

Blessed are the Merciful

The Beatitudes #6

Matthew 5:7

But he has told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Therefore, go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

"If you curse me, then I will bless you. If you hurt me, I will forgive. And if you hate me, then I will love you. I choose the Jesus way." Those lines to the song Sean just sang get me every time. Here's why: Choosing the Jesus Way implies rejecting all other ways, most especially our way. And that's hard. Before we could walk, one word dominated our lexicon: "mine." Put a pull in front of two toddlers and they won't choose the Jesus Way. They'll both say "mine." When those toddlers graduate to adolescents, they feel right at home at Burger King. Because "at B.K., have it your way. Your rules." When those adolescents become adults, they'll have one of those bosses that tells them "do it my way or it's the highway." When those young adults turn 50, they'll unearth this tune from the pile of Frank Sinatra records they inherited from their parents: "the record shows I took the blows. And I did it my way."

What makes the beatitudes so inspiring, so motivational, so convicting, and so incredibly hard to put into practice is they outline the Jesus Way for us. And the Jesus Way is so unnatural from "my way." The Jesus way says I need salvation and that can only come by being poor in spirit, mourning over sin, and, in meekness, saying, like the tax collector: "have mercy upon me, Oh God, a sinner." Then a change takes place in this Jesus Way. I begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness and the things of God. Then, the Jesus way moves into action. We know this because the fifth beatitude is the first one that involves an action toward others: it's the action of showing mercy. That might not be my way. That might not be your way. But I'll assure you that the mercy way is the Jesus way. For it is written: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

If the merciful receive mercy, this beatitude is extremely important for us to put into practice, don't you think? To do that, we must learn: (a) what mercy is; (b) how mercy operates in our lives; (c) what the merciful receive; and (d) why it matters. But before we do that, pray with me.

1. What Mercy Is

- **The Portrait:** (1) I once heard a story about a girl who stopped by a photographer's booth in Central Park to get her picture taken. When she got the polaroid, she looked at it and said "This is not right! This picture has done me no justice." To which the cameraman responded: "Ma'am, you don't need justice. What you need is mercy."
- **What Mercy Is Not:** (1) It's not grace – We often get grace confused with mercy. Grace is "unmerited favor." It's God giving us, through no effort or merit of our own, what we do not deserve. Peter didn't deserve a second chance to "feed the sheep" after he abandoned Jesus three times. But he got it on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. That's unmerited favor. (2) Nor is it not giving us what we do deserve – That's the definition of mercy I've heard often. But giving/not giving implies a gift/or a lack thereof. Anytime you speak of "gift" in relationship to God, you are talking about grace, not mercy.
- **What Mercy Is:** It has a two-part definition. (1). Mercy is God withholding from us what we have earned. The Ninevites were ruthless with God's people and had earned the wrath and condemnation of God. But God withheld what they had earned through the reluctant preaching of Jonah. (2) Mercy is God demonstrating his compassion to an offender when it is in his power to do otherwise. "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways," Jonah 3:10 tells us, "he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened." (3) Mercy then has to do with withholding and relenting. And the withholding and the relenting is brought about because of compassion. It is "thou shalt not," tempered by the voice of Jesus on Calvary saying "Father, forgive them for doing what You said not to do."
- **Something to Think About:** The highest essence of Christian discipleship is when your thou shalt not's have been violated. You know it and the offending party knows it. And with great compassion, you withhold what has been earned. And see them through kind and benevolent eyes instead, just as Jesus did on the cross. That's easier said than done. But that's the beatitude.

2. How Mercy Should Operate

- **George Foreman Commercials:** (1) George Foreman was so effective at commercials that he inspired me to buy a George Foreman Grill. (2) "Hi, I'm George Foreman," he said, "two-time world heavyweight champion and the inventor of the George Foreman Grill." (3) One of the great things about the Gospel is Jesus values us before we do anything. He would introduce George Foreman not as the two-time heavy weight champion, but as one of his dearly loved children. Because for Jesus, who we are is more important than what we do. (3) Your identity in Christ – who you are in him – is what produces mercy. You can't be merciful otherwise because mercy is supernatural and has to come from a different nature altogether: God's nature.
- **Mercy Operates by Being:** (1) The words "be" and "being" are as important for the Christian as words like mercy, grace, cross, resurrection, and Calvary. Our life experiences are about doing things. And through what we do, we build an identity. We're all the two-time heavy weight champion and the inventor. We've earned it. We've proved it, all through the sweat of our brow. (2) Our faith works the opposite way. We're given an identity when we, poor in Spirit, throw ourselves at the foot of the cross and say "Lord, save me." That new identity comes by God's

grace and were made a different kind of being. And then we live that out. Our activity does not build our identity. It flows out of our identity. Consequently, mercy flows from that identity. But that's not all.

