 1:3; Titus 3:5; Jude 1:21).²⁷ Indeed, his mercy becomes a byword for salvation (Rom 9:23; 11:30-32; 12:1; Eph 2:4). Not only then is God’s mercy in Christ faithful to his promise to bless all nations, but it extends covenantal redemption to those whose rebellion he has patiently overlooked until now (Acts 14:16; 17:30). The New Testament re-affirms both the faithful and longsuffering nature of God’s mercy.

²³ Moo takes ‘the divine glory’ as referring specifically to God’s presence amongst his people. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 563.

²⁴ Piper explores these connections in some detail. See Piper, ‘Prolegomena’, 216.

²⁵ William J. Dumbrell, ‘Paul’s Use of Exodus 34 in 2 Corinthians 3’, in *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox* (eds. P. T. O’Brien and D. G. Peterson; Homebush West: Lancer, 1986), 188.

²⁶ Bailey among others argues that this is referring specifically to the place of atonement rather a propitiatory sacrifice. Daniel P. Bailey, ‘Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul’s Use of Hilasterion in Romans 3:25’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 (2000): 158. However, the mention of Jesus’ blood suggests that Bailey draws too fine a line between the two – the function of the mercy seat itself is inseparable from the propitiatory function of the blood sprinkled on it. Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 236.

²⁷ Chan, *Mercy, Community, & Ministry*, 94.

God's merciful attributes are not merely *demonstrated* through Christ's work, they are *embodied* in his person. The synoptic gospels portray the Christ as a man of merciful character and action, revealing God's mercy 'at the level of human relationships.'²⁸ Jesus' first reaction to situations of dire need is pity or *σπλαγχνίζομαι* (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13).²⁹ His healings and exorcisms are requested as acts of *ἐλεέω* (Matt 9:27; 15:22; 17:55; 20:31-32 etc.), and Jesus sees them as instrumental acts of God's own mercy (Mark 5:19). He himself teaches mercy in parables and from the Old Testament (Matt 5:7; 12:7; 18:33; Luke 10:37). In fact, Ryken finds all the mercy-related characteristics of God revealed at Exodus 34:6-7 reprised in Jesus' own character and action. 'If we take the most important statement of God's identity from the Old Testament and compare it to the life of Christ, we see that Jesus is the very God of very God.'³⁰

Moving from divine to human mercy

Having observed mercy as a divine virtue through both the Old and New Testaments, we can begin to sketch how Scripture generally moves from divine to human virtues. This will guide our study of human mercy in the next section, grounding it in its divine precedent. In drawing these connections, however, we must be careful to acknowledge the conscious disjunction in Scripture between divine and human virtues.³¹ It is actually God's mercy which distinguishes him from humanity (Hos 11:9), and the extent and wonder of his mercy to which Scripture gives

²⁸ P. H. Towner, 'Mercy', *NDBT* (Electronic ed.). Version 1.1a. 2000-2002, n.p. It is interesting to note that John's gospel and the rest of his writings do not use the language of mercy, even if mercy is present thematically (e.g. John 13:20). This may be a function of his specific selection of healing miracles and teaching material, or more likely a differing emphasis in his Christology.

²⁹ Although we have chosen not to focus on the emotive side of mercy, it is important to note that Jesus' merciful actions are frequently preceded by displays of merciful emotion. Davies sees Jesus as compassion personified on the basis of Luke 1:78. Davies, *Compassion*, 245-46.

³⁰ Ryken, *Exodus*, 1045.

³¹ This nature of this disjunction is explored further in Section 3.

overwhelming priority.³² Nonetheless, a number of ethical movements can be observed in Scripture in which moral instruction is grounded in God's own virtue.

The first is the Levitical command to 'be holy, because I am holy.' (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7 etc.) This is a kind of ethic-by-association, arising from God's personal presence amongst his people. It demands that their conduct be distinct in order to signify that they are his people (20:26). Jesus echoes this at the Sermon on the Mount: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' (Matt 5:48) Given the seminal revelation of Exodus 34:6-7, it is not surprising then to find ethical instruction echoing the same divine attributes: 'Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for the gracious and compassionate (ἐλεήμων καὶ οἰκτίρμων) and righteous man.' (Ps 112:4). Likewise in Jesus' own teaching: 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' (Luke 6:36) Davies sees this kind of ethical language for human mercy as analogical to God's own qualities.³³ Familial relationship with God produces qualities that are simply *fitting* for his family members (Amos 1:11; Zech 7:9; Job 19:21).³⁴ We might even trace this *analogical ethic* back to the image of God (Gen 1:27; 9:6), giving it an ontological grounding. The New Testament develops a similar ethic-by-association with respect to the imitation of Christ, himself the perfect image of God (2 Cor 4:4; cf. Gal 4:19; Rom 8:29).

A second ethical move is pointed out by Davies with regard to the Law.³⁵ Practical compassion is included in deuteronomic instructions for showing care to the disadvantaged members of society (e.g. Exod 2:21-27), and disobedience to this invokes God's wrath. In this sense, mercy is a 'matter of the Law' (Matt 23:23). This is literally an *ethic of divine command*, although in historical context we might see it as the expanded implications of the ethic-by-association demanded by the

³² Gibson, 'Dearly Loved', 91.

³³ Davies, *Compassion*, 246.

³⁴ E. R. Achtemeier, 'Mercy', *IDB* 3:353.

³⁵ Davies, *Compassion*, 246.

covenant (cf. Deut 1:5). Brueggemann describes it as a 'covenantal ethic', Israel being bound in obedience to God as their sovereign ruler.³⁶ The eighth-century prophets seem to bear this out in their role as covenant lawyers, accusing Israel's leaders of their failure to show appropriate mercy to the defenceless (e.g. Hos 6:6).³⁷

A third movement from divine to human mercy is an *ethic of response* or gratitude. God's merciful acts toward Israel in the Exodus are the motivation for ethical conduct, such as compassion toward the alien (Deut 10:19). This also appears to be an ethic at work in New Testament. The parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:23-25) implies there is an appropriate response (or imperative) to the master's act of mercy.³⁸ The Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:30-37) can be read as picturing both *God's* mercy to us, and *our* response of mercy shown to others.³⁹ The Apostle Paul begins his major practical section of Romans with 'Therefore... in view of God's mercy...' (Rom 12:1), and follows this responsive pattern in almost all his letters.⁴⁰ An ethic of response with regard to mercy causes human mercy to be informed by the goodness of God's own merciful character and actions.

A fourth movement can be seen in the way in which God's mercy is instrumentally supplied through his agents. In the Old Testament God says to Israel concerning the King of Babylon, 'I will show you compassion so that *he* will have compassion on you' (Jer 42:9; cf. 1 Ki 8:50). And in corollary, God withholds mercy (i.e. brings judgment) through the very same agents (Ezek 7:4-6). Yet in such cases God's character is not identical with that of his agents, even though manifested in the one set of actions. Babylon is condemned for its lack of mercy on Israel, even as it

³⁶ Brueggemann, *Reverberations*, 66.

³⁷ Brueggemann, *Reverberations*, 67. See also Mary Hinkle Edin, 'Learning What Righteousness Means: Hosea 6:6 and the Ethic of Mercy in Matthew's Gospel', *Word & World* 18 (1998).

³⁸ Kyle D. Fedler, *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 42.

³⁹ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1986), 241.

⁴⁰ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 253-55.

implements God's judgement (Isa 47:4-7).⁴¹ In the New Testament, Jesus sees himself as enacting God's mercy to the helpless (Mark 5:19). He even casts himself as the indirect object of interpersonal acts of mercy: 'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat'. (Matt 25:31-46; cf. Matt 10:40-42; 18:5; John 13:20). O'Donovan calls this the 'double aspect of the moral life' – an *instrumental ethic* that sees human virtue as ultimately an exercise in relationship with God.⁴²

Finally, there is sometimes an apparent Pelagian or *reciprocal ethic* at work in Scripture regarding human virtue in general and mercy in particular. In the Old Testament we see this in God's merciless destruction of Israel's enemies in response to their own lack of mercy (Jer 50:42ff). In the New Testament James says, 'judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful' (Jas 2:13). Jesus states its corollary in the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.' (Matt 5:7) Newman takes these at face value, citing numerous Rabbinic sources to the effect that 'so long as Israel is merciful it will merit God's mercy.'⁴³ However, Craigie rightly observes that the gospel of God's mercy is presupposed in these passages, which implicitly call on Christians, as recipients of God's mercy, to exercise mercy.⁴⁴ This relational presupposition undergirds all of the ethical movements observed here, with the possible exception of the instrumental ethic.⁴⁵ We will find that the prior operation of divine mercy is central to the distinctiveness of human mercy in the New Testament.

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, 'At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Rereading of the Empire', *JBL* 110 (1991): 10. However, Babylon's judgement appears to be for their eager destruction of God's treasured people, not an excess of destruction over a certain measure of chastisement intended by God (Jer 50:11ff).

⁴² O'Donovan, *Moral Order*, 241.

⁴³ Louis E. Newman, 'The Quality of Mercy: On the Duty to Forgive in the Judaic Tradition' *JRE* 15 (1987): 167.

⁴⁴ P. C. Craigie, 'Mercy', *EDT* 761.

⁴⁵ The instrumental ethic is exceptional because God uses even godless nations as unwitting agents of his mercy (e.g. Jer 42:12). It may be argued, however, that an ethic per se only exists where the agent is consciously cooperative, and so only applies to Israel acting as an agent of divine mercy or judgment (e.g. Deut 7:2), in which case the relational presupposition still holds.

SECTION 2: MERCY IN HUMANITY

Having examined the mercy of God in the Old Testament and in Christ, we can now make a more detailed study of the language and semantics of mercy as a human virtue in the New Testament. We begin by reviewing the Greek vocabulary for mercy and its incidence in the New Testament. Then we move to a categorisation and exegesis of the major passages dealing with merciful human attitudes and activities. We will finish by positing a working definition for mercy as a distinctive human virtue.

Mercy language in the New Testament

We have already bounded our study to a semantic domain including the words ἔλεω, οἰκτίρω, ἰλάσκομαι, and their cognates. We also offered a *prima facie* meaning for this domain: ‘showing mercy or compassion to someone in difficult circumstances’.¹ And we have added to this the richness of God’s mercy in the Old Testament which stands behind the Apostolic usage of the same vocabulary. Now we must examine each lexeme in more detail to bring out their individual connotations in the New Testament.

