

# The power of mercy



**How should Christians respond to a polarised world where people can be ‘cancelled’ for holding an opinion with which others do not agree? How can the Church offer second chances to people, rather than responding with judgement? Natalie Williams, author of a new book on the subject of mercy, outlines some pointers.**

Recently I met a man in his mid-forties. An ex-prisoner with a history of violence, his life had also been impacted by homelessness and addiction. He explained that he gave his life to Jesus after he lied to a church to get help and, when caught out, they offered him a second chance – the first time anyone had ever done so.

That second chance turned his life around, but they are not common in our world of cancel culture and showing others no mercy. Instead, the culture around us celebrates a form of justice without mercy, where no apology or atonement is sufficient to be forgiven.

The other day I was listening to a 12-year-old advising her younger brother on some creative ideas for how to get revenge on some bullies.

During the 2024 general election campaign, the then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak posted on social media that criminals should be shown ‘no mercy’. This was hot on the heels of a Liberal Democrat saying that what Mr Sunak had done on D-Day (he had left the commemorations early to attend a TV interview) was ‘unforgivable’.

## Why mercy matters

Mercy may be hard to find in contemporary culture but our communities are desperate for it.

### Christians have a unique and distinctive role to play in being mercy-bringers.

In the Bible, Moses encounters ‘the God of compassion and mercy’ (Exodus 34:6, NIV) and Jesus called his followers to ‘be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36).

But we may need help! Left to my own devices, I find it easier to be judgmental than merciful. I want mercy when I am in the wrong, but I often leap to judgement when I am the one being wronged.

It’s also true when it comes to the issues affecting my community and my country. I find it a lot easier to be merciful to people in poverty than to those who make decisions that affect them. I like to imagine Jesus sitting on the street with someone who is rough sleeping, sharing a takeaway. But I don’t like to think of Jesus eating a meal in a mansion with someone who has never lacked anything and doesn’t care much about those who have nothing.

The reality is that Jesus would eat meals with the people I feel compassion for *and* the people I don’t! Jesus the ‘friend of sinners’ also ate with the very people who ostracised ‘sinners’ and reviled the ‘unclean’.

The uncomfortable fact is that Jesus extended mercy to *anyone* who came to him.

### God delights to show mercy (Micah 7:18) and calls his followers to do the same.

In the Bible, justice and mercy go hand-in-hand. This is demonstrated most powerfully through the death of Jesus on the cross, the place where justice and mercy meet. But it is also required of God’s people – we are called to both ‘act justly’ and ‘love mercy’ (Micah 6:8, NIV). But this isn’t easy. We can follow some very specific religious practices,

just as the scribes and Pharisees did, and still miss the heart of God – in fact, Jesus called them ‘hypocrites’ for neglecting ‘the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith’ (Matthew 23:23).

## How can we live more mercifully?

We all need help with this. It is a heart issue, requiring teaching, discipleship and being intentional. But imagine the impact it would have on our neighbourhoods if we, as individual Christians and as whole church communities, became merciful as our Father is merciful!

It would affect what we do with our money: our culture tells us that getting rich is the way to happiness, but living mercifully leads us to invest our money in eternal things. A good place to start is by going over what you’ve spent in the last month and seeing how much went on essentials compared to how much went on luxuries. What would be the impact if, for just one month, we gave to those in need everything we usually spend on non-essentials?

Living mercifully will also affect how we think about possessions. If we own two winter coats, or three pairs of trainers, or a bike we never ride, who might we be able to show mercy to by giving to them from our excess?

Becoming a mercy-bringer will affect who we are friends with. Merciful people don’t look for friends in high places, but in low places. It is easy to donate tins to a food bank, but who can you sit down with and share food?

Preaching through and studying Luke’s Gospel and Jesus’ parables is an easy way to learn about God’s heart of mercy, especially for those on the margins.

While mercy is so hard to find around us, there is an urgent need to cultivate it within us and practice it as individuals and as church communities.

### Being merciful is radical, counter-cultural and distinctively Christian.

No one else can imitate our merciful Father like we can. The people around us – from the poorest to the most powerful – need Jesus-followers to become mercy-bringers in our communities, and in the wider world.

*Natalie Williams is the author of Tis Mercy All: The Power of Mercy in a Polarised World (SPCK, 2024) and Chief Executive of Jubilee+, a charity that helps to get mercy and justice in the DNA of churches so they can help to change the lives of people in poverty in their communities.*  
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 Hear Natalie in conversation on this topic on the Roots podcast: [rootsforchurches.podbean.com](http://rootsforchurches.podbean.com)

