



Book Review: [Ministries of Mercy](#), Tim Keller

LMPG Network Resources

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When asked by a law expert in Luke 10 how to inherit eternal life, Jesus asked the man what the law itself said. The law expert answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (ESV, Luke 10:27). The law expert then tried to justify himself and asked, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). What follows is the story known as the Good Samaritan—the story of a Jewish man left for dead on the dangerous Jericho Road, rescued not by the passing priest or Levite, but by a Samaritan. The Samaritan, a man whose race was hated by the Jewish people, “risked his safety, destroyed his schedule, and became dirty and bloody through personal involvement with a needy person of another race and social class” (13).

In his book, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, [Tim Keller](#) paints the Good Samaritan as the church’s paradigm. The Samaritan shows us that the neighbor the believer is commanded to love is *anyone* in need (15). But how can we meet this impossible standard of showing mercy to hurting and messy people? To do this, we must have an accurate view of the world, ourselves, and the needy; understand the nature and motivation of mercy; and *act* on that mercy through the way we live individually and collectively in the church. Keller outlines these principles in *Ministries of Mercy*, growing the reader’s love for mercy through a better understanding of God’s mercy, followed by practical advice on how to apply this mercy in one’s own life and in the church.

The Reality of the World

To start, Keller gives a brief overview of the state of need in the world. One in every seven people in North America is poor, and about one in four U.S. children grow up in poverty (18). Some believe there are as many as half a million homeless in the U.S., 40% of which are families with children. Keller quotes an article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which says “unless kids like this [homeless children] can be reassured the world is safe, they are likely to be criminals by 12. By 14, they may kill” (23). As the divorce rate continues to grow, families suffer in a multitude of ways. In fact, according to Weitzman’s *Divorce Revolution*, women’s living standards decline approximately 73% after divorce, including alimony and child support (25). Needless to say, the world is breaking all around us, and these statistics are only those in the U.S.

How can we respond to this overwhelming reality of the world? First, we must live on the Jericho Road so that our lives intersect with broken people. Second, the church *must* face its responsibility for the hurting neighbors. It is not an optional way of life (30,1). Lastly, Keller states, “Only the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ, and the millions of ‘mini-churches’ (Christian homes) throughout the country can attack the roots of social problems” (31). Because of sin we are depraved individually and socially—only the Gospel of Jesus can minister to the “whole person” (31).

The Principles of Mercy

As illustrated in Luke 10, the mark of a true believer is loving God and others. However, like the rich young ruler in Mark 10, we cannot do what the law demands. This is the point Jesus is making in Luke 10— “you can be accepted by God if you obey the law perfectly, but *look* at the law...if you see clearly, you will realize that the righteous requirement of the Law must be fulfilled in some other way” (36). How can we faithfully love all the needy, selflessly, at all times? It is only through the mercy of God that we can love others. This is the mercy of God: “We must see that all of us are spiritually poor and bankrupt before God (Matt. 5:3)” (37). As Keller says,

Jesus is not telling us that we can be *saved* by imitating the Good Samaritan, even though he is clearly charging us to follow his pattern. Rather, Jesus is seeking to humble us with the love God *requires*, so we will be willing to receive the love God *offers*.

As we are swept away by the mercy of God that covers our brokenness, this mercy motivates us to show mercy to the hurting world around us. It is Jesus who “literally ‘moved in’ with the poor,” with the lepers and outcasts (42). Because we are now united to Christ, we can also move in with the poor, as deacons who can humbly serve the hurting. We did nothing to deserve the mercy of Jesus, so can freely help those who have done nothing to deserve mercy. We can give away all we have to serve the hurting world as a “sacrifice of praise to God” because we are infinitely rich in Christ (67, John 12:1-8, 2 Cor 9:12-15, Phil 4:18, Heb 13:15-16). The ministry of mercy can be defined as “the meeting of (1) “felt” needs through deeds” (46). Sin has alienated people from God on a multitude of levels—theologically, psychologically, socially, and physically. As deacons, or agents of God’s Kingdom, “the church seeks to bring substantial healing of the effects of sin *in all areas* of life” (45, emphasis added). The church is to be a new society in which the world can see what family dynamics, business practices, race relations, and all of life can be under the kingship of Jesus Christ. God is out to heal all the effects of sin. (56)

The Principles of Living Mercifully

Throughout the following four chapters, Keller outlines a four-category approach to doing mercy—a balanced lifestyle, a balanced focus, a balanced judgment, and a balanced testimony. As believers seek to steward our resources well, we should give sacrificially up to the point that our lifestyles are lowered in line with our callings and ministry opportunities (71). We should seek to live simply and contently, not loving money (Matt 6:19-23, Heb 13:5, 1 Tim 6:6-9). This does not mean a Christian should not make a lot of money—in fact, hard work usually increases one’s salary—but that money is a gift that is given to be used to spread the Kingdom of God through the multi-faceted meeting of people’s needs.

