



## Blessed are the Merciful

St. Matthew 5:7

Fr. William Klock

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St. Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth:

**I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

(Galatians 2:20)

*It is not longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.* Why are Christians called to live like Christ? Because he lives in us. And yet how often do we try to live like Christ all on our own – by our own power? We get it all backwards. We think that as Christians we're supposed to try to be Christians in this or that aspect of our lives. But you see, when we do that, what we're doing is trying to earn the badge of "Christian" by acting like one. What the Gospel really calls us to do is the opposite. Jesus gives us the badge "Christian," and we then act like one. We aren't meant to control our Christianity. Christianity is meant to control us! Jesus now lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to let him live through us.

To really understand the Beatitudes we need to understand this principle. We're prone to pulling them apart and taking them out of context. But they all work together. The Beatitudes are like a chain that leads us from where we need to be in order to be redeemed by Christ all way through the life that he then empowers us to live once we've been joined to him. If we *are* poor in spirit, we will naturally *be* mourners. If we *are* mourners, we will naturally *be* meek. If we *are* meek, we will naturally hunger and thirst for righteousness. If we *are* those things – if they form our character – then the rest of the Beatitudes (the *doing* part) will come naturally.

And so Jesus tells us:

**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.** (Matthew 5:7)

Being merciful is the direct outgrowth of the new life we have in Christ – it's the evidence of our redemption. But what is mercy? I think the best way to see what true mercy is, is to look at how Jesus defined it in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

**Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 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. 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.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37)**

To show mercy is to give relief to someone who is in trouble. Mercy goes along with grace so much that I think we have a tendency to confuse the two. Mercy deals with relieving the results of pain, misery, and distress – the things that are the end result of sin. In contrast, grace deals with the sin and guilt itself. Mercy gives relief. Grace gives pardon. Mercy cures and heals and helps. Grace cleanses and restores. And mercy doesn't always have to relieve the results of our own sin. In Jesus' story we see the Samaritan showing mercy to relieve the pain and suffering that resulted from the sin of the robbers. Mercy sees a need and doesn't ask what happened, doesn't point an accusing finger, but meets the immediate need. The point of Jesus' story was to show someone performing a profound act of mercy. And so we don't see the Good Samaritan tracking down the robbers to get revenge or to haul them before a judge to hold them accountable for their crime – how would that meet the immediate need of the man dying in the ditch? We don't see him complaining about the fact that the priest and Levite passed the man by

without helping him. And we certainly don't see him kneeling down next to the man and castigating him for doing something foolish: "Stupid! What were you thinking travelling on such a dangerous road all by yourself and without any kind of protection for bandits!?!?"

It's not that there isn't a place for those things. The robbers did need to be tracked down and brought to justice. The priest and the Levite needed to be dealt with in terms of their lack of mercy in stopping to help the man. And the man himself probably needed to be told that he should be more careful when travelling in future. *But* none of those other things is mercy. None of them had to do with meeting the man's immediate need. Mercy is doing what you can to help someone in need – and especially to help someone whose life has been bruised and broken as a result of sin, even if that sin isn't their own. It's a willingness to set aside your own agenda, to get down on your hands and knees, to get a little dirty, knowing that another person needs help and needs it now.

That's what Jesus did. Look at Jesus' example: He was a man on a mission – the most important mission that anyone has ever undertaken on earth. He was here to redeem us from our sins. If anyone could be justified in passing by the hurt and helpless and leaving them for other people to deal with, we could say it was Jesus – he was on his way to the cross after all and it would have been a disaster if he didn't make it there. But he didn't pass them by. And that's the second quality of mercy we see in Jesus' parable: Mercy doesn't hide behind our own agenda or scruples in order to protect itself from costly service.

