

# Blessed Are the Merciful

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## Introduction.

- A. Now that we're through with our six-week split Sunday-night class session, and more recently, through with a Sunday night singing, we can return to our regularly scheduled journey through the Beatitudes, those short, sweet-sounding, but oh-so-challenging statements of Jesus. We find tonight's Beatitude in Matthew 5:7.
- B. We often talk about the way that the worldview of the people around us contradicts what God's word says, but that's not really the way that modern Americans treat mercy. If anything, they just ignore the topic altogether. The only time I can think of when I've ever used the word "mercy" outside of a church context was when I was a boy and we played a fairly cruel game called "Mercy," in which the object was to twist the other boy's hands until the pain caused him to cry out for mercy. Other than that, the subject has never come up.
- C. Perhaps this tells us that we as a people are just, but not particularly merciful. I'll be the first to tell you that I wonder sometimes if I am as merciful as I ought to be. During my work week at the church building, I get all kinds of calls from all kinds of people who want one thing—money from the church. Of course, general benevolence isn't part of the work God has given the church, so I customarily tell the aid-seekers that we don't have any funds for that and politely bid them goodbye. I wonder sometimes, though, if I should make more of an effort to be personally merciful where God has made that an individual responsibility.
- D. Perhaps this is a question that we all need to ask ourselves. What is it that God expects from us in the realm of mercy? What do we have to do to be like Jesus, to gain the commendation of "Blessed are the merciful"?

## I. What Is Mercy?

- A. As always, we need to ask what mercy is before we can figure out what role it needs to play in our lives. In all of Scripture, perhaps the passage that best describes what mercy is is Ephesians 2:4-6. In this text, we see mercy defined by what God did for us. In fact, before Christ entered our lives, we weren't loyal to Him, we weren't good, we weren't lovable. Every one of us, because we chose to sin, became a rebel against Him. Each one of us was given a choice between God and the devil, and we picked the devil. Under those circumstances, God would have been totally justified in squashing the entire human race. Because of our disobedience, we deserved to die, and none of us would have had the right to object to our treatment.
- B. However, God was merciful. Rather than giving us the bad thing we deserved, He gave us the good thing that we did NOT deserve. We were under the sentence of death, but He made us alive through Jesus. That, in a nutshell, is what mercy is. When we are merciful, we are interacting with someone who does not deserve good from us. Either we're not obliged to them in any way, or they've actively harmed us. Despite how undeserving they are, we choose to give them the good that they had no right to expect. To put it another way, we are just when we give someone what they have coming. We are merciful when we give them more.

## II. What Does Mercy Look Like?

- A. Now that we know what mercy is, we next have to determine what mercy should look like in our lives. We can learn quite a bit about this from Jesus' discussion at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:36-37. There are two main lessons that we need to take from the text. First of all, the way that the lawyer uses the word "mercy" here adds another nuance to the meaning of the word. Scripturally speaking, mercy is not an attitude or a feeling. Mercy is an action. If we are truly merciful people, that means that we can point to merciful actions in our lives that prove it. If we just feel sorry for people but don't act, we're not merciful.
- B. Second, this tells us whom the objects of our mercy should be. In context, the lawyer was looking for loopholes. He wanted Jesus to define who his neighbor wasn't, so that he could know when he didn't have to be merciful. Jesus, of course, wasn't having any of that. Jesus' point is that our neighbor is anyone who is in need. We don't get to divide the world into "us" and "them"; instead, everybody is an "us."
- C. However, God doesn't merely expect us to be merciful to random strangers who need help. Instead, He expects us to show mercy even to people who have actively wronged us. Consider what Jesus reveals in Luke 6:35-36. This is a passage that's a lot easier to contemplate in the abstract. It's easy to breezily say in Bible class, "Why, yes, of course we have to do good to our enemies!" It's a lot harder, though, in real life, when a co-worker or a brother in Christ has just treated us in a spiteful and vindictive way, and it's all we can do to keep from blasting back, and then, all of a sudden, we have an opportunity to do something nice for them. I've been there, folks, and sad to say, I do not always make the right choice. I do not always return good for evil. Whenever we struggle with that, though, we need to remember the example of God. There is nobody outside of heaven who treats God the way He should be treated. Sometimes, it seems like the whole human race is bent on offending Him as greatly as possible. Even then, though, God gives to every one of us good that we don't deserve. We are ungrateful and evil, but He is still merciful, and He expects the same of us.

