

# It Is Mercy That I Desire

## The Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy

*“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’  
For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mt. 9: 13)*

**O**n April 11, 2015, right before First Vespers of the Vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday, the Holy Father stood before the Holy Door in St. Peter’s Basilica and announced that for only the fourth time in Church history, there will be an extraordinary Jubilee Year – in this case, an extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy will run from December 8, 2015, the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, to November 20, 2016, the solemnity of Christ the King.

By calling for the Jubilee Year, Pope Francis has underscored the signature message of his pontificate: mercy. “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy,” Pope Francis says in his papal bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (*The Face of Mercy*). In this light, “Merciful like the Father” is the motto he chose for the jubilee year which comes from the gospel according to St. Luke: “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful” (Lk: 6: 36).

The origins of the jubilee year go back to the period of the Old Testament in ancient Israel. The jubilee year is so called because its opening was announced by the sound of the goat’s horn, called Yobel in Hebrew and the origin of the word “jubilee.” It recurred every fifty years, at the end of seven weeks of years. It was a general emancipation of the inhabitants of the land. The fields lay fallow and defaulting debtors and Israelite slaves were set free and fields and houses which had been alienated were returned to their original owners. A very important religious message underlies all this. The land cannot be sold absolutely, for it belongs to God; Israelites cannot be kept in perpetual slavery, for they are servants of God, who brought them out of the slavery of Egypt. This lays an important spiritual foundation for the Jubilee Year. The Jubilee Year seeks

to free the people for whom Jesus Christ gave His life on the cross from the perpetual slavery of sin.

One reason that Pope Francis called for the Jubilee Year was because we as a people (most especially in the affluent Western world) have simply become too “comfortable” with sin and thus don’t recognize the slavery that we’re in. A comfortable slavery to be sure. Plenty of materialism with many technological toys to play with, sexual indulgence seen as the *sine qua non* of human existence, and plenty of entertainment. In other words the modern equivalent of ancient Rome’s “bread and circuses.” These pleasures can entice us into a form of slavery much as the “fleshpots of Egypt” enticed the people of Israel in the desert. So to begin we need to look at the beginning of Our Lord’s Public Ministry.

In the first public words which He speaks Jesus Christ says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk: 1:15). He makes it absolutely clear that His mission is to free us from the slavery of sin. Hence it is most appropriate that the Jubilee Year of Mercy begins as we prepare to celebrate the Glorious Birth of our Lord. Recall the words of the angel to St. Joseph in a dream telling him of the mystery about to unfold: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save His people from their sins.” The name “Jesus” itself means “savior.” That’s why He came to earth. The Jubilee Year seeks to remind us that sin is the worst possible thing that could happen to us: because it alone can deprive us of what we were created for – to be with God eternally in Heaven.

Mercy comes from the Latin word *merces* meaning “reward” or “gratuity.” To be merciful is to freely offer clemency to someone worthy of punishment or to

release someone from a debt he or she owes. It's God's free gift to us, totally unmerited. You see this particularly in two Scripture accounts: the Prodigal Son and the Woman caught in adultery. The parable of the Prodigal Son reveals the boundless mercy of God. You see the essence of sin in the younger son's "Frank Sinatra" attitude: "I had to do it **my** way." St. Augustine said that "sin is its own punishment." The younger son is estranged from all. You see his desperate situation in that he's reduced to feeding pigs and since the Jews consider the pig to be an unclean animal he's forced to be in the most disgraceful position possible.

The consequences of sin bring him to his senses and he heads back home trusting that his father will receive him. God is always able to bring good out of evil and He uses the consequences of sin as a means to bring us back to our senses. The son knows his guilt and is ready to admit it and seek forgiveness. The father, "while he was still at a distance, ran and embraced and kissed him." Despite the fact that his younger son had spent a good part of his fortune on dissolute living, the father is ever ready to forgive. We have an important lesson here. There is no sin, no matter how heinous, that God won't forgive if we come back to him as this son and say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." God's mercy is always bigger than our sinfulness.

The father doesn't rage about how his property was squandered, but rejoices that he has returned. He puts a robe on him, a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. The robe, ring and shoes are symbols of authority and signs of full restoration. Household slaves normally went barefoot. The father refuses this for his son, restoring him instead to full family membership. When the priest says, in the sacrament of penance, "I absolve you of your sins," you have been restored to full family membership in the Mystical Body of Christ.

The same applies in the account of the woman caught in adultery. Archbishop Charles Chaput O.F.M. Cap., Archbishop of Philadelphia writes the following concerning this account. *Most of us know the story, in John's Gospel, of Christ's encounter with the woman caught in adultery. For St. Augustine, the woman embodies the entire human race. She has sinned grievously. She has betrayed her God, her family, and the community to which*

*she belongs. Brought before the religious authorities, she faces the severity of Mosaic law, which allows for stoning. The men who stand in judgment of her, all of them sincerely committed to the law, seek to rid the community of sin by ridding it first of the sinner. Their interest is punishment, not penance.*

*Jesus makes use of the moment to show the power of mercy and the conversion it can bring about. As Augustine notes, Christ is not indifferent to sin or justice – quite the opposite. When Jesus asks the religious authorities who among them is without sin, he speaks with the voice of his Father's justice. When the law casts its eye on the human race, all persons – including those who consider themselves righteous – need God's mercy. In forgiving the woman, Jesus does by grace what the moral law cannot do. He gives her a new life in God's friendship.*

*We should not read Christ's mercy as a judgment against all judgments. Evil exists. Sin matters. The damage it does can be bitter and not easily undone – adultery being a perfect example. But the story does remind us that, apart from God's grace, all of us are misshapen by the distorted desires of our hearts.*

Another way in which we may reflect on the forgiving God who seeks to restore us to our status as "adopted children of God" can be visualized in the following meditation taken from the spiritual teachings of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta – an apostle of mercy of our times. Imagine that this is Jesus Himself speaking this to you.

*"Behold, I stand at the door and knock..." It is true. I stand at the door of your heart, day and night. Even when you are not listening, even when you doubt it could be Me, I am there. I await even the smallest sign of your response even the least whispered invitation that will allow Me to enter...If you only ask Me with faith, My grace will touch all that needs changing in your life, and I will give you the strength to free yourself from sin and all its destructive power. I know what is in your heart – I know your loneliness and all your hurts – the rejections, the judgments, the humiliations, I carried it all before you. And I carried it all for you, so you might share My strength and victory.*

Gaze lovingly on the crucifix as you prayerfully read this. This is what the Jubilee of Mercy is all about. ✠