Jesus described the other two men in the story as a priest and a Levite for a reason. If anyone could be excused for not stopping it was they. It would be a bit like setting it in the modern world and describing them as maybe a pastor on his way to church on Sunday morning or as an evangelist on his way to a revival. They're on their way to do God's work and maybe even running a little late. The priest and Levite were probably travelling for religious reasons related to ministry. They could have seen the man in the ditch and thought that they ought to help, but then, what if he was already dead – then they'd not just be late, but ceremonially unclean and unable to perform whatever religious duties they were on their way to do. But, you see, being late wouldn't have been a

sin. Even being rendered temporarily unclean wasn't a matter of sin. Failing to show mercy was! What it boils down to is that they were unwilling to be inconvenienced; they were unwilling to die to their own plans in order to fit into the providence of God.

Jesus ministry shows us exactly what mercy is all about. It shows us what it looks like to give of ourselves in order to meet the needs of others. Jesus, God's Word incarnate, the second person of the Holy Trinity, saw the brokenness of the world that came as a result of our sin – our cosmic treason against him, and he showed us mercy. St. Paul writes in the great Kenotic Hymn of Philippians:

**Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.** (Philippians 2:5-8)

Donald Barnhouse writes, “When Jesus Christ died on the cross, all of the work of God for man's salvation passed out of the realm of prophecy and became historical fact. God has now had mercy upon us...All the mercy that God ever will have on man, he has already had when Christ died. This is the totality of mercy. There could not be any more...[he can now] act toward us in grace because he has already had all mercy upon us. The fountain is opened and flowing, and it flows freely.” Christ's humble birth as one of us, all he went through in his earthly life, and ultimately his death on the cross was all an act of mercy. St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

**But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.** (Ephesians 2:4-7)

God's mercy is the source of our mercy. Did you catch that in there? God's mercy is the source of our mercy. Being merciful is the result of our new life in Christ as we experience the mercy and grace that God shows to us. And this is important. In our natural and fallen state mercy is the last thing that characterises us. Lots of people misinterpret this particular Beatitude, thinking that God shows us his mercy only when, or because, we show mercy to others. And that's one way that we could take Jesus' statement here. But to interpret it that way would go against everything else that Scripture teaches us. We can never earn or merit God's mercy. If he were to show us mercy because we earned it then St. Paul could never say in the next two verses:

**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Jesus' point is that our willingness to show mercy is the *evidence* that we have received God's mercy already.

I think another of Jesus' stories illustrates this point. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, Jesus tells us a story about a servant who owed his master a huge debt. Jesus says ten thousand talents – he's speaking in hyperbole. That would be like us saying that the man owed his master a gazillion dollars. To put it in perspective, Josephus tells us that the entire region of Palestine paid only 600 talents in tribute or taxes to the Romans in 4 B.C. That would have been a lot of money and Jesus is talking about ten thousand talents! It was a debt that could *never* be repaid no matter how hard he tried. And yet when the man went before his master and fell on his face and cried for mercy, his master was so moved that he forgave the entire debt. But then that same man, leaving his master's house, saw someone walking down the street who owed him money – Jesus says a hundred denarii, one denarii being a day's wages. That's not a small amount of money, but in comparison one talent equalled six hundred denarii. This man had just been forgiven 600,000 times the debt that his fellow servant owed him, but instead of showing the same mercy he had just been

shown, he demanded payment. And when the payment wasn't forthcoming he grabbed the man by the neck, choking him, and dragged him to the prison for not paying his debt. So it's no surprise that in Jesus' story, when the master hears what happened he can't believe it. He just forgave a debt of ten thousand talents, yet that man failed to show the same mercy to his fellow servant. It's no surprise that the master calls the deal off and throws the first servant into prison.

If we fail to show mercy to the people who wrong us, let alone the people in need who have never sinned against us, we're just like that man who was forgiven the gazillion dollar debt, but then violently went after his friend who owed him a few thousand dollars. If we fail to show mercy it's ultimately because we either don't understand the mercy we've been shown by God or because we haven't actually received his mercy yet and are still unredeemed. As Christians we want to do all sorts of good things, but I don't think mercy is as high on our list of priorities as it should be. I think that sadly too many of us think of it as something that's optional, but Scripture tells us the opposite. And in fact, if we ignore it we ignore it to our own peril!