While references to the divine form of mercy dominate in the Old Testament, in the New Testament around half of the 92 references to the mercy word-cluster refer to a human attitude or activity.² Of these, the majority are derivatives of the ἔλεω/ἔλεος word group (see Table 1). ἔλεος appears four times with reference to human action toward those of lowly circumstance (Matt 9:13, 12:7, 23:23; Luke 10:37), and six times expressing a desire that someone else receive or experience such mercy, with no particular circumstance in view (Gal 6:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Jas 3:17; 2 John 1:3; Jude 1:2). The verb ἐλέω or ἐλεάω appears ten times in direct requests to Jesus

¹ ‘Mercy, Merciful, Merciless’, *L&N* 751.

² Statistics derived from the Bibleworks computer program (Bibleworks 7.0. 2006).

(e.g. Matt 9:27, Mark 10:47-48 etc),³ and five times as instructions or requests to others (Rom 12:8; Luke 16:24; Matt 18:33; Jude 1:22,23). Louw and Nida thus summarise the word group in terms of showing kindness or concern for someone in serious need.⁴ The adjectival form ἐλεήμων relates to a character or manner of mercy (Matt 5:7), and the alpha privatives ἀνέλεος (Jas 2:13) and ἀνελεήμων (Rom 1:31) speak of its lack. The cognate adjective ἐλεεινός also appears twice for persons whose particular situation is deserving of mercy or pity (1 Cor 15:29; Rev 3:17). The cognate noun ἐλεημοσυνή appears to be a reification of the mercy concept, appearing thirteen times with reference to financial giving to the needy (Matt 6:2-4; Luke 11:41, 12:33; Acts 9:36, 10:2 etc.). There thus appears to be a basic continuity with the Old Testament usage of the same word group, except that in the New Testament the paradigmatic act of mercy switches from the Exodus to the cross. ‘When the Christian tradition adopts such principles, the new feature is not the thought as such, but the knowledge of God in Christ.’⁵ As a human virtue then, the ἔλεος word group connotes divinely approved desires or acts of merciful concern, most often directed to a person in need.

Lexeme	Synoptics	Acts	Paul	Epistles	John	Total
ἀνελεήμων			1			1
ἀνέλεος				1		1
ἔλεος	4		3	3		10
ἐλεεινός			1		1	2
ἐλεέω	13		1	2		16
ἐλεημοσυνή	5	8				13
ἐλεήμων	1					1
ἰλάσκομαι	1					1
οἰκτιρμός			2	1		3
οἰκτίρμονες	1					1
Total	25	8	8	7	1	49

Table 1 – Words for human mercy in the New Testament

³ Although these requests, strictly speaking, result in divine actions of mercy, they are treated as references to human mercy in the study because in each case, from the suppliant’s point of view, they are requesting a merciful action from someone they understand as being human. Further argumentation on this point is presented in the in the exegesis of the relevant passages.

⁴ ‘Mercy, Merciful, Merciless’, *L&N*, 751.

⁵ R. Bultmann, ‘ἔλεος’ and cognates, *TDNT* 2:483.

The other mercy terms used by the LXX are much less frequent in the New Testament. The οἰκτιρμός word group appears only four times with reference to human activity. The noun itself features twice in lists of virtues (Phil 2:1; Col 3:12), both times in close connection to its more emotive counterpart σπλάγχνα, and so possibly as a hendiadys indicating an attitude of ‘merciful compassion.’⁶ It is also used in Hebrews 10:28 with reference to the mercy withheld from those convicted under Mosaic law. The adjectival form appears only in Jesus’ command to be merciful (Luke 6:36). The verbal form is not used at all with reference to human virtue. With such infrequent use, it is difficult to posit a distinctive ‘human’ nuance to this word group. Contemporary Greek usage appears to suggest a mostly emotive connotation. So LSJM suggests ‘bewail, lament’ or ‘compassionate feelings, mercies’.⁷ However, when the same word group refers to divine mercy in the New Testament, it is always with respect to God’s activity or attributes rather than his emotion per se (Rom 12:1; 2 Cor 1:3; Rom 9:15; Jas 5:11). It is hard then to grant a purely emotive nuance to the human use of the same lexemes. Given the inconclusive data, Louw and Nida seem to provide the best compromise. They suggest that οἰκτιρμός and its cognates mean the *showing* of mercy and concern, with the *implication* of sensitivity and compassion.⁸

Despite its common Old Testament use with regard to human virtue (e.g. 2 Sam 21:3; Psa 106:30; Pro 16:14), ἰλάσκομαι and its cognates also appear rarely in the New Testament, and only arguably ever as a human desire or activity. In Luke 18:13 the tax collector requests that God be merciful to him (ἰλάσθητί), consistent with the ἔλεος concept of acting to meet another’s deep need. However, it also carries the specific Old Testament connotation of atonement or forgiveness that is more explicit in the ‘mercy seat’ language of its other cognate, ἱλαστήριον (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:5; cf. Heb 2:17). The only arguable human instance of this word group is at Matt 16:22, where Peter’s

⁶ R. Bultmann, ‘οἰκτιρμός’ and cognates, *TDNT* 5:161.

⁷ ‘οἰκτερέω’, *LSJM* 1205.

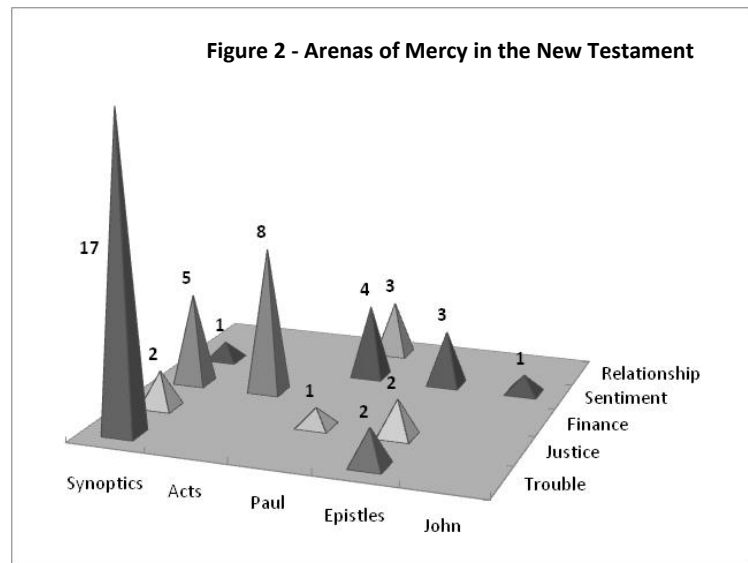
⁸ ‘Mercy, Merciful, Merciless’, *L&N* 751.

exclamation ἰλεώς σοι, κύριε can be taken as idiomatic for ‘mercy to you, Lord’, an idiomatic appeal to God’s mercy, desiring that he experience mercy rather than hardship.

Arenas of Mercy

Our brief survey of mercy language in the New Testament confirms that the human virtue of mercy is an emotive/volitive response directed toward the need or circumstance of another. It is most often expressed using ἔλεος and its cognates, and has specific applications to areas of human need such as poverty and physical or spiritual ailment. In order to determine a properly ‘New Testament’ view of human mercy, however, we must exegete the relevant passages in context and attempt to identify the underlying ethical and theological concepts.⁹ Here then we will examine the passages referring to mercy as a human virtue, categorized according to the various *sitz im*

leben from which they appear to arise. These are summarised in Figure 2 with a count of their references to mercy. We will term these ‘arenas’ of mercy, since they are identified more according to thematic context than to historical setting.



1. The Arena of Trouble. This is unsurprisingly the major category of passage, given that mercy is most often directed toward the deep need of another. Here we include appeals to Jesus for mercy

⁹ Andersen applies the same procedure to his study of mercy in the Old Testament, saying, ‘The meaning of a word is determined by all the contexts in which it is appropriately used. [...] Each text has its own nuance; and it requires delicate exegesis to relate general denotations to specific connotations.’ Francis I. Andersen, ‘Yahweh, the Kind and Sensitive God’, in *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox* (eds. P. T. O’Brien and D. G. Peterson; Homebush West: Lancer, 1986), 41.

arising from dire trouble, and teaching about showing mercy to those in specific troubles. The synoptic Gospels record ten petitions for Jesus to show mercy (ἐλεέω), most often formed as urgent requests in the aorist imperative.¹⁰ The circumstances of these petitioners (or of their children) include leprosy, blindness, seizures and demon-possession. These are not the full extent of their troubles, however, which by implication also include social and religious isolation (Luke 17:12-14), financial destitution (Luke 18:35), emotional suffering (Matt 15:22), and danger of injury and death (Matt 17:15). These related troubles are often expressed in Greek with an iterative sense (e.g. Matt 17:15, Luke 18:35), emphasising the ongoing impact of the condition.¹¹ We can say that the petitioners' understanding of the mercy to which they are appealing is both pragmatic and instrumental. They almost always refer to Jesus as 'Son of David', suggesting an identification of him with the healing ministry of the Messiah, who was to bring in the blessings of the new age (Isa 29:18, 35:5; cf. John 7:31).¹² There is no reason, then, to see them as making technical requests for benefaction as in the beginnings of a Graeco-Roman patronal relationship.¹³ In the flow of the synoptic narratives, they are simply incidental requests from those who are confessedly helpless with respect to a deep need to one who is manifestly powerful to meet that need. Such requests also appear to be directed to Jesus only instrumentally, since the Jews expected the Messiah to be a mediator of God's blessings, not an innate wielder of divine power (Mark 2:7; John 5:18).¹⁴ Jesus encourages this view when he commands the exorcised demoniac to report 'how he [the Lord] has had mercy on you.' (Mark 5:19) The various 'troubles' from which appeals for mercy arise thus suggest an instrumental ethic of pragmatic mercy in which the one who is divinely equipped to meet particular needs can be reliably entreated to do so.

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (2 vols; Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994), 2:1401. Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 487-88; Carson et al., *Matthew*, 390.

¹¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 520.

¹² Bock, *Luke*, 2:1508.

¹³ Witherington, *Matthew*, 205.

