

Matthew 5:7
From Forgiven to Forgiving
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We come today to the fifth beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." What a wonderful promise that is, "for they shall obtain mercy." We all need God's mercy, whether we realize this or not.

We sometimes complain that our driver's license photographs don't do us justice, but that's not really true. The problem is that those hastily made photographs really do do us justice. What we really want is not photographic justice but rather the photographic mercy of the professional photographer who knows how to use lights and angles and even a little touching up to produce an image that transcends reality.

So it is in our relationship with God. What we need is not divine justice but divine mercy.

Before we look specifically at this beatitude which begins and ends with a word of mercy, let me remind you that there is a definite progression of thought in the beatitudes. They are not encapsulated statements given in a random order like some of the wise sayings found in the book of Proverbs. The beatitudes are an organic whole with a logical order. The pivotal beatitude is the fourth, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." The beatitudes before

this are expressions of spiritual hunger and thirst, acknowledgements of spiritual need.

Blessed are the poor in spirit; that is, blessed are those who recognize their spiritual poverty and bankruptcy; those who have been delivered from pride and have given up on any hope of saving themselves or earning God's favor or meriting heaven. These are blessed because they alone are going to recognize Christ as the Pearl of Great Price and come to Him for spiritual riches.

Blessed are those who mourn; that is, blessed are those who have been delivered from hardened hearts and calloused consciences and self-deception and thus are inwardly miserable, pained and distressed that they have sinned against a holy God. These are blessed because they alone are going to come to the Great Physician for healing and comfort.

Blessed are the meek; that is, blessed those who recognize their own spiritual impotency and inability; those who recognize that apart from Christ, they are spiritually dead and in bondage to Satan. These are blessed because they alone are going to come to the conquering Christ as their spiritual strength and shield.

These first three beatitudes are acknowledgements of need. The sinner's heart is calloused and stony. The Holy Spirit, in the context of the gospel message, applies the redemptive work of Christ to the sinner's heart, and it comes to life. With life comes feeling, and the first expression of this new life is this spiritual hunger, this painful sense of one's great spiritual need.

That brings us to the pivotal beatitude which again says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." And the beatitudes which follow describe the filling. The one who by grace confessed his need of grace becomes the recipient of grace. He is filled with grace to the point of overflowing, and he thus becomes a distributor of grace or an agent of grace in a fallen world. In a world of misery, he is merciful. In a world of sin, he is pure. In a world of conflict, he is a peacemaker.

So the first beatitudes are a confession of emptiness and the latter beatitudes are an experience of fullness. And we have before us today the first of the fullness beatitudes.

Let's now look at the fifth beatitude, the mercy beatitude, under three headings: distortions of mercy, the disposition of mercy and descriptions of mercy.

First, **distortions** of mercy. I am going to consider first what this beatitude does not mean. There are two common misunderstandings of this beatitude, and interestingly they point in opposite directions. One distortion points toward license, by which I mean a disregard for God's law as a guide to holy living, and the other distortion points toward legalism, by which I mean dependence on God's law as a means of salvation. Here I have two opposite errors, license and legalism, and they both claim the same verse. But we can expose them both as errors by allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.

First, the license distortion. This is the view that being merciful means refusing to condemn sin as sin. Being merciful means regarding any and every sin as just an alternate lifestyle. Being merciful means not imposing my morality on others and not judging others by my standards.

If this view were true, then the merciful parent will never correct, must less spank, his child. The merciful employer will never fire the incompetent employee. The merciful judge will never mete out punishment to the guilty criminal. And the merciful church will never discipline the hardened backslider.

This is a distortion of mercy, and the clearest proof of this is what the Bible teaches about God. The word merciful, especially in the Old Testament, is used predominately to speak of God. The God of Scripture is a merciful God, but the God of Scripture is also a God of truth and justice and holiness. The God of Scripture is a merciful God, but He also revealed His moral law not as ten suggestions to be considered but as ten commandments to be obeyed. The God of Scripture is a merciful God, but He also chastens those who love Him and punishes those who hate Him.

Any explanation of God's mercy which denies or compromises God's truth and holiness and justice is a false understanding of mercy. And the same is true of mercy as it relates to salvation. The Psalmist said,

9 Surely [God's] salvation is near to those who fear Him, that glory may dwell in our land.

10 Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed.

Psalm 85:9-10

In Biblical salvation, God's mercy does not eliminate truth and righteousness but rather God's mercy is reconciled with truth and righteousness through the saving work of Jesus.

The second distortion is the legalistic interpretation of this beatitude. The beatitude is, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Some interpret this to mean that we must be merciful in order to merit mercy and thus earn our salvation. That simply cannot be correct. To begin with, merited mercy is a contradiction in terms. When the Good Samaritan freely helped the waylaid traveler, that was mercy. When the inn keeper, whom the Good Samaritan paid two denarii, helped the waylaid traveler, that was just a business transaction. Earned or merited mercy is not true mercy at all.

Also, we must interpret this beatitude in a way that is consistent with what the Bible elsewhere teaches about salvation by grace.

Ephesians 2:8-9

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that
not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,
9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Titus 3:5

5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

Whatever this beatitude means, it must be consistent with the Bible's teaching that salvation is a free gift from God and not something we in any way earn or deserve. This means that when Christ said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," He was not giving us an explanation of how to be saved but rather a description of those who are saved. You see, salvation is a package deal which provides both deliverance from hell in the next life and deliverance from sin in this life. I can't observe your life and determine if you have been delivered from hell. But I can observe your life and get a good idea if you have been delivered from the dominating power of sin and transformed into a merciful person.