- D. When we're putting mercy into practice, whether it's for our neighbor or our enemy, we need to remember to show mercy with cheerfulness. Paul tells us so in Romans 12:8. Especially when we're dealing with someone who has sinned against us, this is a tough passage to swallow. It's not enough to refrain from taking revenge; we have to actively do good for them, and now, even actively doing good isn't enough. We have to be nice to these people who have treated us like dirt with a smile on our lips and joy in our hearts. Ouch.
- E. This is where the rubber really meets the road for Christianity, friends, when we have to not just do the right thing, but do the right thing for the right reason. We have to be merciful not just because God forces us to be merciful. We have to be merciful because that's what we genuinely want to be. That's a way of thinking that is completely alien to the mindset of the world, but it's the way that Jesus wants us to think. When we are cheerfully merciful even to those who have sinned brutally against us, that's when we walk in His footsteps. Let's remember, then, not just to show mercy, but to show mercy with cheerfulness.

### III. Why Be Merciful?

- A. All of this, to me, makes mercy one of the truly intimidating aspects of Christian living. We really have to have our spiritual acts together to be merciful like God wants us to be merciful, and I'd imagine that getting to that point is the work of a lifetime. Why, then, should we invest all of this effort in being merciful at all?
- B. First, we should be merciful because every one of us is the recipient of mercy. Look at Paul's instruction in Colossians 3:13. When we are dealing with those who have sinned against us, we should be ready to forgive because we have so readily been forgiven. Sometimes, it seems almost ridiculously easy to get forgiveness from God. There are days when I feel like a wretch, when I've committed the same old sin for the 90<sup>th</sup> time, and I'm sick of it, and I'm sick of me, and I ask God to forgive me, and I know that He does, just like that. How can it be that easy? Of course, it's not easy, and we only have to think of Jesus on the cross to realize how not-easy our forgiveness is. We wronged God, yet God was the one who suffered because of it. It's like a double not-fair for God that God only counts as fair because He loves us. Friends, when we are the recipients of such mind-blowing mercy, who are we not to show mercy to those who sin against us?
- C. Second, we ought to show mercy because that's what God wants to see. We see Jesus' thoughts on the matter in Matthew 9:11-13. The point wasn't that God didn't want sacrifices, nor that He didn't want obedience. The point is that if we want our obedience to please God, we must obey in the most merciful way possible. The Pharisees had a whole pack of rules about why they shouldn't eat with sinners, but in making those rules, they forgot to show mercy. We can fall into the same trap. We can invent our own version of Christianity that is so cold and ruthless that it has nothing to do anymore with loving God or anybody else. There was a discussion on Pleonast a couple of months ago in which somebody was insisting that we shouldn't follow Jesus' example and eat with sinners because He did that under the Law of Moses. In other words, under the law of Christ, instead of behaving like Christ, we're actually supposed to behave like Pharisees. That's not what God wants. He wants us to obey with mercy rather than with hard-heartedness.
- D. Third, we must be a merciful people because we will get back the mercy that we give out. Let's look at what Jesus tells us about this in Luke 6:37-38. In context, this comes right after the passage we looked at earlier, in which Jesus told us to be merciful because God is merciful to the unthankful and evil. As we all know, this is one that people like to misapply a lot. Whenever we try to tell some folks about God's will for their lives, they respond with shrill cries of, "You're judging me!" Naturally, that's not what the passage is talking about. When I say that people shouldn't commit adultery, for instance, that's not my judgment. Instead, it's God's judgment that I'm merely repeating. However, when I say, "I'm not going to forgive you because your sin against me is too great to be forgiven," THAT'S when I start acting like a judge. Really, all three parallel phrases in this text are talking about the same thing: the behavior of the unmerciful and the unforgiving.
- E. Interestingly enough, depending on what our course of action is, the second half of this passage is either very reassuring or very menacing. If we are merciful and don't condemn others, that's the kind of mercy that God will show to us. Nor will we simply get back the same amount of mercy that we've given out. Instead, just like one of those dispensers for whole wheat or flax seed or what have you in the health-food stores, God will keep pouring out his mercy on us until it overflows everywhere. On the other hand, if we are judgmental and condemnatory, that too is the kind of mercy that God will show to us. Once again, we won't get back the same amount either. Instead, God will keep pouring out His judgment and condemnation on us until it overflows too, and I guarantee you that not a single one of us can hope to stand an outpouring like that.
- F. The point, then, is that we need to be merciful because our mercy determines our eternal destination. A couple of weeks ago, we looked at Matthew 25 and the importance of hospitality to the Christian. Mercy is another one of those things that we have to get right if we want to go to heaven. Consider the words of James in James 2:13. Folks, we'd have to be out-of-our-minds crazy to stand before God on the day of judgment and say to Him, "OK, God, give me what I deserve." I don't want what I deserve, brethren. It's much too warm there. And yet, if we are merciless in this life, that merciless treatment is precisely what we are inviting. This is precisely why the merciful are blessed: only those who show mercy can hope to obtain it.

**Conclusion.** No matter what you've done, God will be merciful to you this evening if you invite Him to.