

Thad Barnum's latest book, *Real Mercy*, weaves deeply moving story into the authentically relevant truth of Scripture. This book models what it means to be a *real* disciple—to be God's agent of mercy to the broken; how through me they can know what it means to be mercifully held by him.

—NATALIE GRANT, Grammy nominated singer/songwriter;
five time GMA, Dove Award winner; human trafficking abolitionist

Using the power of biblical and real-life stories, Thaddeus Barnum brings the mercy of God to life in this devotional. For fifty days, he will lead you to see the Lord, His people, and even your own life with new eyes—the merciful eyes of the Lord.

—FOLEY BEACH, archbishop and primate, Anglican Church in North America

Thaddeus Barnum has beautifully integrated well-known and beloved Bible stories with his own pastoral experiences to dramatize the awesome mercy of our Lord and move hearts and minds in a convicting and very meaningful way. This book will compel many of us to reexamine our responsibility to pass on God's great mercy to others and commit to do more in His name.

—BILL BEATTIE, founder and chairman, Jericho Partnership

Experiencing mercy is life transforming. When you are weary of the journey, mercy is a balm to the soul. But mercy enters another dimension when you are merciful to others. This is the deep mercy in Barnum's new book, *Real Mercy*. The wise words of this book will renew and encourage your soul.

—FRANK A. JAMES III, president and professor historical
theology at Biblical Theological Seminary

Real Mercy is an evangelistic tool, a nurturing tool, a discipleship manual. It challenges the beneficiaries of God's mercy to be advocates of hope to the hopeless. This book tells the mercies of God in practical and real-life experience and is a testimony script for many who have come from hopelessness to hope in Christ.

—LAURENT MBANDA, Anglican bishop, Rwanda, Africa

After twenty years running a ministry of mercy to the unlovely, I have seen the truth of Thad Barnum's insights into our God of mercy. He carries the implications of God's attributes to a new level here and tells powerful stories to illustrate. Highly valuable.

—ED MORGAN, president of The Bowery Mission, New York

Weaving together the strands of Scripture study, journal reflection, and poignant questions, Thad models a modern method for meditation along the way. He transports the reader into the text as he explores the senses, thoughts, and emotions of the gospel stories of mercy. A must-read calling for those seeking to be merciful.

—CHRIS SHINN, co-pastor of Faith Community Church, Charleston, West Virginia

This book is for real people—those who refuse to see the mercy of God as mere flowery speech or academic metaphor. It's for those who experience God's mercy and desire to live it out in the service of others, especially the suffering in the world.

—AL TIZON, executive minister, Serve Globally;
associate professor, North Park Theological Seminary

Real Mercy offers the deepest truth: Mercy is everything to Jesus. Thaddeus Barnum takes the reader on a seamless journey from familiar biblical stories to the lives of ordinary men and women in his life who are extraordinary in the power of God's mercy.

—FRANK WILLIAMS, director and United Nations
representative, World Vision International

REAL MERCY

WHERE BIBLE AND LIFE MEET

THADDEUS BARNUM

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Other books by Thaddeus Barnum include:

Never Silent

Remember Eve

Where Is God in Suffering and Tragedy?

Real Identity

Real Love

For more information about these and
other discipleship resources,
visit the call2disciple ministry website at
www.call2disciple.com.

Thad's other devotionals in this Deeper Devotion series,
Real Identity and *Real Love*, are available at
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INTRODUCTION



Freely you received, freely give.

—MATTHEW 10:8

There is a kind of mercy we can't express in our own strength. It belongs to God. It is given by God—freely. All we have to do is receive it. And when we do, the miraculous happens: God changes us on the inside.

He makes us a people of mercy.

And suddenly the motion begins. As we receive, we give. It's how His mercy works. We can't hold on to it. We can't hoard it or hide it or keep it to ourselves. When we have it and are changed by it, we give it as freely as we received it.

But there are people . . .

Jesus warned us about them. There are people who receive but never *receive*. There's no miracle. There's no change. This, Jesus explained in great detail, is the story of a wicked slave. We are not to be like him (see part 2).

But our Lord didn't leave us with that warning. He also told the story of a son, a lost son, who found his way home

again. This young man knew, deep in his soul, he didn't deserve his family's compassion and mercy. But it came, in full; and willingly, joyfully, he opened his arms and received it (see part 3).

This is everything.

It's the very heart and soul of the good news: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4-5 ESV).

And when it comes to us, we are made new.

