

# BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

MATTHEW 5:7, MATTHEW 18:21-35

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott  
Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey  
August 18, 2002

**T**his morning we are going to look at what I consider to be the most difficult of all the statements found in the section of scripture we call the Beatitudes. It is the fifth of eight virtues Jesus ascribes to those who belong to God's kingdom. It is the characteristic of being merciful.

Like all the other virtues we have looked at so far, people sometimes confuse the virtue of mercy with a certain kind of personality or behavior that has nothing to do with being a Christian.

For example, today it is politically correct to be tolerant of another person's behavior. In the minds of many, showing tolerance is the same as showing love and mercy, and a lack of tolerance means that you have no compassion. It means that you are a narrow-minded person or a racist. If you take a stand in school and speak out against certain behavior, you will be labeled as a person who lacks love and mercy.

But when we define mercy as tolerance toward sinful behavior, we are not even coming close to the Biblical definition of the word. The person who smiles at sin and says that it doesn't matter may be considered easy to get along with, but he is not merciful in the way Jesus meant when he said, "blessed are the merciful."

God Himself is described as being merciful. But God is also described as righteous and holy and just. God does not compromise justice in order to show mercy. Likewise, a person who truly shows mercy does not do so at the expense of truth and law. So we misunderstand the meaning of being merciful if we confuse it with a high tolerance for sin, and this misunderstanding does exist in our society.

But this kind of mistake is easy for me to point out. The fact that people do make the mistake of confusing tolerance for sin with mercy is not what makes this the most difficult of all the beatitudes to understand. Coming up with a correct Biblical definition for mercy is not what makes this Beatitude so challenging. There are enough examples of people who showed mercy in the Bible that we can, without much difficulty, come up with a clear picture of what Jesus meant when He said, "Blessed are the merciful."

For example, there is the story of the Good Samaritan. While on a journey, the Good Samaritan saw a man who had been beaten by robbers, so he stopped and went across the road to where he was lying. Others also saw the same man. They also had feelings of pity, but they did not do anything about it.

But the Good Samaritan was merciful, because he did something to relieve the situation. He dressed the wounds and took the man with him and made provision for him. That was being merciful. Mercy does not mean only feeling pity; it means a great desire and an effort to do something to relieve the situation.

The best Biblical illustrations of mercy come from God Himself. In the Old Testament we see God looked down upon the suffering of His people in Egypt. He felt pity for their miserable condition, so He worked through His servant, Moses, to save them from their suffering. Then, in the New Testament, we see God looking down on all the people of the world in their pitiful sinful condition. And, having pity, He sends His only Son to save the human race from total destruction.

When we look at these Biblical examples, it is not too hard for us to come up with the true definition of what it means to show mercy. It is not too hard to see that showing mercy means taking pity on someone in his or her misery and then doing something to relieve the suffering. It is not difficult to understand that showing mercy is noticing people who are suffering from the awful consequences of sin, feeling sorry for them, and doing whatever possible to reduce their misery. Coming up with a Biblical definition for mercy is not hard.

The difficulty of this Beatitude is not defining mercy itself; rather, it is understanding the relationship between mercy and the promise attached to those who show mercy. The promise is this, "for they shall be shown mercy." "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."

The most common, and perhaps the most natural way of interpreting this statement is to say that, if I am merciful towards others, God will be merciful towards me; if I forgive, I shall be forgiven. That is to say that the condition for my being forgiven is that I forgive.

There seems to be support for this kind of interpretation in other sections of scripture. For instance, we have the well-known statement in the Lord's prayer that says, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" or "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

And then there is the statement recorded in the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18. The unmerciful servant was asked by his master to pay back a huge debt. The man did not have the money and the

master decided to forgive him of all he owed. But, as you remember, this man went outside and demanded payment from a certain person under himself who owed a small amount. Although that person begged the man to be patient with him, the unmerciful servant would not listen. He had the person thrown into prison until he could pay back what he owed. But when the other servants found out what had happened, they reported him to their lord. When the lord heard the story, he took back his pardon and threw the unmerciful servant into prison. Then the parable ends with this statement recorded in MATTHEW 18:35: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

Here again it seems that Christ is teaching us that we are forgiven by God only as we forgive others and to the extent that we forgive others. But this kind of interpretation is wrong for two reasons.

First of all, if our receiving mercy and forgiveness from God were strictly dependent on our ability to forgive others, then none of us would make it to heaven. With the exception of Jesus Christ Himself, no human being has ever been able to demonstrate perfect mercy and forgiveness towards his fellow man. We condemn ourselves when we interpret Christ’s teachings in such a strict and legal manner as to say the only way to receive forgiveness from God is to have a perfect record of forgiving others.

And there is another reason for us to seriously question this interpretation.

