

Mercy

Matthew 5:7

At the very lowest point of the devastating flood in our home in Atlanta which we had just moved into, I called a friend whom I had known from our previous church. I was desperate, quite nearly in despair. My friend had retired from full time employment several years earlier. He had sold his house and bought a trailer, enabling him and his wife to spend their time in places where there was need to help, beginning in southern Mississippi after hurricane Katrina. So as their email signature at the time noted, they towed their home. That was where they lived. His labors as an ordained Deacon focused on ministry throughout the country rather than merely a focus within a particular local congregation.

So I called him and asked him if he could come and help me dry out our flooded house. It was in the morning. He had a few things to do and couldn't leave until after lunch, seemingly apologizing for the delay. He was at my door the next morning and supervised the clean-up, and with the help of several others, the basement was entirely dry within two days. So,

I. WHAT IS MERCY?

That was mercy. It was more than kindness, for as Sinclair Ferguson puts it, "kindness is a friend calling when you are well; mercy is a friend calling when you are sick." A friend calling when you are sick. Actually, a friend calling, because you are sick. A friend helping, because you have need. Mercy doesn't even describe the actions that are taken, but the motivation behind them. The disposition of the heart. So consider your heart as you study this beatitude. Mercy recognizes the need of others, and responds. Mercy identifies the difficulties of someone else's life, and responds to them. With help. With compassion.

Mercy has to do with motivation. Too often, way too often, even when we offer help, it is begrudging. It is limited. It is measured, calculated, especially so as not to be of too great a bother to ourselves. So maybe you offer help, but you make sure that it doesn't inconvenience yourself too much. That's not mercy. Mercy has to do with who you are, not what you do. To quote again my favorite book on the Sermon on the Mount, Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "The Christian gospel places all its primary emphasis upon being, rather than doing. The gospel puts a greater weight upon our attitude than upon our actions. In the first instance its main stress is on what you and I essentially are rather than what we do...A Christian is something before he does anything...Being is more important than doing, attitude is more significant than action. Primarily it is our essential character that matters."

"Blessed are the merciful." So what is mercy, and how does it develop in the heart of a believer? I believe the best way to answer that question is to emphasize,

A. A realization of the misery of life.

That's the starting point of mercy. A realization of need, as I've said. A realization of misery, the misery of others in their lives. And in that context, it is good to understand misery by comparing it to grace. They are related, to be sure, but different in origin. Grace is a response to men in their sin, an awareness of sin and a willingness not to hold that sin against them. Grace emphasizes a response to people that doesn't hold any offenses against them. To be gracious with others is to overlook their sins, overlook their sins.

Mercy, however, emphasizes men in their misery. "In other words, while grace looks down upon sin as a whole, mercy looks especially upon the miserable consequences of sin." That's where

it starts. And so the blessing of the gospel is not just ‘grace and peace,’ as we read so often, but as we read that greeting in,

1 Timothy 1:1 “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2 To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Mercy however means that you get involved. With compassion. With sympathy. Not perfunctory obligation or duty. Not begrudging. Nor condescending, with a touch of self-righteousness thrown in. John Calvin would define it as “nothing else but the pain we feel at someone else’s sorrow.” Mercy is right up there with grace and peace.

This is not what we usually mean when we speak about “feeling sorry” for someone. It is not “pity,” in the modern sense that that word is generally taken. “I don’t need your pity,” generally means, “I don’t need you looking down at me as someone less fortunate. I don’t need you to help me because it makes you feel better, or makes you feel more important.” I don’t need you to give me money, out of your surplus, to show yourself to be a philanthropist, to flaunt your own wealth.

Do you know people who simply can’t engage with you if the context includes any misery. There are people that when they know of your misery, they stay away. They don’t know what to say, so they don’t say anything. They don’t know what to do, so they don’t do anything. Whenever you experience the death of someone for whom you cared deeply, you find those people. They don’t say anything because they don’t want to make you feel bad. They don’t say anything about the person who died because they fear you might cry. They don’t want to upset you.

