We’ve been in this great series called, “Jesus’ Bible.” And we’ve been looking at the scriptures that were available to Jesus – the Old Testament – and we’ve been talking about how Jesus used the Old Testament throughout his life and ministry.

Jesus would’ve studied the Old Testament as a child, he would’ve gone to the local synagogue to learn and he would’ve studied at home and with members of his family. Because writing was expensive back then, Jesus would’ve committed many of the Old Testament scriptures to memory rather than writing them down. Some estimate that Jewish children would’ve memorized the majority of the Old Testament by the time they finished school. Jesus must’ve excelled in his study of the Old Testament because He quickly became a prominent Rabbi and He debated with the religious leaders of his time with great skill.

Jesus would’ve read the Old Testament and saw himself in it – his life and his death being prophesied about. He quotes the Old Testament in order to prepare his disciples for his death. He confirms and affirms the lives of many Old Testament people and He treats the scriptures as truth. He talks about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and recognizes those patriarchs to have been real living people. And Jesus will even use small words from the Old Testament – He’ll take a sentence like, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and he’ll use that to demonstrate scriptural proof of an afterlife. Why? Because God doesn’t say, “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but rather He says, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” So those patriarchs must still be alive somehow. So one of the overarching things that we should be learning from the series is that the Old Testament mattered to Jesus and it ought to matter to us.

Rabbis of Jesus’ time would sometimes use two categories for scripture: The Law and the Prophets. Or sometimes three: the Law and the Prophets and the Writings. The Writings would’ve included things like Psalms and Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. At one time Jesus quotes a Psalm and He refers to it as the Law. But nonetheless, for the Jews and for Jesus himself all of it was authoritative. Even the accounts of things that happened were supposed to be used to draw principles that would guide the way they lived. God’s Law wasn’t just the “Thou shalts” and the “Thou Shalt nots.”

We’ve spent some time looking at the Law and Matt preached last week on the The Writings, specifically, the Psalms ,and today I want us to look at Jesus’ use of the Prophets.

We’re gonna start out here in Matthew 9:9-13 (TWO SLIDES). Let’s just start by reading it and then I want to explain a few things.

(Read Passage)

Jesus invites Matthew (sometimes called Levi) to follow Him. When a Rabbi says, “follow after me” it’s rabbinic jargon that basically means, “I want you to be my disciple.” And most Rabbis were itinerant teachers. They would travel from place to place, they’d depend on the hospitality of others, and they’d carry a small bag with a meal in it for back up. And they’d be teaching others often. And sometimes their disciples would be on the road with them for months at a time. So when Jesus calls to Matthew and says, “Follow me.” It’s no small invitation.

Matthew drops everything and follows Jesus.

He invites Jesus to his home and he invites many of his friends who Matthew characterizes as: sinners and tax collectors. The Pharisees take note of this… and they object to it and Jesus responds: “Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

“Go and learn what this means” by the way is also Rabbinic jargon. Other Rabbis from around Jesus’ time have been recorded as saying things like, “Go and study this” or “Go and consider this.” That doesn’t bear a lot of significance for us but I think sometimes it’s just good to get a fuller picture of who Jesus was. Pastor Kory’s mentioned before during this series that sometimes we can have a tendency to look at Jesus as if he’s on a green screen and we remove him from his context. The truth is, He looked like a Rabbi and spoke like a Rabbi yet at the same time he acts in a way that is seen as scandalous to many of his contemporaries.

The passage that Jesus quotes is from the prophet Hosea and we find it in Hosea 6:6

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,  
    and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

It’s interesting that Jesus doesn’t just say, “allow me to explain this to you.” But instead he says, “Go and learn what this means.” There’s value in the discovery process and this is such an important idea for Jesus (That God desires mercy, not sacrifice) that he doesn’t want to treat it like a platitude and he’s not going to quickly give away the answer. He wants us to wrestle over it, he wants the Pharisees to wrestle over it. Not because he doesn’t have time to explain it to them but because He wants it to change them. He wants them to fully digest it. Go and learn what this means and allow it to change you.

