

“Sovereign Mercy”

Matthew 26:17-35

February 14, 2021

**Scripture Reading:** Matt 26:17-35

One of the heart-warming memories I have of the innocence of childhood, was playing hide-and-seek with Hannah as a toddler down in our basement. At the time our basement was unfinished with just 2x4 studs for interior walls. And while I was counting to 10, Hannah would hide behind a 2x4 with her back turned toward me. She could not see me, so she thought she was hiding, but in actuality she was *hiding in plain sight*.

Well sometimes when we read Scripture, we need to see what is hidden in plain sight. And what I hope to help you see today is the Sovereign Mercy of God in Christ.

Sovereign mercy. Consider the significance of these two words together. If God were holy and sovereign but not merciful, we sinners would have not hope of anything but divine judgment. On the other hand, if God was merciful yet didn't have the sovereign power and authority to intervene on behalf of sinners, we would be no better off. But praise God, the cross is the result of both God's sovereign plan and His heart of mercy.

I suppose there is a sense of tension in this. How can He as a holy and sovereign God with zero tolerance for sin and unhindered ability to carry out His justice, also be merciful to sinners? Perhaps it would be helpful for us to think about how a stringed instrument works. The tension on the string is essential for a beautiful sound. One end of the string is attached to a fixed point while the other is attached to a tuning peg which is used to create tension on the string. And without this tension you cannot have the beauty of music. In a similar way, the music of redemption cannot sound forth without the beautiful tension created by unalterable character (fixed point) of God's sovereign, holiness and His dynamic heart of mercy.

Yet the tension alone does not create the music. The string must be played. The finger of the guitarist must strum, the bow of the cello, or the hammer

of the piano must strike. And the cross is the hammer that strikes the string. At the cross the sovereign Lord pours out the fullness of His justice and holiness against sin while at the same time pouring out mercy for sinners as Christ takes our sin upon Himself. As the hammer of the cross strikes the tension of the string, the vibrations of justice and mercy rush to meet at the cross releasing the beautiful sound of redemption and forgiveness for all who will hear.

Here's the song of redemption: God's sovereign plan of mercy is for Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of man's sin. And this song calls for a very specific response: ***We must abandon our misguided confidence in self to trust wholly in the sovereign plan of God and the merciful heart of Christ as our atoning sacrifice for sin.***

Before we jump into the details of our passage, I want to point out that Matthew used a unique structure for these verses. Let's call it the sandwich technique. The beginning and end of the passage have very similar content which highlights the meaty part in the middle. It looks like this (**diagram**):

A. Mt 26:20-25 (cf. 15-16): **JUDAS WILL BETRAYAL**  
(self-motivated *unfaithfulness* for selfish gain)

B. Mt 26:26-29 – **JESUS' SACRIFICIAL FAITHFULNESS**  
(motivated by Sovereign Mercy)

A. Mt 26:30-35 – **DISCIPLES ALL FALL AWAY**  
(self-motivated *unfaithfulness* for self-preservation)

Let me urge you to do three things in response to Matthew 26:

**1. See the sovereign mercy of Christ displayed through the cross.**

If we look at this passage through the lens of what is hiding in plain sight, I think we can get a pretty accurate view of what is in both the mind and the heart of Jesus. Consider, The mind articulates *what* one plans and purposes to do. The heart reveals *why* one purposes to do it.

**The *mind* of Jesus articulates a clear, comprehensive, and specific understanding of future events as the unfolding of *God's sovereign plan*.**

Let me show you:

- Vs. 18 ~ This is providence at work.<sup>1</sup>
- Vs. 21, 23 ~ Jesus knew with certainty that one of his own would betray Him. It would not come as a surprise. He sees/knows and understands what will take place.
- Vs. 24 ~ Jesus knows where He is going (to the cross) and it is according to God's predetermined plan ("as it is written")—not a surprising turn of fate. By the way, we also see in vs. 24 the tension that we were introduced to last week between co-existing roles of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is very clear from vs. 24 that God's sovereign plan does not excuse Judas' guilt in the betrayal of Jesus.
- Vs. 25 ~ Jesus knows precisely that Judas will betray Him—this is no mystery to Jesus.
- Vs. 31 ~ "the disciples' defection, though tragic and irresponsible, does not fall outside God's sovereign plan"<sup>2</sup> ("it is written").
- Vs. 32 ~ Jesus was conscious of His future resurrection and the events that would follow.
- Vs. 34 ~ Jesus knew specifically what Peter would do.

