

The Beatitudes, Part 5: Blessed Are The Merciful

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Mercy is not a quality we expect to see much these days. Instead, our eyes, ears and emotions are assaulted daily, even hourly in the case of radio and TV news items, by violence, injustice, willful stubbornness, intransigence, bigotry, scams, prejudice and intolerance. Acts of mercy are so rare that, when they do occur, they make headline news, replete with pictures, in newspapers and magazines and on television.

This is not to say that mercy is not admired. It indeed is, which accounts for it making headlines when the media hear of it happening. Though people admire the merciful and wish they were more like them, they rarely take the opportunity to express mercy when such a chance arises.

Perhaps because the Bible is so readily available in the Western world, our culture admires mercy. Ancient Rome did not share our admiration. Romans spoke of four cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, temperance and courage—but not mercy. The *Interpreter's Bible* states that the Romans despised pity! The Greeks held similar views, thinking that mercy indicated weakness rather than strength. Aristotle wrote that pity was a troublesome emotion.

The Pharisees, harsh in their self-righteous judgments of others, showed little mercy. Jesus saying of them in Matthew 23:23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the other undone." This difference makes apparent how far apart God and men are on the value we should place upon specific qualities of character.

We need to remind ourselves from time to time that the Beatitudes represent signs of those who are truly Christ's disciples. They help identify those upon whom God's blessings rest to aid them in living joyfully. From another angle, they describe the nature of true happiness.

How much different they are from what the carnal mind, driven by sight, strives to use to achieve happiness! The carnal mind desires to possess things, power and social standing because it thinks happiness resides in them. God reveals that the ultimate sense of human well-being comes from possessing and cultivating spiritual qualities that derive from a relationship with Him. These are the elusive characteristics that carnal mankind is looking for and cannot find.

We also must not be misled into believing that, because Jesus says that the merciful will obtain mercy, this somehow proves salvation by works. Nothing anywhere in the Bible supports this conclusion. Jesus does not describe the foundation of a sinner's hope of receiving God's mercy, but traces the spiritual features of His people.

Mercy Over Judgment

Mercy is a very prominent spiritual feature; it is an indispensable trait in the holy, divine character that becomes ours as a result of a warm and close relationship with God. It is a quality given to us through His indwelling Spirit as we yield in obedience and cultivate it.

In the context of the outcome of our lives, we must not underestimate the quality of mercy. Jesus plainly asserts that the merciful are blessed, but there is much more to mercy. Perhaps no verse states its importance more clearly than James 2:13: "For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." Does anyone not want a merciful judgment from God, before whom all must stand?

Proverbs 21:13 cites a practical example of this principle in action: "Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard." Jesus vividly captures the essence of this valuable principle in concluding the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant: "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matthew 18:35). Could this be a major reason why we are not as blessed as we desire to be?

Although this beatitude begins the second group, it is not disconnected from the first four; it is inextricably linked with the others. However, it begins the four beatitudes that are more outward toward fellow man rather than inward toward God. It is more obviously a fruit, a clearly visible action produced by the first four beatitudes.

What Does It Mean?

English language dictionaries are of limited help in understanding this mercy's biblical usage. In English "mercy" is normally used to mean showing compassion, forbearance, pity, sympathy, forgiveness, kindness, tenderheartedness, liberality or refraining from harming or punishing offenders or enemies. These synonyms give us some insight on this word; they all express how a merciful person might act. However, none of them specifically pictures what biblical mercy is, because the scriptural concept is virtually untranslatable into a single English word.

The Greek word used in Matthew 5:7, *eleemon*, means essentially the same as its English counterpart, "merciful." However, in all likelihood Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and the idea behind His statement about mercy come from Old Testament—that is, Hebrew—usage and teaching. The word He would have used is the Hebrew and Aramaic *chesed*.

William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible* commentary on Matthew states regarding this word:

It does not mean only to sympathize with a person in the popular sense of the term; it does not mean simply to feel sorry for some in trouble. *Chesedh* [sic], *mercy*, means the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until we can see things with his eyes, think things with his mind, and feel things with his feelings.

