

Blessed Are the Merciful

“The quality of mercy is not strained; It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath.”¹ Mercy... the Bible has a lot to say about mercy, so it isn’t so surprising that Jesus would say, *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*, Matt. 5:7. It’s one of the “Beatitudes” ... those sayings of Jesus that begin with *“Blessed are...”* (In case you just joined us we’re in the midst of a series of messages on the Beatitudes found in Matt. chap. 5. I urge you to look it up and read and ponder). The Beatitudes certainly provide guidance on what we should do, yet, more importantly, through them Jesus is illustrating how it is we should be. The Christian life is really a counter-cultural pattern for living, and by grace, the Holy Spirit creates within us the ability to reach for these holy possibilities.

The Character of of Mercy

The Bible speaks of mercy often. Let’s take a look. Speaking of God, 1 Chronicles (21:13) tells us that *“his mercy is very great.”* Then you read Nehemiah (9:31) which records the Israelites’ prayer of confession, saying to God, *“But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”* The Bible also tells us that Christ came *“to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God,”* Luke 1:77-78. The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that God’s offer of salvation springs from God’s mercy. *“It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy,”* Romans 9:16. Again, in Ephesians he says that God is *“rich in mercy”* Eph. 2:4. The book of Hebrews (4:16) tells us that when we come to Jesus in prayer we are coming to a throne of grace where we can receive mercy. According to Titus 3:5, God saved us because of his mercy. James 5:11 declares that *“The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.”* Wow that’s a lot of references. From the Old Testament through the New Testament the Bible is replete with references to God’s mercy. How could we ever miss it? Come to Him who is the real “safe space.” Mercy is not just an action that God performs from time to time. Mercy is an attribute of God. It is God’s nature to show mercy.

The Character of Justice

At the same time the Bible is filled with references to justice, which is also an attribute of God. The Old Testament tells us that when the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land God gave them these instructions: *“Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess*

the land the LORD your God is giving you,” Deut. 16:20. In fact, so strong is God’s demand for justice that the Israelites are admonished,

“Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow,” Deut. 27:19. So justice was to be practiced even for those who had no power to demand it. King Solomon “... built the throne hall, the Hall of Justice, where he was to judge, and he covered it with cedar from floor to ceiling,” 1 Kings 7:7. The O. T. prophets reminded kings and people of the divine origin of justice: This is what the LORD says: “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed...” Isaiah 56:1. Over and over again throughout the sayings of the prophets come calls for justice to be practiced. “Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph,” Amos 5:15

Announcing his own ministry Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, “Here is my servant ... I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations,” Matthew 12:18. And later He spoke of the day of judgement. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” Matt. 25:31-32. Justice, which necessarily means judgement, flows from God’s very nature ... that’s only fair.

After the end comes the Day of Judgement ... and no one is exempt. As long as there is evil, there must be judgement. Every sin, every wrong, every evil has to be brought to an end. Without it, there would be no hope... hear me, without an end to evil there would be no hope.

Think about it, without judgement there would be no end to evil in the universe ... or in the heart of people. And there’d be no more heaven, because if evil entered heaven it would need locks and prisons, there would be hatred, fear, and destruction and it would no longer be heaven ...

Judgement comes to everyone. You can never judge yourself by your own standards and your own righteousness, but only in light of His righteousness. For example: which is greater, the moral distance that separates us from the most monstrous of Nazis, or that which separates us from God?

The first separation (between us and the Nazi) is finite. But the second is infinite. The slightest good within ourselves appears, in the eyes of Him who is absolute goodness, are more abhorrent than the crimes of the Nazis appear to us. Compared to absolute Good, our lust is as adultery and our hatred as murder, just as Jesus said (Matt. 5:22, 27). Even one sin separates us from God, infinitely, and it would take an eternity for us to bridge that gap. Every effort by humanity to bridge that infinite gap between God’s absolute goodness and our sinfulness, is doomed to failure.

Mercy Balances Justice

The chasm can only be bridged from the infinite to the finite, from heaven to earth, from God to man. *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many...* Hebrews 9:27-28. Only infinite mercy can answer infinite justice. The infinite mercy of an infinite love is the only thing that can fill the infinite void between us and our Creator.²

We often use the words grace and mercy as if they were synonyms, but they actually reflect different meanings. Grace is God's solution to our sin. Knowing that we cannot atone for the sin within us, God has done so through Jesus Christ. Mercy is God's solution to our misery. Knowing that we mourn our sins, God shows mercy and spares us the spiritual punishment that justice demands. Grace covers the sin, while mercy removes the pain. Grace forgives, while mercy restores. Grace gives us what we don't deserve, mercy withholds what we do deserve. God is just... and God has a heart.