¹⁴ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 623.

The other set of passages in this category involves divine teaching regarding mercy applied to particular troubles. Mercy, along with justice and faithfulness, is 'a matter of the Law' (Matt 23:23). This reminder from Jesus comes in a list of woes delivered to the scribes and Pharisees in their position as religious teachers (23:2). The overall rebuke is that, on the one hand they are burdening the people with the minutiae of their legal interpretations, and on the other they are not fulfilling their own task of aiding the people in their spiritual walk. 'They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.' (23:4) Mercy is thus applied abstractly to the 'trouble' of the people's spiritual ignorance and their need of teaching and guidance. As a 'matter of the law,' mercy is not so much a divine command here as a 'central value' or virtue which Jesus expects should generate more than just letter-of-the-law activities like tithing.¹⁵

In Matthew 9:13 and 12:7, Jesus similarly rebukes the Pharisees using Hosea 6:6, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' This is not to overturn the sacrificial system, but a Jewish idiom indicating which was the more basic principle.¹⁶ In the first passage Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees' lack of concern for the 'sinners' with which he is eating, once again suggesting that the 'trouble' in view is their spiritual state. In the second passage it is the more mundane trouble of the disciples' hunger. But in both cases Jesus points to God's desire for mercy as being met in a concern for people, not for the Law per se. In contrast, Jesus portrays himself as fulfilling God's desire for mercy by his table-fellowship with sinners. This is implied by the causal γάρ which links the Hosea quotation to what follows: "'I desire mercy, not sacrifice," for I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'¹⁷ Where the Pharisees appear to hold to a compassionless ethic of divine command,¹⁸ Jesus' reading of the Old Testament again suggests a virtue ethic underlying the edicts of the Law.

¹⁵ Turner, *Matthew*, 556.

¹⁶ Termed 'Semitic antithesis'. Carson et al., *Matthew*, 225.

¹⁷ Witherington, *Matthew*, 200.

¹⁸ Carson et al., *Matthew*, 225.

There are also two parables of Jesus which describe particular troubles requiring mercy. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) uses the language of mercy – the same urgent *ἐλέησόν* of Jesus' petitioners – to describe the appeal of the rich man to Abraham for relief from the flames of Hades. However, as Jeremias points out, it is too late for the rich man, and the parable is directed to those still in a position to show mercy.¹⁹ In context, Jesus is critiquing the Pharisees for their love of money (16:14-15). The mercy being recommended to them is what the rich man omitted – mercy toward the poor like Lazarus, probably almsgiving in particular.²⁰ Thus the real 'trouble' in view is portrayed by Lazarus' condition – laid passively at the rich man's gate, penniless, sore-ridden, hungry, unable even to fend off dogs (16:20-21). The rich man is not portrayed as the opposite of Lazarus in order to highlight their reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. Rather, he is portrayed as the one who had the relative power to alleviate Lazarus' suffering in this life by his proximity and wealth. 'He has the means but not the will to help.'²¹ The mercy required by this parable is thus ultimately volitional; the mercy that acts with the resources it has to alleviate the suffering it sees.

The other parable is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), which again portrays a certain man's 'trouble' in language that demands an act of mercy. He is robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead (10:30). This time mercy is characterised positively by the actions of the Samaritan. He sees the man, has an emotive response of compassion (*σπλαγχνίζομαι*), and then acts to tend, bandage, transport, accommodate, and fund him (10:33-35). The lawyer to whom the parable is addressed then refers to the Samaritan as *ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος*, the one showing mercy (10:37); unable even to give name to his racial enemy. In contrast, the Samaritan has given of his own resources – his cloth, oil, wine, donkey, money, and time – all to *his* racial enemy. Jesus uses this parabolic act of mercy to interpret Leviticus 19:18b – 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' and

¹⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Trans. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM, 1972), 186.

²⁰ There is an implied Greek pun here, with the word for almsgiving, *ἐλεημοσύνη*, cognate to the mercy that the rich man himself requests from Abraham. Green, *Matthew*, 608.

²¹ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 252.

implicitly critique the lawyer's understanding of the Law. He rejects the Pharisaic showing of love only to worthy neighbours, and substitutes a virtue ethic which requires one to *be* a neighbour, deftly switching the concept of 'neighbour' from the object to the subject of love. To 'be a neighbour' means a disposition of love which generates the appropriate act ('mercy') when presented with a particular circumstance ('trouble'). Bock suggests that showing mercy is just a context-specific way of defining love. 'Here is the essence of being a neighbour: having the sensitivity to see a need and act to meet it.'²²

A final specific application of mercy is found in Jude.

²¹ Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy (ἐλεος) of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. ²² Be merciful (ἐλεᾶτε) to those who doubt; ²³ snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy (ἐλεᾶτε), mixed with fear-- hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. (Jude 1:21-23)

The doubting in view (1:22) appears to be of God's love and of the coming of Christ for final salvation. The particular 'trouble' is once again spiritual – a wavering or hesitant faith.²³ The nature of the mercy ethic here is firstly responsive: the one trusting in Christ's mercy should themselves show mercy to others. Secondly, it is analogical: the great mercy of Christ in salvation provides the model for lesser acts of pastoral mercy by the believer.²⁴ Thirdly, it is empathetic: the one who is himself waiting can show compassion to those who struggle with perseverance. The textual state of 1:22-23 makes it ambiguous, but it would appear that a different group again (and hence a different trouble) is in view in each of 1:23a and 1:23b, given Jude's practice of presenting his

²² Bock, *Luke*, 2:1032.

²³ Cf. 'διακρίνω', *BDAG*, n.p.

²⁴ See Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 116.

examples in threes.²⁵ The two further troubles then would be the danger of hell (1:23a) and a wilful state of sin (1:23b) – an overall progression from bad to worse.²⁶ Jude does not spell out the exact nature of the merciful act, but in the middle case (1:23a) the combination of the imperative σώζετε and the attendant participle ἀρπάζοντες (1:23a) pictures a ‘seizing’ of the person which results in their salvation. A sharp and timely rebuke of the erring brother seems the likely implication.²⁷ For the ‘doubter’ of 1:22, a more gentle encouragement or exhortation may be intended. For the ‘corrupted’ of 1:23b, perhaps a more ‘arms-length’ rebuke such as a written warning (cf. Gal 6:1).²⁸

In summary, we find that the ‘troubles’ which mercy addresses can be tangible in the sense of physical, social, and financial deprivation and suffering. They can also be less tangible, in the sense of spiritual ignorance, doubt, and sin. Petitions, where present, simply request the pragmatic alleviation of suffering. Mercy is not a New Testament innovation, but was already one of the underlying principles or virtues of the Law. At times it is informed analogically by the nature of God’s own mercy, and at times empathetically by one’s own experience of the same trouble. Ultimately, however, it is instrumental of God’s own mercy and is attributed to him. Merciful acts are presented as the proactive employment of one’s resources, including physical assistance such as medical care, transport, financial aid and alms, food, and time. Spiritual assistance can involve table-fellowship, instruction, guidance, patience, exhortation, and even rebuking. Personal cost is an implied element of such assistance, although the requisite resources are assumed available.

²⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary On The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 659-60.

²⁶ Ruth Anne Reese, *2 Peter and Jude* (THNTC; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 70.

²⁷ Bauckham, *Jude*, 115.

²⁸ Contra Bauckham, a written rebuke seems a more likely implication than ‘merciful excommunication’, especially given the epistolary context. It would also be more consistent with the merciful rebukes suggested by the other two cases. See Bauckham, *Jude*, 116-17.

2. The Arena of Justice. In extra-biblical literature, mercy is very commonly associated with justice, and they are often suggested to be opposites, or at least in great tension.²⁹ This is true of God's mercy in the New Testament, which is most often raised amid the judicial paradox of salvation and judgement (e.g. Rom 9:15-23, 11:30-32; Tit 3:5; Heb 4:16; 1 Pet 2:10 etc.). However, there are relatively few references to human mercy in connection to the idea of justice. In the public sphere, this is a reflection of the relative powerlessness of the New Testament communities, in contrast with Old Testament theocracy. With the coming of Christ such mediated authority recedes into the eschatological horizon of God's own end-time judgement.³⁰ As a result, passages on earthly judgment are more concerned with submission than justice (e.g. Rom 13:1-8, 1 Pet 2:13-17). And in the private sphere we find strong warnings against judging others (Matt 7:1, Luke 6:37, Rom 2:1 etc.).³¹ Nonetheless, there are some passages in which human mercy has some connection to interpersonal justice.

The key passage in this regard is Jesus' maxim, 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' (Luke 6:36) It is linked to justice by the context, which deals with enemies, revenge, and judging others (6:27-38). Jesus' words echo the Levitical command to be holy because God is holy (Lev 11:44-45), and demonstrate a similar ethic-by-association.³² Once again, mercy is treated as a particular manifestation of love (6:35). The disciple is urged to do good, even to their enemy, without expecting anything in return (6:29-30,32-33). Such behaviour will evidence their relationship with God, because they are reflecting God's own virtue of being 'kind to the ungrateful and wicked.' (6:35) Carson notes that this is not merely an ethic of *imitatio Dei*, because the familial relationship precedes the imitation. 'Believers are to be like what they really are.'³³ The 'Be merciful'

²⁹ See Section 3 for a discussion of contemporary notions of mercy in contrast with justice.

³⁰ Hence, as Koester observes, Hebrews applies the merciless implementation of Mosaic Law, *a fortiori*, to God's own judgement on those who abandon the covenant. Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (ABC; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 452.

³¹ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), 99.

³² The parallel in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,' (Matt 5:48) likely reflects the same saying of Jesus, but with Matthew's particular concern for righteousness expressed in his choice of synonym. See Bock, *Luke*, 1:604-605.