And what does that do for you? It makes you lonely, and in

your loneliness, your misery is only compounded. So mercy begins with a realization of the misery of life, but it cannot be just a realization. There must be a willingness to get your hands dirty as you get involved those who are in that misery. And that willingness is nothing less than the biblical virtue of compassion.

Mercy and compassion are closely associated, intimately connected. You see, if you are merciful, you don’t just identify the misery of others, you seek to relieve it. So in its fullness, mercy is,

B. A compassionate desire to relieve the suffering of misery.

Biblical compassion means that I will come and get down on my hands and knees to scrub your floor, if that’s what you need. Biblical compassion means that I will weep with you when your misery reduces you to tears. Biblical compassion means that I will do whatever I can to reduce your suffering. And it has nothing to do with me. It’s not about me. Mercy is all about you.

So what does Jesus says about helping others?

Mat. 6:2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

That’s mercy. You aren’t showing off. You aren’t boasting. Rather, you are moved to whatever action is necessary by a compassionate desire to relieve the suffering of someone else’s misery. Blessed are the merciful.

The proper question with these beattitudes for all of us is

simply, What about you? What about your heart? Your motivation? Your desire? Do you feel the pain of someone else's someone else's sorrow? Are you compassionate, or disinterested? Filled with mercy, or merely selfish convenience?

Beloved, these beattitudes should cause all of us to look deeply into our own souls, and confess our failures. Then to stir us on. This requires that you care about other people. That you are interested in other people. That you know other people. And it has to begin in the church, with our church family.

Let me give you a great contrast, in which mercy plays a prominent role. Consider James 3, where these beattitudes are clearly identified in how James describes godly wisdom. Mercy is at the heart of such wisdom.

James 3:13 "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

That which arises out of jealousy and selfishness is disorder, discord, every vile practice. But wisdom from above is "full of mercy." There is one example of all of this you know well. The man we call the good Samaritan. Who proved to be a good neighbor to this injured man? Not the busy priest or the self-righteous Levite, but a Samaritan, a man himself despised by the Jews because of his ethnic identity. This is what we read,

Luke 10:33 "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back. 36 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? 37 He said, The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him, You go, and do likewise."

Don't miss the strength of Jesus' words. "You go, and do likewise." It is not a matter of picking who your neighbor will be, but upon being a good neighbor yourself. Look at that good Samaritan. Observe the motivating force of his mercy, "when he saw him, he had compassion."

Let me emphasize, however, a danger. This is related to that idea of "pity" that we have today. The dangers relate to what I call a legal requirement for mercy.

II. THE DANGERS OF A LEGAL REQUIREMENT FOR MERCY.

What I mean by that is the attempt to show mercy, the attempt to help someone in need, with reference to legal duty foremost in your mind. A legal obligation. You have to help. You are required to help. You feel guilty for not helping. You are fulfilling your own debt and hope to get rewarded. And that danger can be stimulated by these words themselves, the promised reward, v.7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

So the danger is the thinking that by fulfilling your duty, you will be rewarded. If you satisfy the legal demands of the law, you will be rewarded. But this call for mercy is not a law. This is not in

the context of law, nor is mercy ever defined merely in terms of fulfillment of law. And that's a good thing, because if mercy became a legal requirement,

A. Our forgiveness will be impossible, since we don't forgive perfectly.

In other words, if it is his reward for our good performance, God won't show you mercy because your performance of mercy isn't good enough. It isn't perfect. And if this verse is interpreted in such a strictly legal manner, mercy then becomes impossible to obtain.

So please don't be distracted by thinking that mercy is somehow a good work that if you do good enough, you will earn God's mercy. For, of course, that isn't what mercy is all about, is it? Don't let the performance of mercy become the standard by which you expect to receive mercy from God. Don't let all of this degenerate into a legal requirement that you are attempting to satisfy, some sort of "public service" as a judge might assign today in a courtroom in order to avoid a jail sentence.