That change is visible. It reshapes how we think, how we act, how we engage the world around us, and all of these things to our very core. This mercy shapes our character. We see it in the royal line of Jesus' own family (see part 4). We find it in people we least expect—those we've labeled and pushed away (see part 5).

It's meant to be in us.

And the only way for that to happen is to let mercy come. He—the person of mercy himself—must do with us what He came to do (see part 6). And when He does, one taste of it in our souls, and Micah 6:8 comes alive. He gives us everything we need to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

And out we go—a people of mercy to live mercy. We are men and women on Matthew 10:8 mission (see part 7), holding in our hearts God's eternal promise: "His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" (Lam. 3:22-23 ESV).

New and full of surprise.

For this is our God! And He zealously wants us to hear with His ears and see with His eyes. Just as He did in the simple story of a blind beggar (see part 1).

A person no one sees.

With a cry no one hears: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

But Jesus is like no one else. He sees. He hears. Mercy is everything to Him. He wants it to be everything to us. So we must start here, outside the town of Jericho, with a man on the side of the road, begging.

And let the story of real mercy change us forever.



PART 1

A BLIND
BEGGAR

—

TO LOVE MERCY: A STORY



And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

—MICAH 6:8 NIV

I didn't understand it at first. Isn't mercy something we do?

I see mercy in my Aunt Barbie and Uncle Paul. Their love for the Lord led them to start two mission centers in Colorado that serve hot meals and provide food, clothing, toys, blankets, counseling, and financial assistance to those in need.

It's what my sister Kate does every day in her social work. Her big heart of love overflows with compassion for the rural elderly in southern Ohio. It's seen in my dad every Wednesday night as he serves the poor in Stamford, Connecticut.

This I get. It's what Christians do: We remember the needs of the poor (Gal. 2:10).

I was thirty-four, pastoring a church in Pittsburgh, when the "lightbulb" went on. I happened to be listening to a visiting preacher from East Africa. He urgently tasked all church

leaders to build “the character of God’s mercy in the Christian soul.” He went on to say, “If we’re going to tell people about Jesus, they need to see Jesus in us. If we’ve received His mercy, we must be a people of mercy.” I liked it—a lot. I wrote it in my journal. I thought I knew what the preacher meant. But truth be told, I didn’t. Not until I saw it the eyes of one man.

Jared.

We met coincidentally. In March 1991, my friend Bob was in the hospital dying of lung cancer. He’d been diagnosed just after Christmas. On his last Sunday in church, he got on his knees next to his wife, Dot, and prayed as Jesus prayed, “Heavenly Father, not my will be done, but Thine.”¹

And now, in March in the hospital, he was in a coma. The doctors said it wouldn’t be long.

In the bed next to Bob sat a twenty-eight-year-old man named Jared. The young man sat hunched over, his face down, his legs outstretched, fighting for breath. His cancer had already taken his left arm and collapsed one lung. It was easier for him to breathe bent over. Easier not to talk.

But he was beautiful. His eyes were huge, set to perfection above high cheek bones and a strong, chiseled face with cocoa brown skin stretched tightly over each bone. There was gentleness in his face—even as he struggled for breath.

That afternoon, I heard Jared’s phone ring.

“May I answer it for you?” I asked. He nodded, and I soon told him, “Your wife wants you to know she loves you. She’ll be in about quarter to seven.” He reached for my hand, squeezed it, and whispered, “That was nice of you.”

I blurted out, almost selfishly, “How do you do it, Jared?”

He lifted his head, looked me in the eyes, and said, “Jesus is all I’ve got.”

I already knew this about him. His family was a Christian family. His mother told me Jared had given his life to Jesus as a young man. “He did everything right,” she said, and then she talked about his time in the military; his marriage to a lovely woman, a nurse; and their two children, both under the age of five.

“He wanted to see his children grow,” she said, “and that’s not going to happen. He knows that now. We all do.”

Even so, I didn’t understand it. It scared me to think of myself suffering as Jared was suffering. Would I be able to say what he just said to me?

As the day went on, in that same room, my friend Bob and his family faced deepening trials of their own.

By 3:00 in the morning, while he was still deep in a coma, Bob’s breathing started to slow. Dot was the only one with him. She sat at his bedside, holding her husband’s hand, her chair next to the curtain that separated him from Jared. She leaned her head on the bed and began to cry.

Then came a familiar sound—the curtain rings sliding on metal. And then she felt it. A hand—Jared’s only hand—gently resting on her shoulder. Softly patting, tenderly rubbing, as a son would comfort his mother. She could feel his warmth. She reached up, covered his hand with hers, and turned to look at him. There was enough light to see his beautiful eyes.

