

Mercy!
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Series: The Beatitudes: People in Synchrony
Title: Mercy
Text: Matthew 5:7

Jesus of Nazareth came into the towns and cities of first century Palestine, as He comes into our towns and cities, with what writers of the New Testament call “the Gospel of God”. Jesus arrived on the scene with “God’s good news” for our broken world. “It is time”, He says. “it is time for the long-awaited Kingdom of God to come near! Come near. So very near. “among you” and “in you”, Jesus would later say. “The Kingdom of God has come near.” God’s future is spilling over into the present! The life of heaven is invading the earth! Now.

When this Gospel, this good news, get hold of a person or community or city or nation something happens. A new kind of humanity emerge. A healed humanity, a re-stored humanity, a re-wired humanity. The kind of humanity Jesus describes in the collection of sayings we call “The Beatitudes”.

Matthew, chapter 5, verses 3-10. Jesus says to us:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

"Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."

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

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

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

I invite you to focus today on the fifth of Jesus' eight Beatitudes. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."

From my perspective, this fifth Beatitude is the least paradoxical and the most paradoxical of all the eight. I hear the fifth Beatitude and my heart says "of course". Of course the Saviour of the world congratulates mercy. I hear the other Beatitudes and say "really?" Blessed are the poor in spirit? Those who mourn? The meek? The persecuted? Really? But when I hear Jesus declare "right –on are the merciful" I say "Yes, this makes sense". It is the least paradoxical of all the Beatitudes.

But then when Jesus begins to unfold the nature of mercy, I soon think "oh, my goodness! This quality feels even more upside-down than the others!" To practice mercy is to practice a profoundly paradoxical way of being.

Now all of the character traits Jesus blesses in His Beatitudes "merciful" is the most measurable. More than the others this one is "worn on the sleeves", sort of speak. As William Barclay puts it: "this mercy lodges in the heart but expresses itself in the hand" (Beatitudes, 77)

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

I want to ask three questions of this Beatitude.

1) Question one: why is 'merciful' a mark of those who have been grabbed by Jesus and His good news? Why is being merciful a symptom of the time being fulfilled and the K Kingdom of God coming near?

2) Question two: What is this "mercy" Jesus blesses? Can we get some practical handles on this Kingdom-quality?

3) Question three: what does Jesus mean by 'shall be shown mercy', "shall obtain mercy"? Is Jesus saying that we merit mercy by being merciful? I think Jesus is clearly saying that mercy begets mercy: the more we experience mercy the more we extend mercy. But is Jesus also saying that unless we extend mercy to others we will not receive mercy from God?

Throughout this series of studies I have noted that the pronoun " theirs/they" is in the emphatic position: it comes at the beginning of the clause to say, "theirs and only theirs", "they and only they". Is Jesus saying that only the merciful are shown mercy? That if I withhold mercy from others God will withhold mercy from me? Oh Mercy!

First question: why is "merciful" a character trait of those grabbed by Jesus and His Gospel? I see three reasons. First, Jesus who announces the Gospel is Himself merciful. The exact word Jesus uses [eleemones] in the fifth Beatitude is used in only one other place in the New Testament; namely, in the book of Hebrews. Where after affirming the real and full humanity of Jesus the Son of God the author writes; Hebrews 2:17 "for this

reason he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, on order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest.”

What did the people of Palestine experience when they first met Jesus of Nazareth? Why were they drawn to Him? Unlike them, He was Holy. Yet they flocked to be His. Why? Because, unexpectedly, the Holy one was merciful. Thus the cry, heard over and over again in the Gospels; “Lord, have mercy on me.” The cry was drawn out of their hearts by the realization, often unconscious, that here was Mercy Himself. No-one can encounter Jesus. Enter into relationship with Him, share His life without beginning to take something of His mercy.