As we give, we should seek to give to believers as first priority until their needs are eradicated, but also give to unbelievers as a ministry to the world (85). Most admonitions to give to the poor are to believers, meaning that it was a blessing to the church by way of their covenant relationship (86). The next responsibility for giving is to one's family (Lev 25:25, 1 Tim 5:8). Next, we give to those outside the church— "The ministry of mercy is not only an expression of the *fellowship* of the church, but also an expression of the *mission* of the church" (88). As we show mercy, we bring about the "already" Kingdom of God through the spiritual meeting of physical and spiritual needs.

Because of Jesus' mercy, we can unconditionally give mercy. As our mercy increases, however, it should lovingly demand change similar to the mercy of God (99). As we show mercy, we should be wary that our mercy "*not* make it easier for someone to disobey God... [and] our mercy to the poor must be such as to make the poor merciful themselves" (102). When we show mercy, we seek to restore, not just bandage. If a recipient of mercy will not allow us into their lives to seek restoration, then mercy must change forms. In this way, mercy is similar to evangelism—

we offer the gospel to anyone and everyone, as we have opportunity and resources to reach them...But, if *eventually* a person or a group evidences a rebellious and disrespectful attitude towards the gospel, we withdraw.

Continued pressure only hardens them and dishonors the message. (105)

As we practice word and deed evangelism, recognize that these ministries are "equally necessary, mutually interdependent and inseparable ministries, each carried out with the single purpose of the spread of the Kingdom of God" (113). The increased, multi-faceted realization of God's Kingdom is our goal. God created the physical and spiritual, and will redeem both (123).

The Practice of Mercy

In this last section, Keller outlines the steps of individual believers, families, and churches take to practically do mercy. Though outside the scope of this review, the practical steps of this section are outlined and can be found on Impgnetwork.org under "Free

Resources.” Various channels of mercy include the family, the local church, voluntary associations, and the government.

The believing family must first be attuned to the needs around it, for often the best mercy ministries in churches are through believers living out their roles as deacons in the world. For church ministry, the church must be prepared, mobilized, its vision expanded, its ministry managed, and new believers incorporated well into the church. In the same way that a farmer does not plant seeds without first tending to the soil, the process of fertilizing and digging up the soil of the church for mercy ministry is critical. Mercy for the broken comes out of the work of the Holy Spirit, not a manufactured guilt.

As believers experience, study, are taught, and meditate on the mercy of God, compassion should increasingly grow in their hearts for their hurting neighbors. Throughout this process, oftentimes the hearts of several individuals will be especially burdened for their neighbors; this group can become a “mercy subcommittee,” divided into ministry teams that seek to minister to certain needs in the community. Immediately after this, a mercy fund should be set up in the church. The “mercy subcommittee” then looks in their vicinity and asks, “What are the needs? What are the existing services? What are the gaps between needs and services? How can we find and meet these people?” (160). The seriousness and the extensiveness of the needs should be documented so that those in the church can more wisely decide how to engage the community. Additionally, Keller includes ways the pastor and staff can initiate top-down approaches through promoting specific church-wide projects, discussing how to place members according to their gifts, planning mercy programs in the church, continuing to water the church’s mercy ministries, and incorporating new believers into the church.

Evaluation

Though approximately one half of Keller’s book is practical application of mercy ministry, the theoretical overview of mercy outlined in the first half of the book was one of the most remarkable aspects of the book. The practical application and case studies in the second half of the book were useful, but it would be best used as a reference tool when planning

mercy ministries in the church, not as light reading to understand mercy ministries. It could be used well in cooperation with *Just Church* by Jim Martin, a practical book on starting to do mercy ministry.

In his theoretical overview of mercy ministries, Keller casts a vision of mercy that brings the believer to her knees. How can one stand up against Luke 10? After reading a Biblical overview of mercy (see Chapter 1), and grasping the unreachable requirements of the law and man's continued inability to keep even a semblance of it, Keller's readers should be completely humbled. First, that God would save us and send Jesus to meet the law's requirements on our behalf is incomprehensible. Second, that God would then use us—the broken vessels that we are—to accomplish the spreading of His Kingdom, is beyond humbling. Yet, for His glory, He uses our weak beings to spread His Kingdom. Jesus has given us abundant resources to spread His Kingdom in preparation for the Kingdom to come—health, finances, spiritual gifts, and ultimately, Himself. Oh that the church would wake up, seek to walk the Jericho Road, and realize the plentiful resources He has given us to do so.