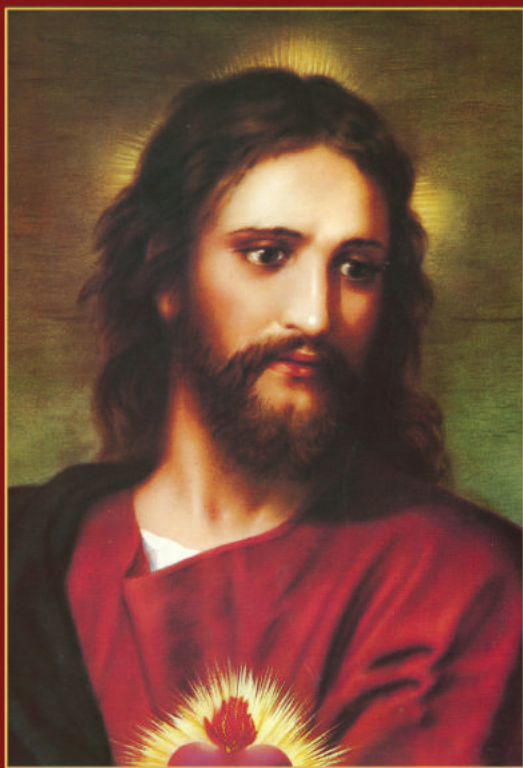


JESUS

Mercy from God's Heart



Stories & Prayers

JESUS

Mercy from God's Heart

Written, compiled, and edited by
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and Christine Setticase, FSP



The Library of Congress has cataloged the earlier printing as follows:

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jesus : help in every need / compiled and edited by Kathryn J. Hermes and Christine Setticase.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8198-3991-4 (pbk.)

I. God (Christianity)—Mercy—Meditations. 2. God (Christianity) — Mercy—Biblical teaching. 3. Jesus Christ—Biblical teaching. 4. Mercy—Meditations. 5. Spirituality—Christianity. I. Hermes, Kathryn. II. Setticase, Christine S.

BT153.M4J48 2010

242'.4—dc22

2010003563

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Cover design by Rosana Usselman

Cover art: Heinrich Hofmann, *Christ at Thirty-Three*, detail from *Christ and the Rich Young Ruler*, 1889.

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ISBN 10: 0-8198-4015-7

ISBN 13: 978-0-8198-4015-8

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Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491. www.pauline.org.

Printed in the U.S.A.

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

19 18 17 16 15

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Introduction

Dear Reader,

Jesus says to you, “Come to me!” The Gospels are simply an elaboration on these three words: come to me. In his being born as one of us, living among us, and reaching out in healing, teaching, and saving lives, Jesus bends low to share the lot of us all. The condition for finding relief, Jesus says, is to come to him: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out.... Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Mt 11:28–30, *Message* translation).

If you are holding this book in your hand, you might be looking for the prayers for the Chaplet to the Divine Mercy, or the Twelve Promises of Our

Lord to Saint Margaret Mary, or information on the First Friday Devotion.

Why do we pray the Chaplet to the Divine Mercy or celebrate the Feast of Divine Mercy? Why do we keep the First Friday Devotion? Why do we want to consecrate ourselves and our families to the Sacred Heart of Jesus? Why do we want to know Jesus' promises? We want mercy for ourselves or others. We live inundated with expectations, schedules, parameters, and red tape when we desperately need help. And we often evaluate others according to how they measure up to our criteria. We may cut people off from a relationship, make demands on them, and at times refuse to forgive and move on. Into this world, our world, your world and mine, comes Divine Mercy, the Teacher and Lord who simply loves us, accepts us, and invites us to come to him.

As you read this book and pray the prayers it contains, I invite you to be aware of the movements of your soul. Jesus will love you, invite you, and perhaps even challenge you to make some changes in your life: in the way you think, in the things you choose, and in the way you love. As you experience Jesus, the Shepherd who leads you to restful pastures, bending low to refresh you, you will begin to see ways in which you can shepherd others. Jesus

will show you how to bend low to serve and care for them in quiet ways. The ripple of the Master's mercy and love will begin to transform your life and bring healing gifts to those around you. His way will become your way so that through you, others will find their way to mercy.

Sister Kathryn James Hermes, FSP

Mercy in the Scriptures



*I waited patiently for the LORD;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit...
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD.*

— PSALM 40:1-3

The Story of the Father's Mercy

The Old Testament gives us many stories of the Father's mercy. From personal stories such as those of Isaiah, or Hannah, or Jeremiah, to the great narratives of the Israelites concerning Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, we always find God's mercy.

The story of the Father's mercy could be seen as having three phases that unfold from the Book of Genesis through the Gospels: creation (God's first gift of love that causes us to be); covenant (when God claims a people as his own and promises fidelity to them); and incarnation (when God's love takes on flesh and steps into our history, to do for us himself what we couldn't do for ourselves).

Creation: Genesis 1–2

The story begins with the dawn of creation. God takes pleasure in bringing forth an extravagant variety of things: earth, sun, moon, plants, animals, oceans, forests. And then God creates man and woman in his likeness. God commits himself not just to creating, but also to maintaining his crea-

tures, which need the breath of his spirit every moment, day after day, for an entire lifetime. Without God we would cease from existing.

