

**“Mercy, in spite of me”**  
**Genesis 38**  
**November 12, 2000**  
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The whole youth group knew that the pastor’s daughter, a high school senior, was a lot different than she made herself out to be on Sundays. If there was one girl in school that the guys knew was an easy mark – it was she.

And finally it happened – she got pregnant with a guy from the youth group and within four months it was no longer possible to hide it.

It began with rumors and gossip but before long there was a full-blown demand that something be done about this situation. Surely she (oh, and I suppose he too) would be punished.

We can’t let this kind of thing go undisciplined. What about God’s Word, God’s law? God’s name and our church’s reputation are at stake here.

Pastor, Elders, what are you going to do?

He was a very popular teacher in a community Bible Study group. His own church took some pride in being home base for this well-known teacher of the Scriptures.

Five years of growing success passed before it was discovered that on out-of-town trips he was carrying on an affair with his sister-in-law. It was his wife who caught him.

Again the cry from many Christians was that he should be immediately publicly censured, stripped of all responsibilities in the Christian community and excommunicated from the church.

After all, the church and God have a reputation to uphold and this kind of despicable behavior must be dealt with swiftly and strongly – we must send a message to all others – justice demands it.

Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Baker – they got theirs, didn’t they? Serves them right! They were so high and mighty and yet their dirty little secrets caught up to them.

No Bill Clinton – he should have gotten it too and it still galls many that he got by with his rotten little escapades – where’s the justice?

Then there's Gordon MacDonald. He as the pastor of the large and influential Grace Chapel in Boston and an author of such significant books as "Magnificent Marriage." He went on to become the president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship when it all came out that even while he was speaking around the country with his wife on the subject of a Christian marriage, he was carrying on an affair. Oh sure, he was out of a job for a while, but now he's back as pastor of that same church and once again speaking and writing. Now where's the justice? How can he be back in prominent ministry again?

What about Atlanta's Charles Stanley or Southern California's David Hocking or singers Sandi Patti or Amy Grant? Hocking was hardly even out of circulation and Stanley never even left his church – but continues to preach with impunity. And the singers – Christians still buy their music and make them rich. Hey! What about standards, what about justice, what about God's reputation? Have we gone soft on sin?

Hold those thoughts for a few minutes as we move to our text for today.

In our study of Genesis, we come next to a pretty sleazy story. I'm surprised Hollywood hasn't made a movie of it. Deceit, brothers marrying the same woman, prostitution, two mysteriously dead husbands and the same wife, and incest, it's all there. Before we read the story, I want you to remember some things that the first readers would have known that help to understand the story.

### **First, the importance of children.**

To Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been promised a great family, large in number. In order for that family to grow, each of the twelve sons of Jacob would need to have families of their own. (Judah was one of the twelve.) It is also true that any man and **particularly any woman** in that culture depended on children for their welfare in their old age and depended on children to carry the family name and place into the next generation. That would be particularly true of widows.

**Secondly, the levirate marriage custom.** ("Levir" means brother-in-law.) From the book of Ruth, from a much later period of time, we have the most well-known instance of a levirate marriage. Ruth was widowed and it was the responsibility of the closest unmarried male relative to marry the widow and produce children by her to carry on the first husband's name, property

and place in the greater family/nation. So when the closest relative wouldn't marry Ruth, it became possible for the next relative, Boaz, to marry her.

That custom later prescribed by God's law was evidently well-known and operating even in Judah's day. Deut. 25:5-6, "If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel." It seems strange to us, but we can see how it would keep all the family names alive and reproducing into the future.

### **Thirdly, cult religious prostitutes and common prostitutes.**

There were religions in Canaan that very immorally used prostitutes as part of the religion – suggesting that by sleeping with a religious prostitute you would better insure fertility for your family and your cattle. Surely it was nothing more than a rationalization for unbridled lust. But there were also common prostitutes who sold their bodies simply for profit.

