

Compassion

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Matthew 5:7

Why do we do the things we do? What motivates us to act in certain ways or to react to others the way we do? When Socrates famously said that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” he was tapping into a Biblical concept. Living a life of joy requires that we be thoughtful about our heart and truthful about the underlying reasons we have for our outward behavior.

In the first four Beatitudes we discovered that the condition of our heart speaks to our personal relationship with God. Recognizing our poverty of spirit, we mourn and repent over our sin which leads us to salvation and a restored relationship with God. Recognizing our human tendency to arrogance leads us to humble ourselves before Him and to hunger for the power of His Word in our lives. All of these required an honest examination of our heart and a willingness to accept the change God demanded.

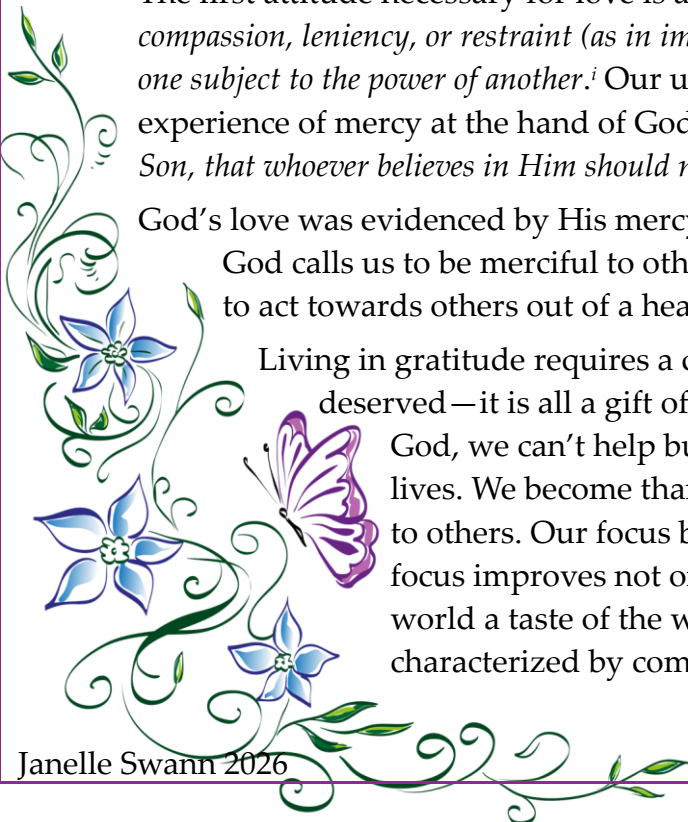
Now as we move to the second set of Beatitudes, we see this same emphasis on an examined heart. But at this point, the focus shifts from our heart’s relationship to God to our heart’s relationship with others. Just as we see in the Great Commandment—first we are to love God and then we are to love others. But what does it mean to love others? In these four Beatitudes, Jesus teaches us the real basis for love. It comes from hearts that are merciful, pure, peaceful, and sacrificial.

Hearts like this do not happen accidentally. They are like gardens—they must be maintained. Jesus explained, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). What we allow to grow in our hearts will affect the way we behave. If we fail to examine the condition of our heart on a regular basis, we will default to simply acting out of habit which will rarely be a good thing, “The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

The first attitude necessary for love is a heart of mercy. Merriam Webster defines mercy as *compassion, leniency, or restraint (as in imposing punishment) shown especially to an offender or to one subject to the power of another.*ⁱ Our understanding of mercy is inextricably linked to our experience of mercy at the hand of God: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).*

God’s love was evidenced by His mercy in sending His Son to pay the penalty for our sin. God calls us to be merciful to others in the same way that He was to us. And so we are to act towards others out of a heart of gratefulness for all that God has done for us.