“He’s all we’ve got,” Jared quietly whispered.

It was like medicine from heaven to her soul.

By morning's light, Bob had somehow come out of his coma, and he would spend the next six weeks at home before he passed into the arms of the Lord.

For Jared, however, the story was different.

On the very next night, the curtain stayed closed between us. His family never left his side. When morning came again, the curtain was finally pushed back, just long enough for the briefest glimpse. It was the first time we'd seen Jared lying down—peacefully. No more struggles. No more gasps of air. No more sleepless nights to come. The watch was over.

But I have never forgotten him. Or that hand stretched out in the night.

He's the one who showed me that mercy isn't first what we do. It's who we are. It's who the God of mercy makes us in Christ. Because of Jared, I began praying the prayer the East African preacher taught me to pray: "Build the character of Your mercy in me—and in us, Your people."

For this is where it all begins.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION*

Mercy is a common word, known and experienced by all people. But the mercy God gives is different. What changes in your life if you let God make you a person of mercy?

How did Jared do this—show mercy even in his suffering? What are you like when you suffer? Why do we long for mercy more than give mercy?

NOTE

1. Thaddeus Barnum, *Where Is God in Suffering and Tragedy?* (DeBary, FL: Longwood Communications, 1997), 254–257, 266–269.

* *The reflection questions at the end of each devotion are designed to encourage prayer, journaling, and conversation in small group settings. It's easy to read and go on. It's better to read, stop, and engage in dialogue and prayer.*

AT THE OFFICE



Reflections on Luke 18:35

A blind man was sitting by the road begging.

—LUKE 18:35

If only I could interview the blind man:

“I was wondering, sir, how you got here this morning. Did friends bring you? Same ones each day? Or do you have to beg for that, too? And where did you spend the night? Do you have a home? Do you sleep in a bed with a roof over your head, a fire in the fireplace? Did you wake to a warm meal? Are you hungry, even now? Do you have any family or friends who love you? Care for you?”

“Or are you, as I fear, homeless?”

“Has it always been this way? Were you born blind, or did it happen later in life? Perhaps an accident of some kind? Maybe you had a good childhood? Or, did you have to start begging even then? Have people been kind to you, or do they make you feel like an outcast? Maybe less than human? As if God has forsaken you?”

I wonder how old he was when he met Jesus. I wonder why Luke, the gospel writer, didn't give him a name.

Mark said he had a cloak (see Mark 10:50). I wonder if it was his only possession. Was it his roof in the rain; his warmth in the cold; his knapsack to carry a beggar's haul at day's end; his one

secret hiding place—dug deep under its cover—where he could dream of a world where he was known, honored, and loved? A respectable man! A Jewish man whose prayers at synagogue actually reached the throne of almighty God. I see him there, just outside Jericho, begging. Perhaps I could say his office door was open for business.

He begged like half the modern world today begs. By all reports, half and more of the planet's population in the twenty-first century lives below the poverty line in need of food, clean water, vaccines, basic health care, a sustainable job, and a kind remembrance that they too were made in God's perfect image. He, like all of them, waited for someone to pass by and show mercy.

He irritated me.

I was attending a pastors' conference. It was my job to introduce him as the keynote speaker that morning and open the session in prayer. Since I knew nothing about him, he provided a sheet of paper that listed his accomplishments. They were most impressive.

He was everything I am not. Tall, handsome, with an athletic build and lovely smile—like he'd just come off a photo shoot for a magazine cover. He had a beautiful tenor voice, soothing and strong. As he began speaking, he oozed charisma. He was funny, engaging, self-deprecating, and, at times, deeply moved by emotion. The crowd laughed, cried, and, at the end, rose in a standing ovation.

Afterward, I overheard a pastor say, "That was the best ever! If I had half his talent, our church would be filled

every Sunday.” Another said, “I could listen to him all day long. He was eloquent, entrancing, hysterical, and completely delightful!” A young pastor agreed: “He’s exactly what my generation needs.” I was horrified. This preacher did what no preacher should ever do. He left us talking about *him*.

I vented with a friend—also a pastor—over lunch.

“I think you’re jealous,” he said, poking. “The man’s a consummate performer. He’s got a huge church in the Midwest. People adore him everywhere he goes. Now, what could be better than that? I bet most preachers dream of being like him.”

I was too agitated to poke back.