- **Mercy Operates By Becoming:** (1) "Becoming" is also an important word for us. Retribution is natural. Mercy isn't. (2) We are given a new identity at salvation through the Spirit of God. That's being. We are "in Christ." (2) But His Spirit empowers us in life to produce traits that are in no way natural for the flesh to produce. That's becoming. And as we see ourselves grow, becoming hungry and thirsty for righteousness, we'll see ourselves becoming more and more "merciful" to those around us.
- **The Sons of Zebedee:** (1) James and John were called *Bonerges* by Jesus, meaning "The Sons of Thunder." They wanted, like Elijah, to call fire down from heaven on those who rejected Jesus. (2) But Jesus gave them a new identity. That's being. (3) And, consequently, in the case of John, he became the disciple who used the word "beloved" more than any other disciple. (3) The thunder was still there because God created him to be thunderous. But the withholding was too. That's becoming.
- **Something to Think About:** You have to rely on the Spirit to empower you to be merciful. That empowerment comes only by being and becoming.

3. What We Receive

- **The Mercy Rule:** (1) In amateur athletics, there is something those who find themselves on the losing end of a game dread, especially if that game is getting out of hand. (2) It's called the Mercy Rule. When you are on a baseball team that's getting beat like a tied-up goat, the umpire can say "It's over. The tied-up goat has had enough." (3) The Mercy Rule in amateur athletics spares us from further catastrophe. The Mercy Rule in the future spares the blessed of the beatitudes from judgment.
- **Down the Road** — (1) "Shall receive" is perfect tense in the language of the NT. That's important because the action of "receive" starts in the present and has implications for the future. (2) Jesus has a lot to say about what his 2nd coming is going to be about. In the 1st coming, Jesus came as the Suffering Servant who was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. But in the 2nd coming, Jesus is coming on the clouds in all his glory to separate the sheep from the goats. (2) One of those parables about the 2nd coming tells us something very important about how the mercy or lack thereof that we show now in the present will impact the mercy or lack thereof shown to us on that day. It's called the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. It's a parable about a servant who owed a king 10 thousand bags of gold. He couldn't pay so he ordered that he and his family be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees saying "Please, Lord, be patient with me and I will pay back everything." He couldn't. But the king had compassion on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when another man owed this servant 100 silver coins and the same narrative happened, he had the man thrown into prison. As a result, the king in his anger said: "after what I've done for you, this is how you treat this man?" And he handed him over to the jailers to be tortured. Then Jesus says: "this is how my heavenly Father will treat you (in the future) unless you forgive your brother or sister from the heart (Mt 18:35)
- **Right Now** — The only other spiritual virtue commanded more in the Bible than mercy is love. Mercy is that important. (1) There's a reason it's commanded: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam 3:22-22). (2) There's a volume of the commands: probably because it's so difficult. (a) Jesus: "be merciful, even as your Heavenly Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36); And "go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (b) Micah: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." (Mi 6:8). (3) There's a way it looks in action: It looks like the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
- **Something to Think About:** "Two things in life are infinite: the stupidity of man and the mercies of God" — G.I. Gurdjieff

4. Why It Matters

- **There's a Lot at Stake:** (1) You say this when there is a lot to be gained or lost. This idiom comes to us from an ancient practice. People would bet on someone fighting a bear staked to the ground. "They better not lose," they said, "because there is a lot at stake."
- **There is a lot at stake when it comes to mercy.** (a) Our Eternal Future — "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:36-38). Though we are saved by grace through faith, the mercy or lack thereof in you will confirm your eternal position or cause you to question it (and rightly so). (b) Our Community and Mission — "The church is a hospital in which nobody is completely well, and anyone can relapse at any time" (J.I. Packer). When mercy ceases to reign, our community and mission becomes compromised. (c) View of God in the Eyes of Others — God doesn't need us to defend his reputation. He can take care of that himself. But we bear His image: "Be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful." When we aren't, we hide God's image for others.
- **It demands a level of faith from you that you will find most difficult to put into practice.** The older I get, the more I recognize that it's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that trouble me. It's the parts I do. And mercy is one of those issues. Mercy is a virtue that requires supernatural empowerment to demonstrate. And you can be merciful with God's help.
- **Be judicious with your anger. But generous with your mercy.** We have a right to our anger. We don't have a right to our resentment, bitterness, and unforgiveness. God guards his anger with a stiff safety lock, but his mercy has a hair trigger (John Piper). So must we. To the glory of God. Amen.