### **Fourthly, the family tree – a large family.**

By the time this story was written by Moses for his readers, some 400 years later, the people of Israel had grown to a couple of million. And the descendants of Judah, the very ones about whom we read in this story, were a large, significant and prominent portion of that large nation of people.

### **Fifthly, the later family tree – David and Jesus.**

While Moses' readers wouldn't have known this, the Bible emphasizes the place the major characters of this story had in the later important history of this people. From one of the children born in our story would eventually come King David himself and later the Messiah, Jesus.

Matthew 1 – "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

2000 B.C.

Abraham

Isaac

Jacob

Judah and **Tamar** – the two about whom we will read today.

Then five more generations listed  
1500 B.C.  
Salmon and **Rahab**  
Boaz and **Ruth**  
Obed  
Jesse  
1000 B.C.  
King David and **Bathsheba**  
Solomon  
13 more kings until the Exile  
600 B.C.  
12 more men after the Exile  
B.C./A.D.  
Joseph, the husband of **Mary**,  
of whom was born Jesus

The messiah of the world comes from this somewhat disgusting and certainly illicit relationship that forms the heart of this story.

READ Genesis 38

Is that all? Does the story end there? What about Judah and Tamar getting disciplined for their actions? Does Judah get by with such a weak confession as “she’s more righteous than I am”? Does Tamar get rewarded for her deception and incest by becoming the mother of the ancestor of the Messiah? Where’s justice? What about God’s reputation, God’s law? Shouldn’t somebody pay for all this sin?

Last week I said that in the latter chapters of Genesis we see the good and guiding providential hand of God working even through great adversity. But in chapters 37-38 we see the providence of God working **even through the sin of his own people**. Chapter 38 is a story of mercy and grace in spite of great sin.

There is a book, whose former title was Guilt and Freedom that has as its thesis these three truths:

By God, we are **wonderfully made, deeply fallen and greatly loved**. Deeply fallen and greatly loved are the elements we see in this story. Deeply fallen they certainly were!

In the story, Judah himself finally comes to recognize that his sins were worse than Tamar's. He says it in a strange way, the way we would like to say it of ourselves, "She is more righteous than I."

"Righteous" neither of them is. There's no righteousness here unless we can imply that Tamar was trying to be obedient to God's command for them to produce children for the family name. No, this is not a matter of who is more righteous, it is a matter of who is most sinful – and Judah finally rightly acknowledges that he wins that prize.

Judah's sins:

1. Marrying an unbelieving woman – a woman outside of the circle of faith. Spiritual corruption is often the result of such a marriage. God was attempting to build a people wholly committed to him through whom he could bless the world. But Judah, and he was not the first, disregarded that command and all too easily entered into the world around him.
2. Reneging on his promise to Tamar and the future of his family. Judah was obviously aware of his obligation to his oldest son to promote the levirate marriage so that a child would carry on the son's name and place in the greater family to come. But Judah, in fear, disregards that command – thus again allowing the present circumstances to outweigh his responsibility to promote the family to fulfill God's plan.
3. Descending into immorality with a prostitute. Whether Judah thought she was a religious prostitute or a common whore, he had finally stooped to blatant immorality and that with a foreign woman – Judah looked little different than the culture around him. He was dangerously close to selling out the whole plan of God for himself, his family and the future.

And what about Tamar?

This is a woman who starts out very much a victim of circumstances but who finally takes control of the situation. But in spite of her need to protect her future by having children, and in spite of her possible good intentions of producing a child to carry on her dead husband's name, **her incestuous method is anything but commendable.** She may be trying to do the right thing, but she does it in the wrong way! She's clever to be certain, but righteous? Hardly!

So what's the point of telling this story?

First of all, I'm convinced that the major character in this story is neither Judah nor Tamar. God is the major character. When I read this story, I see mercy all over it. The providence – the good, guiding hand of God – even in the midst of our sin.

These people act terribly and what happens to them? Judah's name becomes great in the history of God's people. Tamar's child becomes the forebear of the King of Israel and the King of Kings – Jesus. Judah's descendants form the heart of the nation of Israel. Tamar's name is revered in history as one of five women in the genealogy of Jesus – noted in Matthew. Something inside us says, that isn't right!