³³ Carson et al., *Matthew*, 894.

imperative (6:36) follows on as an apparent summary, which implies that all the preceding activities (6:27-35) are examples of mercy. This suggests that mercy can be the act of meeting another's social or relational need – the passing over of a deserved judgement, repayment, or vengeance. The need which mercy addresses is not merely incidental, as in the arena of trouble. It is the need for some kind of reckoning, such as toward an enemy (6:27,35), an antagonist (6:28), an abuser (6:28-29), a debtor (6:24), or even a robber (6:30). In such situations mercy is either a proactive deed, or the resistance of a reactive deed, which tends to restore or promote relationship by absorbing a hurt, cost or loss. It is thus antithetical to the principle of reciprocity.³⁴ Tannehill sees Jesus as challenging the self-centred reciprocity of the ancient world, turning it into 'a guide for proactive goodness.'³⁵

Related observations can be made of Jesus' other famous mercy maxim, 'Blessed are the merciful (ἐλεήμονες), for they will be shown mercy (ἐλεηθήσονται).' (Matt 5:7) The connection to justice comes from the reference to God's own eschatological judgment. The background to this sapiential statement in wisdom literature could connote either forgiveness of guilt or compassion toward the needy (Pro 11:17, 12:10, 14:21, 19:11, 19:17, 22:9).³⁶ We should probably then take 'the merciful' broadly as showing kindness to others without counting debt or status against them. Carson points out the virtue ethic at work here. 'No particular object of the demanded mercy is specified, because mercy is to be a function of Jesus' disciples, not of the particular situation that calls it forth.'³⁷ The promise of eschatological mercy is not necessarily a statement of divine reciprocity, because Jesus is simply linking the countercultural virtues of God's people with their eschatological

³⁴ A number of elements in this passage have been interpreted as advocating a reciprocal ethic. Jesus' coining of the 'Golden Rule' in 6:31 has been read as 'Do to others as you *expect* them to do to you'. And Jesus talks about a heavenly reward for merciful acts, if not an earthly one. However, Topel has rightly critiqued such readings, especially Ricoeur's 'logic of equivalence,' as missing the general tenor of grace in Jesus' words – his 'logic of superabundance.' John Topel, 'The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31): The Inescapable Radicalness of Christian Ethics', *TS* 59 (1998): 477-78.

³⁵ Tannehill, *Luke*, 118. Cf. Green, *Luke*, 274.

³⁶ See Carson et al., *Matthew*, 134, for a fuller discussion of the O.T. background to this beatitude.

³⁷ Carson et al., *Matthew*, 134.

hope (cf. Matt 6:14-15). That is, he is establishing the *occasional* ground of God's mercy, not its *causal* ground.³⁸

The converse is expressed in James 2:13, which says that judgement 'without mercy' (ἀνέλεος) will be shown to 'anyone who has not been merciful' (τῷ μὴ ποιήσαντι ἔλεος). In context, James is rebuking partiality toward the rich (2:1), and so mercy is opposed to favouritism and instead 'biased' toward the poor. The merciful acts in view are the provision of clothes (2:2,15), respect (2:3), and daily food (2:15). For James, mercy is not mere words such as "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but the actual *provision* of these physical needs (2:16). Merciful acts are once again presented as a sub-species of love, with James quoting Leviticus 19:18b as the 'royal law' of Scripture (2:8) that is broken by favouritism. The context of justice arises from the Law's 'conviction' of his readers for their lack of mercy (2:9), and from the resulting warning of eschatological judgement (2:12-13). Thus the high standard of divine justice motivates practical love and mercy among those who know they too are lawbreakers in need of mercy. James' proverbial conclusion is less clear: 'Mercy triumphs (or boasts) over judgement.' (2:13b) There is no preceding conjunction, so the connection must be inferred. Fedler suggests that 13b is a corollary reinforcing the crucial importance of mercy in 13a, presenting mercy as ultimately descriptive of God.³⁹ '[Mercy] is the idea which perhaps gives substance to the moral law in the first place, namely, an implicit *imitatio Dei*.'⁴⁰ Mercy is emblematic of God's nature and therefore human expressions of mercy generate confidence of being in a relationship with God where the strict 'fairness' or reciprocity of the Law (13a) will not ultimately condemn the believer.⁴¹

³⁸ Carson et al., *Matthew*, 134. Nevertheless, Witherington is right to insist on the strong rhetorical force of this beatitude which is sometimes lost in protestant attempts to defend *sola fides* (cf. Luke 6:36). But neither does he argue for a reciprocal ethic. Witherington, *Matthew*, 122.

³⁹ Fedler, *Ethics*, 69.

⁴⁰ Fedler, *Ethics*, 69.

⁴¹ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 118. Also Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1988), 71-72; R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works* (PTW; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1991), 103. Contra Spicq, who argues for mercy as the 'indispensable condition' of salvation, based on parallels in extra-biblical sources such as Sirach 28:2. We would argue that the context of 2:14 is decisive over the parallels. Ceslas Spicq, '*eleos*', *TLNT* 1:476.

In the arena of justice, as in the arena of trouble, human mercy acts with the resources it has to meet the need it sees. In addition to meeting physical needs such as food and clothes, it meets relational needs such as respect, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The merciful person may need to absorb a cost or hurt themselves in order to meet this need in the other. Mercy is again a context-specific application of love, and we note the re-occurrence of Leviticus 19:18b as a key text.⁴² Love and mercy are not only proactive, but are often deliberately counter-reactive, responding to cruelty with kindness. Ethically speaking, mercy is motivated by an analogical ethic which self-consciously mimics in the human sphere God's own merciful acts in the arena of divine justice.

3. The Arena of Finance. By the time of the New Testament, the language of mercy developed certain colloquial uses which are helpful in understanding the concept of mercy. The first of these has to do with finance and the poor. Over time, the use of ἐλεημοσύνη in Jewish literature was gradually reified, moving from 'righteousness' (Deut 6:25) to 'righteous acts' (Dan 4:27) and 'benevolent activity' (Pro 20:28; Sir 7:10).⁴³ By the New Testament, it is used exclusively with the technical sense of almsgiving, either given (Matt 6:2-4; Luke 11:41, 12:33; Acts 9:36; 10:2-31, 24:17) or begged (Acts 3:2-10). This reflects a traditional Jewish belief in the piety of almsgiving for the relief of poverty (e.g. Acts 24:14).⁴⁴ 'The poor' was a theologically loaded term, identified with the 'eschatologically poor' (Isa 61:1; Matt 5:3) whose hope rested in God's end-times mercy.⁴⁵ Almsgiving thus expressed an implicit analogical ethic which anticipated the mercy of Yahweh. Giving alms to the poor was perhaps *the* paradigmatic act of practical mercy, as implied by lame

⁴² The arena of justice illuminates the puzzling adversative connection of this text with 19:18a – 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, *but...*'. i.e. Mercy is an application of love to the 'trouble' of private justice or vengeance.

⁴³ R. Bultmann, 'ἐλεος' and cognates, *TDNT* 2:486.

⁴⁴ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 387. Also David L. Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 183. This was in part facilitated centrally through the temple. See David J. Downs, 'Paul's Collection and the Book of Acts Revisited' *NTS* 52 (2006): 63. Also 'ἐλεημοσύνη', *BDAG*, n.p.

⁴⁵ Sze-kar Wan, 'Collection for the Saints as Anticolonial Act: Implications of Paul's Ethnic Reconstruction' in *Paul and Politics* (Ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 195n14.

man in Acts 3 who was evidently expecting 'silver or gold'. Hence Peter's unexpected response, healing him in Jesus' name, substituted the more ultimate paradigm of God's mercy in Christ (Acts 3:6).

The subjective nature of mercy in almsgiving is illustrated by Matthew 6:2-4, where Jesus suggests that mercy should be performed discretely; not to be 'honoured by men,' but to be seen by God. The mercy that God approves does not seek indirect or intangible benefits such as prestige from its actions. Thus the right motivation is an important element of mercy. Jesus says 'be careful,' (6:1) and so calls for a virtuous introspection.⁴⁶ The correct motive is seen in Luke 12:33. The Father's giving of the kingdom means his people can give everything to the poor and still know that they have 'a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted.' Of course Jesus is not saying that mercy necessitates poverty, but rather 'making use of one's resources in a way that benefits others.'⁴⁷ On the other hand, it is also not limited merely to 'the tenth'. The Pharisees are told that their diligent tithing is still somehow neglectful of the almsgiving that God requires, because inside they are yet 'full of greed and wickedness' (Luke 11:41-42). True almsgiving is a self-giving which cannot leave the giver aloof from the receiver. Green suggests that the modern idea of mediated charity is far from Luke's ideal, which sees almsgiving as a necessarily social relation which 'collapses the distance between the social elite and the needy.'⁴⁸ Like in the arena of justice, mercy tends to promote relationship.

4. The Arena of Sentiment. A second colloquial use of mercy language is found in passing comments which express a sentiment or desire for mercy toward another. This category is unique in that there is no immediate opportunity for an act of mercy. We include here the epistolary greetings of the New Testament letters, which often express a desire for ἔλεος for their readership.

⁴⁶ Witherington, *Matthew*, 140.

⁴⁷ Bock, *Luke*, 2:1167.

⁴⁸ Green, *Luke*, 471.

So ‘Grace, mercy and peace’ (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; 2 John 1:3), and ‘Mercy, peace and love’ (Jude 1:2). Most of these salutations attribute mercy to God, and so in some sense the sentiment is instrumental – it expresses the speaker’s desire that God’s mercy be manifest to another. It is not necessarily salvific mercy in view, since the context is salutary, and the audience is assumed to be already Christian. Paul himself is able to attribute to God’s mercy temporal events such as the recovery of Epaphroditus from illness (Phil 2:27; Cf. 2 Cor 4:1; 1 Tim 1:13,16). Matthew 16:22 may be another example, as we have already argued. Peter’s exclamation ἴλεώς σοι expresses the desire for Jesus to be rescued by God from the ‘trouble’ of the cross. The mercy of God appears then to encourage an affectionate and merciful desire for providence in the circumstances of other believers’ lives.⁴⁹

5. The Arena of Relationship. A final context from which various references to mercy arise is that of the corporate life of the early church. The letters of the New Testament address Christians in relationship, and urge various practices and virtues in relating to one another in Christ. Mercy appears relatively infrequently in this context, and yet it is treated as a normative component of Christian character. Romans 12 provides a list of various gifts or functions within the body of Christ, and how they are to be exercised in response to God’s own mercy (οἰκτιρισμός), as expounded in the first eleven chapters of the letter. Included in this list is one who shows mercy, who is to do so cheerfully, ὁ ἐλεῶν ἐν ἰλαρότητι. A similar cheerfulness is exhorted by Paul with regard to charitable giving (2 Cor 9:7), which may be the connotation here.⁵⁰ Moo, however, argues for the broader reading of ‘any act of mercy toward others, such as visiting the sick, caring for the elderly or disabled, and providing for the poor.’⁵¹

⁴⁹ It is assumed that the desire would be expressed in action, given the opportunity. In contrast, James 2 deals with expressions of desire for mercy toward the poor where there is a clear and present opportunity for merciful acts. James is thus dealing with inauthentic mercy sentiments arising from an inauthentic faith.

