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The Beatitudes: Part 2

Blessed Are the Merciful

Scripture: Matthew 5:7-12

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Beatitudes, Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:7-12 (ESV)

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Father, we come humbly to you as we pause to consider your word. Your word is life and power. Your word is salvation and security. Your word is healing and hope. Help us to understand the meaning of mercy and how and when we are to be a merciful people. Lord Jesus, by your Holy Spirit, change us ever more into your image. Let your kingdom, in all its power and goodness, come among us this morning. Amen.

Introduction

Last week we looked at the first four blessings (i.e. "beatitudes") that belong to those who have entered the kingdom of heaven. Today, we will pick up where we left off last Sunday.

I had thought to get through the next four beatitudes, but it seemed to me that the notion of the mercy of God was large enough to consider by itself this morning. Thus, we will consider three questions; 1) what is mercy, 2) why ought Christians to be merciful, and 3) when ought Christians to be merciful?

A Conversation with a Brother¹

This past week I spoke with a brother who shared an insight that had come to him as he was praying and thinking about this Sermon on the Mount. He reported to me that he had been reading the Sermon several times and each time after reading it he grew more and more distressed and frustrated. He said something like, "The standards called for here are impossibly high and I realized that I can't live up to them. If this is what God requires, then I'm hopeless." He then told me he and his family had been out of town last week and so he listened the sermon podcast and then attended the Tuesday evening prayer time. At one point during the prayer time, we began praying for God's kingdom to come among us and praying for the qualities that Jesus commends to be ever more present among us. Somewhere during that prayer time it dawned on him that he was looking at the Sermon on the Mount all wrong.

Something that was said in the sermon came back to him. These words that Jesus has spoken are not the list of requirements which one must first attain *before* entering the kingdom, but rather they are the calling Christians are to embrace *after* having already entered the kingdom. Jesus is not saying, "Do these and you will be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven," but rather he is saying, "Because you have been welcomed into the kingdom of heaven, now do these things."

This distinction is crucial to understand. Jesus is not saying, "Keep these commands and you'll be given the Holy Spirit," rather he is saying, "Now that you have been given the Holy Spirit, you can begin to keep these commands." No one can keep these standards without the help of the Holy Spirit. This point is worth repeating because it may take a while to sink in. Knowing the difference results in delight and deliverance rather than depression and despair.

Review

The first blessing belongs to those who are "*poor in spirit*." We learned that this refers to people who understand that they are spiritually poor, which means they know that they have no righteousness of their own. These people have an accurate assessment of the holy, holy, holiness of God and they also know that they are empty, empty, empty of such holiness. Thus, they understand their condition to be one of spiritual bankruptcy. These go to God having zero trust in their own righteousness, good works, or holiness. They go God in faith that God himself will graciously give them that which they need in order to be accepted by Him. This truth is well captured in verse three of the hymn "Rock of Ages."

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace:
Foul, I to the fountain fly,

¹ DH.

Wash me, Savior, or I die.

The blessing to these people is that *"theirs is the kingdom of heaven!"*

The second blessing belongs to *"those who mourn."* We argued that these are those who mourn over sin and its sad effects in this cursed world, whether these sad effects be in themselves or in others. The people resident within the kingdom of heaven mourn all sin in the world. The first blessing is for those who know what it is they don't have (i.e. righteousness), while this second blessing is for those who know what they do have (i.e. sin). The first are blessed for they know their own righteousness is absent, but the second blessing is for those who are keenly aware of the presence of their own sin—and they mourn over that sin. Their blessing is that *"they shall be comforted"* by God himself.

The third blessing belongs to the *meek*. Meekness is strength under control. These meek people are the opposite of those who are arrogant, self-confident, and self-assertive. These are humble before God. They fall on their faces before their Creator. These trust in God and look to Him for their provision. And God provides. Their blessing is that *"they shall inherit the earth."* They are given God's kingdom.

The fourth blessing belongs to those who *"hunger and thirst for righteousness."* These spiritually poor, sin-mourning, humble residents of the kingdom know what they most need and that is *righteousness*. Thus, they hunger and thirst for it. Their souls yearn for righteousness as much as their bodies yearn for food and water. Thus, they go to God in faith looking to Him to give them that which they most need, and their blessing is *"they shall be satisfied."* God will satisfy them by giving them an abundance of that for which they thirst. God gives righteousness to those who hunger and thirst for it.