Living in gratitude requires a constant reminder that nothing we have in life is deserved—it is all a gift of God to us. When we train our focus upon the mercy of God, we can’t help but be amazed at the goodness of God revealed in our lives. We become thankful for what we have and willing to give of ourselves to others. Our focus becomes outward rather than inward. This outward focus improves not only our life, but also the lives of others. It gives the world a taste of the wonder of heaven as we live in a world characterized by compassion and kindness.



The Joy of Gratitude

The freedom to see beyond ourselves.

Enjoying God's Mercy

Some things in Christianity are one and done. Salvation—once saved, always saved. Baptism—a one-time ritual of identifying with Christ as believer. But others require maintenance and upkeep.

Although we have experienced God's mercy in salvation, we also experience God's mercy in many other areas of our life as well. A large part of gratitude is recognizing God's gracious blessings in our life. As David reflected upon his relationship with God, he returned to his life as a shepherd and compared himself to a sheep. Read **Psalm 23**.

As we see in this passage, a shepherd has many roles in watching sheep, but what is the foundational one that David lays out in **verses 1-2**? *I shall not want. The shepherd provides for the basic needs of the sheep—food (green grass) and water (sheep can only drink from still water). The specifics here are not just poetic, they point to God's goodness in providing exactly what we need in a way that is good for us.*

In **verse 3**, the Hebrew word translated *restores* has the meaning of “to turn back, to retreat, again.”

The imagery here is of sheep wandering away. What does God do when we get off track? Why?

He restores us and brings us back to where we should be. He sets us on the correct path again and leads us in righteousness. He does it for His glory. To show Himself as merciful towards us when we stray and to the world around us as a testimony.

The Christian life is not guaranteed to be problem free as we see in **verse 4**. Yet in what ways does God show His mercy towards us? *He walks with us through the most difficult moments of life, protecting us from evil, guiding us (with His staff) and keeping us on the safe path.*

Verse 5 turns to the kindness we experience at the hand of God. How does God go above and beyond in caring for us? *He doesn't just meet our needs; he prepares a feast for us despite the adversity we face in life. He blesses us to such an extent that we have abundance. He gives us victory and peace in the presence of trials and affliction.*

What kind of assurance does God's goodness and mercy provide in our lives? (v. 6) *Our lives are ruled by a God who is both merciful and good. We can trust that He will care for us in all things and that He will always be with us.*

Responding to God's Abundance

In **Psalm 50:8-14** God expresses what He wants in return for the abundance He provides. Although He commanded Israel to offer sacrifices to Him, what does He say about them? (v. 8) *He is happy they obey Him—the sacrifices have purpose. But He doesn't need them.*

Why does He say this? (v. 10-13) *He already owns all the cattle and animals that will be sacrificed. He also does not eat the sacrifices, so has no need of them for food.*



What does He desire instead? (v. 14) *Thankfulness, gratitude. To offer their sacrifices with a sincerity of heart and a recognition of all that they owed Him.*

We no longer are required to offer sacrifices to God. But what kind of rituals do we engage in? What does this passage tell us about how we are to view these rituals? *We are still to give offerings, to gather for worship, to praise God, to partake of the Lord's Supper. There is nothing inherently wrong with rituals. However, when rituals become automatic, when they do not focus our attention on all that God has done for us, they become worthless to God.*

What curse would befall the Israelites if they did not acknowledge God's blessings in their lives according to **Deuteronomy 28:47-48,51**? *They would lose the abundance that God had given them to their enemies, it would be taken away from them. Their enemies would enjoy it instead of them.*

We are blessed to be the richest people who have ever lived. We never worry about famine. We live in homes that are almost impervious to most natural disasters. We are so far removed from the threat of total annihilation from famine, war, or disease that humanity subsisted under for millennia that we cannot comprehend the fear of it. Yet, we have become so comfortable with our abundance, so assured of it that our society has become fixated on the belief that we do not have enough. What happens when we become discontented with our lives and forget the abundance God has given us? (See **Proverbs 17:22**.) *We lose the joy of the blessings God has given us. We become frivolous focusing on silly, inconsequential things rather than seeing the world around us through God's eyes. We fail to meet the spiritual needs of the world. The enemy steals our joy and rather than enjoy the blessings God gives, we suffer due to our own discontentment, anger, and worry.*

What solutions does **Psalms 16:5-9** give to help us overcome our discontentment?