Clearly this is much more than an emotional wave of pity; clearly this demands a quite deliberate effort of the mind and of the will. It denotes a sympathy which is not given, as it were, from outside, but which comes from a deliberate identification with the other person, until we see things as he sees them, and feel things as he feels them. This is *sympathy* in the literal sense of the word. *Sympathy* is derived from two Greek words, *syn* which means *together with*, and *paschein* which means *to experience* or *to suffer*. *Sympathy* means *experiencing things together with the other person*, literally going through what he is going through. (p. 103)

Much easier said than done! Having a sense of another's feelings to this degree is very difficult to do because we are normally so self-concerned, so aware of our own feelings, that sensitivity for others

to this depth often requires a great effort of the will. Normally, when we feel sorry for someone, it is an exclusively external act because we do not make the effort to get inside another's mind and heart until we can see and feel things as he does. It is not easy to walk in another person's shoes.

True Mercy's Beginning

The world, from which we have all come, is true to its nature; it is unmerciful. The world prefers to insulate itself against the pains and calamities of others. It finds revenge delicious and forgiveness tame and unsatisfying.

This is where we all begin. Indeed, all too often in the church, worldliness is hardly dormant, revealing itself in acts that show some degree of cruelty. Usually, these cruelties are delivered verbally, but all too frequently, brethren simply ignore the real needs of others.

The mercy Jesus teaches is not humanly derived. He says in Matthew 6:14, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you." This occurs, not because we can merit mercy by being merciful or forgiving of others, but because we cannot receive the mercy and forgiveness of God unless we repent. We cannot claim to have repented of our sins if we are unmerciful towards the sins of others.

The truly merciful are too aware of their own sins to deal with others in sharp condemnation, so they constrain themselves to deal humbly and kindly with those in need. Nothing moves us to forgive others like the amazing realization that God has forgiven *our* sins. Mercy in God's children begins by experiencing His forgiveness of them, and perhaps nothing proves more convincingly that we have been forgiven than our readiness to forgive.

Recognizing God's mercy is a key element in motivating our expressions of mercy. Too many people today, even in the church, possess a "welfare mentality." They go through life with little or no gratitude, thinking they deserve the handouts of governments or private citizens. Ingratitude is vital to understanding this because, as long as one is unthankful, his thoughts will center on himself. The merciful person is sensitive to others' needs and takes action to supply them. An ungrateful person, though, insulates himself from others' pains because he is too focused on his own perceived miseries.

God Is Our Model

God does not insulate Himself from the world's misery, as John 3:16 says: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." In Jesus Christ, God literally got inside men's skin. On this principle, Paul writes:

For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:16-18)

Hebrews 4:15 echoes the same thought: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Barclay comments: "He came as a man; he came seeing things with men's eyes, feeling things with men's feelings, thinking things with men's minds. God knows what life is like, because God came right inside life" (p. 104). Jesus Christ is not remote, detached and disinterested, nor insulated and isolated from our lives. He knows our frame; He knows that we are but dust. He can see in us a reflection of what He experienced as a man. He can thus extend mercy to us, completely understanding what we are going through.

Psalms 103:1-14 gives strong evidence that God's mercy has no end:

Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.

God is our model of mercy, and we are to reflect His mercy in our actions toward fellow man. Because our powers are so limited compared to His, we cannot reflect it in many ways, but from beginning to end, the Bible's writers show God extending mercy in an almost endless variety of ways.

The Mercy Seat

The second commandment expresses His broad and generous giving of mercy, an indication of His selectivity in giving it and its enduring quality:

You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)

A well-known use of "mercy" is that God calls the lid of the ark of the covenant the "mercy seat." The Israelites transported the ark, a gilt chest containing the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, wherever they journeyed. Normally, it remained in the holy of holies, where God symbolically resided, first in the Tabernacle and later in Solomon's Temple.

The mercy seat symbolizes God's throne, where He judges men's conduct, and its name reflects the basic nature of His judgments, which always rest on mercy. This does not mean that God is soft-headed in judgment, carelessly overlooking men's sins. Even so, it is God's nature to be merciful

rather than severe, acrimonious, implacable and vengeful. Unlike men, God finds ways to change men so He can be merciful.

God's judgments always contain a perfect balance of justice and mercy. Though He mercifully forgives a repentant sinner, the sinner does not escape without some measure of painful judgment. In any given circumstance requiring a judgment between justice and mercy, men's judgment may be "all over the map," but God's judgment, tending toward mercy, will be perfect.

