

Mercy Melts "Hidden Sin"

Part 7 of a Register Series

by Edward Sri

Jesus commands us to take on the merciful heart of God: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). The Bible describes our God as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy" (Psalm 103:8). Do we reflect such patience and mercy? Without in any way approving of sinful behavior, Jesus challenges us to examine whether our hearts are full of compassion for those whose lives are not perfect: Do we have an endless desire to show mercy? Or are we quick to criticize and condemn?

St. Catherine of Sienna was once confronted by God about a "hidden sin" she had: the sin of judging people. She used to think that she had a gift for reading human nature and noticing other people's faults, especially priests' faults. But one day, God pointed out to her that the insights she was receiving about other people's weaknesses were not coming from Him – they were coming from the devil. She came to see that this was the "devil's trap."

The devil allows us to see each other's faults so that, instead of wanting to help, we start to judge their souls and condemn them. Catherine admitted this to God, saying, "You gave me ... medicine against a hidden sickness I had not recognized, by teaching me that I can never sit in judgment on any person, ... For I, blind and weak as I was from this sickness, have often judged others under the pretext of working for your honor and their salvation."

If we face the truth about ourselves and experience our own daily struggles with sin, we are less likely to set ourselves up in judgment over others. If we truly recognize how much we need God's mercy – if we experience His forgiveness and His healing power in our lives – then our hearts will be much more compassionate when we encounter other people's faults. If we've experienced how patient and gentle God is with our weaknesses, then we are going to be more merciful toward others. That's why St. Catherine learned that when we notice a person's faults, we should say to ourselves, "Today it is your turn; tomorrow it will be mine, unless Divine grace holds me up."

But if we tend to respond to others faults with condemnation and not compassion, it may be because we ourselves have a serious moral problem. It could be because we have not truly come to terms with our own weakness and sins and experienced God's mercy. While many Christians can easily say they need God's mercy, the true disciple of Jesus knows this truth profoundly at the core of his being: He knows how utterly dependent he is on God's grace.

Such a man is in no position to be impatient with the faults of others, for he knows himself well, and he knows how patient God has been with his own weaknesses. The habit of judging others, however, could be a sign that we do not really know ourselves or the God who loves us. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux taught, "If you have eyes for the shortcomings of your neighbor and not for your own, no feeling of mercy will arise in you, but, rather, indignation. You will be readier to judge than to help, to crush in the spirit of anger than to instruct in the spirit of gentleness."

St. Bernard went on to explain how only the truly humble man will have compassion for his brothers weaknesses: "The sound person feels not the sick ones pains, nor the well-fed the pangs of the hungry. It is fellow sufferers that readily feel compassion for the sick and the hungry. ... You will never have real mercy for the failings of another until you know and realize that you have the same failings in your soul."

Pope Francis made a similar point: "The more conscious we are of our wretchedness and our sins, the more we experience the love and infinite mercy of God among us, and the more capable we are of looking upon the many 'wounded' we meet along the way with acceptance and mercy."

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