THE *Mercy* King

HOW THE KINDNESS OF JESUS HEALS YOUR SIN, SHAME, AND WEAKNESS

SCOTT SAULS

Author of *A Gentle Answer*

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

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To Donald Miller:
For helping me see more clearly the story God is writing
and for helping me find the courage to step into it.

To the friends who stayed close when I needed mercy the most:
You know who you are.

And to the pastors who keep going, despite the enemy's schemes:
You know whose you are.

The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

—Titus 3:5

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Introduction

When Mercy Comes Looking for You

There's a reason most people struggle.

Behind the pace and pressure of modern life, beneath the daily decisions and obligations we juggle, most of us are carrying more than we realize. We carry longings—for peace, for purpose, for connection. We carry hurts—some fresh, some long buried. And many of us, even those who have walked with God for years, carry a quiet sense that something is still missing.

Sometimes we call it exhaustion. Sometimes doubt. Sometimes we're not even sure what to call it. But we feel it just the same.

This book is for people who feel that weight. It's for those who believe in grace, at least in theory, but struggle to weave it into their lives. It's for those who wonder whether they've somehow missed what others seem to have found. And it's especially for those who have been told, in one way or another, that they don't quite measure up—not to people's expectations, not to their own, and maybe not even to God's.

The central claim of this book is simple, but it's not soft: Jesus is full of mercy. And not mercy in the abstract. His mercy

is personal. It's pursuing. It's stronger than our shame and more patient than our doubts. The Bible tells us that his mercies are new every morning—and that's not just poetic language. It's a reflection of the kind of King he is. A King who reigns not through fear or force but through compassion and kindness. A King who is moved by our weakness, not repelled by it.

That's the kind of King this book is about.

We're calling him the Mercy King not as a metaphor or a catchy book title but as a way of describing what Jesus is actually like. In a world that often rewards performance and hides weakness, Jesus does the opposite. He draws near to the brokenhearted. He welcomes the weary and the weak. He goes out of his way to restore those others have given up on. His strength is not there to crush us. It is there to carry us.

This isn't a theory for me. It's personal.

For much of my life, I operated from a quiet belief that love had to be earned. I wouldn't have said that out loud, but it showed up in the way I lived—in how I gave myself to ministry, service, and pouring into others. Somewhere along the way, I started to confuse being useful with being lovable. If I could lead well enough, serve and give faithfully enough, keep going long enough, then maybe I could feel more secure and I could know that my life had meaning.

What I didn't realize was how, bit by bit, that mindset was wearing me down. Over time, sincere devotion turned into anxious striving. Joy was replaced by pressure, and rest by workaholism. What began as faithfulness started to feel more like fear—the fear that if I stopped moving, everything might come undone, including me.

Eventually, it did. The weight became too much. And when I was at the end of my strength, something happened I didn't expect: Mercy came looking for me.

Not with a list of corrections. Not with disappointment. But with an invitation.

It was as if Jesus himself whispered, "You can stop now. You can rest. You don't have to carry this anymore. You are not alone, and you never have been."

I had spent years preaching this message to others, and plenty of good fruit came from it in *their* lives. Those years were not a waste. But now Jesus was speaking it to me. Not because I had earned it but because I hadn't. And because his mercy really is for the tired and spent. For the ones who are ready to admit they need it.

That realization softened me. It changed how I saw Jesus, how I saw myself, and how I now show up in ministry and in the rest of life. It gave me space to breathe, laugh, rest, and play again. And it led me to write this book.

The Mercy King unfolds in three movements:

- The first explores *the longings we carry*—our desires for belonging, security, and meaning.
- The second turns toward *the hurts we endure*—the kinds of wounds that often get buried or superficially spiritualized, but never actually healed.
- The third emphasizes *the hope that holds us* when the stuff of life seems shaky—when we're tired, jaded, or even facing the shadow of death itself.

Each chapter centers on the person of Jesus. Not just what he said but how he lived. How he responded to the weary, the guilty, the proud, and the grieving. And how he still does.

If you're tired or worried, you're in good company. If you feel like you've fallen short, welcome. If you've been hurt by church or confused by faith, there's still room for you at the Mercy King's table. You don't have to earn your place. You don't have to prove you belong. You're not here because you got it right. You're here because mercy came looking for you.

Before we begin, I want to invite you to pause for a minute and breathe.

You are not behind. You are not cast out. You are not forgotten.

You are being pursued by the kindest King the world has ever known.

So shall we begin?

Not by striving but by receiving.

Not by chasing God but by realizing he's already running toward you.