David understood this, as a judgment of God against him and Israel in II Samuel 24 shows. David had sinned in numbering Israel, an undertaking God had forbidden. When God exposed his sin and confronted him, He gave him three choices regarding penalties that would befall Israel.

And David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man." So the LORD sent a plague upon Israel from the morning till the appointed time. From Dan to Beersheba seventy thousand men of the people died. And when the angel stretched out his hand over Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the destruction, and said to the angel who was destroying the people, "It is enough; now restrain your hand." (II Samuel 24:14-16)

God records David's wise choice because it is worthy of our emulation. In modern language, he "threw himself on the mercy of the court" of the great God of heaven. The greater "David," Jesus Christ followed the same reasoning during His life, even though a judgment of the court of heaven was not one of sin against Him:

. . . when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: . . . who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. . . . (I Peter 2:20-21, 23)

Mercy and Judgment

Clearly, exercising mercy requires precise and correct judgment, something we often, sadly, greatly lack. Not every circumstance that may require mercy is exceedingly difficult to judge, but some are because we are not really "inside" the other person's mind enough to pursue a balanced approach to his needs. Human nature tends to go to the extremes of, on the one hand, being too confident of ourselves, rigid and harsh, or on the other, being too insecure, lenient and tender. It is quite common for people's feelings to get in the way of proper judgment. This is understandable, but it does not prevent the judgments from being wrong, either harshly intolerant or weakly tolerant.

One woman did not "get inside" Jesus to know either His need or her own:

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is

needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."
(Luke 10:38-42)

Though Martha's service was undoubtedly good, in this case her judgment told her to serve in an inappropriate way, and Jesus corrected her. She thought she was being kind to Him, but resentment was building in her, and her kindness was misplaced. In reality, all her activity was insensitive to the situation and resulted in her being mildly chastised. Martha loved Jesus and intended to be kind, but she gave her "kindness" in her own way, more or less forcing it upon the situation whether anybody else liked it or not. She produced an unintentional unkindness to the situation and to Jesus.

The New Testament instructs us in a number of places not to judge our brother. This does not mean we should not judge at all; a broader view of this subject shows we should be cautious and not condemn. We must judge, because making choices and acting upon them requires judgment. When we must judge a brother, we must remember that we really know very little about their situation. This plays a large role in skewing our judgment.

This is where mercy enters. We must judge people from the inside out, as it were. There are reasons why they—and we—act as we do. If we knew their reason(s), we could much more easily understand, sympathize, forgive, be patient and tolerant toward them—or for that matter, be harder on them if need be. When we take this approach, both justice and mercy are tempered by clearer understanding of another's words, attitudes and conduct.

A French proverb states, "To know all is to forgive all." This saying is somewhat similar to the more commonly known, "There but for the grace of God go I." They touch upon the general truth that, if we really look inside another person deeply and clearly enough, we begin to see ourselves reflected in them. The circumstances, chronology and specific situations may be somewhat different, but the human nature expressed in them will be the same. Once we recognize this, it greatly tempers our judgment of the other and almost automatically activates the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Forgiveness or mercy follows.

Mercy Toward the Miserable

One man mused that mercy is love expressed toward the miserable, as well as that mercy encompasses both the kindly feeling and the kindly act. He left "miserable" undefined, thus the person is either miserable because of the way life had treated him, because of his suffering, or miserable because of the way he is treating the merciful person. Either way, the statement applies. I Corinthians 13 illustrates many ways that love mercifully expresses itself toward others.

Many are miserable because of their circumstances. Jesus' best known teaching on this is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Notice how He brings out both the feeling and the acts that are encompassed within mercy:

"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where [the injured man] was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' So which of these three [the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan] do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" And [the

lawyer] said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:33-37)

A parable is not a news report. However, in a real-life situation, a priest or a Levite might have widely varying feelings when confronted with such a situation. They might range from aversion and/or fear that a similar tragedy might happen to him if he remained in the area, to sympathy and commiseration. Jesus does not explore this angle, but we can understand the possibility because we also are not unmoved by another's plight. We are not cold marble statues without feelings.