1. Acknowledge that God has *given us all we have* (v. 5)
2. *Focus on* a positive attitude *towards God's blessings* (v. 6)
3. Recognize that God's abundance in our life is *not simply financial* (v. 7-8)
4. Set our hearts *to rejoice in our blessings* and *rest in the knowledge* that He will provide (v. 9)

Living in Contentment

Gratitude is the opposite of discontentment. When we are focused solely upon ourselves, our needs, our desires; we become ungrateful. And when we become ungrateful, our world narrows and becomes centered completely around ourselves. Rather than be a channel of God's mercy to others, we become unhappy, bitter, angry and unable to be a force for good in the lives of those around us. In **James 4:1-3**, why does it say that we often do not have the things we want in life? *We are too caught up in ourselves to ask God for things we want. But also at times, we ask for things that might hurt us or that reflect the wrong priorities.*



How were Paul's needs met in **Philippians 4:10-13**? *The Philippian church sent him a love offering.*

Should we expect others to meet our needs according to this passage? *No. We cannot expect our needs to be met by others. They don't owe us anything. To have an attitude like that displays a lack of faith in God. Instead Paul looked to God to supply his needs and recognized that when he felt like he needed more, that was an attitude of discontent.*

What happens when our needs are not being met according to Paul?

We need to see times of need as opportunity for growth. Perhaps we expect too much, perhaps our eyes are on the wrong things, perhaps we are being greedy. Learning to be content with what we have is key to the happiness that Paul expresses here in having his needs met. Otherwise, we often take things for granted.

Ultimately, upon what was Paul's hope based? *The key here, is that Paul is referring to verse 11 and 12. We can be content in whatever state we find ourselves through the strength that Christ provides.*

What is the blessing of living for God seen in **Psalms 37:25-26**? *God will never forsake us and the blessings of a righteous life extend into the lives of our children. Note that the righteous here is merciful to others and because of this, God blesses.*

What is Solomon's conclusion about living a joyful life in **Ecclesiastes 5:18-20**?

1. Recognize any wealth *we have from our labor has been* provided by God.
2. *Enjoy* what God gives us and recognize it *as a gift of God to us.*
3. *Allowing ourselves to fully enjoy our life* keeps us from worrying about the future.

Channeling God's Mercy

Reflecting God's Character

Why are we commanded to be merciful in Luke 6:36? *Because God is merciful to us.*

Just as God has treated us with mercy, so we are to treat others. What is to be the basis for the way we treat others according to **Matthew 7:12**? *The Golden Rule.*

How does **Galatians 6:7-10** explain receiving mercy when we give mercy? *God gives back to us what we have done for others. This speaks to God's justice in rewarding our behavior either good or bad.*

What example does Paul use to explain the concept of sowing and reaping? (v. 8). *The example given is that of salvation—we receive everlasting life by sowing the spiritual seeds of humility and repentance. The antithesis is that sowing to our flesh—arrogance and reveling in our sin—results in eternal death. God's justice is seen in these results, but it also points to reality of our choice. In rejecting salvation, one chooses eternal death.*



How does knowing our own heart keep us from mocking God? *God knows our true motivation in the way we behave. He is not fooled by our attempts to pretend to love others. We mock God when we act like He doesn't know what we are really doing or thinking. Rather than reflect God's character to others, we end up making a mockery of God by showing our disregard for His knowledge and power. When we open our heart to God and ask Him to reveal our impurities, we serve Him with a transparency that reflects His character to others.*