—Scott Sauls
Nashville, Tennessee

MOVEMENT ONE

The Longings We Carry

ONE

When You Feel Too Broken to Belong

The Mercy King Who Invites You In

> Grace is the very opposite of merit. . . . Grace is not only undeserved favor, but it is favor shown to the one who has deserved the very opposite.
>
> —Harry Ironside, *Full Assurance*

One evening the church where I served as pastor hosted a panel discussion on a topic of growing relevance: Christian deconstruction.

For many deconstruction isn't just about rethinking beliefs and theology, it's about wounds. It's about feeling disillusioned, betrayed, or spiritually homeless. Some walk away not because they reject Jesus but because they wonder whether his people have rejected them. The weight of doubt, disappointment, and shame

can leave them questioning whether the church still has room for them. This was the struggle behind our conversation.

There is a faithful form of deconstruction that seeks not to dismantle Christian faith but to recover it. It aims to strip away counterfeit expressions of faith to uncover the authentic, life-giving, biblically rooted truths beneath. During the panel discussion, an artist who is also a Christian shared his personal story of growing up in a church environment that nearly drove him away from faith. He described a culture that was rigid, rules driven, and politically charged, a place where mercy was scarce and an us-versus-them mentality prevailed.

This environment left him teetering on the edge of abandoning his faith.

Reflecting on his experience, he said, "We are all fallen and broken. Like every Bible character, we are a mix of glory and dirt. Where we have made a mess, we as the church should be leading with apology and repentance." He also shared a statement often attributed to Gandhi, one that I have also quoted previously: "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians, because your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Whether or not Gandhi actually said these words, they capture the pain of many who feel like outsiders to grace. The artist's story is not unique; it echoes the ache of so many who yearn for a faith community that feels like home but instead find themselves wandering, unsure where they fit. Some wrestle with doubt, wondering whether church, church people, or God can still be trusted. Others battle shame, believing they've failed God too many times. Still others fear that their struggles, if made known, would invite and seal their rejection. If Jesus is full of mercy, why does it seem so scarce and unreachable?

This struggle—the ache of feeling spiritually displaced, uncertain where we belong, and thereby severed from mercy—is not new. Jesus

understood this ache well, and in Luke 15 he speaks to it directly to help those who feel disillusioned find their way back home.

To the tax collectors and sinners who gathered around him—outcasts pushed to the margins by religious gatekeepers—Jesus defied all expectations. Even as the religious leaders muttered among themselves about his unconventional ways and shady associations, Jesus continued to extend his arms to the lost, searching, and fed up. His message was, and still is, clear: No one is too far gone for grace.

Jesus didn't just accept tax collectors and sinners, he went out of his way to seek them. He shared meals with them and extended a kind of warm, unapologetic hospitality that was unheard of at the time. As the Mercy King, he broke with social and religious expectations, offering a vision of kindness and welcome that challenges the way we give, receive, and—like the Pharisees—sometimes withhold the gift of belonging.

The King Who Welcomes Tax Collectors and Sinners

To understand Jesus accurately, we must be made aware of how intently he drew near to those whom society rejected. The tax collectors and sinners who gathered around him were drawn in by a love they had never dreamed of for themselves. Tax collectors, in particular, were justifiably seen as traitors, exploiting their own people for profit with Rome's backing. *Sinners* was a broader term used by religious authorities to categorize anyone they considered morally compromised. Yet despite their deserved reputations—or perhaps because of them—Jesus did not push tax collectors and sinners away. Instead he warmly embraced them.

Jesus is irresistibly drawn to the guilty, lost, and discarded. These very qualities seem to attract him most, revealing not just the

skills of a healer but the heart of a King who reigns through mercy. In his teaching and actions, Jesus redefines what kingship looks like. Where earthly kings guard their glory, Jesus gives his away. Where worldly rulers demand loyalty, Jesus offers love. He rules chiefly through grace, forgiveness, and restoration.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Jesus' most well-known parable: the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). This parable is more than a tale of rebellion and return; it's a window into the heart of God toward anyone who has wandered, squandered, or lost their way. At its core, it's not only about one runaway child but about the universal ache of separation, the weight of shame, and the radical mercy of a Father who runs toward lost souls to love them back to life.

In a stunning act of defiance, the younger son demands his inheritance, essentially saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." He takes what he falsely believes is owed to him and squanders it in reckless living. His self-made freedom feels exhilarating at first. But when the thrill fades, reality sets in: emptiness, isolation, hunger, and shame. The once-proud son is reduced to feeding pigs. He is unclean by his own doing and, in his mind, unredeemable, stuck in the ditch of his own making.

G. K. Chesterton once said, "Man cannot break the laws of God; he can only break himself against them."[1] The laws of God are rock solid; it is we who are not.

