

Mercy for the Miserable

SERIES: THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

At one time or another, we all need mercy. My son and I play a game called "Mercy." We clasp hands and try to inflict pain by bending each other's hands back. The first one who can't take it cries "Mercy!" and the game is over. In that case, the winner is not the one who gets mercy but the one who gives it. Unfortunately, he's also the one who's inflicting the pain!

In the ancient world, mercy was scarce, even despised. To the Greeks and Romans, mercy was a sign of weakness. They prized justice, courage, discipline and power. One Roman philosopher said, "Mercy is a disease of the soul." You can see that in the way they treated slaves. Aristotle said slaves were living tools. If he got tired of his slaves, an owner could send them into the Coliseum as dinner for a lion. If a slave got so old he was no longer productive, he could be thrown out like a broken hammer. Babies were not treated much better. If woman gave birth to a girl or a crippled son, the father could simply give a thumbs down and the baby would be disposed of.

In the midst of this merciless world, Jesus proclaimed in the fifth Beatitude, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**" In Jesus' mind, the merciful are to be congratulated; they are winners, not losers.

Today, we hear this and nod our heads in agreement. For the most part, mercy gets pretty good press these days. But it really depends on who we're talking about. Mercy is not for those with a third strike. Mercy may be for the underdog, but not for the top dog. Too much mercy and we wonder if we're maintaining boundaries. We like mercy as long as we get to choose the people and the places where we give it. We might give a little mercy in a food kitchen, but not in the courtroom or the classroom. We may like the sound of this Beatitude, but I'm not sure it's because we're such merciful people. If we really understood Christ's words, they would trouble us as much as they troubled the people of his day.

In order to really understand this Beatitude, we have to start with what Jesus means by mercy.

I. What is mercy?

Mercy is not what we think it is. Mercy is not mere

sentimentality. It's not to be the kind of person that goes around oozing with emotion every time you see someone who is in need.

Nor is mercy a kind of easy-going tolerance. There are too many people today who think that mercy means to pretend like anything goes; to smile at sin and say, "No big deal. We're all human. Nobody's perfect." Mercy is not moral flabbiness. It's not being carefree and unconcerned about what people do.

Nor is mercy a kind of forced, compulsory kindness. Shakespeare wrote, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven..." Mercy is not strained; it starts in the heart. You can drop a quarter in a beggars hat without an ounce of mercy in your heart.

Keep in mind that when we talk about mercy we are talking about something that applies especially to God. Whatever we decide "merciful" means is also true of God. God is not merely sentimental. He's not easy going in his attitude toward wrong. He's holy and just. No one forces him to act in kindness. He doesn't feel one thing and do another. Every act of mercy flows naturally from who he truly is.

So what does mercy really mean? The word used here means the outward manifestation of inward pity. It means to feel something, but it also means to act. We can best understand mercy if we see it in relation to grace. Grace is a loving response to the undeserved; mercy is a loving response to those suffering. So grace extends pardon to those who don't deserve it, while mercy extends relief to those in misery. When God shows us grace he's responding to our sin; when God shows mercy he's responding to our misery.

It is misery that calls forth mercy. It might be physical misery. In Matthew 9 a blind man cries out to Jesus, "**Have mercy on me.**" Jesus responded by healing him. That's mercy. We can understand mercy if we have ever had small children. About a year ago we got a call that our son was being rushed to the hospital because someone accidentally sliced his cheek open with a pizza cutter. When I met him at the emergency room and saw what had happened my heart melted. When the plastic

surgeon began to work on his face and he began to whimper there is nothing I wanted more than to make the pain stop. I wanted to crawl into his skin and suffer for him. Physical misery calls forth mercy.

Sometimes it's a different kind of misery. Tony Campolo tells a story about a visit he made at 3:30 in the morning to a small diner in downtown Honolulu. The guy at the counter was gruff. As he sat there eating his greasy donut a few boisterous prostitutes walked in. He overheard one of them say that tomorrow was her birthday. Her friend responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me, a birthday cake?" The lady, whose name was Agnes, said, "Why should you give me a birthday cake? I've never had a birthday party or a cake in my whole life." At that moment, Campolo made a decision. After they left, he talked to the guy behind the counter about putting together a birthday party for Agnes the next morning when she came in. The guy volunteered to make a cake. Tony started decorating the place at 2:30 the next morning. He made a huge sign that said, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They even spread the word around so that by 3:15 every prostitute in town was there. At 3:30 on the dot Agnes walked in and they all sang "Happy Birthday." Agnes was so flabbergasted that she asked permission to not cut the cake but to take it home so she could enjoy it a while. After she left, the guy behind the counter somehow found out that Campolo was a preacher. He leaned over the counter and asked him, "What kind of church do you belong to?" Campolo said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Mercy responds to all kinds of misery.

