

Blessed Are The Merciful

The Beatitudes (part 5)

Summary: Having received mercy from the Lord, the saved sinner now exercises mercy, a gracious disposition toward fellow creatures and friends of Jesus.

Scripture: Luke 10:25–37

Date: Sunday, 12 March 2023 (Narellan Cong)

Introduction

To begin this fifth part in our series on The Beatitudes, I would like to share with you all two illustrations.

Kindness Parked On

At the end of a morning run, as I was walking the last few metres home, a car approached me from behind. I moved off the road to give it room to pass. As the car passed me, I was neighbourly and smiled at the driver and his passengers. The driver then proceeded to park the car immediately in front of where I was standing, so that I had to walk around the car in order to get past.

Judging from the attire of the car's passengers, they appeared to be returning from a morning religious ritual.

In this situation, there was certainly no compassion nor care for me, on the part of the driver.

Anger Boiled Over

Last weekend, I attended a networking event for Australian leaders of men's ministries. I rode up to the event in Brisbane with a friend and member of my motorcycle club.

On our return ride, I led my friend along some beautiful country roads. We were, however, pressed for time, wanting to arrive in Armidale before dark and before the kangaroos come out to knock bikers off their hogs.

Knowing his riding style, I maintained the speed limit, yet rode hard. At each stop, my friend was becoming noticeably angrier. In my mind, I was trying to show care and compassion for him, but because he did not understand my change in riding style, he took this to mean I was trying to leave him behind.

On arrival at our accommodation, there were words, there were accusations, there were fisticuffs exchanged ... nah, I'm kidding. We settled it like modern men do: "Bruh! What's up?" ☺

In this instance my compassion and care was misunderstood, and likely not demonstrated as I intended.

What & Why?

Mercy is often in short supply in our fallen and sinful world, which is why the merciful stand out, shining like stars in the world (Php 2:15).

The friends of Jesus have received mercy from the Lord, so now exercise mercy toward our brothers and sisters-by-faith and to our neighbours.

Explanation

The first four of the Beatitudes describe a loose progression of spiritual awakening and transformation.

First, one recognises his emptiness and pledges allegiance to the Kingdom of God. Next, he experiences grief over sin and receives comfort through forgiveness. Then, he rejects his self-centredness before God and begins to glimpse the fulfilment of God's Promises and Plan. Fourth, he desperately yearns for his own perpetual peace with God and is satisfied, so much so that he overflows with a desire to help others enter that same peace with our Creator.

These four beatitudes, though, are *negative* in orientation. They all involve recognising how we became defective and then pursuing what has become desirable.

The next four beatitudes are *positive* in orientation. They all involve transformation into the friends of Jesus, who overflow with good in their own lives, among their family and in all their spheres of influence.

Mercy Comes After

The fifth beatitude is well known:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. (Matthew 5:7)¹

It is the fifth beatitude for a reason. Mercy comes *after* the emptiness, grief, humility and desperation of the first four. Being granted the Kingdom of God, receiving comfort, participating in the promises and being filled are themselves mercies of God. According to writer and pastor J. C. Ryle,

Now is come the time when God's kindness and good will towards guilty man is to be fully made known. His power was seen in creation. His justice was seen in the flood. But His mercy remained to be fully revealed by the appearing and atonement of Jesus Christ. (J. C. Ryle, 1816–1900)²

We do not deserve such mercy. That we are shown mercy is a grace from the God who is merciful, as it is written,

He will not leave you, destroy you, or forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them by oath, because the LORD your God is a compassionate God. (Deuteronomy 4:31)

Yet he was compassionate; he atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them. He often turned his anger aside and did not unleash all his wrath. (Psalm 78:38)

Go, proclaim these words to the north, and say, 'Return, unfaithful Israel. This is the LORD's declaration. I will not look on you with anger, for I am unfailing in my love. This is the LORD's declaration. I will not be angry forever. (Jeremiah 3:12)

Yes, God is compassionate, full of grace and merciful. Yet his mercy is not arbitrary nor loosely dispensed. God is merciful to those who approach him in the correct attitude of desiring mercy. Those who desire mercy are those who are first empty, grieving sin, rejecting self-centredness and yearning for peace.