⁵⁰ Dunn makes this argument, as recounted by Moo, *Romans*, 769.

⁵¹ Moo, *Romans*, 769.

Another list of virtues is found in James 3, where ‘true wisdom’ is characterised in terms of its works, and is opposed to that of false teachers. Heavenly wisdom is ‘full of mercy (μεσση ἐλέους) and good fruit’ (3:17). The practical qualities of mercy are thus being emphasized, and any teaching that lacks attendant mercy is condemned.⁵² In contrast with the dissension and disorder caused by false teachers, mercy heals over disputes and promotes relationship, being linked with other relational virtues such as peace-making, consideration, submission, impartiality, and sincerity. Ethically, mercy is itself the fruit of heavenly teaching – the divine commands and virtues of the Law such as the love of neighbour (Lev 19:18b), which James has already linked to mercy (2:8-13).⁵³ The practice of mercy is informed not merely analogically by faith in God’s own mercy, but is fleshed out by the wisdom and example of Christian teachers, whose own life should bear merciful fruit.

Two more exhortations to mercy (οἰκτιρισμός) are found at Philippians 2:1 and Colossians 3:12, where they come in a more emotive context. They both appear in close connection with σπλάγχνον, which refers to the seat of the emotions (literally, bowels or inward parts), and is taken figuratively as ‘compassion’.⁵⁴ In Philippians the two words can be taken as a hendiadys such as ‘affectionate sympathy’.⁵⁵ So Paul urges his readers that if they have any emotional response to God’s love towards them, they are to act analogically – demonstrating the same love of God toward each other. In Colossians, a similar hendiadys is used, but as a specific virtue to ‘put on’ (Ἐνδύσασθε) like a set of clothes, resulting in relational acts such as the forgiveness of grievances (3:13). Compassionate mercy here becomes a virtuous disposition, a settled pattern of emotion and response. And yet again, we find that love is cited as chief over all the virtues – ‘which binds them all together in perfect unity.’ (3:14) The explicit motivation for mercy here is a reprise of the Old

⁵² Martin, *James*, 134.

⁵³ Moo, *James*, 176.

⁵⁴ ‘Compassion’, *L&N* 395.

⁵⁵ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 67.

Testament ethic-by-association. Paul urges them to put on mercy because they are ‘God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved’ (3:12; Cf. Exod 19:5-6). But as O’Brien notes, Christ himself is chosen, holy, and loved by God in Colossians, establishing a new Christological ethic-by-association in the New Testament.⁵⁶

A Working Definition of Mercy

Having made a detailed study of all the New Testament texts dealing with mercy, we are in a position to put forward a more detailed definition which can be contrasted with other biblical virtues and extra-biblical conceptions of mercy. Such a definition must incorporate two key elements. It must be phenomenological, identifying the circumstances in which mercy arises and its basic pattern of action. It must also be ethical, identifying the goals, motives, and moral sources which give shape to its practice. Our working definition then is as follows:

The New Testament virtue of mercy is a settled disposition of love which, when confronted with the physical, social, or spiritual need of another, expresses itself in a compassionate desire to meet that need, informed and motivated by God’s paradigmatic mercy at the cross. Wherever it has occasion, due to proximity and resources, it acts upon that desire, seeing itself as an agent of God’s mercy. It takes initiative to meet the observed need pragmatically and self-sacrificially, bearing any incidental costs or hurts, and wary of any incidental gains, in order to close the circumstantial and relational gap between the subject and the object of mercy.

The intricacy of this definition is required by both the diversity of the texts involved, and more fundamentally by the nature of biblical virtues as a complex of *actus*, *habitus*, and indeed *affectus*.

⁵⁶ See Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC; Waco, Texas, 1982), 197.

If we were able to prise these elements apart, we might find that mercy is simply a habit formed and motivated by love, which acts in diverse ways when confronted with the complex physical and relational troubles of a fallen world. The concern of this study, however, is the practical nature of human mercy, and so we must embrace its biblical diversity.

What yet remains is to put our definition to work by contrasting it with other virtues that the New Testament recommends, and with some specific extra-biblical conceptions of mercy. This will enable us to further see the distinctiveness of mercy in the New Testament, and prepare for the final task of this study, which is to suggest how the biblical virtue of mercy is distinctively manifested in the Christian life.

SECTION 3: MERCY IN CONTRAST

There are a number of different axes along which we can position the New Testament conception of mercy. As a specific virtue, it can be compared with other New Testament virtues such as compassion, love, grace, and justice. As a human virtue it can also be compared with the divine virtue of mercy examined in our first section. And as a particular conception of mercy it can be compared with alternative conceptions in the history of moral thought.

In contrast to other biblical virtues

We have already made some distinctions between mercy and other virtues raised in the New Testament. Compassion, or *σπλάγγνον*, as the ‘inward parts’ and seat of the emotions, generally refers by synecdoche to feelings and emotive reactions such as love, affection and sympathy.¹ It is often found in close connection with mercy (e.g. Jas 5:11, Phil 2:1, Col 3:12, Phlm 1:20-22), suggesting an overlapping semantic domain that warns against making too fine a distinction. Davies’ claim that mercy does not imply ‘a compassionate sharing in the suffering of the other’ is thus too strong.² The act is almost always preceded by an emotive reaction to the plight of the sufferer (Luke 10:33, Cf. Matt 14:14, 15:32, 18:27 etc.). Indeed, emotive mercy language is sometimes used in contexts where no volitional act is in view (e.g. Phil 2:1). Compassion is thus both broader in scope and more simple in essence than mercy. Compassion includes affection at the mere thought of another (e.g. Phil 1:8), whereas mercy is a psycho-social activity invoked by a specific plight. But within this activity, compassion often describes the emotive component.

¹ ‘σπλάγγνον’, *BDAG*, n.p.

² Davies, *Compassion*, 232.

We have also already observed that love is a broader principle and category of virtue than mercy. We have noted the key role of the neighbour-love command (Lev 19:18b) in establishing the deuteronomic context for discussions of mercy (Luke 6:35, 10:27; Jas 2:8; cf. Col 3:14). This may help explain the dearth of mercy language in the Johannine writings by pointing out John's compensatory focus on love as the broader virtue to be practised (John 13:34). 'This rule of self-sacrificial, self-giving, selfless love, a unique quality of love inspired by Jesus' own love for the disciples, will serve as the foundational ethic for the new messianic community.'³ Love then appears to be the virtuous disposition which issues forth in mercy, both in God himself (Eph 2:4-5) and in human expression (Jas 2:8-13). The difference between love and mercy is that love is the root principle, and so is generally taught with reference to a generic object – the 'neighbour' – expressing its indiscriminate embrace (Cf. Luke 10:27-29). In contrast, mercy is generally focussed on specific plight (e.g. poverty) and its pragmatic alleviation.

Grace falls into a similar broad category as love, and is found in collocations both with love and mercy (Eph 2:4-5; Cf. Heb 4:16 1 Cor 1:2 etc.).⁴ However, grace is almost exclusively a divine virtue in the New Testament. The exception is one very specific application of grace, but one which is akin to mercy: the language of 'gift' (χάρις). In human gift-giving, as with divine, χάρις implies a lack on the part of its recipient.⁵ It is used of Paul's collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:3, 2 Cor 8:6), and is viewed by him as 'a ministry of benevolence to the Jerusalem church to meet economic need.'⁶ In this sense it is analogous to the reification of mercy into its almsgiving cognate, ἐλεημοσύνη. Human grace is volitive like mercy, with Paul repeatedly emphasizing that contributions must be voluntary (2 Cor 8:8, 8:12, 9:7). Grace thus helps confirm the radical break

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 423-24.

⁴ Bruce F. Harris, 'The Idea of Mercy and its Graeco-Roman Context', in *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox* (eds. P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson; Homebush West: Lancer, 1986), 91.

⁵ 'χάρις', *BDAG*, n.p.

⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, 'The Jerusalem Collection and the Book of Galatians' *JSNT* 5 (1979): 47.

which mercy constituted from the reciprocity of the Graeco-Roman patronal system.⁷ There is also a similar analogical ethic at work in human grace: ‘For you know the grace (χάρις) of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.’ (2 Cor 8:9) Paul also expects that his collection will result in thanks not to its contributors, but to God (2 Cor 9:11-15), demonstrating a mercy-like instrumental ethic. Human grace thus shows a similar ethical structure to mercy, but its reified usage puts the focus on the gracious gift itself rather than the plight it alleviates.⁸

Finally, we must distinguish between the biblical virtues of mercy and justice. As we have already observed, there is a conscious tension between *divine* mercy and justice in the New Testament (Rom 9:15-23; Cf. Rom 3:21-26), which is resolved by the sovereignty of God in election (Rom 9:18), and the vicarious substitution of Christ in salvation (Rom 3:25).⁹ In the human sphere, however, there is no immediate analogy because humans can achieve neither absolute sovereignty nor genuine substitution. It seems they must either judge with merciless severity as God’s delegated authorities (Rom 13:1-7), or with endless pardons as his forgiven servants (Matt 18:33).¹⁰ O’Donovan attributes the problem to the mistaken Aristotelian notion that justice is a virtue.¹¹ If justice is really about truthful judgments, as O’Donovan suggests, and this truth includes a humble judgment about our own need for God’s mercy, then there is room for the virtue of

⁷ Stephan Joubert, *Paul as Benefactor: Reciprocity, Strategy and Theological Reflection in Paul’s Collection* (Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 67-68.

⁸ Grace even has a derivative relation to love, as does mercy. Paul sees the Corinthians’ ‘gift’ (χάρις) as a ‘test’ (2 Cor 8:8) and a ‘proof’ (2 Cor 8:24) of their love. Gracious giving is seen as the appropriate application of love to the particular ‘trouble’ of poverty. Indeed, Nickle argues that love is the ‘central constitutive factor’ of Paul’s collection, although the relative frequency of χάρις versus ἀγάπη language in 2 Corinthians 8-9 suggests that his point may be overstated. Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul’s Strategy* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 103.