I want to pray for us. I want to pray that the Holy Spirit would change us this morning as we wrestle through this together. Can we do that? Let’s pray together on that for a moment.

There’s at least two legitimate ways to understand this passage. The first is that God wants us to perform acts of mercy (he wants us to be merciful) more than he wants us to be religious. In other words, God would much rather us be good to one another and not give sacrifices than to be evil to one another and give sacrifices. That’s the first way to understand this. And I believe we’ll be talking about this again in the upcoming weeks. Today I’m going to focus on a second way of understanding this passage.

The first thing I want to talk about is sacrifice. It’s kind of surprising to me that Jesus says God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Is it surprising to you? I’ll tell you why it’s surprising to me: Isn’t it God who prescribed sacrifices in the first place? I mean at first glance it certainly looks like God desires sacrifice.

Also sacrifice isn’t an intrinsically bad thing. As a matter of fact, it’s a Judeo-Christian value. The first time the word worship is used in the Bible, it’s synonymous with sacrifice. Jesus tells us there’s no greater love than he who sacrifices his life for a friend. Jesus himself became a sacrifice for us. And Jesus’ love is our example of how we are to love others. So there’s no doubt that sacrifice is valued in other places in scripture.

I was listening to a Google talk the other day, which is kind of like a TED talk except it happens in front of Google employees. And the woman giving the speech, Stephanie Gray, was talking about her Pro-Life stance. But she started out talking about her favorite ice-breaker question when she meets people for the first time. When she meets a new person and wants to know more about them she’ll ask the question: Who inspires you? And the next question she’ll ask is: Why?

And she what’s she’s found from doing this is that while people name a lot of different inspirational people, they’re usually all inspirational for the same reasons. She says that inspirational people tend to have these things in common:

When faced with suffering or faced with an obstacle or difficulty they respond by:

* 1. Putting others ahead of themselves
  2. Having perspective
  3. Doing the right thing even when it’s hard.

Stephanie Gray would probably say that it’s a near universal rule that sacrifice is to be valued by individuals and society.

So what is God saying when he says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”?

You know I’ve seen commentators that look at this passage and look at Hosea and they end up coming to the conclusion that mercy and sacrifice must be opposites. That you’re supposed to do the one but not the other. I want to challenge that thinking. Jesus doesn’t say be merciful and don’t sacrifice.

When Hosea talks about sacrifice he’s not necessarily talking about sacrifice in the general sense of the word. Like sacrificing your wants for the needs of others. Rather, he’s talking about the specific religious ritual of sacrificing animals in worship to God. Here’s the thing though – both are sacrifice. The religious act of worship where Israelites would give up an animal was a sacrifice in the general sense of the word too. They were giving up their livestock, their livelihood, or their money in order to be right with God or in order for their family members to be right with God.

Are you tracking with me? I guess I want you to know *that* because it will help you understand how mercy relates to sacrifice. They’re not opposites. It’s not that God was saying “Do one but not the other.” Rather: sacrifice is a means to mercy. That’s how they typically relate. Sacrifice is a way that we receive mercy and a way that God gives mercy. It’s through sacrifice that mercy takes place.

And this is true when we’re talking about the religious ritual of animal sacrifice where I give an animal in order to receive God’s forgiveness and it’s true in the general sense of the term sacrifice where I give up expensive coffee in order to provide clean water to someone who normally wouldn’t have access to it. Right? Sacrifice is the means through which mercy can take place.

When Hosea says, God desires mercy, not sacrifice. He’s not saying: Do away with the sacrificial system. He’s saying that God only values sacrifice as a means to an end and that end is - mercy. He means that sacrifice should never be seen as the end in and of itself.

This isn’t new. It’s a mistake the Jews have made before and it’s a mistake that we make today.