Those who are self-sufficient, confident, full of themselves, and doing very well —thank you very much— have no need of mercy for they are the dispensers of mercy to others, on whom they look down, the less fortunate than they.

Even if done without such arrogance, human mercy will always fall short because it cannot help but be tainted with sinfulness. Human mercy can never truly be altruistic, for in our fallen state there is always an agenda to further ourselves, to strengthen our position, to look after our own.

On his first day of teaching his class of 250 college freshmen, R. C. Sproul carefully explained the assignment of three term papers—due on the last day of September, October, and November. Sproul clearly stated there would be no extensions (except for medical reasons). At the end of September, some 225 students dutifully turned in their papers, while 25 remorseful students quaked in fear. “We’re so sorry,” they said. “We didn’t make the proper adjustments from high school to college, but we promise to do better next time.” He bowed to their pleas for mercy and gave them an extension, but warned them not to be late next month.

The end of October rolled around, and about 200 students turned in their papers, while 50 students showed up empty-handed. “Oh, please,” they begged, “it was homecoming weekend, and we ran out of time.” Sproul relented once more but warned them, “This is it. No excuses next time. You will get an F.”

The end of November came, and only 100 students turned in their papers. The rest told Sproul, “We’ll get it in soon.”

“Sorry,” Sproul replied. “It’s too late now. You get an F.”

The students howled in protest, “That’s not fair!”

“OK,” Sproul replied, “you want justice, do you? Here’s what’s just: you’ll get an F for all three papers that were late. That was the rule, right?”

“The students had quickly taken my mercy for granted,” Sproul later reflected. “They assumed it. When justice suddenly fell, they were unprepared for it. It came as a shock, and they were outraged.”³

Mercy comes after recognition we are desperately in need of mercy from the only One who can be truly and thoroughly merciful, as it is written,

His mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear him. He has done a mighty deed with his arm; he has scattered the proud because of the thoughts of their hearts; he has toppled the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. **He has helped his [servants], remembering his mercy** (Luke 1:50–54)

A Virtuous Cycle

That mercy comes after emptiness, grief, humility and desperation helps to explain why it is *those who are merciful* that are the blessed, the fortunate, they are to be commended and honoured.

This beatitude can be mistakenly interpreted as an expression of works-righteousness, as if Jesus had said it is only until we are merciful, then God will show us mercy. This is far from the truth.

Mercy is the product of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through the first four beatitudes. It results in a virtuous cycle.

When we contemplate the wonderful grace, pity and patience of our Creator, we cannot help but admit we are prone to such debauchery that we have become unworthy sinners.

When we reflect on the undeserved mercy we receive from the Almighty God, we have to acknowledge we are saved from an unquenchable fire and delivered only by the sufferings of Christ Jesus.

When we become conscious of just how undeserving we are of divine grace, how can we act with anything other than mercy toward those who offend, wrong, injure or hate us? For we recognise ourselves in them, that they are only acting out of their own fallenness. We are all victims of the human condition; therefore,

Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. (Luke 6:36)

No, God is not merciful because we love mercy, but we love mercy because we have received mercy and that mercy remains on us as we love mercy. It is a virtuous cycle that transforms our inner being. Mercy is a character trait in those who know firsthand the mercy of God.

Evidence of Satisfaction

When we love mercy, therefore, it is evidence of the filling, completion and the satisfaction of hungering and thirsting for righteousness noted in the fourth beatitude, as it is written,

Be gracious to me, LORD, for I am weak; heal me, LORD, for my bones are shaking ... The LORD has heard my plea for help; the LORD accepts my prayer. (Psalm 6:2–9)

LORD, hear my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer me ... Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD cares for me. (Psalm 27:7–10)

These psalmists hungered and thirsted for righteousness and were satisfied!

When we desperately yearn to be reconciled with our Creator, made right with our God, we are satisfied and when we are satisfied, we have more than enough to share. We love mercy for we have received more mercy than we deserve.

The human condition is not naturally merciful; so, when we are merciful, that is evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, who lead us to and through the beatitudes of Jesus.

Mercy Feels

“What is mercy?” you might be wondering, for I have not yet actually answered this question.