The interpretation that our forgiveness is conditioned by our ability to forgive others cancels the whole doctrine of grace. EPHESIANS 2:8-9 says, “for it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” ROMANS 3:28 also states the doctrine of grace very clearly. It says, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.” Now if we maintain that man is forgiven based upon his ability to forgive others, then we make nonsense out of these and many other passages of scripture found in the New Testament.

We cannot allow ourselves to interpret this beatitude in a way that will contradict the rest of the Bible. The teaching of the Bible is that we are forgiven when we are truly repentant of our sins and ask God for His forgiveness. For me to be truly repentant means to realize that I deserve nothing but punishment, and that if I am forgiven it is entirely because of God’s love and mercy and grace, and nothing else.

Now with that said, I still believe there is a

direct relationship between receiving forgiveness and showing forgiveness, between receiving mercy and showing mercy. And the relationship is that the one who has truly repented and realizes that his forgiveness is totally dependent on God will then forgive those who trespass against him. If we have truly experienced all that God has to offer us in terms of forgiveness and mercy, then our attitudes toward everyone else must be completely and entirely changed. This change means that we no longer see people simply as men and women whom we dislike. But we see them as people who are slaves to sin and to Satan. WE see them as people we used to be like before we received God’s mercy. In our minds we separate the sin from the sinner. We pity people, because we see them as slaves of hell and of Satan. If this is not our attitude, then we have not yet truly experienced God’s forgiveness. It is impossible to receive God’s mercy and not have such a change.

So rather than giving us a condition for receiving mercy and grace, Christ is teaching us that the true and necessary demonstration of receiving forgiveness and mercy is to be forgiving and merciful to others. We shall be shown mercy at the last judgment, not because we have first shown mercy to others, but because God has first shown mercy to us. Because we recognize His mercy and grace in our own lives, we are merciful to others, and that becomes proof that we have already receive mercy and will receive mercy at the last judgment. The virtue of being merciful is evidence of

a change in our lives. It is evidence of the fact that we have eternal life. It is not a condition for going to heaven.

The very order given to these Beatitudes also supports the truth that mercy flows from grace. Jesus deliberately placed this virtue as number five in a series of seven virtues. The first three virtues all focus on our sin problem. We are poor in spirit when we realize we have failed in the light of God’s perfect standards. We mourn when we are sad about our failure. We respond meekly when others treat us harshly, because we realize we ourselves are deserving of death. As we do all these things, we are confessing our sad condition before God and man. And then we seek God’s forgiveness and righteousness with all of our hearts. As a result, God uses His mercy and grace to cleanse us and fill us with His righteousness. From that point on, we become changed people, and the first evidence of that change is our ability to show mercy to others.

Christ deliberately placed these virtues in the order we find them today. He did not place showing

---

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

Matthew 5:7

---

mercy to others prior to receiving mercy from God. Instead, the order strongly suggests that this virtue of showing mercy along with the next two that follow, flow out of a life that has been filled. They are the necessary response to the filling that comes as a result of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. They are the evidence of that filling.

When Jesus died on the cross, God extended His mercy and grace to all people, but only those who are truly repentant will actually be able to experience God's mercy. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, that servant was never truly repentant in the first place. He regretted his situation and was happy to be free from his debt, but he never fully appreciated the mercy he received. If he had, it would have affected the way he looked at others. Since he would not forgive the servant who was under him, the unmerciful servant never understood forgiveness and what his master had done for him in the first place. Therefore, he was not forgiven.

In contrast, the apostle Stephen, while being stoned to death had pity on the very people who were killing him. He fell to his knees and cried out, "Lord do not hold this sin against them." Stephen was a Jew who had experienced God's mercy. He knew very well that if it were not for God's mercy, he would be no different from those who were taking his life. Even in his physical suffering, he was able to see that the people killing him were trapped by their own sin. In the final analysis, they would be the ones who would truly suffer. Stephen realized what the consequences of their sins were doing to them, and he felt pity for

them. So Stephen did what he could to reduce their pain. He prayed for them.

But Stephen's experience is meant to be the experience of every Christian. Is it our experience? Do we feel sorrow for people who show from the expression on their faces the bitterness and the anger they feel? They are to be pitied. Notice the things that cause them to be angry, revealing that their whole central spirit is wrong. They are so unlike Christ, so unlike God who wants to forgive them of everything. We should feel sorrow for them. We should pray to God for them and ask God to have mercy upon them. We proclaim whether we have received forgiveness or not by whether we forgive or not. If I am forgiven, then I shall forgive.

So this Beatitude should cause us all to examine ourselves. None of us by nature has a forgiving spirit. And if we have one, it is for one reason only. We have seen what God has done for us in spite of what we deserve.

Are we merciful? Are we sorry for every sinner, even if the sinner is offending us? "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy." WE are merciful, because we have already obtained mercy. In the last judgment, on that day when all the things we have done wrong will be made plain, we will all need to be shown mercy. But in order to obtain mercy then, we need to experience it now. And the test of whether or not we are experiencing it now is our ability to be merciful. This is the test that our Lord Jesus Christ gives to us: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."