Let's say that on judgment day, God asks for your record of mercy. And in response you hand God a certificate that says, "This is a merciful person." And then God says, "You can go to heaven because the merciful shall obtain mercy." If God did that, He wouldn't be treating your record of mercy as a time card. God wouldn't be saying, "I see you have done works of mercy, so now I owe you wages."

No, God would not regard your record of mercy as a time card. That would be legalism and salvation by works. God would instead view your record of mercy as a spiritual medical chart. He would say, "I see from your chart that you have a merciful heart. That means that Jesus, the Great Physician, has treated you. He has taken out your heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh with the law of God written upon it. And Jesus has paid the price to open the doors of heaven for all His patients."

Or God could view your record of mercy as a spiritual birth certificate. He would say, "I see from your certificate that you are merciful. That is a family trait of those who are born again as the children of God. And Jesus has paid the price to open the doors of heaven for all the children of God."

Well, that takes care of the two distortions of mercy. We know that the license interpretation of this beatitude is wrong because of what the Bible elsewhere teaches about God and mercy, and we know that the legalism interpretation is wrong because of what the Bible elsewhere teaches about grace and mercy.

Let's now look at the **disposition** of mercy. This beatitude speaks of mercy as a disposition, as a heart attitude or character trait, and not as an action. The beatitude does not say, "Blessed are those who do acts of mercy," but "Blessed are the merciful." Yes, acts of mercy are important but they are not logically first. What is logically first is that deep and radical inner transformation which we call the new birth. Before we can live a new life, Jesus must give us a new heart. Before we can bear holy fruit, Jesus must give us a holy root. Before we can do righteous works, Jesus must make us a new creation.

You see, our salvation is not something superficial, something merely on the surface. It is not a whitewashing or a shallow veneer of outward conformity to some standard. Our salvation is first of all a radical transformation that occurs at the very core of our being. It is the giving of spiritual life to those who are dead in trespasses and sins. It is a restoration of the image of God in fallen sons of Adam.

The key to our persevering in a life of mercy is our staying close to Jesus, who maintains and strengthens our merciful inner spirit. He is the source of our spiritual power and ability. As Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

So we live close to Jesus by worshipping Him on the Lord's Day with His people, by praying to Him and by meditating on His Word. And when we neglect our communion with Jesus, we become like a branch cut off from a vine, a branch that dries up and ceases to bear fruit.

Apart from the saving grace of Jesus, we could make some effort at mercy, but it wouldn't be the genuine article. The book of Proverbs warns us that even the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel (Proverbs 12:10).

The truly saved are those with a heart disposition of mercy which is given and maintained by the grace of Jesus. Their acts of mercy are not superficial deeds but rather authentic acts rooted in a transformed heart and empowered by Jesus.

And that brings us to our last point, and that is a description of mercy. What, after all, is mercy? God's mercy is a subset of God's grace. God's grace is the response of God's love to our sin. God's mercy is the response of God's love to the misery which results from our sin. The root idea of grace is the joy which God's love brings to us when we experience salvation. The root idea of mercy is the divine compassion which motivates God to save us.

God is merciful, and Jesus is compassionate. If we are truly the children of God, then we too will be merciful and compassionate because God has given us both a new heart to enable us and a good example to motivate us. The good example is God's own mercy to us in our salvation. God the Father sent God the Son into this world as an act of love, and God the Son voluntarily came to seek and save sinners. If we are truly the children of God, then we will follow God's example and be merciful to others.

We basically have two broad situations in life where we have the opportunity to be merciful. The first is when someone sins against us. That wounds our pride, and our natural response is to cry out for all our rights and to think in terms of vengeance. But if we know the mercy of God both as a transforming power and as a motivating example, our response is going to be different. If the sin against us is something minor and unintended, we will ignore it.

Proverbs 19:11

11 The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, and his glory is to overlook a transgression.

We'll not just overlook it, but we will glory in the opportunity to do so

If a sin is done against us in ignorance, we will follow the example of our Lord who on the cross said regarding those who crucified Him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Even when a sin against us is done deliberately and knowingly, we will freely forgive when the offender acknowledges his sin, makes proper restitution and asks our forgiveness. Jesus said that this is our obligation even if this happens seven times seventy times.

What if the one who sinned against us deliberately and knowingly will not ask our forgiveness? Well, then we turn the matter over to God to deal with on judgment day. Whatever we do, we are not to continue to focus on the matter and allow our anger to grow until we are filled with bitterness.

Ephesians 4:26

26 "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath,

The other broad opportunity for exercising mercy is when we are exposed to someone in genuine need. The great lesson on this in Scripture is the parable of the Good Samaritan, which I don't have time to go into.

Let me conclude by asking, Have you obtained God's mercy? Yes, you have, if you are yourself merciful. That is what this beatitude teaches.

Are you swift to hear the other man's point of view, slow to express your own and slow to wrath?

Do you refuse to let the sun go down on your anger?

Do you glory in an opportunity to overlook a transgression against you?

Are you willing to help when others are in genuine and real need?

That's what mercy is. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."