The younger son's collapse is not simply punishment, it is the natural consequence of life apart from the father's merciful rule. Alone in a distant country, stomach empty and dignity in ruins, he prepares and rehearses a groveling speech not expecting restoration but merely seeking survival. What he doesn't realize is that his father has never stopped watching. Never stopped longing. Never stopped loving.

The moment the father sees him on the horizon, he breaks every cultural convention: He runs to his son, embraces him, and interrupts his speech with unrestrained joy. The son isn't punished

or put on probation. He's *restored*. Grace doesn't wait for the speech to finish, it rushes in with a robe, a ring, and a feast. The son expected boundaries and berating but instead found belonging.

Jesus tells this story not only to offer hope to those who are wandering and ashamed but also to reveal the kind of kingdom over which he presides—in which power is expressed in a way that causes mercy to triumph over judgment.

The two parables that precede the prodigal son—the lost sheep and the lost coin—echo the same heartbeat. A shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to find one wandering sheep. A woman turns her house upside down to recover one missing coin. In both cases, the lost item holds immeasurable worth in the eyes of its owner. And when what was lost is found, celebration follows. These stories lay the groundwork for the prodigal son, revealing a pattern that we also see throughout Scripture and in everything else that is purely Christian: Grace goes first. It initiates. It rescues.

Where the sheep wandered in ignorance and the coin was helpless in stillness, the Prodigal Son walked away by choice. Yet in all three stories, the message is clear: Our lostness never diminishes our worth. It only seems to intensify the determination of the one who pursues.

Jesus, the Mercy King, tells this story to reframe our understanding of God—and of ourselves. His mercy is not weakness, it is authority made manifest through compassion. It is not mere sentiment but sovereign love that chases down the lost, lifts the shamed, and embraces the weary.

These parables invite us to locate ourselves in the story. Whether we've wandered, resisted, or doubted, Jesus extends the same welcome: Come home. The laws of God are not cages, they are boundary lines inside of which we are invited to flourish. And when we "break ourselves against" his laws, the Father doesn't relish the consequences we bring upon ourselves. To the contrary, he runs toward us to rescue and carry us home.

Drawn to the Worst in Us

Jesus' selfless and loving pursuit of his beloved prodigals runs counter to everything we expect. It defies human logic and reveals the heart of a King whose message and methods contradict the ways of the world. The parts of ourselves that we find most discouraging, disappointing, or even shameful—our worst traits on our worst days—are the very places that stir his affections toward us the most. God doesn't love us in spite of our flaws; he loves us in the midst of them and even through them. We might even dare to say he loves us because of them. Like moths drawn to a flame, God moves toward us in our darkest, most guilt ridden, and despairing moments and seasons.

Consider also the apostle Paul, whose life after encountering Christ was marked by unwavering devotion. He planted churches, mentored believers, endured persecution, and was imprisoned and executed for the gospel. Yet at the end of his ministry, his autobiography wasn't a boast of his accomplishments but an honest confession that remained with him until the day of his death: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim. 1:15–16).

Not was but *am*—a present tense acknowledgment, even at the height of his virtue, of his never-ending need for grace. Yet this recognition didn't lead him to self-loathing or despair. Instead it stirred him to worship and wonder.

The mercy Paul experienced was more than the removal of judgment; it lifted burdens and empowered him to live freely in the presence and love of God. This mercy is not an award for performance but is given freely to those who finally stop trying to perform. It sets Christianity apart from every other philosophy, religion, and creed, freeing believers from the struggle to prove themselves worthy to a God who already loves and accepts them.

It bears repeating: Your moments of deepest discouragement, disappointment, and even self-disgust do not push Jesus away. They draw him closer.

Jesus runs toward you just as the father ran to welcome his prodigal son, interrupting your rehearsed apologies with an embrace that asks for nothing in return. Even the journey home isn't something you have to figure out on your own. Jesus, your Savior and elder brother, is the one who comes looking for you, crossing every barrier, pursuing you to the ends of the earth to bring you back. As John, the disciple who called himself "the one Jesus loved," reminds us, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

And as Charles Spurgeon once said of Jesus' mercy, "There is mercy for the very chief of sinners. Mercy, that has no bounds. Mercy that is infinite. Mercy that is given freely. Mercy that is given even to the vilest of the vile."[2]

Jesus' mercy can dismantle the self-righteousness and contempt of the Pharisee within. When the depth of his love reaches the center of our thoughts, we notice changes within ourselves. Pride gives way to humility, and judgment becomes mercy, transforming us into beggars eager to tell other beggars where the bread is.[3]

I once had a conversation with a pastor from the urban core of St. Louis who offered some thought-provoking insights about the church he served. Among their written core values, one stood out in particular: weakness. At first this might seem like an unusual or even unappealing value, but it's deeply rooted in Scripture. It's the very quality the apostle Paul chose to embrace and highlight when he wrote, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses" (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

The truth is that we are all weak. We just expend significant effort trying to keep it hidden.