“There was a preacher from my grandfather’s generation,” I told him, “who pulled me aside one day and gave me sound advice. ‘Your job is to preach the gospel. Point to Him—not yourself. Remember what the apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:5: “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord.” But,’ he warned, ‘it won’t be easy. Pride will dog you your entire life. It’s subtle. It’s strong. It’s a deep pull inside all of us. We want the attention, the applause, the approval.’”

My friend admitted candidly, “He’s exactly right. I fight it all the time.”

“But you saw what happened today,” I replied. “This man’s job was to open the Scriptures to us. He didn’t do it. He told stories for an hour. And worse, a congregation full of pastors didn’t even notice. They didn’t care. They loved it.”

“Absolutely!” He smiled in jest. “He made us feel good about ourselves.”

I sat back, wishing he’d take my concern more seriously.

“So, you don’t wrestle with this?” he began with a touch of challenge. “There isn’t a little tiny piece of you longing for recognition and praise? I don’t believe it.”

“You’re changing the subject,” I protested.

“Am I? Are you sure you’re not the least bit jealous?”

I did my best to ignore him. But as far back as I can remember I’ve always been confused by this. I’m part of a denomination that teaches that pastors are servants. We serve the people. We never exalt ourselves. We do as our Lord did and lead by serving.

But the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.


—LUKE 22:26–27

But it’s odd. We say one thing and do another.

For example, my denomination has the most elaborate ordination services. First to deacon, then presbyter. For some, bishop and, for a small few, archbishop. We dress in fine robes. We distinguish ourselves from those not ordained.

Then we stand in lofty pulpits and tell people we're here to serve.

It confuses me. Always has. Aren't we actually lifting ourselves up? Older pastors wisely taught me. "We don't step up the ladder of success," they'd say. "We step down, just as our Lord did."




For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though
He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor.

—2 CORINTHIANS 8:9


"But then how do you handle all the attention?" I asked them, knowing many of them experienced great success in ministry, pastoring large congregations.

"By keeping focus," they'd advise me. "Simply remember how the apostle Paul answered your question."



So we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who
examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering
speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—
God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men.

—1 THESSALONIANS 2:4–6


“If you’re out to please men—entertain them!” they went on. “Tell them a joke! Get them to love you. But if you want to please God, if you want His approval more than theirs, then do what He has called you to do. Be real. Be faithful. Give them the saving message of Jesus Christ. Point them to Him so when you’re done, they’re only talking about Him.”

So I did my best, as a young minister in my twenties.

But looking back over the years, I see now what I didn’t want to see then. My motives were not always pure. As much as I felt called to follow their example and heed their counsel, I secretly wanted what they had. It was there, a small flame burning inside me, a quiet longing to have a big congregation just like them. Yes, me too—a beggar on the side of the road—begging for attention. Begging for approval.

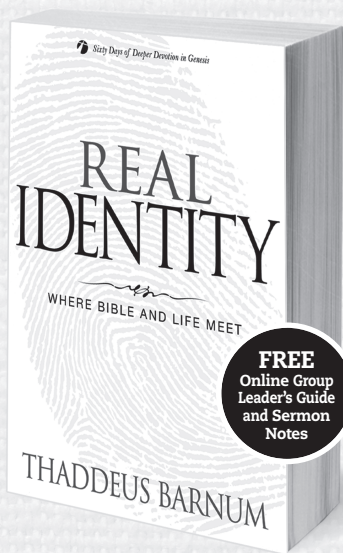
I was young, and I guess you could say I opened my office door for business. I sincerely believed in my heart the cheering was only and all for Jesus Christ. But in truth, I wanted the tiniest little bit for me.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Imagine taking time this week to interview a homeless beggar near you. What would you ask? What do you think you’d learn about yourself?

What happens if you let someone interview you? Where are the places of longing and begging inside your heart?

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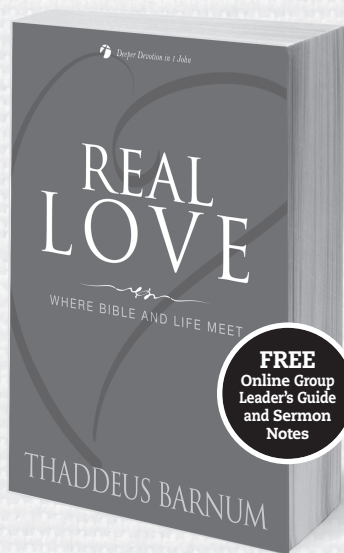
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