But what does that righteousness look like? How is that righteousness manifested in the life of the inhabitant of the kingdom; in the life of the Christian? The answer comes in the next four beatitudes. Righteousness is manifested in the life of the believer as mercy, purity, peace, and persecution.

The Fifth Blessing

Now we will consider the fifth blessing in Jesus' sermon, which is the first manifestation of righteousness in the heart of the citizen of the kingdom (i.e. the Christian).

Matthew 5:7 (ESV) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

The people of God who belong to the kingdom of heaven are a merciful people and their blessing is that *"they will receive mercy."* They show mercy to others, and thus God shows mercy to them. God will give to them what they give to others.

Do not think this is an instance of righteousness earned, but rather righteousness expressed. Do not think that Jesus is here teaching, "If you are merciful, then you will be given mercy," in the same sense as earning a wage. Remember this fifth blessing is spoken to the same as those to whom the first blessing was spoken. Those who will receive this mercy are the same as those who are "poor in spirit." You cannot pluck these beatitudes out of the context of that in which they were spoken and expect to understand them rightly. These have no righteousness of their own, but rather in their hunger and thirst for righteousness, they are satisfied, that is, they are given righteousness and that righteousness is expressed (i.e. manifested, seen, revealed) by the giving of mercy.

Remember Jesus is speaking these words to those who already are his disciples (Mt. 5:1-2). Jesus is training his disciples on what kingdom living looks like. He is not giving them a kingdom entrance exam, but rather on-the-job training. The calling of the Christian is to be merciful to others, for God has first been merciful to you by giving you righteousness and he will be merciful to you in the future.

What is Mercy?

The word 'mercy' (ἐλεέω *eleeō*), in extra-biblical Greek contexts, refers to the "the emotion aroused when coming into contact with another person's affliction"² or "serious need that moves one to show [undeserved] kindness or concern."³

It includes both the emotion and the action. Mercy is both the inward compassionate response of the heart and the outward kind response of the hands.

The word is often used in judicial contexts, such as when a judge hears the plea of a guilty person and is so moved by their plea to be merciful to them, by not giving them the punishment they justly deserve.

The New Oxford American Dictionary pick this notion up and defines mercy as the granting of "compassion or forgiveness toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm."

Mercy Toward Tax Collector

This is manifested in the prayer of the tax collector who,

"...standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" (Luke 18:13).

² Rudolf Bultmann, ""Ελεος, 'Ελεέω, 'Ελεήμων, 'Ελεημοσύνη, 'Ανέλεος, 'Ανελεήμων," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 477.

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 750.

This sinful tax collector is completely aware of his sin and guilt. His knowledge of his own sin is what keeps him “*standing far off*” from the temple, his eyes on the ground, and his hands beating his chest. He is well aware of the fact that he does not deserve to ask God for anything. He knows the only thing he deserves is God’s judgment on his sin. Yet, he comes to the temple in faith asking for mercy. He was asking God to withhold from him the punishment he justly deserved and to give him the blessing of forgiveness which he did not deserve.

Theologically, mercy is “*God’s goodness toward those in misery and distress.*”⁴ The tax collector was in misery and distress over his own sin. He went to God mourning over his sin and pleading for mercy and forgiveness. And his request was granted to him. Jesus tells us that he home justified (Lk. 18:14).

All he did to be justified was to humble himself before God and earnestly plead for mercy. He did not do 40 hours of community service as penance, or donate 188 shoe boxes to Operation Christmas Child, neither did he promise to give \$10,000 to Toys for Tots, nor commit to donate 50% of his Christmas bonus. He certainly could do any or all of those things if he wanted to do so, but he was justified by faith expressed through a humble prayer for mercy.

Summary

God was moved by his humble prayer and granted him the merciful gift of forgiveness. God’s heart was touched and then he acted in accord with the request. God was inwardly moved and then he outwardly acted by granting forgiveness. This is mercy.

Mercy Toward Hezekiah

We also see this in the case of Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 20:1-7). King Hezekiah was sick and at the point of death. God sent Isaiah to him to tell him to “*Get your house in order, for you shall die and not recover.*”⁵ In response to this news,

2 Kings 20:2-3 (ESV) ² Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, ³ “Now, O LORD, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

God responded to this by saying Isaiah,

2 Kings 20:5-6 (ESV) ⁵ “Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 1247.

⁵ 2 Kings 20:1.

tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD, ⁶ and I will add fifteen years to your life.

