

Blessed are the Merciful

Matthew 5:7

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

I read a story recently about two brothers. They were identical twins, and were very, very close. They even took over their father's business when he died. One day, in the store, one brother left a dollar bill on top of the register and went to help a customer in the front of the store. When he came back, the bill was gone. He asked his twin brother if he took the money. He said, no, of course not. A little later he asked again – maybe with a bit more suspicion. His brother became angry and defensive.

Over time they would bring the matter up and it led to bitterness and division. Unbelievably, they eventually dissolved their partnership, put up a partition in the store and ran competing businesses – an open wound in the middle of the community. Twenty years (!) later a man came in the store and confessed to stealing the money. A confession which led to the reconciliation of the brothers. It's an extreme example, but we see similar things like it all the time. Friends divided. Family members estranged. Churches torn apart.

Alienations, large and small, accumulated, defended, and allowed to harden. Grudges kept, clung to, in some cases, with a death grip. Bitter memories of some slight, treasured, and turned over and over in our heads. All of it occurring in an atmosphere where the free mercy of God has vanished, where some tit for tat notion of fairness or justice or revenge – or the desire to punish the other -- has replaced the gospel.

Our beatitude this morning: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy-- is a healing remedy for the wreckage that corrosive, bitter divisions, bring to our lives and our witness. We will make four points: Mercy defined, Mercy's source, mercy shown, and mercy received.

I. Mercy Defined

First, then, defining mercy. Mercy, like a number of virtues in the beatitudes, was not highly valued in the ancient world. For them, the four cardinal virtues were wisdom, justice, temperance and courage (which certainly are noble). But things like poverty of spirit, meekness, and mercy, were considered unmanly, and weak.

Christianity has forever changed (and enlarged) the West's estimation of the virtuous life.

Now the first thing to say here is that mercy is not some sort of easy-going acceptance of sin and evil. Some sort of spineless tolerance. As if we could overlook the sins of others and then figure God will overlook our sins – that would be a complete distortion of the spirit of this beatitude.

One way to get at defining mercy is to ask how it differs from grace. Now, obviously, mercy and grace are closely related, and they overlap a good bit and are often used together in Scripture.

But, as a rough first approach to the issue we could say: that grace focuses on sin and guilt. The accent in grace is the idea that it pardons and reinstates, it justifies. With mercy, the idea highlighted is the relief, the assistance, the help and pity on the misery *resulting* from sin and guilt. It comforts and lifts up.

We could say that mercy is the attitude of forgiveness toward sinners, from which the grace which pardons, flows. As well as the attitude, the spirit of generosity, from which help and assistance flow. Grace contemplates sinners as undeserving and guilty. Mercy contemplates them in misery and distress.

Mercy then, more simply, is love for those in misery or need. It is most akin to compassion. *And some translations of the beatitudes render this one: blessed are the compassionate, for they shall receive compassion.* And compassion means, literally, to suffer with others. Co-passion. Mercy, then, means getting outside of one's self. It begins as a disposition, but it acts. If it doesn't act, it is not mercy. It takes up the plight of others, it shoulders their burdens, it gets inside and underneath their woes. It freely, generously, expends itself for the sake of relieving others.

II. Mercy's Source

Second, mercy's source. Mercy flows from the infinite mercy of God – the most merciful God. The One who, when his glory passed before Moses, declared that he was “the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious.” Mercy, then, is a chief feature of God's glory, fundamental to his being. And Scripture teaches that his mercy is over all his works. It repeatedly asserts that the Lord is merciful in all his ways, and his mercies are new every morning.

He is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. And Luke can command us: Be merciful, as your Heavenly Father is merciful. And this mercy is embodied in Jesus Christ. He is the mercy of God abounding to the chief of sinners. The God who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, has made us alive together with Christ.

This Christ shows the depths of the mercy of God, perhaps most clearly, when, on the cross, he prays for his enemies, his murderers: "father forgive them, then know not what they do." In Jesus, God has come into our plight, shouldered our sin and our misery, our griefs and our sorrows, our death and condemnation, and gladly expended himself on our behalf.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. And for this reason, you have moved from not being the people of God, to being the people of God. It is according to his MERCY that he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus. As risen, Jesus has become a MERCIFUL and faithful high priest, that we might find mercy and grace to help in time of need. So, the Triune God, revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, he is the wellspring, the source of mercy.

III. Showing Mercy

Third, let's look at showing mercy. Now, the rationale, the basis, and the absolute necessity of our showing mercy is, as we have just seen, that we have received mercy, we have tasted the mercy of the Triune God. He who is forgiven much, loves much, and he who understands the depths of the mercy they've received, shows much mercy. How much mercy you show, is how much mercy you know. If we forget this mercy, we really are in danger of becoming Christian Pharisees. People who tithe mint, and dill, and cumin, but who forget the weightier matters of the law, among which, Jesus says, is mercy.

Mercy then, is not optional. A nice extra we might on occasion indulge in. Mercy is commanded, for it has already been freely given. We might expand this beatitude a bit and put it this way: Blessed are those who having received great mercy, show mercy, for they shall receive further mercy.