Second, not only is He merciful; mercy is one of His greatest concerns. It is on the top of His agenda. The Pharisees, the self-righteous ones, criticize Jesus for eating with “tax-collectors and sinner”. Jesus responded, Matthew 9:12 “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means; I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

The Pharisees, the rule-keepers, rule –enforcers criticized Jesus for picking again on the Sabbath. Jesus responded: Matthew 12:7. “If you had known what these words mean, I desire mercy not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent” (Matthew 12:7)

During Holy week Jesus spoke a series of “woes” to the religious establishment. (Matthew 23:23). “woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites” (note: this says mercy is not afraid to speak hard truth) “You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness”. (Matthew 23:23)

Hang around Jesus long enough and you cannot but begin to take on His bent toward mercy.

The third reason mercy is a mark of those grabbed by the Gospel is that the Kingdom which is breaking into history in Jesus is a Kingdom of mercy. That is why the good news is “good” news. God’s New World Order has come near. And it is a new order of mercy.

At a dinner party, one of the Pharisees said to Jesus, “blessed is the one who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15). Luke then tells us that tax-collectors and sinners started coming to Jesus to listen to Him and Jesus welcomed them and shared bread with them. The Pharisees and scribes were horrified and began to grumble saying “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2) They said this in disgust and anger. Jesus then tells His most beloved parable, the one about the father and his two sons. The younger son “blows it”. He is afraid to approach the father but out of desperation risks returning home. Jesus says, “While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” (15:20)

Jesus is shown us that the God of the Kingdom of God is the Father of mercy. If that Kingdom is breaking into our lives we cannot help becoming all caught up in mercy.

Question two:

What is this mercy Jesus embodies and blesses?

As I hear Jesus, He comes at it both negatively and positively. Negatively: Mercy is not giving someone what they deserve. Positively: Mercy is giving someone what they do not deserve.

Negatively: Not giving what is deserved. This is the way the word is used in a Court of Law. The plaintiff appeals to the judge: "Have mercy on me do not give me what I deserve." And the Gospel according to Jesus is just that: God, the Judge, not giving is what we deserve.

Amazing! The essential character of the Living God demands that our sin be punished. Indeed, that sin must be annihilated. God is Holy. Holiness by its very nature cannot stand the presence of unholy sin. Holiness but its very nature naturally recoils at all that is not holy. God's very being, by nature, seeks to consume sin in the fire of purity. It would be perfectly just for God the Judge to wipe us out.

But what has God the Holy One done? At the cross the Holy One expresses. Holy indignation against sin but does it against Himself.

In Jesus, the Holy one becomes one of us. But not only one of us. He became us. He not only became human; He became "the Representation Human". Pontius Pilate put over the head of Jesus on the cross the sign "Here is the King of the Jews." But as many scholars have suggested, had the Holy God written the sign it would have read: "Here is the whole sinful human race".

As the apostle Paul so daringly puts it; "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Mercy! God Himself took upon Himself our sin. And then God Himself took upon Himself the awful judgment we deserve.

The Holy God does not give me what I deserve. He does not give you what you deserve.

In light of what God did on the cross you can see that being merciful does not mean ignoring the gravity of sin. It does not mean saying, "oh, it does not matter." It does matter. The cross says it matters terribly. Being merciful simply means not giving a person what they justly deserve. And positively, mercy going further, extends undeserved blessing.

New Testament scholar Robert Guelich suggests that in the Bible this positive understanding of mercy "points in two directions". (Sermon on the Mount, 88)

Mercy is “Kindness shown one in need” (palm 86: 15-16, Job 30:15, Ezekiel 39:15, Mark 10:47). Thus the phrase “acts of mercy”. (Matthew 6:2-4) and mercy is “pardon accorded one in the wrong”. (Exodus 34:6-7, Isaiah 55:7) Mercy is extending kindness to the helpless and pardon to the guilty, to those in debt.

And the one who speaks this Beatitude exemplifies both by these positive directions of mercy. Jesus extends kindness to us who are in great need who are so utterly helpless. And Jesus extends pardon to is who are in the wrong who owe a debt we can never pay.

We were drowning and Jesus dove into the water to rescue us. We were crushed beneath a horrible debt and Jesus canceled it. Mercy!