A special Hebrew word describes this love of the Father: *rahamim*. This word denotes the deep bond that exists between mother and child, which results in a love that is wholly gratuitous, unearned, unable to be repaid. It is a love that can't help but flow out of a mother's heart. In creating us, in sustaining us, in forgiving us, God shows us this love.

Rahamim describes God's *merciful* love shown to us when we refuse God's love again and again, from those first days in the Garden to this very day. Despite such love at our beginning, we are so feeble in returning that love. We are easily swayed to discover "good" where God is not, and to be bored where God is. We forget the One who made us, and desire the thrill of what we can get away with, what we can become, what we can do on our own. God's love for us is marked by goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding that extend through the generations. As we live with, sustain, and forgive others, we learn to love as God loves us.

Covenant: Exodus 13–15, 19

Another aspect of the Father's love is denoted by the Hebrew word *hesed*. This word is connected

to God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt that they might worship him at Mount Sinai. God reached down and led the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of slavery in Egypt. He heard their cries and acted on their behalf through mighty deeds and wonders. God brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai, that sacred mountain where he would make a covenant with them through his servant Moses.

In this covenant, he would be their God and they would be his special people—not because they were better than anyone else, but because he had decided to pity them and take them as his own. He made himself responsible for their protection and well-being and they, for their part, were to listen to his commandments and wholeheartedly obey them.

Hesed denotes an attitude of goodness between two parties, an attitude so profound that they are faithful to each other because of a deep interior commitment. Their fidelity to each other becomes fidelity to themselves because they have pledged themselves to each other. The covenant God made with Israel on Mount Sinai was an incredible promise of fidelity on the part of God to his creatures. The covenant had a sort of juridical or legal sense. When Israel broke the covenant and strayed from God, which happened over and over in the long

course of salvation history, God no longer was “legally bound” to be faithful to his part of the covenant. But he remained faithful. It was precisely when the relationship was broken that *hesed* was revealed most deeply: it showed a love stronger than sin and a grace more powerful than betrayal.

Incarnation: Luke 2

The Father’s mercy responded to the deep longing of his people by entering into creation, into the fabric of human living, in God’s Son made flesh. Jesus forgave sinners, healed the sick, reached out in mercy, and spoke to us of love. He taught the way of poverty and simplicity, which does not boast in arrogant pride but rather has mercy even on the unjust. Jesus’ every word and deed are direct revelations of the intentions of God, of the love and mercy of the Father’s heart. Believing in Jesus means believing that love has been made present in the world, that love is more powerful than evil. It means standing beneath the cross, believing in God’s mercy for ourselves and for the world. Committing to follow Jesus is to allow oneself to be “remade,” to become a “new creation,” to become selfless, to be Christ-like love poured out for others.

Jesus Christ: Mercy Made Visible

One of the Beatitudes that Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount is precisely about mercy: how fortunate the merciful (cf. Mt 5:7). Those who practice the Beatitudes imitate God. Those who have taken on the life of mercy live, think, and desire as does God, who is mercy itself.

Mercy is a movement that bestows life and love on another, that bends low wherever it finds misery. It restores the one who is suffering to the image originally intended for him or her by God himself. Mercy means offering life. Jesus taught us mercy through his parables and through his actions.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Luke 10

Mercy means to be shaken at the plight of another. One of the most profound parables Jesus told about mercy is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Christ himself is the Good Samaritan to the human race. God's mercy is poured without reserve into the heart of his Son. Christ descends to earth, to become man, to reach down and pick us up from the side of the road where we have been left for dead—weak, wounded, and ill. He comes, not to walk past us in arrogance or indifference, but

to nurse us to health with divine tenderness, to restore us to the image and likeness of God in which we were first created. The Son of God has cast his lot with us. The Samaritan took the wounded man left for dead on the side of the road to the nearest hotel. He promised to pay whatever was necessary for the man to be made well. This reflects the love of Jesus, who has done and will do whatever is necessary to save us from sin and death.

Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery: John 8

Mercy is a powerful aspect of love. It prevails over sin and infidelity. A woman has been caught in the act of adultery and dragged before a group of men so that justice should be served—she is shamed, humiliated, exposed. Jesus, unlike us, however, is not interested in punishment as much as he is in winning over the love and fidelity of the sinner.

Jesus bends down to write in the sand. Could it be that he does not want to humiliate the woman further by looking at her, so exposed and humiliated? Or is he trying to get down to her level, if she were crouching on the ground trying to make herself invisible, in an act of compassion and pity? In any case, when the crowd persists in asking how the woman should be treated, Jesus simply states: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to

throw a stone at her.” One by one the men leave, uneasily, aware that they also have hidden sins they don’t want exposed to merciless public scrutiny. Only two sentences are recorded of the conversation between Jesus and the woman, but perhaps Jesus said more: words of kindness, gently but firmly inviting the woman to change her life. Conversion blossoms under the working of love and the presence of mercy in our world.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son: Luke 15

Love becomes true mercy when it stretches beyond the norms of justice. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father is often in the background. The son who flees his former life, taking his inheritance, casting off the relationship and authority of his father for the wild life of a young rebel—this youth’s colorful story is what usually grabs our attention. Perhaps we more easily identify with him, at least a little.