Do you see it hiding in plain sight now? What's in the mind of Jesus is the future sovereign plan of God which He is acting in concert with. Jesus is not a mere victim of people or circumstance. He is acting out God's purpose and plan.

By the way, take note for your own life that God's sovereign plan is not void of suffering or pain. God works through pain. So when hardship takes you by surprise, remember that God is not taken by surprise. In fact, *because God knew it would happen, He's been planning to help you all along the way*. So, what do you do when surprised by suffering? Don't get disillusioned. Just

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<sup>1</sup> Not likely that Jesus' had made prior arrangements per Mark 14:13 and Luke 22:10 where the unknown man would be identified as carrying a picture of water (normally done by women rather than men).

take the next step of faith and obedience as Jesus did. *As we trust and obey, God will fulfill His greater purposes through our circumstances.*

You can be confident of this because of what we also see in the *heart* of Jesus. **The *heart* of Jesus reveals a relentless *mercy toward sinners* in *unwavering determination to go to the cross*.**

Where do we see Jesus' mercy?

- Vs. 24a ~ It is because of God's mercy toward sinners that Jesus would persist in going to the cross in the face of betrayal.
- Vs. 26-28 ~ It is an act of mercy that Jesus would willingly offer up his body and shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sins.
- Vs. 29 ~ Jesus is giving the hope of eternal life to those who would abandon Him in His darkest hour—that's mercy.
- Vs. 32 ~ It is according to mercy that Jesus would remain faithful to the very disciples who would abandon Him—and specifically Peter who would deny Him (vs. 34; cf. Jn 21:15-19). It is because of mercy that Jesus would be reunited to His disciples after His resurrection—clearly an act of undeserved reconciliation.

Do you see divine mercy hiding in plain sight? The mercy of God in the heart of Jesus is summarized so well in Romans 5: "Very rarely will anyone die for a *righteous* man, though for a good man someone might *possibly* dare to die. **But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us**" (Rom 5:7-8) It is pure mercy, for which Jesus went to the cross, fully knowing the disciple's sin—and ours!

Do you see the sovereign mercy of Christ displayed through the cross?

**2. *Believe in Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for your sin* (Mt 26:26-29).**

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*: Vol. 8, pg. 540.

Jesus did something absolutely shocking in vs. 26-29. He changed the centuries-old tradition of the Passover when He said, “This is my body...This is my blood.’ You don’t just change the Passover unless you are God speaking at a moment in time when the Passover has found its ultimate fulfillment.

The Passover was the Jewish celebration of God’s sovereign and merciful deliverance of His people out the bondage of slavery in Egypt. God had displayed His sovereign power through 10 plagues that demonstrated He was supreme over the false gods (non-gods) of Egypt. And His deliverance was merciful in that they did not deserve the kindness of God. Even after God made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai, the people continued to demonstrate their unfaithfulness to God.

As Jesus spoke these words, He held two symbols in His hands. The first was unleavened bread, a reminder of how the Israelites were to eat in haste on that night, ready to leave at a moment’s notice. As Jesus held up the unleavened bread which He had just broken to share with His disciples, so Jesus’ sinless body would be broken on their behalf.

The second symbol Jesus held was a cup of wine representing the blood of the Passover lamb. This would have been the 3<sup>rd</sup> of four symbolic cups of wine during the Passover celebration. The 3<sup>rd</sup> cup was called the cup of blessing, or the cup of redemption (Ex 6:6). It was a reminder that on that first Passover night, they were spared of God’s judgment by coming under the blood that had been put on their doorposts—the blood of a sacrificial lamb that had died on their behalf. As Jesus held up the cup of redemption and said, “*this is My blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,*” He not only declared Himself to be the true Lamb of God that takes away the sin of those who trust in Him, He also declared that His blood would ratify a new covenant. This new covenant was the one anticipated by Jeremiah and Ezekiel<sup>3</sup> in which God would sovereignly and mercifully give His people a new heart.

For centuries the Israelites had been celebrating the Passover, by looking back to God’s great deliverance from Egypt, and now Jesus reveals all that they had celebrated was actually pointing forward to Him and the even greater deliverance He would provide. The Passover celebrated deliverance from bondage in Egypt and the anticipated future in the promised land. This was a foreshadowing of Jesus’ greater deliverance from the bondage of sin and the believer’s anticipated future in the promise of heaven.