Let us digger deeper. Jesus develops for us. Mercy is kindness to those in need. In His parable of the Good Samaritan. It is recorded for us in Luke, chapter 12. Jesus tells the story of a man who travels the treacherous road that winds down from Jerusalem to Jericho in the desert. I have walked on it – desolate, dangerous twists and turns. Along the way some robbers overtake the man, strip him, and leave him “half –dead”. A certain priest happened by. But when he saw the man laying off the side of the road, did nothing to help. Then a certain Levite happened by. But when he saw the man on the road, also did nothing to help. But, says Jesus, a certain Samaritan happened by; and, says Jesus, “he felt compassion”. (10:33) He felt mercy. The Samaritan poured oil and wine on the mass wounds, bound wrapped them I bandages. The Samaritan then put the man on his on beast brought him to an inn and “took care of him”, says Jesus. Because he still had other matters to which he needed to attend. The next morning he gave the inn-keeper the equivalent of two days wages, asking the inn-keeper to continue the care, promising to return and pay any further costs. Mercy is kindness to those in need.

Now, note that the Samaritan did not need to know why the man was in need. He extended kindness regardless of how the man got himself into that mess. We assume that the beaten man was an innocent victim. Maybe he was not. Maybe he had offended someone and the beating was an act of revenge. Or maybe he had been involved in some illegal transaction, and not fulfill his part of the bargain, and was being ‘liquidated’. Or maybe he had ‘bad – mouths’ his assailants taunting then into their brutal act.

The point is : the good Samaritan, as he has come to be called, did not need to know why the man as suffering. Fr it did not matter. It would not have changed his actions. Mercy extends kindness to the needy regardless of the reason for the need.

How many of us withhold kindness when we discover that the one in need caused his or her own problem? Yes, some people are poor because they gambled away their income. Yes, some are on the streets because they lack initiative. The merciful simply see the need and look for ways to bring help. Some who have the AIDS virus contracted it innocently, as children, for example: or through tainted blood transfusions. Other, who have the AIDS virus are not “innocent victims.” They could have protected themselves by not using dirty needles to get a drug fix, for example, or by not messing with God’s

design for human sexuality. “So?” ask the merciful. The merciful simply see the need and seek ways to bring help.

Note also, that the Good Samaritan risked in order to extend kindness. Mercy always involves risk. Risks loss of time, loss of money, loss of health, loss of reputation.

The priest in Jesus’ parable knew he would risk losing ritual purity to get involved. The Levite knew he would risk becoming a target for the bandits. The Samaritan pushed through his fears. He knew he could have been beaten himself. For, in that culture has the beaten man’s friends come around the bend and seen the Samaritan near the victim, they would – without asking – have assumed the Samaritan had done the beating and they would have retaliated. Mercy risks for the sake of the other.

Is not the Good Samaritan a picture of Jesus? He risks everything to extend kindness to us. He especially risks the Divine reputation. He loses face with the religious people of the day. “This man welcome sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2) It was means as a put down, a lam on Jesus. So be it. Mercy does not worry about the loss of name.

Mercy as kindness toward those in need. Jesus develops for us mercy as pardon for those in debt in the Parable of the Unmerciful slave, as recorded for us in Matthew 18, verses 21-35. Jesus’ disciple Peter asks: “How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven tie?” Peter thinks he is being quite magnanimous – up to seven time. Jesus responds, “ I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” Up to 490 times! And then Jesus tells the story of a King who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. A slave who owes the king \$10 million begs for mercy: “Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.” Right! Here? And , says Jesus, the lord “felt compassion”, felt mercy, and released the slave, cancelled all the debt. “10 million erased from the ledger. The forgiven slave then meets up with a fellow slave who owed him “5, maybe not even that much. Ad the forgiven slave demands payment, the slave owing the \$5 appeals for mercy: “Have patience with me, and I will repay you.” But the forgiven-slave would not listen to the cry. And turns the fellow slave into prison until the debt was paid. When all the other slaves of the king witnessed this, they were “deeply grieved” and reported to their lord all that happened. The lord summoned the unforgiving-forgiven-slave and said: “I forgave you that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?” (18:32-33) And the lord put the unmerciful slave in prison. And Jesus ends the story. “So shall my heavenly Father also d to you, if each o you does not forgive his brother or sister from your heart”. (18:35)

Mercy cancels debts.