However, this parable on the lips of Mercy himself may have been meant to teach us more about the father. How patient is this father who waits day after long day, week after week, month after endless month for his child’s return. How loving is this parent who, when the son returns, does not reciprocate the ill treatment and insult he

had been shown by his child. How great-hearted he is to see beyond the mistaken choices his son has made for an illusory happiness that could not last. The father is patient with his son, knowing his difficult experience would form him into a man. His son had made a choice. He had made a mistake. He would suffer for it, and, with hope, he would learn from it. Absolutely he would be welcomed home, no longer a naive boy but a wiser man, ready to truly enter into relationship with his father—man to man.

Jesus Asks Peter, “Do You Love Me?”: John 21

Peter, the impetuous disciple whose faults are scrawled across the pages of the Gospels, brings the Parable of the Prodigal Son to life. We see Peter betraying Jesus, running to save his own life, hiding and leaving Jesus alone with only John and the women beneath the cross—he who had boasted that he would die before betraying the Lord. How could Peter face the Master again? But on the shores of the lake, around a campfire, at a breakfast prepared by the Risen One, Peter experienced for all of us the reality of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is not just a story. The words of Jesus reveal the heart of the Father. “Simon . . . do you love me?” “[D]o you love me?” “Do you love me?” Thrice the question

pierces Peter's heart. No longer does he boast of his love. He knows his weakness, how easy it is to fall into self-protective modes of behavior. Quietly he answers yes, because he does indeed love the Master. Jesus does not utter one word about the betrayal, the hiding, the running away. He simply tells Peter he has work for him to do and to follow him. This is his judgment—a judgment made in love. Do you love me? Then that's enough. Come follow me. Put your love into practice.

The Parable of the Merciless Servant: Matthew 18

Peter had finally found the central knot of mercy. He needed mercy, and he knew it. The Parable of the Merciless Servant, however, teaches us what to do with this most personal of discoveries. A servant owes his master a large sum of money and has been forgiven his debt. He is spared from being sold into slavery with his family to pay it off. Immediately after this he meets someone who owes him a small amount of money. Showing no mercy, he has him imprisoned until he pays back what he owes. The beatitude that tells us we are fortunate and blessed if we show mercy is the key to unlocking this parable. What we need the most, we must give to others. We depend on the merciful love of God. We have no other recourse, for we owe a debt

that we could never pay. God doesn't tell us to work extra hard to pay it. He forgives it. But because we have received mercy, we need to show others the mercy we have most needed ourselves.

Jesus Begs for Our Mercy: Matthew 18

In the Parable of the Merciless Servant we could focus on the judge who has the power to decide whom to forgive and whom to condemn. But Jesus, perhaps, wants us to focus on the third and most hidden person in the parable—the person who begs for mercy and who is refused mercy by his fellow servant. This last person represents Jesus, who is always a beggar, asking for our mercy. We have been forgiven. Mercy has been shown us. But how often we neglect to show mercy toward Jesus and to remain in solidarity with he who suffered and died to save us. He rescues us, as it were, from a burning building and transfers us safely to the kingdom of light and love. “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking...” (Rev 3:20). It is up to us to let him in. It is up to us to show him mercy. “As you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me.” The human heart is capable of this most wondrous attribute of God: mercy. It is our greatest dignity to practice a love for others that overreaches

justice and becomes mercy, thus showing mercy to the Lord.

*Saint Paul: "God Has Shown Me Mercy":
Acts 22, 1 Timothy 1, Ephesians 2*

Outside of the Gospels, only one person in the New Testament narrates his autobiographical reflections on what God has accomplished in him: Saint Paul. That story revolves entirely around the merciful way Paul has been treated, the love he has been shown in being purchased for God, and the fire of devotion that burns in his heart for Jesus.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is recounted three times. In several passages of his letters, Paul reflects on its meaning. Jesus had to get in Paul's way and stop him, because Paul's whole life was intent on one thing: getting rid of those Israelites who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul believed that these people were jeopardizing the identity of the Israelite people. He was on his way to Damascus to continue his zealous efforts when God revealed his Son to him, as he recounts:

While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground

and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Then he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.” ... I asked, “What am I to do, Lord?” The Lord said to me, “Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.” (Acts 22:6–8, 10)

Paul refers to this meeting with the Lord Jesus in terms of mercy:

... I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim 1:13–16)

From that moment on, Paul became part of the community of those who believed in Jesus, crucified and risen, the promised Messiah. Those whom he had formerly persecuted he now collabo-

rated with, seeking to spread near and far the story of God's mercy to us in Christ, because he had experienced it firsthand.

Paul made it clear, again and again, to those who followed him that they were also called and blessed out of mercy. It was a gift. Not because they were better than others, nor because they were smarter, but because God decided to call them.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not the result of your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Eph 2:4–10)

Paul understood that because he had been called he was now sent as an ambassador of reconciliation to proclaim the message of mercy.