How do we see sowing and reaping described in **Proverbs 11:17-19**? *Sowing mercy and righteousness bring goodness to our lives, but sowing cruelty, dishonesty, and evil brings harm and eventual death.*

Principles in the Bible are different from promises. God always fulfill His promises – salvation if we call on Him is an example of this. Principles are no less important, but do not always show immediate fulfillment in our lives and work for both the saved and the unsaved. Is *sowing and reaping* a promise or principle? What are the implications of that? *Paul clearly describes it as a reward we often have to wait for. We should not be focused on receiving the reward, instead we should be focused on sowing good things. This also explains why we see non-believers who are compassionate reap rewards in their lives.*

Compassion & Kindness

Meeting needs and going above and beyond

In **Acts 20:35**, what words of Jesus does Paul turn to as the motivation for his lifestyle of compassion? *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

How does this teaching support an attitude of gratitude? *It focuses our attention away from ourselves. It helps us look at what we have with an eye to giving to others, rather than having unreal expectations towards others in providing for our desires.*

Jesus taught that the second commandment is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). When challenged on the definition of the word *neighbor* in this command, Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:30-37**. According to this parable, who acted neighborly? *The Samaritan who cared for the Jew because he showed mercy.*

There are many layers to this story. Some are cultural—the Jews and Samaritans hated each other and therefore had nothing to do with each other. Some concern legalism—the priest and Levite feared touching a dead body and becoming unclean. But ultimately, how do these lessons point to what God says He desires in **Matthew 9:13**? *God desires us to be merciful, not to be focused upon outward things.*

How does an emphasis on outward conformity undercut our ability to be compassionate and kind to others? *We allow conformity to rules to make us feel that we are better than others and that they are deserving of our disdain. (Story of the hot cup of coffee.) We allow conformity to cultural boundaries to give us a narrow outlook on others and fail to see how we can break down barriers to reaching others. (We don't break out of the box.) We fear what others will think if we do something that is different or unusual and so we fail to act. (Peer pressure.)*



The Good Samaritan modeled showing mercy by:

1. Reacted with compassion (Matthew 9:36) *Jesus modeled a heart engaged by the needs of others.*
2. Going out of his way. (John 4:3-4) *Jesus went through rather than around Samaria.*
3. Cared for physical needs. (James 2:15-16) *Don't be so heavenly minded you are no earthly good.*
4. Paid for the care himself. (2 Samuel 24:24) *Worship requires sacrifice.*

Showing mercy begins with a heart of compassion but goes nowhere if it is not directly tied to our actions as the Good Samaritan demonstrated. We have to be willing to get out of our bubble and out of our comfort zone in order to engage in the lives of those in need. Jesus was willing to go through Samaria, a place Jews usually avoided, to witness to a Samaritan harlot. We too, must be willing to venture into places in our world that make us uncomfortable in order to find those God calls us to help.

And while, God calls us to tend to the spiritual needs of those around us, James 2:15-16 makes it clear that we must also be aware of people's physical needs. Two thousand years of Christian history is full of the many who cared for orphans, the sick, the outcasts (lepers), and the needy. As we saw during Covid, we cannot give up our place in offering to care for those in need to secular institutions who do not operate upon the mercy of God. Proverbs 12:10 warns us, *"the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."*

We also have to be willing to care for others through our own effort and means. The Samaritan was dependent upon the innkeeper to provide some level of care while he was gone. But he made it clear from the beginning that he alone was paying the cost. In the same way David recognized that offering a sacrifice without personally paying the cost of it was worthless. Charity makes a larger impact in people's lives when it is directly received from the giver rather than paid for by the taxpayer. We need to be helping people out of our own pockets, not connecting them to governmental programs.

This story speaks to the dedication of our whole lives in showing mercy to others. In gratitude to God, we view others with compassion, purposefully go to where there are needs, and then use our bodies and the blessings God has given us to care for the needs of others. These are actions that have eternal consequences as Jesus explained:

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?"

And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:37-40).

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mercy>