The Jews were condemned as a nation over and over again throughout the Old Testament for failing to show mercy. It wasn't that they weren't religious – they were very religious. The problem was that they did all the outward things that made them *feel like they were doing the right thing*. They were like the Christian who goes to Church every Sunday, who drops a big cheque in the offering plate each week, who steers clear of all the big sins, but who never really shows that he cares for anyone else but himself. God spoke through Hosea to his people saying:

**For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.** (Hosea 6:6)

Over and over the Old Testament prophets stressed that religious observance was worthless without mercy. In fact, Jesus, as we'll see later in the Sermon on the Mount, tells us that reconciliation with our brothers and sisters is *required* before we come to make our offerings to God. Reconciliation is showing mercy to another. And as modern Christians we've

really fallen down on this one. The Church would be much more effective if we could all live out this beatitude. We have the mistaken idea that when someone wrongs us, it's enough to simply not be war with them – even if we never speak to them again. That's not reconciliation. That's not showing mercy. People hop from one church to another trying to avoid those whom they have wronged or have been wronged by. Even in the same congregation people with a history between them are satisfied to simply avoid each other. Children and parents, and husband and wives split up and disown each other rather than show mercy to those who have wronged them.

Israel's religion didn't save her being condemned over and over for trampling over those in need. She was called to care for the widow and the orphan, but instead she exploited them and left them to fend for themselves. And yet how often do we as Christians expect God to accept us because of our outward religious acts. If God's Law is the standard we ought to judge a civilisation based on how it cares for its children, its women, and its elderly. And yet our civilisation kills its children before they're even born, puts our women in harm's way in the military and police, and we shut up our elderly in nursing homes where we can pretend they don't exist. And Christians let it happen – even sometimes approve of it all. And where are we as the Church to then care for those in need by sharing the mercy Jesus has shown to us? We're often just like the priest and the Levite. We're so busy with what we think is the work of the Kingdom, that we forget that showing mercy *is* Kingdom work!

We as Christians and corporately as the Church need to put being merciful higher on our priority list. This is the natural progression from being poor in spirit. When we look at the world around us I think our natural fallen proclivity toward pride and selfishness tends to want to forget that the righteousness we have in Christ is not our own. We take a self-righteous attitude toward the world and see the unredeemed sinners around us as lowly scum – as if we were never just like them. Instead of seeing those people as sinful scum, we need to look at them and have pity, knowing that they're still living their lives under the deception of Satan and knowing that unless something

changes they're all bound for eternal damnation – *just as we once were*. That kind of merciful pity was what moved Jesus to plead to the Father as he was hanging on the cross, saying, “forgive them, for they know not what they do.” It was that kind of merciful pity that moved St. Stephen, the first martyr, as the crowd was hurling stones at him, to plead, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” We need to remember that the world is still blind and that our eyes are only open thanks to the mercy of God.

A willingness to show mercy is the real sign of true conversion to Christ. Jesus has scary words for those who fail to show mercy: “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’” (Notice they don't say, “Did we not show mercy in your name!”) Jesus goes on, “And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’” (Matthew 7:22-23). Notice all the “good” things these people appeal to. They prophesied, they cast out demons, and they did “many mighty works,” but because they never showed mercy, Jesus calls them “evildoers.” Mercy is the key. If we fail to show mercy because it's inconvenient, because it means getting a little dirty, or because it means setting aside our own “rights” we merely prove that we've never truly grasped the depths of the mercy that God has shown us. This is Jesus' test: do you show mercy because even greater mercy has been shown to you?

Please pray with me: Almighty God and Father, in your great mercy, you have graciously forgiven each of us a debt we could never repay. You gave up your only-begotten Son to be come sin for us, so that we could have the eternal life we have never deserved. Father we confess that all too often we've forgotten that our new life is not something we've earned. We too often forget that your grace is free and comes to us unmerited. Remind us, we ask you gracious Lord, not only that we are sinners, but that we are sinners with opened eyes. Let us see the world for what it is: unredeemed and blinded by sin and the Devil. Let us look at the world with the same pity that Jesus did. Move us to show the world the same mercy that you showed to us. Give us a desire to mercifully relieve the pain and suffering

we see in the same way that your Son did when he was here. We ask this in his name. Amen.