⁹ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1997), 171.

¹⁰ O’Donovan raises the valid question of whether Christians can ever, in good conscience, judge others. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 258.

¹¹ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), 7.

mercy in the human practice of judgement.¹² We will return to O'Donovan's solution in the final contrast of this section.

In contrast to divine mercy

The distinction between mercy and other biblical virtues draws us back to the question of how human virtues relate to the divine. In our first section we identified several features of God's mercy in the Old Testament and in Christ: his compassion, his covenant faithfulness, his longsuffering love, and his elective sovereignty. As a human virtue, most of these features of mercy map quite naturally to their human analogues. Compassion has been found as the normative emotive component of the practice of mercy. Longsuffering love is demonstrated in mercy's willingness to absorb hurts and offences. Covenant faithfulness is analogous to the concern to promote and maintain relationships that guides merciful action. Elective sovereignty, however, stands out as a feature of divine mercy that is foreign and even antithetical to human mercy. The Good Samaritan's unmerciful predecessors on the road to Jericho were negatively characterised for the selectivity of their mercy. The principle of neighbour-love seems to require an impartiality quite alien to Yahweh's 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy'. However, God's standing in mercy is that of creator to creature, which means his mercy is non-contingent and is subject neither to obligation nor question (Rom 9:20-23). Humanity's standing is that of creature to creature, which means that his mercy is contingent both on God's prior mercy and his creative purposes for creaturely relations. We do not then expect to find an *autonomous* electivity in human mercy, but rather an *instrumental* electivity whereby the merciful person enacts mercy in the circumstances in which providence places him. Human mercy is elective only in the

¹² O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 99.

Augustinian sense of being free to do good rather than evil, not of choosing one person over another.¹³

In Section 1 we also related divine and human virtues by observing a number of ethical movements by which the Bible generally relates the two, including ethics of association or analogy, divine command, gratitude, and an instrumental ethic. In our New Testament studies of mercy, we have found that the analogical ethic dominates in the general form of the *imitatio Dei*, but with its particular referent and context as the mercy and forgiveness of God at the cross. This has led naturally to a reprise of the Old Testament ethic of response in gratitude to God for his mercy. And we have also observed a frequent use of the instrumental ethic which attributes human acts of mercy to God's ongoing providence. Finally, we have continued to argue against any sense of mercy as an ethic of reciprocity which trades merciful acts for divine benevolence, finding God's mercy always a step ahead of its human analogue.

The question that remains is what qualifications we should make to the analogical ethic which motivates New Testament mercy. In the Old Testament, God's mercy sets him apart from the cruelty of humanity (Hos 11:9). Likewise, in the New Testament a key characterisation of rebellious humanity is that they are ἀνελεήμονας, unmerciful (Rom 1:31). While God's attributes of compassion, love, grace, justice, and mercy are paradigmatic for human virtue, in each case as we approach the singularity of the cross we are tempted to demur from any ultimate correspondence between divine and human virtue. We must take care then not to argue our mercy ethic exclusively from below, as if it were an analogy of *being*. Rather, Barth's interpretation of the analogy of *faith* reminds us that only God's self-revelation in Christ, grasped in the act of faith, is true and real knowledge of God, allowing a truly analogous imitation of God's mercy. 'While

¹³ See Bettenson. Henry, Bettenson, ed., *The Later Christian Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 204-206.

creaturely realities are never strictly identical with God's action, by grace they may (in the analogy of faith) become correspondences or echoes of that action.¹⁴ The analogical ethic is thus no mere literary device – it is ontologically grounded in the familial relation established in Christ (cf. Luke 6:36). Its limit however is that it is not an *exhaustive* reflection of the divine. It is restricted to the resources it has and the trouble it sees. And it is not ultimately salvific, able to treat only the symptoms of sin, not its root. At best it is instrumental of God's providential mercy, and hence the need for wariness against incidental gains which reward human mercy as if it were ultimate rather than analogous.

In contrast to extra-biblical conceptions of mercy

A final task in testing our definition of mercy is to contrast the biblical conception with various moral thinkers whose formulations of mercy have been influential. We have chosen one each from the periods of the early, medieval, and modern church. However, we should note that Aristotle precedes and influences all of these. His idea of virtue as the mean between excess and deficiency has guided much of the history of Western moral thought (Arist., *Ethics*, II.9). He defines mercy (ἐλέος/ἐλεάω), however, as a passion rather than a virtue, resulting in its translation as 'pity' (Lat. *miser cordia*). 'Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it.' (Arist., *Rhetoric*, II.8 [Roberts]) This seminal definition stands in the background of each of the following contrasts.

1. Mercy in Seneca. *De Clementia* is an essay on mercy written by the Stoic philosopher Seneca to the young emperor Nero in 55-56 A.D.. Half the work is no longer extant, but in his introduction Seneca divides the work into three parts regarding mercy (*clementia*): its practice in the 'remission of punishment', its definition in the 'nature and aspect of mercy', and finally its cultivation in 'how

¹⁴ Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 121.

the mind is led to adopt this virtue' (I.3.1).¹⁵ Seneca inhabited the same Graeco-Roman world as the New Testament authors, and provides for them a contemporary foil. Despite certain similarities in thought, and Tertullian's claims to the contrary, he is clearly not Christian in his outlook.¹⁶ He offers two related definitions of mercy:

Mercy means restraining the mind from vengeance when it has the power to take it, or the leniency of a superior towards an inferior in fixing punishment. [...] Mercy may also be termed the inclination of the mind towards leniency in exacting punishment. (II.3.1)

For Seneca, the practice of mercy is best seen in the pragmatic verdicts of the emperor with regard to criminal justice and the treatment of enemies, by which the security and prosperity of the state is enhanced, and his personal glory increased. 'Mercy, then, makes rulers not only more honoured, but safer, and is at the same time the glory of sovereign power and its surest protection.' (I.11.4) This is much narrower in focus than the New Testament, being limited to the arena of justice in the public sphere. However, while Seneca considers this the dominant application of mercy, he still sees it as a particular application of a more general virtue available to all. 'The quality of mercy [...] is indeed for all men in accordance with nature, but in rulers it has an especial comeliness inasmuch as with them it finds more to save, and exhibits itself amid ampler opportunities.' (I.5.2) In this sense, Seneca is close to the New Testament practice of mercy, because its opportunity lies in one's relative power and resources to meet the need of another. The emperor simply has the *par excellence* opportunity to exercise mercy.

However, there are significant differences and even conflicts in Seneca's ethical motivations compared to those of the New Testament. On one level, Seneca is supremely pragmatic and

¹⁵ All quotations taken from *Seneca: Moral Essays* (trans. John W. Basore; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ See J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1961), 6-15. Also Paul Berry, *Correspondence Between Paul and Seneca: A.D. 61-65* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1999), I.

consequentialist, following the Aristotelian and Stoic goal of this-worldly happiness.¹⁷ Mercy is exercised or withheld only as necessary to ensure an orderly society and the security of its sovereign. (I.8.6; cf. I.22.1-2) Harris concludes that his motive for mercy is perpetuation of power and security through obligation rather than reflecting divine virtue.¹⁸ However, Seneca does operate on the religious level at times, and in fact suggests an analogical ethic for mercy. He motivates Nero with the flattery of being ‘chosen to serve on earth as vicar of the gods’. (I.1.2) Indeed, he cites the gods as ‘the standard after which a prince should model himself – that he should wish so to be to his subjects, as he would wish the gods to be to himself.’ (I.7.1; cf. Luke 6:35-36) This should not be taken too literally, however, because religious appeals are mostly a rhetorical device in Seneca. He immediately goes on to question the ideals of popular religion based on his own conception of mercy. ‘Is it, then, desirable to have deities that cannot be moved to show mercy to our sins and mistakes?’ (I.7.1)

Seneca’s ultimate ethical source is neither pragmatics nor religion, but the Stoic ideal of the serene and detached Wise Man. The prince is able to tolerate insults and injuries but still judge with moderation, superficially resembling our idea of personally absorbing hurts and offences. But his mercy comes from the suppression of emotion, not its outpouring in compassion. ‘[H]e will bring relief to another’s tears, but will not add his own; to the shipwrecked man he will give a hand, to the exile shelter, to the needy alms’. (II.6.1-2) Outwardly these deeds resemble those of biblical mercy. But instead of closing the gap between the subject and object of mercy, Seneca’s mercy maintains their distance. He has no place for Aristotelian pity (*miser cordia*), which he sees as a vice that overrides the truth of guilt with sympathy for the victim’s plight. ‘Pity is a weakness of the mind that is over-much perturbed by suffering [...] very much like requiring [the Wise Man] to wail and moan at the funerals of strangers.’ (II.6.4) Instead of emotion, mercy is triggered by the

¹⁷ Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 49.

¹⁸ Harris, ‘Graeco-Roman Context’, 99.

self-interest of the emperor as the organic head of the empire. Judicial mercy is thus really a form of instrumental egoism: 'you are merciful to yourself when you are seemingly merciful to another'. (I.5.1) Seneca even has his own echo of the neighbour-love principle: 'an all-embracing love of the human race even as of one-self'. (I.11.2) But it is undercut by his belief that as emperor, the human race is simply *part* of himself. There is no settled disposition of love, only what Sevenster call's Seneca's 'ultimate anthropocentricity' when compared with the biblical account of virtue. '[I]n Seneca such words are descriptive of qualities which arise from the heart of a man who relies on his own strength.'¹⁹ Seneca's mercy is always aloof and selective, preferring mercy for the unfortunate rather than the guilty, the reformable rather than the irascible, the reputable rather than the slave (II.6.3, I.2.2, I.18.1). The lack of a genuine analogical or instrumental ethic means that the emperor's mercy has no higher appeal than his own sovereignty. As a result he can be lenient in punishment, but he has no grounds for pardon. '[T]o pardon is to fail to punish one whom you judge worthy of punishment. [...] Mercy is superior in that it declares that those who are let off did not deserve any different treatment.' (II.7.3) Forgiveness is thus missing from Seneca's account of mercy. As O'Donovan puts it, Seneca's mercy cannot overcome 'the simple fact of guilt'.²⁰ He is therefore limited to alleviating material 'troubles' such as punishment, and cannot handle the biblical dimension of relational 'troubles' such as broken relationship.