In Psalm 50 God says (TWO SLIDES)

“Listen, my people, and I will speak;  
    I will testify against you, Israel:  
    I am God, your God.  
8 I bring no charges against you concerning your sacrifices  
    or concerning your burnt offerings, which are ever before me.  
9 I have no need of a bull from your stall  
    or of goats from your pens,  
10 for every animal of the forest is mine,  
    and the cattle on a thousand hills.  
11 I know every bird in the mountains,  
    and the insects in the fields are mine.  
12 If I were hungry I would not tell you,  
    for the world is mine, and all that is in it.  
13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls  
    or drink the blood of goats?

What’s God saying? He’s reminding the Israelites: “I don’t get anything out of this deal.” I’m not hungry. I’m not asking for sacrifices because I eat. I don’t need anything from you. I don’t have anything in short supply. Yes, you sacrifice to me, “your sacrifices are ever before me,” God says. In other words the Israelites are constantly worshipping God through this ritual. And God says, “This isn’t why I’m bringing a charge against you.” So what is the charge? What’s the issue? God goes on to say: (TWO SLIDES)

“What right have you to recite my laws  
    or take my covenant on your lips?  
**17**You hate my instruction  
    and cast my words behind you.  
**18**When you see a thief, you join with him;  
    you throw in your lot with adulterers.  
**19**You use your mouth for evil  
    and harness your tongue to deceit.  
**20**You sit and testify against your brother  
    and slander your own mother’s son.  
**21**When you did these things and I kept silent,  
    you thought I was exactly[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+50&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14690c)] like you.  
But I now arraign you  
    and set my accusations before you.

**22**“Consider this, you who forget God,  
    or I will tear you to pieces, with no one to rescue you:

Interestingly enough God ends that Psalm by saying

“Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me,

and to the blameless I will show my salvation.”

See? He’s not saying “offerings are bad.” He still wants them. But he wants them as a means to an end. He wants them from a heart of sincerity, not as someone going through the motions. The thank offering by the way, isn’t prescribed. It comes from the heart of the worshipper. It’s not routine.

So here’s what we learn:

1. God desires to show mercy.

God’s desire isn’t ultimately sacrifices. Rather, it’s ultimately that He would be able to show mercy to those who bring sacrifices. It’s not sacrifices that he desires but rather he desires for people to receive mercy and they would receive mercy by giving sincere sacrifices.

So returning to the New Testament - Jesus, a Rabbi, is having a meal in the home of a tax collector and the guests are well known sinners. The Pharisees are upset. “How can Jesus remain clean? How can Jesus be pure? And who are these sinners that they should eat with a well-known Rabbi?” And you can begin to see how the Pharisees have focused on the ritual for too long. They forget that the reason behind the sacrifices is God’s desire for mercy. They forget that the reason behind the rituals is God’s desire for mercy. So they end up with this religion that is blind to the really good thing that’s happening: sinners are learning God’s word and entering into a relationship with a skilled Rabbi. The Pharisees have forgotten the reason for their religion and their rules.

But how amazing is this truth. God desires to show mercy. All of the Old Testament rules. All of the 10 commandments. Every instruction. Every law. Every ritual. Every sacrifice. It’s not because God desires for human beings to sacrifice, to withhold, to go without.

God’s purpose behind religion isn’t so that we would suffer. He doesn’t enjoy it when we have less. He doesn’t get a kick out of withholding pleasure from us. He’s not testing us to see how much we can endure. He doesn’t put restraints on us for the sake of putting restraints on us. Ultimately his desire is to be merciful and to show mercy.

So that when we follow him, he can be merciful. So that when we turn to him, he can be merciful. So that when we obey him, he can be merciful. So that when we repent with sincerity, he can respond mercifully.