God had determined that it was time for Hezekiah to die and he sent Isaiah to inform him of his decision. Hezekiah was deeply distressed by this news. In his misery he humbly turned his face to the wall and wept bitterly. God heard his prayer and saw his tears and His heart was moved. He then responded with pure mercy. He mercifully decided to give Hezekiah that for which he had not prayed. God promised to both heal him and add 15 years to his life span. This is mercy.

Summary

Mercy sees and hears the distress and misery of the soul. Mercy is both moved inwardly and then acts outwardly. Mercy hears and see distress and then acts in order reduce the misery and deliver from distress. Both of these actions are undeserved. Mercy includes the withholding of deserved punishment.

Why Be Merciful?

Why does Jesus commend mercy as a characteristic of the Christian? Why should a Christian be merciful? We find the answer in the Psalms and Exodus. ***God the Father is merciful, therefore God's children are to be merciful.*** The language of this fifth blessing is strikingly similar to that found in Psalm 18. It may be the Jesus has this psalm in mind as he is speaking.

Psalms 18:25 (ESV) "With the merciful you show yourself merciful..."

In this psalm the "you" here is God himself. God is the one to whom David is speaking. David is saying that *God is a merciful God and he shows mercy to those who are merciful.* This is almost exactly what Jesus says in this beatitude. Clearly those who are blessed are the ones who *"will receive mercy"* and they will receive mercy **from God**. Christians are to be merciful with others, because God has been and will be merciful with them.

God is the great giver of mercy, because this is how God describes himself. When Moses asked God, *"...show me your glory"* (Ex. 33:18), God responded by revealing his name. God's name is the most glorious thing about him because his name reveals his glorious character. And when God revealed his name to Moses, the first word that He used to explain the meaning of His name is *mercy*.

Exodus 34:6 (ESV) The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God **merciful** and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..."

When God begins to reveal the glory of who he is, the first brightness of that glory shines through the word 'merciful.' It's almost as if God is explaining that the most glorious

characteristic about him is that he is merciful. It is like Moses asked, "God, what is the first word that comes to mind when you think about yourself?" He answers, "Merciful." If the king of the kingdom is merciful, then those who dwelling in his kingdom also ought to be merciful.

God: the King Who Settled Accounts

Jesus explained this fact by telling a story (Mt. 18:23-35).

Matthew 18:23 (ESV) "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants."

This king called one of his servants who owed him "10,000 talents" and he demanded to be repaid. One talent was a monetary unit equal to about twenty years worth of wages for a day laborer.⁶ Thus, this man owed the king an amount that would take an average day laborer about 200,000 years to pay off. In today's money, he owed about **\$6 billion**. The point is that his debt is far beyond what he will ever be able to repay.

When the king called in repayment on the loan, the servant fell on his knees before the king and begged the king saying, "*Be patient with me and I will repay the full amount.*" The king was emotionally moved by his entreaty and he chose to be merciful to him. The king listened to his plea and had pity on him (18:27). His pity moved him toward compassion. The king released the servant from the obligation to repay the loan and "*forgave him all his debt*" (Mt. 18:27). D. Martin Lloyd-Jones defined mercy as "pity in action."⁷

That servant then went out from the king's gracious presence and bumped into a guy who owed him about \$12,000.⁸ He grabbed the guy and started choking him and demanding that he pay what he owed. The servant fell down on his knees before him and begged the man saying, "*Be patient with me and I will repay the full amount.*" But the servant was unmoved by his plea and his begging. His heart was not moved and he show no pity or compassion. He refused the request and had the man thrown into prison until he should pay his debt. Some of his fellow servants saw what he did and they were shocked. They went and told the king. The king then summoned the servant whom he had previously released and said to him,

"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had **mercy** on you?"

Matthew 18:32-33 (ESV)

The king expects his servants to act like him. He expects his servants to treat each other in the same way that he treats them. This servant did not do that. The king was so angry with this

⁶ See ESV footnote at Matthew 18:23.

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Second edition. (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 103.

⁸ See ESV footnote at Matthew 18:28.

wicked servant that he had him thrown in prison until he could repay the full \$6 billion that he owed the king. Of course, we understand that this wicked servant will never get out of prison.