2. Mercy in Aquinas. The *Summa Theologiae* was written by Aquinas in the high middle-ages, beginning in 1265 A.D.. Its second part concerns ethics and, like Seneca, is indebted to Aristotelian philosophy. At the same time however, Aquinas writes with the outlook of Christian faith, and goes beyond Seneca to focus on the highest moral good not as this-worldly happiness, but as the 'beatific vision' of God (I-II.3.8). He places his discussion of mercy (Latin *miser cordia*) beside joy and peace as 'interior effects' of love (II-II.28), which is congruent with our observation that love is

¹⁹ Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca*, 146.

²⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 258.

the ‘root-virtue’ from which mercy stems.²¹ He begins by quoting Aristotle on mercy, but then adds Augustine’s expanded definition: ‘mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress, *impelling us to succor him if we can*’ (II-II.30.1).²² He proceeds then to integrate Aristotle’s virtue ethic into Christian theology via Augustine.²³

The first transformation this brings is to allow mercy even for those suffering deservedly. Aquinas changes Aristotle’s list of *necessary* conditions for mercy – that is, painful, accidental, and undeserved misery – into *sufficient* conditions.²⁴ ‘[T]he motive of mercy, being something pertaining to misery, is, in the first way, *anything* contrary to the will’s natural appetite, namely corruptive or distressing evils.’ (II-II.30.1) His theological justification for this move is that even deserved suffering, suffering due to sin, is in some sense involuntary. It has rightly sought happiness, but desired it from a source other than God, and so has ended in misery. Hence Jesus has compassion on the multitudes not as sinners, but as distressed sheep without a shepherd (II-II.30.1). For Aquinas this analogy opens the door for relational and spiritual acts of mercy (such as fraternal correction) not found in Aristotle and Seneca, and acts not restricted by the ‘worthiness’ of their object. ‘The merciful person seeks through fraternal correction to enhance the good of the suffering sinner not because of the sinner’s manifest virtue’.²⁵ Aquinas thus parallels our observation that mercy meets both material and spiritual needs, informed by the analogy of God’s mercy on sinners.

The second Augustinian transformation applied to Aristotle is to expand the motive for mercy. Aquinas describes Aristotle’s motive – the fear of experiencing similar misery – as a ‘real union’ brought about by close encounter with another’s misery. (II-II.30.2) But he adds a second motive, a

²¹ Aquinas’ choice of *miseriordia* over *clementia* appears to be a reflection of the Latin translation of Aristotle rather than a technical distinction. See Anthony Keaty, ‘The Christian Virtue of Mercy: Aquinas’ Transformation of Aristotelian Pity’ *HJ* 46 (2005): 196, Endnote 8.

²² All quotations taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (3 vols.; New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

²³ Keaty, ‘Virtue of Mercy’, 186.

²⁴ Keaty, ‘Virtue of Mercy’, 188.

²⁵ Keaty, ‘Virtue of Mercy’, 194.

‘union of the affections, which is the effect of love.’ (II-II.30.2) Love enables one to view another as ‘another self’ and make their defects one’s own, where Seneca saw them as a subordinate *part* of self whose misery remains unfelt. Love thus bridges the gap between the subject and object of mercy, making their suffering ‘near’ despite differences in status or circumstance.²⁶ Its paradigmatic expression is again taken as almsgiving: ‘a deed whereby something is given to the needy, out of compassion and for God’s sake, which motive belongs to mercy.’ (II-II.32.1) But in line with Scripture, Aquinas also argues that love or ‘charity’ (ἀγάπη) is the greater and more basic virtue. ‘Almsgiving is an act of charity through the medium of mercy.’ (II-II.32.1) For Aquinas this is because love’s unitive activity is the precondition of mercy; both in the semi-Pelagian sense of God-enabled human love bringing unity with him via an analogy of being, and in the love required to bring the misery of another near and invoke our compassion.²⁷ ‘The sum total of the Christian religion consists in mercy, as regards external works: but the inward love of charity, whereby we are united to God preponderates over both love and mercy for our neighbour.’ (II-II 30.4)

A final transformation of Aristotle is with regard to the status of mercy as a virtue rather than a passion. He argues that when passion is regulated by reason, it becomes a virtue. (II-II.30.3) This is again supported with reference to Augustine – ‘this movement of the mind obeys reason, when mercy is vouchsafed in such a way that justice is safeguarded, whether we give to the needy or forgive the repentant.’ (II-II.30.3) Despite a natural philosophy reminiscent of Seneca’s pragmatism, Aquinas has in mind not merely rationalised emotion, but an ‘elective habit’ or disposition of character which generates merciful actions. Keaty sums up this important moral development:

²⁶ See Keaty for a fuller discussion of the relationship between the two motives for mercy. Keaty, ‘Virtue of Mercy’, 190.

²⁷ Aquinas cites Romans 1:20 as evidence for the analogy of being, ‘God’s invisible qualities... being understood from what has been made.’ Hence terms can be used analogously of both God and humans, taking analogous in the sense of ‘according to proportion’ (ST, I-I.13.5).

Instead of identifying its causes, as Aristotle did, Augustine identifies the heartfelt sympathy that is mercy as the kind of emotion that impels the person to act to dispel the misery of the suffering person. In so far as this heartfelt sympathy described by Augustine inclines us to act, it can be considered a virtue since virtue is, in Aquinas' terms, an operative habit inclining a person to a certain act.²⁸

We conclude then that Aquinas' Augustinian transformation of Aristotle, adding an ethical sub-structure of love, and moving mercy from passion to virtue, broadens the application of mercy considerably. 'By making both temporal and spiritual needs of humankind the subject of charity through mercy, Christian ministry takes on a more holistic approach.'²⁹ Aquinas reflects the Scriptural relation of mercy to love, and thereby transcends Seneca. But he still relies on an analogy of being between divine and human virtue, which introduces the danger of a semi-Pelagian or reciprocal ethic of mercy.

3. Mercy in O'Donovan. Oliver O'Donovan is a contemporary moral theologian writing from within the Evangelical tradition. He resembles Seneca in that he deals with mercy mostly from within the arena of justice. However, in his most recent work on political theology, *Ways of Judgment* (2005), his conception of justice as acts of moral discrimination leads to a close relationship between justice and ethics more generally. As a result, his account of mercy has implications broader than those merely of the arena of justice.³⁰ O'Donovan raises the question of how human judgment relates to divine mercy, and specifically how there can be forgiveness in the act of judgment.³¹ His

²⁸ Keaty, 'Virtue of Mercy', 191.

²⁹ Chan, *Mercy, Community, & Ministry*, 99.

³⁰ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 5.

³¹ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 88.

account of mercy thus proceeds as the search for a 'point of purchase for forgiveness within the logic of justice.'³²

O'Donovan's overall thesis is that human mercy is a *witness* to God's mercy, rather than its simple analogue.³³ He begins with a critique of the Reformers' view of public justice as Mosaic rather than evangelical, which resulted from their fight against the semi-Pelagian implications of the analogy of being. The result, for O'Donovan, was an apophatism with respect to ethics – an overemphasis on the cross as God's definitive acceptance of Christ's work over and against all human works. 'God's acceptance and rejection is narrowed to a mathematical point without length, breadth, or height.'³⁴ This is parallel to our problem of how an analogical ethic can survive, faced with the utter 'singularity' of divine mercy. O'Donovan's solution is to re-emphasise the resurrection, which 'vindicates the pattern of humanity that Christ lived for us and commanded us to follow.'³⁵ Thus God's judgments (and by implication, his mercies) are unfolded and expounded in the life of Jesus. This does not completely solve the problem, however, because human judgment cannot achieve the same effect as the gospel – 'We cannot condemn and redeem at once.'³⁶ He sees this as equally true for merciful judgments: 'In one respect man will never in all eternity come to resemble God, namely, in forgiving sins.'³⁷ The only pattern public justice can follow then, is that of the church, where God's own gospel justice has taken social form, 'in judgments that immediately serve the creation of mutual love and the forgiveness of enemies.'³⁸ Merciful actions within the church serve as the pattern for public judgment by their witness to what God has done in Christ. O'Donovan thus sees mercy not primarily as an analogical ethic, but as christological proclamation.³⁹

³² O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 93.

³³ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 84-100.

³⁴ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 84-85.

³⁵ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 85.

³⁶ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 87.

³⁷ Quoting Kierkegaard. O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 87.

³⁸ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 88.

³⁹ O'Donovan, *Desire of Nations*, 258.

Yet the objection remains that forgiveness appears to compromise justice. O'Donovan deals with this by observing that judgement and mercy are both retrospective and prospective. That is, they are cognisant of past acts but also constitutive of future goals.⁴⁰ Seneca's retrospective view of justice could not allow forgiveness, only a reactive judgement or Stoic indifference. But in the theological concept of *justification*, we find God's ultimate judgment in the very form of forgiveness, redeeming as he condemns. Human forgiveness cannot *justify* in this sense, but it can act with a humble consciousness of God's prior act. 'The possibility of mercy arises when judgment reflects upon the conditions of its own performance.'⁴¹ That is, the moral agent cannot recognise others' acts and circumstances with absolute objectivity, but must recognise and pass judgment on themselves and their own pattern of judgment. The 'ordinary practice of mercy' is possible whenever we find 'the truth of judgment including a reflective truth about its own practice.'⁴² O'Donovan calls this 'recursive recognition,' a helpful conception of the ethical and relational continuity that links all acts of mercy (and judgment) in a chain back to God's original act in Christ. This chain is grounded in Jesus' own teaching of the responsive nature of mercy: simply that 'those who ask for mercy shall show it.'⁴³ Human judgments and mercies are still incapable of redeeming their object, but are analogous to God's actions in the particular sense of witnessing to the gospel.

[T]hey are permitted to mirror the unity of truth and grace which we discern in God's deed of justification. [...] The original act of generosity is God's alone, beyond replication; yet that should not make us despise the partial and conditioned reflections that we may from time to time be given to display.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 92.

⁴¹ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 93.

⁴² O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 97.