One of the difficult things about mercy is that often times it's not deserved. It's one thing to show mercy to the kid down the street who doesn't have a father. It's quite another to show him mercy when he throws a ball through your front window three or four times. It was mercy in Joseph that allowed him to forgive and bless his brothers after they treated him like dirt. It was mercy in David that caused him to twice spare the life of Saul after he tried to nail him to the wall with a spear. It was mercy in Hosea that caused him to take back his wife after she committed adultery.

Of course the greatest expression of mercy is God sending his Son to die on the cross for rebellious sinners. Scripture says we were dead in our sins; we walked according to the course of this world; we indulged in the desires of the flesh and the mind; we were by nature children of wrath. And then it says, "**But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ...raised us up with him...and seated us with him in the heavenly places**" (Eph. 2:1-6). The reason God shows mercy to us is not that we deserve it, but that he loves us.

Mercy is ministry to those in misery. We wonder why this is so important. Why did this matter so much to Jesus?

II. Why is mercy so significant?

The obvious reason is that he cares about people. More than I cared about my son as he was getting his face stitched up, he cares about us. He is moved by people in need. Sometimes we forget that. I mean, why do we do this? Why are we building this sanctuary out here? Why do we have parking attendants and Sunday School teachers and ushers and preachers and mission trips and a budget of over 1.5 million dollars a year? For one reason: God cares about people. He is rich in mercy. If we forget that, we may as well go home and watch TV.

God also knows that showing mercy does us good as individuals. Proverbs 11:17 says, "**The merciful man does himself good, but the cruel man does himself harm.**" Do you want to harm yourself? Be merciless. This even extends to animals. Proverbs 12:10 says, "**The righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.**" Studies show that children who are cruel to animals have a greater propensity toward violence later in life.

Do you want to know the characteristics of a godless society? In Romans 1:28-31, Paul is describing people in a society in the final stages of turning their backs on God. Paul gives a long list of characteristics and puts "unmerciful," as the final thing on the list. It's as if depravity culminates in a society where there is no mercy!

This is one of the ways that we as followers of Christ ought to shine in our life together. As a matter of fact, if we don't have mercy we have reason to question the reality of our faith. 1 John 3:16, 17 says that the way we respond to our brothers and sisters in need says something about the authenticity of our faith.

Jesus seems to give an even greater importance to mercy. He says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." This is a promise of mercy for the merciful. What does that mean? How does that work?

III. The promise of mercy

Some have understood this promise to mean that if we are merciful to others, they will be merciful to us. The idea is that we get what we give. Often that is true, but it's only half true. When we show mercy to others, they don't always show mercy to us. Jesus Christ showed tender mercies to Judas, but that didn't keep Judas from turning him in. There are those who trample on mercy; they see it as their chance to gain something over someone else. They see it as weakness.

The promise of mercy in this statement is not mercy from other people; it's mercy from God. But that raises problems too. It sounds like Jesus is saying that we can earn God's mercy. If you show mercy to others, God will show it to you. But that would obliterate everything else the NT says about God's mercy and grace. God's mercy and grace come to us freely; we can't earn it, it's a gift. God gives it because of who he is, not because of what we do.

If we can't earn God's mercy, what was Jesus saying? He was saying when we know God's mercy, we will show God's mercy. You can't have one without the other. When God deals with us in mercy and grace, we will naturally deal with others in the same way.

In this sense, this Beatitude flows from the first four. We start by being poor in spirit - seeing our spiritual bankruptcy. We then grieve over our sin and begin to beg God for mercy. This creates a genuine kind of meekness where we don't try to throw our weight around because we know how small and needy we are before God. Out of this need we begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Now doesn't it make sense, if I have been through all of that, if I really see myself that way, I will also see other people in a different light? I will look at their wrongs and I no longer see them as people I hate or even dislike, but as people like me who need mercy. Especially if I begin to believe that God has really poured out his mercy on me, making a poor sinner rich, I'll be compelled to be merciful to even those who've done me the greatest harm.

In Matthew 18:21 Peter asked Jesus, "**Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?**" Peter thought he was being generous. The ancient rabbis taught a person should show forgiveness three times. If someone messed up a fourth time, they had gone too far. Peter is willing to go further, but he still saw forgiveness as something with limits. We do the same thing. Think about a person doing something mean to you once. You might forgive them. Then they do it again, you might forgive them again, especially if they are really sorry. But think about it happening seven times; it doesn't matter how sorry they are, you're no doormat! Jesus responds to Peter's question by saying, not seven but seventy times seven. Jesus wasn't just extending the limits of forgiveness, he was saying there are no limits.

We wonder how someone can live that way. How can someone just keep on forgiving? Jesus went on to tell a story to answer that very question. A king wanted to settle accounts with a man who owed him 10,000 talents, an enormous sum. A common laborer in those days had to work twenty years to make one talent. Rome only collected 800 talents a year in taxes from the entire

region of Palestine. This is like 100 million dollars in our economy. Jesus says this man was brought to the king and told to pay up. Obviously he couldn't. The law said when that was the case he and his wife and children could all be sold into slavery. But the man begged for mercy and even promised to pay him back, which was a joke. He was like us before God, with this enormous debt of sin, begging for mercy, promising to change, trying to deal with God. Jesus said the king had mercy on the man and canceled his debt. The man wanted to make a deal, but the king just let him off completely.