Summary

This is an illustration about the kingdom of heaven. The king of the kingdom is a merciful king. God is a merciful God. He gives mercy to his servants, and for this they are blessed. Because they have been so blessed, the King expects them to so act. He expects his servants to be merciful toward one another. This is implied in what Jesus says, "***Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.***" Christians are to be merciful people because God is a merciful God. Thus, on the day of judgment when God "settles accounts" will all people, God will give mercy to his children because they will have been merciful people.

When Are Christians to be Merciful?

This then begs the question, when are Christians to be merciful? Are we always to be merciful in every situation and at all times? Is this what Jesus is teaching?

- Does this call to be merciful mean that a Christian parent ought never to discipline a child who persistently disobeys and yet each time he is confronted offers an impassioned plea for forgiveness?
- Does this call to be merciful mean that a Christian supervisor ought never to terminate an irresponsible and lazy employee because every time his poor performance is discussed he pleads and promises that he will change, even though he never does?
- Does this call to be merciful mean that Christian judge ought never to pass sentence upon a convicted criminal simply because he pleads innocence and promises to stay on the straight and narrow path from this day forward?
- Does this call to be merciful mean that a Christian school teacher ought never to give a failing grade to a student who has submitted failing work simply because he pleads and promises to do better next time?
- Does the call to be merciful mean that a Christian church elder team can never exercise church discipline upon a church member living sin just because he promises to correct the problem and yet never actually changes his behavior?

It does not follow that Jesus is here teaching that the Christian ought always to be merciful in every situation because the king himself isn't. This truth seems obvious from the very illustration Jesus used (i.e. Mt. 18:23-35) to show that God is merciful. In one instance the king was merciful to the servant, but when the servant remained unchanged and unmoved by the king's mercy, then king himself changed his response from mercy to justice. The point is that there are clearly instances which call for mercy and there are instances that call for justice. The

people of the kingdom are to have an inward disposition toward being merciful, just as God has an inward distortion toward being merciful.

- The Christian parent who is only ever merciful to a persistently disobedient child and never disciplines that child, will find that such a child will grow up to be an ungodly little tyrant. The word of God in Proverbs teaches us that the parent who refuses to discipline a child *"hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him"* (13:24).

And yet the Christian parent, being led by the Holy Spirit, will discern that there are moments when in the life of her child that call for mercy in order to demonstrate to the child the character of God and love of Christ.

- The Christian supervisor who is only ever merciful to irresponsible and lazy employees will find himself either sacked or his company without business for no one pays for shoddy workmanship. The word of God calls Christians to *"work diligently as if we are working for the Lord and not for men"* (Col. 3:23).

Yet, the Christian supervisor, being led by the Holy Spirit, will discern that there will be times when it is good and to show the mercy of God even in the workplace.

- The Christian judge who only ever is merciful to convicted criminals and never gives them justice, will find himself thrown off the bench. However, the Christian judge, being led by the Holy Spirit, will also find occasion when repentance is true and the circumstances do call for mercy, even in one who admits his or guilt.
- The Christian school teacher who only ever is merciful to failing students will soon be told that he is failing at his job as a teaching, for no student will be learning anything other than how to lie and be deceptive.

However, the Christian teacher, who is led by the Holy Spirit, will find that there are genuine instances when mercy will be more instructive than would be judgment.

- The church elder team who is only ever merciful to unrepentant members will find themselves rebuked by the Lord for failing to teach the seriousness of sin among the people of God.

However, church elders who are being led by the Holy Spirit, will also find moments in the life of the church when the purpose of church discipline will be seen and the brother caught in sin will express that kind of godly grief that leads to repentance and restoration and in those instances mercy will be the appropriate response to confession and brokenness.

Conclusion

What is mercy? Mercy is the movement of a tender heart that meets someone in misery and distress and then acts to relieve that misery and distress, even though one is not obligated to do so. Or you could by rights require something of someone, but because you know it will cause them misery or distress, you withhold your right. That is mercy.

Why should Christians be merciful? Because God is merciful. God is merciful to the very core of his being, therefore those in whom His Holy Spirit dwells ought also to be merciful. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

When should a Christian be merciful? When the Holy Spirit leads you to be merciful. We must “walk by the Spirit” every day of our lives. The Christian ought to be inwardly inclined toward being merciful. The disposition of the Christian heart ought to be one that leans toward mercy, but when that mercy ought to be expressed will be ultimately be determined by constant prayer and by remaining full of the Holy Spirit.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.