When Jesus said, “This is My body...This is My blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins,” He accomplished 4 things:

- He declared Himself to be the true Lamb of God that takes away sin—our atoning sacrifice.
- He brought the centuries-old Passover to an end as its fulfillment.
- He replaced the Old Covenant with the New Covenant of grace, ratified by His own blood.
- He initiated a new ordinance, the Lord’s Supper, which commemorates our deliverance from sin through His death and points us forward to our heavenly promise.

Notice what Jesus says in vs. 29: “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” What does this mean? Jesus just declared that the third cup of the Passover, the cup of redemption found its fulfillment in Him. Apparently, Jesus did not drink the 4<sup>th</sup> cup of the last Passover, the cup of praise also known as the cup of acceptance which corresponds to the promise of Ex 6:7: “I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God.” This cup will ultimately be fulfilled when we drink with Jesus again at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The ‘cup’ that Jesus would drink, just hours later, was the bitter cup of the Father’s wrath for our sin (the true cup of redemption), securing for us the final cup acceptance which we will drink the fullness of in the heavenly kingdom. So when we partake of the cup in the Lord’s supper in just a few moments, we are celebrating our redemption in Christ that secures our acceptance with the Father.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27

Finally, we must not only *see* the sovereign mercy of Christ and *believe* in Him as our atoning sacrifice, we must believe in such a way that we...

### 3. **Abandon all confidence in self to trust in Christ's covenant faithfulness** (Mt 26:30-35).

We must see the sharp contrast of Jesus' unwavering faithfulness, to sacrificially lay down His life in the face of betrayal and abandonment, while the disciples falter at the first test of persecution. They will be unfaithful to Jesus in the very moment Jesus prepares to secure His new covenant with them by His very lifeblood.

What we must see is not only Jesus' unwavering faithfulness, standing alone as our atoning sacrifice and Savior; we must also see the disciples' misguided self-confidence that is so much like our own.

In vs. 22 when Jesus said that one of the 12 would betray Him, all the disciples responded, "surely not I, Lord?" Were 11 of them right? While only Judas would betray Jesus, Peter would deny Him 3 times, even though He had boasted that He would be faithful to death (33, 35). And all of the disciples would abandon Him, though they pledged they would not (35, 31).

What the disciples needed was *not* more self-confidence in the face of testing. They needed less. The problem is that their over confidence in themselves blinded them to the shallowness of their own hearts. The same is true for any of us that believe we merely need God's help because we are confident that we have something to add to grace.

Beloved, I think Matthew is painting a picture here for us. Jesus' faithfulness to secure our forgiveness and salvation through sovereign mercy is so strong, and our sin-warped self-confidence is so misguided, that we must abandon all confidence in self to place our trust wholly in Jesus.

The good news is that Jesus did not leave His disciples in their failure. He promised (in His faithfulness) that after He was raised He would go ahead of them to Galilee where they would again be reunited and restored.

If you have failed miserably like the disciples, the good news is that Jesus died to provide forgiveness for your sin and He offers God's mercy to you today.

Or maybe you're thinking, "I'm really a pretty good person and I am confident that God would accept me." But is your life perfectly free of the leaven of sin? God's standard is not pretty good. His standard is holy. And there is only one who can make you holy—Jesus, the unleavened, sinless one, who died so you could be forgiven and restored.

Do you see what's hidden in plain sight? The utter weakness and unreliability of your self-confident, sin-sick heart. The supreme strength of God's sovereign mercy, and the utter faithfulness of Christ to bring God's forgiveness to you.

#### **Prayer**

- Prov 16:18, "Pride *goes* before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling."
- We not only need to confess specific known sins, we need to confess the heart of pride and independence from which they come.
- Pray for Spirit's empowerment, even now, to abandon all self-trust, to believe and follow Jesus.
- "God is opposed to the proud, but He gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

#### **Communion**

**Bread:** In the night in which Jesus was betrayed, He took bread, broke it, and said, "this is My body," an atoning sacrifice, sinless, and utterly sufficient, provided by God's sovereign plan and from His heart of mercy. Let's eat together, knowing that our only true confidence is in the faithfulness of Christ.

**Cup:** And when He had taken the cup, Jesus said, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins...drink from it all of you. [*"Nothing but the Blood of Jesus"*]