

Mother

Mercy Manifest

Romans 12:8 exhorts for **“he that sheweth mercy”** to do so **“with cheerfulness.”** Mary Ann Bickerdyke 1817-1901 from Galesburg Illinois showed mercy manifold **“with cheerfulness”** as a nurse and hospital administrator for the Union Army during the American Civil War. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Ann_Bickerdyke and her biography *Cyclone in Calico* by Nina Brown Baker archive.org/stream/cycloneincalico001060mbp/cycloneincalico001060mbp_djvu.txt. The title comes from an irate doctor who complained to his commandant about Mrs Bickerdyke’s visit to his hospital, pp 54-55. Alluding to Mrs Bickerdyke’s garb *he shouted to the astonished commandant that a “cyclone in calico” had invaded his hospital and turned it upside down.* Mrs Bickerdyke spoke with the commandant soon afterwards and thereby made herself indispensable to the army for the duration of the war. *The interview that followed is not recorded, but in after years Mrs. Bickerdyke said simply, “I talked sense to him.”* The irate doctor gave no more trouble.



Mary Ann Bickerdyke in 1898

It had all started when Mrs Bickerdyke’s pastor asked her in the summer of 1861 to care for sick soldiers in camp at Cairo, Illinois. The camp was overcrowded and unsanitary. Many men were ill and some had died. Mrs Bickerdyke visited the tented hospitals there, all of which were filthy. She arranged for the sick men to have hot baths, better food, cleaned-up quarters and clean bedding. When she summoned the men to their hot baths and chicken dinners, it was **“with cheerfulness,”** p 42.

...beckoning the doctor [in charge] and two or three volunteers to accompany her, she marched upon the first tent. She waited a minute, while the dull eyes of the sick men turned toward her. Then, unexpectedly, she laughed.

“If your mas could see you now! I bet they ain’t one of you had a bath since you left home. Well, we’re going to clean things up around here, boys. We’re going to clean you up, too. Now how many of you can walk if you try real hard? I got men here to carry you if you can’t. But how many can get up for a hot bath and a clean bed and a real home supper? This ain’t the sergeant getting you up for drill, remember. Come on, now. Who can walk for fried chicken?”

A surprisingly large number of them could, and did. Those too weak to totter out on their own feet were carried, and set down near the hogsheads-turned-bathtubs...

Mrs Bickerdyke knew Proverbs 17:22 **“A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones”** and in mercy how to mend broken spirits along with languishing bodies. The soldiers to whom Mrs Bickerdyke ministered responded with uplifted spirits and great affection, p 52. *They called her Mother...Before the summer passed Mrs. Bickerdyke was Mother to every enlisted man in camp, sick or well.* The name stuck and would be used not only by enlisted men.

Mercy as Compassion

Showing mercy **“with cheerfulness”** Romans 12:8 as Mother Bickerdyke did is meant to cheer those ministered to and lift their spirits because **“A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance: but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken”** Proverbs 15:13. Luke shows that mercy in Romans 12:8 is therefore compassion manifest as practical care. **“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him...Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise”** Luke 10:33-34, 36-37. That was Mother Bickerdyke’s calling and strength.

“Nobody alive left out there”

Mrs Bickerdyke accompanied the Union Army during its advance into Tennessee where she cared for the many wounded from the days-long battle for Rebel-held Fort Donelson in February 1862. She helped scour the battlefield to bring in every possible survivor. On one occasion in spite of her exhaustion, Mrs Bickerdyke continued her search after dark, with an unexpected result, pp 84-85.

In his tent on the field, a Union officer was sleepless...Colonel John A. Logan...tossed on his cot and cursed his wound...it stung and ached...He got up for a drink of water, and looked out to see how the weather was. The weather was cold, but the sky had cleared, with a waning moon dimly lighting the darkness. While he looked, it seemed to Colonel Logan that he saw another light, close to the ground, and moving a little. It strengthened as his eyes accustomed themselves to the night, and flitted to another spot.

The colonel shuddered. Some ghoul, robbing the dead? What else could it be?...Colonel Logan roused his sleeping orderly. “Find that man and bring him to me!” he roared.

The orderly went, and for a long time he did not come back. When he did, he had Mother Bickerdyke with him.

“I was glad to have your boy’s help,” she said cheerfully. “...I had to satisfy myself. They ain’t nobody alive left out there. Now I know that, I can sleep. You ought to be asleep yourself, son.” She peered at him, holding her lantern high. “Wounded, ain’t you? That’s a mighty messy-looking bandage you got there. Let me fix it” whereupon she did.

Like Mrs Bickerdyke scouring the wilderness in the dark with a lantern for the sake of the dead, today’s believer ***“sheweth mercy”*** Romans 12:8 in scouring ***“the darkness of this world”*** Ephesians 6:12 ***“with the light of the glorious gospel of Christ”*** 2 Corinthians 4:4 for the sake of the dead as Paul reminds the Ephesians. ***“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins...But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)”*** Ephesians 2:1, 4-5.

“Stretched seventy-five miles”

Mrs Bickerdyke’s hospital work was demanding in the extreme for both herself and the volunteers who worked with her, p 86. *For the first ten days after the Donelson battle, she never slept in a bed or took off her clothes. “I felt,” she said afterward, “like my nerves was stretched seventy-five miles.” They were steel nerves, and equal to the tension.* As Paul states, with the same application to today’s believer ***“And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work”*** 2 Corinthians 9:8.

“The one person...who outranks me”

By 1864 General William T. Sherman en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Tecumseh_Sherman had assumed command of the Union Army in the Western Theatre of the war where Mrs Bickerdyke ministered. He too saw her as indispensable but Mrs Bickerdyke’s forthright manner still rankled with some senior officers and those close to them, pp 159-160. One day, a colonel came to Sherman with a complaint *that his wife had been grossly insulted by a nasty old woman.*

“I didn’t know we had any nasty old women in our army,” General Sherman remarked. “Who might she be, now?”

“I believe she calls herself Bickerdyke, sir.”

“Mother Bickerdyke?” The general laughed. “Oh, well, this is too bad. You’ve picked on the one person around here who outranks me. If you want to lodge a complaint against her, you’ll have to take it to President Lincoln.”

In conclusion therefore, today’s believer should understand and trust in Proverbs 22:29 ***“Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men.”***