Mercy is **an attitude of compassion and care, grounded in the nature of God himself, made manifest in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and expected of believers.**

I like the way pastor and author Arthur W. Pink defined mercy:

It is a gracious disposition toward my fellow creatures and fellow Christians. It is that kindness and benevolence that feels the miseries of others. It is a spirit that regards with compassion the sufferings of the afflicted. It is that grace that causes one to deal leniently with an offender and to scorn the taking of revenge. (Arthur W. Pink)⁴

In this way, we might say **mercy feels so that love can act**. Before an act can be loving toward God, one another or our neighbours, mercy has been received and responded to.

The friends of Jesus are grateful for God's mercy and are then filled with compassion for all the people who live on the Earth.

Godly Mercy Is Better

Not all "mercy" is created equal. Godly mercy is better than human mercy, for it arises from compassion and care, whereas fallen and sinful humans cannot help but be self-centred, as it is written,

The poor person pleads, but the rich one answers roughly. (Proverbs 18:23)

Their bows will cut young men to pieces. They will have no compassion on offspring; they will not look with pity on children. (Isaiah 13:18)

You may think this characterisation unfair, but ask yourself why humans are not more ready to show mercy? We all sense the truth in the axiom,

If you want *others* to be happy,
practice compassion.
If *you* want to be happy,
practice compassion.⁵

We sense this is true, yet when there is more than enough resources in this world for everyone, why do we not share more readily?

Why does our legislation favour the rich and our justice the elite?

Why are we so quick to protest low income housing? 'Not in my backyard!'

Need I list more examples for you to recognise and admit you do not naturally love mercy?

Whenever we think we are close to loving mercy, it always pales in comparison to God's mercy. Only with the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives will we ever come close to imaging God's mercy.

Application

Biblical Examples

Don't despair! This is possible yet, for we find examples of mercy throughout the Bible.

When ancient kings battled, and Lot, the nephew of Abraham, was taken into custody, and his possessions commandeered, it is written,

When Abram heard that his relative had been taken prisoner, he assembled his 318 trained men, born in his household, and they went in pursuit [...] he and his servants [...] defeated them [...] He brought back all the goods and also his relative Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the other people. (Genesis 14:14–16)

This story seems unremarkable, at first, until we remember Abraham had been wronged and abandoned by his nephew (Gen 13:1–12). Thus, it was compassion and care in Abraham that inspired him to rescue Lot and his household.

It was mercy on the part of Joseph that caused him to freely forgive his brothers after they so wickedly mistreated him, destroying his technicolour dreamcoat, throwing him into a pit, then selling him into slavery. As it written,

You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. Therefore don’t be afraid. I will take care of you and your children.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:20–21)

After Miriam rebelled against her brother Moses, and the Lord punished her with leprosy, it was compassion and care for his sister that caused Moses to appeal to the Lord,

Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “God, please heal her!” (Numbers 12:13)

It was mercy that caused David to twice spare the life of his enemy Saul, when that wicked king was vulnerable (1 Sam. 24:1–22; 26:1–25):

He said to his men, “As the LORD is my witness, I would never do such a thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed. I will never lift my hand against him, since he is the LORD’s anointed.” (1 Samuel 24:6)

These examples of mercy should inspire us to emulate the character and conduct of these friends of God.

Mercy is Exercised Cheerfully

Since mercy does not come naturally to wicked and undeserving men and women like us, at first, mercy will seem like a chore; yet, the apostle wrote,

According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the proportion of one’s faith ... showing mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:6–8)

Mercy is to be exercised cheerfully, to demonstrate that it is not only done voluntarily but that it is also a pleasure. Cheerfulness spares the feelings of the one helped, and soothes the sorrows of the sufferer. It is this quality of cheerfulness that gives the most value to the acts of love arising from our love of mercy.