Several weeks ago, when I began this series of messages on the Beatitudes I spoke of the first one: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit."* Blessed are those who know their spiritual bankruptcy before God. Jesus contrasted the prayer of the Pharisee, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector,"* with the tax collector who was ashamed to present himself before God and prayed, *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner,"* Luke 18:11-13. Notice what the tax collector asked of God: mercy ... have mercy on me because I know I'm a sinner. In truth, that is my prayer too ... knowing what I do about myself. Mercy is what love gives to those who deserve to be punished. Justice is recognized, but love pays the penalty and forgoes applying the penalty. Even the best Christian would have no hope of heaven without the shining mercy of God.

The Blessing of Mercy

Those who are merciful will receive God's mercy. And yet Jesus is not telling us that God's mercy depends on our mercy. Everything in the spiritual life begins and ends with God. This beatitude assumes that we have already received God's mercy. The merciful man or woman is truly "mercy-full." He is filled with God's mercy. By definition, the only people who receive mercy are those who don't deserve it. If you deserve it, it's not mercy. This beatitude is not about how you want others to treat you but how God has already treated you. *"Do unto others as God has done unto you."* Jesus said many things like this. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you. As God pours out his mercy on us, we respond by showing mercy to others, which causes us to receive even more mercy from God. If God did not continue to pour

out his mercy like the “gentle rain from heaven,” we would struggle to extend mercy to others.

Does this mean that if we show mercy to others, we can expect they will in turn show mercy to us? In a perfect world ... that would surely be the case. And occasionally it does happen... though it is a fallen world into which we’ve been born, where men and women are by nature selfish and evil. So it should not surprise us that in a world where meekness is called weakness and kindness is called folly, that mercy given will be repaid with bitterness or disdain.

You can’t reform the world by showing mercy. So why do it then? Well, because our Lord himself showed the way and commanded us to. The world may not reward you for showing mercy. Show it anyway. Your friends may take advantage of you. Have mercy anyway. You may be scorned and mocked as a softie. Better you be thought too soft than to have a vengeful heart.

English puritan preacher and writer Thomas Watson (1620 – 1686) said that it is only the merciful who have “good security” in heaven. “For every wedge of gold you part with, you will have a weight of glory. For a cup of cold water, a river of pleasure at God’s right hand.” Thus does God reward his merciful children. Mercy is one of God’s chief attributes. When I show mercy, I am showing forth God in someone’s life. Through me God is extending mercy. The world cannot see mercy in the abstract, but only in the concrete. If you and I don’t show mercy, where in the world will it be found?

A Quality Not Strained

“The quality of mercy is not strained; It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven...” It’s one of William Shakespeare’s most well-known quotes, from the play *The Merchant of Venice*. Let me read for you the whole quote: *The quality of mercy is not strained; It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest; It blesseth him that gives and him that takes: ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes The throned monarch better than his crown: His sceptre shows the force of temporal power, The attribute to awe and majesty, Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; But mercy is above this sceptred sway; It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings, It is an attribute to God himself; And earthly power doth then show likest God’s When mercy seasons justice... Though justice be thy plea, consider this, That, in the course of justice, none of us Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy; And that same prayer doth teach us all to render The deeds of mercy...*³

... Mercy always comes down. It starts with God and moves to humans, it begins in heaven and ends on earth. Pastor and writer Warren Wiersbe summed it up like this: “*Mercy is a bridge God built to mankind. Mercy is a bridge we build toward others.*” We have a purpose: to live the mercy of God.

You don't bargain for mercy because to make a bargain you've got to have something to offer, and we have nothing (spiritually speaking) to offer God. Mercy is indeed like the gentle rain that softens the hard soil of the human heart. It is not strained, as it flows freely from the hand of God. The gentle rain seems a weak thing. But watch it falling on a plot of hard, dry, trampled earth. After awhile there is a softening, and life begins to push up through the mellowed ground.⁴ So it is with the hearts of men and women. When we let divine mercy drop repeatedly on the gardens of our imaginations, our hearts are softened, and mercy begins to fill us, overflowing to others. Isn't this the message God has been speaking for ages? *"My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb,"* Deuteronomy 32:2.

Shakespeare had it right: mercy is a quality most valuable to the most powerful, strongest, and highest people in society. Yet mercy, being the very attribute of God himself, is a quality not to be strained within each one of us, sons and daughters of the Heavenly King as we are. If all of us were to be judged by Him, none would be saved. So it is for mercy that we plea to God ... which He grants and teaches us to render to those whom we would judge.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

¹ *The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene I*, William Shakespeare 1564 – 1616.

² *The Harbinger* by Jonathan Cahn

³ *The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene I*, William Shakespeare 1564 – 1616.

⁴ *The Higher Happiness*, Ralph Sockman, p. 111.