1. God’s mercy is not a license to sin

I think it’s obvious that some people, when it comes to religion, they can focus on going through the motions so much that they begin to value the ritual above and beyond the reason for the ritual. Right? We end up being legalistic. “Are we reading our Bibles enough? Did I say enough prayers today? Did I go to church enough this month?” And maybe we start looking at the sacrifices or lack of sacrifices of others and start weighing ourselves against them. “Did that person perform the right outward actions and avoid the wrong outward actions? Are they as involved in outreach as I am?” So I think it’s obvious that legalism starts to creep in when we overvalue the sacrifice and forget it’s intended purpose.

But we have to recognize too that when Jesus says, “Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” Jesus isn’t giving people a license to sin. It’s not, “Oh God desires to show mercy so go and live a sinful life.” Jesus says in that same sentence: the sick need a doctor. His desire isn’t that the sick would still be sick or that the sinner would still be sinning. It’s the mercy of God that brings sinners to the table to be transformed.

God desires to give mercy but you can’t receive it unless you want it. He’s not going to give it to the unrepentant sinner. He can’t. Maybe you have a problem with that. Maybe you think that’s not mercy. Maybe you’re sitting there thinking, “Oh you mean God will only show me mercy if I earn it?” Here’s the deal. It wouldn’t be merciful for God to leave you unchanged. It wouldn’t be merciful for God to not care about your soul.

I was listening to a podcast the other day where a doctor confessed to killing a patient. Basically, it wasn’t malicious but it was cold. The patient was obviously physically ill and wanted to be released. Instead of fighting with the patient, instead of telling the patient all the reasons it was a bad idea, she simply handed the patient the release form. She didn’t put up a fight. She didn’t try to keep him at the hospital even though she knew he had no business being on his own. He came back in the hospital that same day and was immediately put in intensive care and the staff knew he wasn’t going to make it. It would’ve been a different story if she had simply tried to keep him in the hospital. She reflected on it later and said that she was cold, she was tired, she was uncompassionate, she didn’t see him as a human but as an assignment. She said it was the result of doctor burnout. You could also say that she lacked mercy. And her lack of mercy cost someone their life.

It's the unmerciful doctor that doesn’t want to cure the sick.

So God is merciful and it’s because of His mercy that He isn’t satisfied leaving us as he found us. I’m not saying you have to earn God’s mercy. I agree – there’s nothing any of us can do to earn God’s mercy. Otherwise it wouldn’t be mercy. But we have to be receptive to God’s mercy. We can create opportunities to receive God’s mercy. Or we can live in wickedness and in folly and limit the amount of opportunities and the degree of mercy that God is able to show us.

Legalism goes both ways. Some of you – because you go to church, because you worship, because you post about God on social media, because you listen to Christian music, you think you can still act the same as the world. I’m not saying this to hurt anyone or bully anyone but I say it because I think it matters, I think it has real consequences, I think some of you might be a lot further from God than you realize. Is it possible that you think God cares about the ritual so you do the religious act. But you’re blind to the mercy. You don’t realize that God desires to set you free from sin, that he desires to see you live a righteous life, that He desires to be able to show you mercy and that that happens when your hearts are sincere towards him.

As we learned in our Theology After Party God isn’t sometimes just and other times merciful. He’s not sometimes gracious and other times all powerful. He’s not sometimes Good and other times forgiving. He’s all of these things simultaneously. So He’s merciful and just.

The sick need a doctor. Not so they can continue being sick. God’s mercy isn’t to treat symptoms of a sin-sick soul. His mercy is to cure the sin-sick soul. But it’s only going to happen with your permission. Listen the Bible has strong words, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament for those who have everything at their disposal to live a righteous life but are perfectly content to live for themselves. I hope we get this right. I hope you’re seeing this clearly, I hope I’m communicating this clearly.

It's because God is merciful that he desires for you to live a holy life. It’s because God is merciful that He wants you to be fully healed. It’s because God is merciful that He expects you to be more and more sanctified as you walk with Him.