Jesus does not mention what the priest and Levite specifically felt, but He clearly shows that mercy began with the Samaritan feeling compassion for the wounded man. Then, the Samaritan made a number of sacrifices to meet the miserable man's needs. How frequently are we moved to make some small sacrifice toward relieving another's misery, but never mercifully follow through?

To illustrate the second definition of "miserable," many treated Jesus miserably, finally murdering Him, though He was innocent of every single charge. However, He returned their miserable treatment of Him with mercy. He looked inside them, considered why they acted as they did, and died for them that they might live to God. Among His final words were, "Father, forgive them [be merciful], for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Mercy Toward Each Other

A number of passages in the New Testament exhort us to use mercy in our relations with each other. Paul counsels us:

. . . with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. . . . Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:2-3, 31-32)

He adds in Colossians 3:12-14:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

With admonitions like these, we step into the intimate personal relationships within a congregation or family. They show that unity depends more upon the exercise of the members' moral qualities than the structure of the institution. Paul shows in Ephesians that the life we are called to live is characterized by five qualities: humility, meekness, patience, forbearance and love, the last of which embraces the preceding four and is the crown of all virtues. Each of these qualities enables us to act in mercy and live at peace. God's Spirit empowers us to use these qualities to overcome the ill will and the bitter, passionate rages that lead to clamorous slander, destroying reputations.

Such ill will and rage hardly promote kindness, compassion and acting in grace toward each other. "Acting in grace" is an acceptable translation of the Greek word, *charizomai*, rendered "forgiving" in Ephesians 4:32. Acting in grace catches the essence of how God has acted toward us and our sin

against Him. And because He has forgiven us, we are commanded to forgive each other (Colossians 3:13).

Mercy begins with the way we feel about or toward each other and moves toward merciful acts. God loves us and has an outgoing concern for us. If God so loves us, then we ought to love each other (I John 4:11). Thus, we are bound to forebear with one another and act kindly, in mercy. Anybody focused on himself as the center of the universe will have a difficult time thinking kindly of others, and unity will be difficult, if not impossible. It is no wonder, then, why so much divorce occurs, as well as division in other areas of life. A focus on the self does not allow much room for humble, kind and compassionate thoughts of service for others.

Mercy Toward Us

We find perhaps the clearest example of mercy's importance to us in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats:

And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Then they also will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?" Then He will answer them, saying, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:33-46)

Jesus promises in this beatitude that those who give mercy will obtain it. This parable expresses two similar and very important principles regarding life: Galatians 6:7 states the first as, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." This is a principle that anyone who plants seeds knows. We would consider it absolutely foolish to think that we could plant corn and reap strawberries! But how many apply this same principle in their actions toward fellow man? God takes the mystery out of this: If we act in mercy, in kindness and compassion, we will receive the same.

The second principle is similar. It is not given within the imagery of sowing and reaping, but of reciprocity, which shows reward more strongly as well as a more direct involvement by God. Our Savior explains this within the context of showing mercy:

He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.
He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward.
And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a
righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of water
in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.
(Matthew 10:40-42)

David adds in II Samuel 22:26, "With the merciful You will show Yourself merciful." In this regard,
Jesus makes our responsibility very plain in Luke 6:37-38:

Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned.
Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure,
pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with
the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.

Mercy grows in us as a result of our personal experience with the merciful God. It is an important
element toward making an effective witness that we share a relationship with Him. Notice these
truths from the Psalms:

- » "The righteous shows mercy and gives" (Psalm 37:21).
- » "All the paths of the LORD are mercy and truth, to such as keep His covenant and His
testimonies" (Psalm 25:10).
- » "For You, LORD, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those
who call upon You. . . . But You, O LORD, are a God full of compassion, and gracious,
longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth" (Psalm 86:5, 15).

When we study His Word with understanding, we are confronted by the fact that every act of God,
from the very first germ of His plan in eternity past until right now, is also touched by His mercy.
This is why Psalm 103:17 says, "The mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting." He is the
pattern we are to emulate, and He has given each of us an abundant demonstration of His mercy. We
need never fear what He does, what He has planned for us or what He leads us into because, as Psalm
136:1 so clearly states, "Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever."

He will not, He cannot change from what He is, but we can and must change to be like Him. Let us
learn, let us commit ourselves and strive to be merciful as He is merciful!