Notice that Jesus does not give a scope for the beatitude here. He does not restrict in any way the wideness of our mercy. He expects, as a general rule, that we extend mercy to all men. Let's look at our obligation to show mercy under four categories. First, the household of faith, second, our enemies, third the marginalized, and fourth, people in general.

Household of faith

First, the household of faith. We are, Paul says, to do good to all men, especially to the household of faith. We have a special obligation to our family, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Thus, we are commanded to weep with those who weep, to bear one another's burdens, to assist the poor among us, to tend particularly to widows and orphans. While we are all to show this mercy, some have the gift of showing mercy, and those that do, are to do so, Paul says, with cheerfulness.

The intense importance of this mercy to our brethren, our fellow servants in Christ, is shown most sharply in the parable of the unforgiving servant. You'll recall that the first servant was shown enormous mercy in having his huge debt forgiven. He then went out and beat a FELLOW-SERVANT who owed him a much lesser debt than that which he was forgiven. Hear the Lord's words near the end of that parable: You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Listen: Should not you have had MERCY on your FELLOW SERVANT, as I had on you?

This is an expansion, a living commentary on, what Jesus says later in the SOM: If we do not forgive our brothers from the heart, our heavenly father will not forgive our sins. The one who remembers God's mercy to themselves, who beats their breast like the publican, and is always saying: Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Such a person embraces the weaknesses of others, with gentle, pardoning mercy. The one who doesn't pardon, who insists that the other party does not DESERVE mercy, but who wants repayment, who is callous and judgmental, is not, the parable teaches – is not, IN CHRIST.

So mercy is required. He has shown us what is good and what the Lord REQUIRES: to do justice, to LOVE mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Mercy is required in all cases, but especially in the household of God – and our eternal destiny depends on it. Judgment will be merciless to the one who has not shown mercy, and by the measure you use, so shall it be measured to you.

Enemies

Second, we are to show mercy to our enemies. Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you. In this, we are to imitate our Lord who, as mentioned, when suffering unjustly said: father forgive them, they know not what they do. In fact, it is in the context of doing good to and loving our enemies, that we are reminded that our Father shows his kindness to the ungrateful and the evil.

Anyone can love and greet – anyone can show mercy to – their friends and brothers, even the Gentiles to that. It is here that Jesus says: Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. For we are to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect.

This was wonderfully modelled and described by Corrie Ten Boom who, with great struggle, forgave a guard of the concentration camp where her sister died and she herself suffered terribly. She saw him at a church service in Munich years later, and somehow by God's mercy, managed to extend the love and pardon of Christ to him.

The marginalized

Third, we are to show mercy to the marginalized. The failure to grasp this caused a great deal of the confrontation between Jesus and the religious leadership of his day. Jesus eats with, and shows mercy to, the tax-collectors, to notorious sinners, to prostitutes. And he clearly expects us to imitate him, for it's in the context of his meals with the marginalized, with the sick who need a physician; that he tells the Pharisees:

Go and learn what this means: I desire MERCY, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

People in general

Finally, we are to show mercy, even quite costly mercy, to people in general. That is what the parable of the Good Samaritan is about. Just a guy, beaten on the side of the road. Passed by by the Levite and the Priest, and aided by the hated, yet good, Samaritan (cost time and money). When Jesus asks the lawyer, "who proved to be a neighbor to the man?" He replies: The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus says: You go, and do likewise.

IV. Receiving Mercy

Finally, then, let's look at receiving mercy. It is clear that showing mercy cannot be the ground, the meritorious basis on which we receive mercy. That is why I rewrote the beatitude earlier as follows: Blessed are those who having received great mercy, show mercy, for they shall receive further mercy (From God). That is the force of Jesus' meaning here. Not only have we received mercy in Christ, but, if we walk in mercy, we shall receive further mercy now, and great and glorious mercy, in the Day of Judgment. Indeed, the text – by placing the word THEY in the emphatic position - indicated that ONLY those who show mercy, shall receive it.

The Psalmist (Psalm 18) tells us that with the merciful, the Lord shows himself merciful. He tells us that the sheep of the good Shepherd are followed by goodness and mercy all the days of their life. There is an infinite river of mercy flowing from the wounds of the risen Christ. You have drunk from it, and as you sacrificially show it, you drink in more of it. There is a remedy in the ever-merciful God for mercy fatigue – in His Triune life it never runs out, there is an infinite supply.

Finally, on the last day, we shall be judged, but we shall be judged in the gospel, in Christ. Judged as those who, however imperfectly, have shown the fruit of mercy. And as usual, the reward far exceeds our paltry, but genuine, works. We must show mercy to the poor, the naked, the imprisoned, the sick, the stranger and the enemy. But our reward is still all mercy. And it is the future dimension,

this eschatological mercy, which Jesus is focused on here. Blessed are the merciful for they SHALL receive (future tense) mercy.

The coming day is, for the merciful, a day of salvation, gladness, and an open vindication of the mercy we have already received in Christ. For, as James tells us: mercy triumphs over judgment. You have received great mercy, pour yourself out then in showing it. In doing so, mercy will follow you all the days of your life, and it will engulf you in glory in the coming Day of the Lord. We anticipate and enact this every week in the Kyrie: Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. Amen.

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