The next time that Jesus talks about mercy is in Matthew 23:23. Again he’s speaking with the Pharisees. These guys have a tough time understanding the whole mercy thing.

Matthew 23:23

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law : justice and mercy and faithfulness but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

Again Jesus is saying something else about mercy. The first time his point was, God desires to show you mercy. This time Jesus is also saying:

3.) God desires for you to show yourselves mercy.

The Pharisees are tithing so strictly that they’re even tithing their herbs and spices. Jesus says you pay such strict attention to the rules yet neglect such huge things like mercy that it’s comparable to someone who strains out gnats while at the same time swallowing camels (Both, by the way, were considered unclean for the Jews). There’s a balance between following all the rules…. And showing yourself mercy. With all rules and no mercy you’re just as worse off as the person with no rules and all mercy.

So what does it look like to show ourselves mercy? Sometimes it’s helpful to see what it doesn’t look like.

I’ve got a friend who loves Jesus. He desires to be Holy as God is Holy and he desires to avoid sin at all costs. But because of his anxiety and his obsessive mind, He’s often prone to forgetting that God desires for him to show himself mercy.

For example, when he was younger he used to steal signs from buildings. But he wonders… if he doesn’t set it right… is he sinning still by not doing what he ought to be doing? By not making restitution? by not replacing those stolen signs is he doing something wrong? And how can he make it right if he doesn’t remember where these signs came from?

When he was younger and less serious about his faith he illegally downloaded music. Thousands of dollars worth of songs. He has since deleted them and no longer illegally downloads music. But he did before and he even gave those illegally downloaded songs to other people. We’re talking at least a thousand dollars worth of music. And he’s concerned that by not paying it back, he’s sinning. And he doesn’t want to sin.

Also when he was younger and less serious about his faith he didn’t claim some cash tips that he had received while working at a coffee shop. We’re talking peoples loose change from their pockets. He never claimed them when he filed his taxes. And when he was filing taxes it said, “If you’re aware of a falsely filed tax report then you need to fill these forms out and fix it.” And he wonders… if he doesn’t do those things…. Is he sinning? Is he being disobedient to his authorities? Does God hold all of these things against him?

And these thoughts were constantly taxing his mind. And he was depressed. And his relationship with God suffered. There were times when it felt to him as if he was going to have a panic attack. Why? Well partly because of his anxiety and his obsessive mind but also because those things are causing him to strain gnats while swallowing camels. He’s was forgetting that as much as God desires for us to not intentionally sin against him, he also desires for us to be merciful not just to others but also to ourselves.

I have another friend who was in high school. And he had been drinking and he ended up having sex with his girlfriend. When he woke up the next morning he realized what he had done. He realized the sin that he had committed. But he wouldn’t confess it until several years later.

Finally when he had told me about it, he said that he hadn’t asked God for forgiveness yet. And the reason he hadn’t asked God for forgiveness was because he didn’t feel like he should be forgiven. He didn’t want forgiveness because he didn’t feel like he deserved to be forgiven. He wasn’t willing to show himself mercy and he didn’t want God’s mercy.

Christ said, Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice. And some of what we can learn from having wrestled over this is that:

God desires to show us mercy.

And God desires for us to show ourselves mercy.

And he wants this so much more than he wants our religious exercises.

Which one do you need to address in your life today?

Do you know that God desires to show you mercy? And have you accepted that mercy yet? Do you trust in him as your Lord and savior, recognizing that Jesus Christ died as a sacrifice for your sins because he desired to show you mercy?

Maybe you need to see that mercy involves being cured, healed, freed from sin. God’s mercy isn’t a license to sin but rather a desire to see you live out the fullness of life that Jesus has for you.

Maybe you need to recognize that God desires for us to show ourselves mercy. Maybe God’s revealed to you that you’re straining gnats and all the while swallowing camels?

Which one has God spoken to you today? Identify it. Take it with you when you leave today. Promise yourself you’ll work on it this week.