⁴³ O'Donovan, citing the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:23-35). *Ways of Judgment*, 99.

⁴⁴ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 100.

O'Donovan is also similar to Aquinas, in that he constructs an ethic of love beneath the virtue of mercy. This is best seen in his earlier work, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (1986). O'Donovan differs from Aquinas in that he does not rely upon an analogy of being, but upon the resurrection order revealed in the gospel. Love is informed by the generic and telic order with which God has imbued his creation, and which he has re-affirmed in the risen Jesus. Love then is not merely the virtue which overrules all others, but is prior to them, and allows them 'to determine the specific forms which love will take in practice.'⁴⁵ As we have observed, it is more abstract and less specific than other virtues like mercy precisely because they are pluriform instantiations of it. '[L]ove is the principle which confers unifying order both upon the moral field and upon the character of the moral subject. It is the fulfilment of the moral law on the one hand, and the form of the virtues on the other.'⁴⁶ We can apply this to our study by saying that love informs mercy, identifying both what constitutes a 'trouble' (something alien to human nature and purpose), and the goal of its alleviation (a fulfilment of that nature and purpose). Love still has the unitive function which Aquinas attributes to it, but not *our* love unifying us to God in the analogy of being. Rather, in the analogy of faith the prior outpouring of *God's* love into our hearts is witnessed to by the Christian disposition of neighbour-love, which generates appropriate acts such as 'mercy' when confronted with various worldly circumstances such as 'trouble'. Such human expressions of love are unitive for the object and subject of mercy. That is, they promote or maintain relationship: 'We *become* neighbours *by* showing mercy.'⁴⁷

⁴⁵ O'Donovan, *Moral Order*, 202.

⁴⁶ O'Donovan, *Moral Order*, 226.

⁴⁷ O'Donovan's paraphrase of Origen on the Good Samaritan (italics added). O'Donovan, *Moral Order*, 241.

SECTION 4: MERCY IN PRACTICE

Although no longer extant, Seneca's intention for the third book of *De Clementia* was 'how the mind is led to adopt this virtue, and how it establishes it and by practice and makes it its own.' (I.3.1) This captures our intention for the final section in this study, which aims to draw together the findings of our biblical and comparative surveys of mercy into a distinctive portrait of ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος or 'the merciful person' from a New Testament perspective. We begin by re-stating our working definition, before unpacking its various parts in the light of the other virtues and conceptions of mercy examined in the previous section. Our working definition stands as a summary of the New Testament teaching on mercy:

The New Testament virtue of mercy is a settled disposition of love which, when confronted with the physical, social, or spiritual need of another, expresses itself in a compassionate desire to meet that need, informed and motivated by God's paradigmatic mercy at the cross. Wherever it has occasion, due to proximity and resources, it acts upon that desire, seeing itself as an agent of God's mercy. It takes initiative to meet the observed need pragmatically and self-sacrificially, bearing any incidental costs or hurts, and wary of any incidental gains, in order to close the circumstantial and relational gap between the subject and the object of mercy.

We may now begin to suggest how the parts of this definition relate more holistically, by defining the 'Merciful Person' as an alternative to the 'Wise Man' of Seneca and the Stoics. The following features of our definition are distinctive with respect to such a person, and are arranged as an *ordo clementias*, as it were.

1. Analogical. The ethic beneath merciful behaviour has been a major concern of this study – its logic, its motivation, and its goals. The origin or referent of this ethic has been clearly identified as the mercy of God in Christ, and yet we have wrestled with the nature of the analogy between divine and human mercy. We concluded that it was not an analogy of being, a simple analogy of imitation in the Aristotelian sense. Rather, it is the analogy of faith – an ethic that springs from the revelatory character of the gospel itself. The Merciful Person is one already redeemed by a Merciful God, and whose activity is a true yet not exhaustive reflection of God’s own virtue. In terms of motivation, the Merciful Person is grateful for God’s mercy, and acts responsively, knowing that human mercy can never hope to emulate the divine. But in practice their ethic is an *Imitatio Dei*, as their redeemed mind draws on analogies between the plight of their troubled neighbour and their own former spiritual destitution, in order to shape their merciful practice with the compassionate, long-suffering, and self-sacrificial love of their Lord. But they see it not merely as imitation, but as instrumental of God’s ongoing providential mercy, with themselves as its intermediate agent, directing any resulting praise back to the Father rather than seeking it themselves. And most importantly, the minds of both redeemed and unredeemed alike are able to draw analogies between the actions of the Merciful Person and the gospel he or she proclaims. The ultimate nature of the mercy analogy is as *witness*, as christological proclamation. In this sense, to say that mercy is analogical is really to say it is evangelical.

2. Loving. A major outcome of this study has been to establish the strong Scriptural connection between mercy and love, primarily in the neighbour-love command. Love operates as the root-virtue which gives mercy its relational context and shapes its instantiation with respect to specific troubles. Love informs both the practice and goals of mercy by means of its commitment to the nature and purpose of human beings, a moral order re-affirmed in the resurrection. The Merciful Person thus knows what a trouble is and what form its alleviation might take, because they know what human beings are *for*. Love also ensures that mercy acts to restore and promote relationship,

instead of remaining remote and aloof from its object. The Merciful Person does not merely give money, but invests themselves in the circumstances of their neighbour, whether by knowledge, communication, or physical presence. Almsgiving is the paradigmatic act of human mercy not because of its convenience, but because money is self-giving in every language. Love is also unitive, enabling the Merciful Person to ‘draw near’ to those who are different from them in circumstance and status. It guarantees the emotive component of mercy, the Merciful Person not fearing to suffer the same fate as their neighbour, but rather already sharing in their suffering through compassion and desiring God’s mercy upon them. And where the opportunity arises, such emotive mercy prepares the way to share in the neighbour’s suffering practically, bearing the cost or hurt of physical or relational restoration. Bonhoeffer, commenting on Matthew 5:7, summarises the gap-bridging love of the merciful:

As if their own needs and their own distress were not enough, they take upon themselves the distress and humiliation and sin of others. They have an irresistible love for the down-trodden, the sick, the wretched, the wronged, the outcast and all who are tortured with anxiety. They go out and seek all who are enmeshed in the toils of sin and guilt. No distress is too great, no sin too appalling for their pity.¹

3. Virtuous. We return to the basic category under which we have examined mercy in the New Testament – as a virtue or settled disposition toward a certain behaviour. A virtue is not merely a ‘habit’ in the mechanical sense of stimulus-response. As Hauerwas has pointed out, this denies ‘the creativity and flexibility of moral activity.’² Rather, virtue ethicists treat it as a dialectic of character and action.³ ‘[T]he man of virtue is formed from repeated acts of deliberate decision,

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 64.

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 1985), 69.

³ See Fedler, *Christian Ethics*, 38.

and when formed, issues forth in deliberate decision.⁴ This is Aquinas' 'elective habit', a term which neatly captures both its ongoing volitional nature and its moral reflection of the sovereign electivity of God's own mercy.

This means firstly that the Merciful Person is not an all-or-nothing ideal as the Stoics would have it. They are justified instantaneously by God's mercy, but their own mercy is an ongoing process of deliberative sanctification, as those 'who by constant use have trained themselves' (Heb 5:14). Secondly, they react variously to different circumstances. As Aristotle said, virtue is '[the right] feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way.' (Arist., *Ethics*, II.6 [Thomson]) Hence the diverse troubles of a fallen world generate different types of merciful action, and we cannot lay down strict rules for the practice of mercy, only establish its biblical pattern in the hope of recognition. But by reflecting on the divine analogy which motivates it, and the love which informs and guides it, the Merciful Person equips themselves to know an opportunity for mercy when they see it. The diverse pragmatics of mercy suggest that there will be no lack of such opportunities.

4. Pragmatic. Finally then, the Merciful Person is most obviously distinctive in their pattern of merciful actions, stopping to help where others pass by. As they encounter others afflicted with the various troubles of a fallen world, they mobilise the resources they possess to alleviate or mitigate the effects. Such troubles may be tangible, in the sense of physical ailments, social disabilities, financial deprivation, and other forms of material suffering. Alleviation can take the form of medical or other physical care, transport, money, food, clothes, time, visitation, and hospitality. There are also relational troubles such as debts, offences, injuries and other relationship breakdown, which may be addressed by patience, forgiveness, respect and reconciliation. And there are spiritual troubles including ignorance, doubt, and sin, which are met by fellowship, instruction, guidance, exhortation and rebuking.

⁴ Hauerwas, *Character*, 71.

Human mercy is inherently pragmatic because it acts only on what it sees, and it acts only with what it has. This means the cultivation of mercy requires firstly the ability to *look* – to make oneself aware of others and their troubles. Modern technology at once makes this both easier and harder – expanding our field of vision, but potentially overwhelming us with a world-wide flood of troubles and needs. The Merciful Person thus requires both discernment and coordination to identify the troubles for which he is the ‘nearest neighbour’. Secondly, it involves the ability to *stop and act*. The rise of individualism and industry as key principles for modern society requires a conscious flexibility to permit the inherent ‘distraction’ of mercy. For the Good Samaritan, the trip to Jericho must wait. Mercy is also pragmatic in that it deliberately counts and bears the cost entailed in showing mercy – swallowing hurts, rights, vengeance, and depletion of resources as required to meet another’s need. This is different to the political pragmatism which looks for ancillary gains from mercy such as security and prestige. The Merciful Person requires a certain humble utilitarianism in committing themselves to be the means to another’s end.

These four features of course do not exhaust the topic of biblical mercy. This study suggests there is further work to be done. Theoretically, in describing the nature of analogy when applied to Christian virtues in general. Ethically, in distinguishing how love acts as the root of all virtues. Socially, in how mercy operates communally and politically rather than just as a personal virtue. And practically, in applying the biblical virtue of mercy to the distinctive context and troubles of the Western world. However, we have laid the groundwork for these by examining the New Testament texts which deal with the virtue of mercy, and attempting a general definition. And we have proposed an ethical structure for mercy based on these texts, providing a framework for understanding human mercy in relation to God, in connection to the Old Testament, and in distinction to other biblical virtues and extra-biblical conceptions of mercy. On this basis, we trust that the divine imperative of Scripture, *Γίνεσθε οἰκτίρμονες*, will continue to impel both the learning and doing of mercy.

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