And is not the lord in the parable a picture of our Lord to whom we owe a horrendous debt? Dale Bruner, in his commentary on Matthew, points out that the rabbis of Jesus; day taught that “every sin created a certain deposit of debt before God the accumulation of which formed a kind of separating wall between the person and God. On the other hand, every righteous deed contributed to the believers accumulation of assets before

God and so created a kind of bridge. Sins were demerits that separated; righteous deed were merits that connected. The corporate name for those separate demerits was “debts” (254). Jesus uses that very word in His Parable.

And with it announces His Gospel. The Lord of lords cancels debts. When we come before Him and confess that we owe a huge debt, and confess that we can never pay it, He cancels it! Mercy!

This is what Jesus gives us the freedom to pray in the Lord’s Prayer. “Our Father in heaven, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Father! Cancel our debts. And He does. The Father pardons us, He removed the debts and the separating wall the debts create. And does it at an horrendous price. The price of the incarnation and crucifixion. As a Chinese pastor once said; “He came to pay a debt He did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay.”

So, what is this mercy Jesus embodies and blesses? His mercy towards us. Not giving us what we just deserve. Giving us what we do not deserve; Kindness in our helplessness, pardon of our indebtedness.

3.) We come then to question three. When Jesus says “blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy,” is He saying that only those who are merciful toward others will receive mercy from God? From everything Jesus says – especially in the first Beatitude – “blessed are the poor-in-spirit – we know that he is not saying: before God will extend mercy to us we must first extend mercy to others. The Gospel declares that God’s mercy comes first; God’s mercy breaks in enabling us to know and express mercy. Then is Jesus saying that if we withhold mercy from others God will withhold mercy from us? After giving us the Lord’s Prayer Jesus says, “If you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sin, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15) Is Jesus saying that if we do not cancel the debt of others God will not cancel our debts?

I have wrestled with this for years. At this point in the journey, I think Jesus is saying this. If we are asking God for mercy while refusing mercy for someone else, we are not – in that moment – actually asking God for mercy. Oh, we are using the words; “Father, have mercy on me, cancel my debts.” But we are not, in that moment, actually living in the reality of the words. In that moment when I am refusing mercy for another I am not grasping what I am asking for myself. To refuse to pardon another is to refuse to cancel the other’s debts. How can I genuinely be asking God to cancel any debt while refusing to cancel the other’s debt? In that moment when I am refusing to give another person mercy I am implicitly saying that he or she must first pay his or her debt. If I go into God’s presence with that frame of mind, it means that in spite of my words, I either think I have paid my debt or think I can pay it. Which means that in that moment I am not seeking mercy. I am seeking to justify myself before God. If I ask for mercy from God but am not willing to extend it to another I am not really asking for mercy. I have lost touch with who I am before God.

You see, the merciful whom Jesus blesses are also poor in spirit; they know their own spiritual poverty and need for mercy. The merciful whom Jesus blesses are also those who mourn; they know their own brokenness and twistedness and grieve over their own sin. The merciful whom Jesus blesses are also meek; they know they have no other hope in life but the mercy of God. The merciful whom Jesus blesses are also those who hunger and thirst for right-relatedness; they know they have not arrived, but crave to be all God wants them to be.

You can see then that it is in those moments when we cannot extend mercy and some of those moments are very painful because we have been so deeply hurt or violated. It is in those moments when we feel we cannot extend mercy that we are most in need of mercy. And here is the good news, the Gospel: when in that moment we cry out "Lord have mercy." He does. He comes near. So very near. Mercy Himself comes near. And empowers us to do for others what He has done for us.

"Blessed.. in synch with the heart of the Father with the heart of the Holy God are those who practice mercy: who do not give those who sin against them what they deserve, but who give those who sin against them what they do not deserve; Kindness and pardon. For they shall be shown mercy upon mercy upon mercy."