Mercy Begets Mercy

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

We are to love mercy because Almighty God has shown us mercy. When we do so, mercy has benefits, as it is written,

For whatever a person sows he will also reap (Galatians 6:7b)

If you sow with mercy, you will reap mercy. Not only from our Creator, the friend of Jesus who is merciful with others will receive merciful treatment at the hands of others:

For you will be judged by the same standard with which you judge others, and you will be measured by the same measure you use. (Matthew 7:2)

Judge and treat others with mercy and you will be judged and treated with mercy. Additionally,

The one who pursues righteousness and faithful love will find life, righteousness, and honour. (Proverbs 21:21)

Mercy is good for our soul! It is true, therefore,

A kind man benefits himself, but a cruel person brings ruin on himself. (Proverbs 11:17a)

When compassion and care overflows into acts of love, we enjoy an inward satisfaction that cannot be compared:

The one who despises his neighbor sins, but whoever shows kindness to the poor will be happy. (Proverbs 14:21)

The exercise of mercy is a source of satisfaction to God Himself, who

He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights *in* mercy. (Micah 7:18b, NKJV)⁶

Taking all this into consideration, mercy begets mercy. It is good for you and for me and for all of us!

If you want mercy, therefore, overflow with mercy in response to the mercy you have been shown by our loving and gracious and merciful Creator.

Conclusion

Look Forward to Mercy's Fulfilment

Both in the time of Jesus, as it is now, mercy is in short supply. Just when you think someone is showing mercy, you then discover their machinations to enhance and enrich themselves in the process.

It is enough to drive one to despair!

Yet, in the *Second Letter to Timothy*, the writer acknowledged the present experience of mercy leads to its final and complete fulfilment when he wrote,

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus ... May the Lord grant that he obtain mercy from him on that day. (2 Timothy 1:16–18a)

At the conclusion of the *Letter to Jude*, the saints are also exhorted to

keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting expectantly for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life. (Jude 21)

These and other verses remind us the mercy we have received now, which reconciles us to our Creator and leads us to show mercy to others, is a foretaste and acknowledgement of the people of God ultimately redeemed as Christ Jesus comes in glory.

We have been shown mercy and so therefore show mercy because we anticipate the love and acceptance we will receive, despite how undeserving we are.

The Merciful Stand Out

Until that Great Day, when the Lord returns to renew Heaven and Earth, blessed are the merciful! If you have felt empty, grieved over sin, rejected your self-centredness and yearned to be made right with our God, then you know you have been shown mercy. So be merciful!

Until that Great Day, the mercy of the friends of Jesus will have us shining like stars, like salt, light and a city on a hill, witnesses to the good news there is a better way to live. We no longer have to succumb to our fallenness and sin, but are free to be merciful, for we have been shown mercy.

Let us pray with the final prayer of Thomas Cranmer:

O Father of heaven; O Son of God, Redeemer of the world; O Holy Ghost, proceeding from them both; three Persons, and one God; have mercy upon me, most wretched caitiff and miserable sinner. I have offended both heaven and earth, more grievously than any tongue can express. Where then may I go, or where should I flee for help? To heaven I may be ashamed to lift up my eyes, and in earth I find no refuge or help. What shall I then do? Shall I despair? God forbid. O good God, you are merciful, and refuse none who come unto you for help. To you, therefore, do I run; to you do I humble myself; saying, O Lord God, my sins be great, but yet have mercy upon me for your great mercy. O God the Son, this great mystery was not wrought (that God became man) for few or small offences; nor you did not give your Son unto death, O God the Father, for our little and small sins only, but for all the greatest sins of the world, so that the sinner return unto you with a penitent heart, as I do here at this present.

For this reason have mercy upon me, O Lord, whose property is always to have mercy; for although my sins be great, yet your mercy is greater. And I crave nothing, O Lord, for my own merits, but for your name's sake, that it may be glorified thereby, and for your dear Son, Jesus Christ's sake.⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- ² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 1 (New York, NY, USA: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), pg 59; as quoted in Elliot Ritzema, ed., *300 Quotations and Prayers for Christmas*, Pastorum Series (Lexham Press, 2013).
- ³ Matt Woodley, "The Grieving Heart of God," *PreachingToday.com*; as quotes in Craig Brian Larson and Phyllis Ten Elshof, *1001 Illustrations That Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan Publishing House, 2008), pg 115–116.

- 4 Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer* (Bellingham, WA, USA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), pg 39.
- 5 Roy B. Zuck, *The Speaker's Quote Book* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Kregel Publications, 1997), pg 80.
- 6 *The New King James Version* (Nashville, TN, USA: Thomas Nelson, 1982).
- 7 "Thomas Cranmer's Final Prayer", Elliot Ritzema, ed., *400 Prayers for Preachers* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).