The man left and the next day he ran into an associate who owed him about thirty dollars. He choked him, demanding to be paid back. The small time debtor pleaded for mercy with the exact same words that the man had used before the king, but the man had him thrown in prison. It might be possible to pay back 30 dollars, but you can't do it in jail. The man wanted justice more than money. No pity, no mercy. That's like you and me, refusing to forgive someone else, failing to see that our debt to God was so much greater than their debt to us.

Then word got back to the king about the man's behavior, and the king called him in again. He said, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" The king became angry and threw the man into jail until he paid back what he owed, which would have been forever. Then Jesus looks at his disciples and says, "**This is how my Heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.**" These are hard words. What does he mean?

The man in the story had heard about the king's forgiveness, but he never really entered into it. Basically, he believed that he deserved to be forgiven. He saw forgiveness as something he had the right to, and so a sense of the king's true mercy had never really taken hold of his soul. There are people like that today. They claim to know Christ, they claim to know his grace and mercy, but they've never really stood before God and seen the staggering debt they owe him, nor have they experienced the freedom of having that burden lifted, not because they deserved it, but because of mercy. If I claim to be a person who has received God's mercy, and yet I am unwilling to extend that mercy to those who have hurt me, I am proving I really don't know his mercy after all. Those who know God's mercy will show God's mercy. Blessed are the merciful, because they are going to get the mercy for which they are trusting God.

Let me ask you, are you a merciful person? I'm not saying it's easy. I'm not saying it's automatic. I'm not saying you won't go through times where you want revenge or justice. I'm not even saying there aren't times to confront a person or hold him responsible. There can come a time in a relationship where you can forgive but you cannot trust.

But, fundamentally, you know you can't withhold mercy, because you know how much more of it you are counting on from God.

IV. How can we show God's mercy?

As merciful people, we can meet physical needs. Like the Good Samaritan, when we run into hurting people, we can stop, bind up their wounds, and see that their needs are met. We don't have to start a soup kitchen or run a halfway house, but we can stop, we can do something.

As merciful people, we can be sensitive to emotional needs. There are people who just need someone to talk to, or eat with, or write a letter to. They are in hospitals and prisons. Some of them go to your school. Some of them pass by you in the hallways at work. There is no person in your path whom God has not placed there for a reason.

Families need mercy. Sometimes this is the hardest place to show it. Small children who spill their milk need mercy. Teenagers who are trying to figure out who they are need mercy. Your wife needs mercy. Your husband needs mercy. Your parents need mercy. Your in-laws need mercy.

The lost need mercy. Augustine said, "If I weep for the body from which the soul is departed, should I not weep for the soul from which God is departed?" We can show mercy to the lost by praying for them and looking for opportunities to talk to them about the love of God.

CONCLUSION

If you know God's mercy, you will show God's mercy. Former televangelist Jim Bakker went to prison for fraud. He tells about what happened immediately after his release from prison:

When I was transferred to my last prison, Franklin [Graham] said he wanted to help me out when I got out - with a job, a house to live in, and a car. It was my fifth Christmas in prison. I thought it over and said, "Franklin, you can't do this. It will hurt you. The Grahams don't need my baggage." He looked at me and he said, "Jim, you were my friend in the past and you are my friend now. If anyone doesn't like it, I'm looking for a fight."

So when I got out of prison the Grahams sponsored me and paid for a house for me to live in and gave me a car to drive. The first Sunday out, Ruth Graham called the halfway house I was living in at the Salvation Army and asked permission for me to go to the Montreat Presbyterian Church with her that Sunday morning. When I got there, the pastor welcomed me and sat me with the Graham family. There were like two whole rows of them - I think every Graham aunt and uncle and cousin was there. The organ began playing and the place was full except for a seat next to me. Then the doors opened and in walked Ruth Graham. She walked down that aisle and sat next to inmate 07407-058. I had only been out of prison 48 hours, but she told the world that morning that Jim Bakker was her friend.

Afterwards, she had me up to their cabin for dinner. When she asked me for some addresses, I pulled this envelope out of my pocket to look for them - in prison you're not allowed to have a wallet, so you just carry an envelope. She asked, "Don't you have a wallet?" And I said, "Well, yeah, this is my wallet." After five years of brainwashing in prison you think an envelope is a wallet. She walked into the other room and came back and said, "Here's one of Billy's wallets. He doesn't need it. You can have it."

If we're honest, at one time or another all of us have felt like Jim Bakker. In the midst of our misery, Jesus Christ found us. At great cost to himself, he identified with us and brought us into his family; he brought us into his church. When we know his mercy in our lives, we will show it to everyone he brings in our path. And when we do, we will be blessed. God himself will congratulate us. We will be winners and not losers.

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