“Fairness” is a major issue for most children. They are always arguing for things from the perspective of fairness.

As we reach adolescence and adulthood, “justice” seems to become the way we say it – especially retaliation for injustice. We want those who do wrong, especially those who do us wrong, to pay for it. We see this in so much of our popular entertainment – revenge is a major motivator and it pulls the audience into demanding vengeance – we feel good when the bad guy gets it!

The “justice” side of our human nature wants to see God punish Judah and Tamar. Judah expresses our natural tendency well: When Judah learns that Tamar was pregnant by prostitution he wants the full weight of the law to come down on her – how could she do such a despicable thing? He's like us – he wants justice – more probably vengeance. The family name and reputation are at stake. His self-righteousness stinks!

But Moses very cleverly tells the story so that we are caught in something of a moral dilemma. We take some perverse delight in the fact that Judah is tricked after we see the way he earlier cheated Tamar. But then we see what Tamar does and we think, wait a minute, she may have been cheated, she may have reason to be angry, but does that give her the right to do what she does? She intentionally exploits Judah in a time of weakness, his wife had died some time earlier, and she gets by with it and is apparently even rewarded.

How do we sort this out? Shouldn't God come into this scene and punish everyone according to their sin and demonstrate to us exactly what behavior is acceptable and what isn't. We are left with a great deal of ambiguity.

The Wednesday night edition of "Law and Order" is the one television program that I usually enjoy watching because the stories are involved, complicated, and often end with ambiguous conclusions – you are left thinking the outcome could have gone either way and been just as problematic. Life is like that – nothing is ever quite as cut and dried or black and white as we wish.

The stories and people of the Bible are like that – such a mixture of commendable and deplorable, right and wrong, that we see ourselves. How can God use people like this? How can he use me? Can anything good come out of this?

I said earlier that young children operate with a very active sense of fairness. As we enter adolescence and adulthood, however, that turns to an emphasis on justice – particularly punishment or revenge on the one who does wrong. But there's another phase. The older I get, the greater appreciation I have for mercy.

Years ago, I think I disciplined my children because justice demanded it. I was upholding a standard – a law had been broken. The standard was most important. I wanted my children to meet the demands of the law – mine and God's. I disciplined for the sake of justice – they ought to live right.

Today, when I discipline my child, it is because mercy demands it. If I love this child, and if he will be best served, I must discipline him. But though a standard is still important, it is no longer the standard that drives my actions – it is mercy. The relationship is most important and only mercy can preserve the relationship.

Yes, God is just, but he is very bit as much merciful! And mercy is what drives him.

Many years ago, one man wrote, "Judgement is the shadow side of God's mercy." (Ronald Wallace said this, I think.) It seems he only judges when his back is

pushed against the wall – when there is no alternative. God is the reluctant executioner – not desiring that any should perish. God’s method for dealing with us is mercy.

In spite of their sin, God was merciful to Judah and Tamar!

What is God’s disposition toward the pastor’s pregnant daughter? What is his attitude toward the adulterous Bible study leader? Through what lenses does he look at Jimmy Swaggart, Amy Grant, Jim Baker, Charles Stanley, Sandi Patti and you and me? Through eyes of mercy!

This doesn’t mean that God abandons standards or justice. It doesn’t mean the church abandons the standards of God’s holiness. But it does mean we exercise justice through a long-suffering heart of mercy!

Judah and Tamar didn’t deserve mercy, but they accepted it. Not a one of us in this room deserves mercy, but it is graciously offered to us.

Isaiah 55:6-7

Seek the LORD while he may be found;  
call on him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way  
and the evil man his thoughts.

Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him,  
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

Do you need the mercy of God today?  
He offers it to you through his Son, Jesus.

How about others of us, have we accepted that offer of mercy?

Then do we extend it to others?

Or do we still operate out of justice alone?

O, God, grant us mercy **AND** merciful hearts!