The St. Louis pastor shared a story about a couple who began attending his church. They were in a complicated

relationship—nonexclusive, unmarried, and sexually active—and they came to him not seeking moral advice but simply hoping for help to improve their relationship.

At first his internal response mirrored the Pharisee spirit: quick to identify their flaws and trace their struggles back to their choices. But something shifted in him during their conversation. He noticed his own eyes drifting toward the woman's short skirt, and in that moment conviction settled in. "I'm no different," he thought.

That realization didn't disqualify him from ministry; it prepared him to respond according to his church's stated core value of weakness. He was able to respond pastorally, not with condescension but with the compassion of Christ. Instead of becoming a smug, self-appointed gatekeeper, he became a fellow beggar telling other beggars where the bread is, extending the same mercy he knew he needed himself.

This is the essence of Jesus' ministry: meeting us in our mess and moving toward us, not away. Our misery and his pursuit are intertwined. He not only welcomes tax collectors and sinners, messy churchgoers and stumbling pastors, but he also sits with us, shares meals with us, and transforms every table into a place of warmth and belonging.

The Mercy King's Table

When Jesus shared meals with tax collectors and sinners, it was more than a casual gathering. It was a radical act that redefined who was in. Inviting someone to dinner once might be a friendly gesture or a polite interaction that ends when the meal is over. But welcoming someone to your table repeatedly signals friendship and lasting connection. It's one thing to invite someone; it's another to

genuinely want them. Jesus' table was not just a temporary refuge, it was a sacred space where a real, enduring community gathered.

Gandhi, despite his admiration for Christ, wrote in his autobiography, "The pious lives of Christians did not give me anything that the lives of men of other faiths had failed to give." He acknowledged the soundness of Christian teaching and ethics but found little distinctive impact in the Christians he encountered. "From the point of view of sacrifice," he noted, "Hindus greatly surpassed the Christians."[4]

Gandhi's critique ought not be dismissed or taken as an offense; it should challenge us deeply. It suggests that what often stands between spiritual seekers and Christ is not Christ himself but his followers. When we fail to reflect the love and grace we have received, it has real consequences.

It's one thing to speak Christ's words; it's another to live them. It's one thing to attend church; it's another to be the church. To Gandhi, the Christians he encountered offered nothing more compelling than what he saw in other faiths. While Christ's life was profoundly captivating to him, he struggled to see it mirrored in Christ's followers.

As the artist mentioned earlier expressed, our way forward is not through self-sufficiency or simply getting our act together but through apology and repentance. From a place of humility, we can reclaim and impart the true essence of our faith not by hiding our failures, weaknesses, and sins but by owning them and allowing grace to heal and transform us.

This is how we dismantle the façade of religious pretense and recover a faith that is both authentic and fruitful.

A spirit of apology should shape the way we engage with others. Patti and I, though far from perfect, have tried over the years to weave this posture of humility into the fabric of our marriage and parenting. We learned early on that pretending to be better spouses or more

competent parents than we actually were—standing above correction or critique—only creates distance. Rather than drawing our children in, a self-protective posture places a burden on their hearts.

So we chose as much as possible to take the lower, more honest road. To bring our flaws into the light. To own our shortcomings without excuse. And to invite our kids into the healing moments that so often begin with two simple, trust-building words: "I'm sorry."

I remember one evening when I failed in a way that still stings to recall. I had grown frustrated with one of our daughters and, in the heat of the moment, spoke to her sharply and called her an unflattering name. The look on her face told me everything. Words spoken in frustration, especially from a father, can wound in ways that linger long after the moment has passed. To make matters worse, her sister was there too, taking in behavior no child should have to witness from her father.

That night at dinner, I knew that sweeping it under the rug wasn't an option. So I apologized. To the daughter I hurt directly, because "sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can cut us deeply." To her sister, who had seen it happen. To Patti, who felt rightly grieved that the man she married had spoken so harshly to their child.

And in one of the many grace-filled moments that have quietly marked our family over the years, she forgave me. As she—and each member of our family—has graciously done more times than I deserve.

We've never aimed to be flawless parents. But we have hoped to be honest ones. Parents who model the gospel not by pretending we never mess up but by owning our wrongs, seeking forgiveness, and trusting that love—real love—grows in the soil of humility and grace.

King David seemed to be on a similar track when he wrote, "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." God is pleased when we bring our brokenness and contrition not only to