For if you do, to emphasize another grave danger of thinking that way,

B. The grace of the gospel will be cancelled.

If you are saved by grace through faith, then you are not shown mercy by God on the ground of your own merciful deeds. If salvation is not of yourselves, but rather a gift of God, then you cannot interpret out text tonight to teach the opposite. For if you do, the grace of the gospel disappears. It is gone, cancelled. You are then saved by the works of mercy you perform.

So be careful. That's my point, not that any of you would be tempted by that danger in doctrinal form, but you might be

tempted in the outworking of your own life. And you might be challenged by people who question you about this verse. What Jesus describes is not a good work you perform that earns his mercy, but rather it is a promise of his blessing given to those who sincerely live out their faith. What Jesus describes to his disciples is,

III. THE BLESSING OF GOD'S MERCY.

"They shall be shown mercy!" What a blessing that is.

God will not only show us his grace, forgiving us our sins. He will also show us his compassion, seeing our misery and eager to relieve us of that mercy. That is who God is, a God of mercy! Go with me to,

Ps. 103:1 "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! 2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, 3 who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, 4 who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, 5 who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. 6 The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. 7 He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. 8 The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

The Psalm goes on,

Ps. 103:13 "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. 14 For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

That's why he forgives us our sin! That's why he removes our sin from us as far as the east is from the west. Because of his mercy! And so what Jesus gives to his disciples in this sermon on the mount is,

A. A test of true faith.

v.7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

The reward is added to the call for mercy, because that mercy is the very evidence of those in whom God has shown his own mercy. And to put that somewhat negatively, if you yourself are completely unwilling to show mercy to others, you have little reason to believe that you are a believer in the first place.

Do you remember the parable of the unforgiving servant? Matthew 18. The parable was given in answer to a question, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” The thought was, “That’s pretty good!”

But remember the unforgiving servant in the parable, the one whose debt was settled by the king. Yet that servant, when he had been freed by the King, went to his own servant and demanded repayment,

Mat. 18:28 “But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, Pay what you owe.”

He demanded payment, and put the other man “in prison until he should pay the debt.” Jesus’ words of instructions were clear, in the words of the parable,

Mat. 18:32 “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

So this is a test of true faith. Will you show to others the same

grace and mercy which God has shown to you in Christ. A true Christian will be willing to say, “Yes, I will.” Even gladly. Thus, God’s mercy comes as a reminder of,

B. A gracious reward.

Blessed are the merciful, for they SHALL receive mercy. Blessed are you, beloved, when you exercise mercy, blessed are you when you are moved by compassion toward those in need. Because that demonstrates the work of God in your life, and it gives the evidence of his mercy to you in Christ. And the assurance of that gracious reward that shall be yours on the day of final judgment, a day in which we all will be dependent upon his mercy. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. As Paul expresses it to Timothy,

1 Tim. 1:2 “Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Why do we so often hesitate in showing mercy? Why are we often lacking in mercy, preferring our own convenience and self-interest instead? Perhaps it is because you have felt your own need of mercy far too little. Perhaps it is because you have only a superficial understanding of the riches of God’s mercy to you. The positive reality, however, is very simple. Those who know they have received mercy, show mercy.

Let me end with two biblical descriptions of just how important this whole matter of mercy is. How it is elevated to a place of preeminence in terms of our lives as Christian. This is no secondary matter, nor anything that we might consider optional.

Hos. 6:6 “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings..”

The Hebrew word for mercy is “chesed,” perhaps the fullest and most profound definition of God’s character we find in

Scripture. Not sacrifice. Not the performance of duties prescribed by the law. No, something deeper. Not contrary to the law, but more deeply embedded in the heart and soul of a Christian. Mercy.

Then,

Micah 6:6 “With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”

What does the Lord require of you as his people? That you love mercy! Blessed are the merciful.