

"The Merciful" Matt. 5:7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you as we continue the third leg of our Lenten journey on the road from "Dust to Glory". Our text is from Jesus' words in **Matt. 5:7**, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*"

Prince Felix of Schwarzenberg was appointed foreign minister of Austria in November of 1848. After the Hungarian revolt was suppressed in 1849, someone suggested to him that it would be wise to show **mercy** towards the captured rebels. "*Yes, indeed, a good idea,*" Schwarzenberg replied. "*But first we will have a little HANGING!*" His comment illustrates the problem we have with Jesus' words in **Matthew 5:7**: "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*" As a purely **theoretical** concept, **mercy** sounds like a **GREAT** idea! Even those who **reject** Jesus are still impressed by these words. The **problem** comes when we find ourselves in situations where we're required to actually **implement** mercy. It's **then** we usually find ourselves more in sympathy with the sentiments of Prussian Prince **Felix**! **Approving** of mercy and actually **exercising** it are two different animals. I think we **struggle** with this so much, because demonstrating mercy presupposes understanding the impact of **THREE THINGS: DEBT, LOSS, and GRACE**. First of all...

1. **MERCY** always implies **DEBT**.

Speaking **PERSONALLY**, I usually don't have much problem with mercy...if it's **MY** debt being forgiven. It's when I'm required to **SHOW** mercy that I often **struggle**. Why? It may be because, by **definition**, the only kind of person to whom I can show **true** mercy is one who doesn't **deserve** it...someone who's "totally indebted" to **ME**!

Jesus illustrated this principle in **Matt. 18:23–35**, a parable in which He uses a lot of **hyperbole** (deliberate and obvious exaggerations used to make a point). It's about a **king** whose servant owed him an **impossibly** large sum. When the king called in the **debt**, the servant begged for **patience** and asked the king to give him time to **repay** the full amount. This **desperate request** was as impossible as the debt **itself**, because—by my calculation—it would have taken approximately **165,000 years** to acquire the amount he needed to repay his master! The king, of course, was very aware of the **hopelessness** of the servant's situation, but instead of giving him more time to **repay** or making the servant pay for the debt with his **life**, the merciful king **canceled** the debt **altogether**!

Wouldn't it be nice if that were the **end** of the story? But Jesus goes **on** to say that no sooner had the servant gone out of the king's **presence** when he found a fellow servant who owed **HIM** a debt. The forgiven servant grabbed the man by the neck and began to **choke** him: "*Pay back what you owe me!*" he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged, "*Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back*"—the very same words the forgiven servant had just used with the **king** when he pleaded for more time to pay back his **impossibly** large debt. But the irony seemed **lost** on him, so the forgiven servant had his colleague thrown into **debtor's prison**. Jesus goes on to say when the other servants saw what had **happened**, they were **very upset** and told their **master**, the **king**. Then the master called the servant back in. "*You wicked servant,*" he said, "*I*

canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?"

The point of Jesus' parable couldn't be clearer. The debt of our sin **doomed** us beyond anything we ourselves could ever **do** about it, and **yet**, our merciful God **amazingly** forgave it all of it through His **Son**, so shouldn't those who've received such unlimited mercy gratefully extend that **same Godlike** mercy to **others**?

I get that...but the even more **obvious** question is why the forgiven servant couldn't see the **hypocrisy** of his behavior! **Actually**, the answer is quite **simple**: He had a **legitimate complaint** against the other man! **Think** about it: He wasn't trying to steal something that didn't **belong** to him. The fellow servant legitimately **owed** him the money, and it wasn't an insignificant **amount** to him—**nearly three and a half month's worth of wages**! Presumably, the debtor had agreed to pay the money **back**, but how do we know he wasn't a **deadbeat**? This is precisely the **problem** with mercy. There is only one kind of person to whom you and I can show true mercy—to the **indebted** who doesn't **deserve** it!

There's a story told about a mother who came to **Napoleon** on behalf of her son who was about to be **executed**. The mother asked the ruler to issue a **pardon** for her **son**, but Napoleon pointed out that it was the man's **second offense**, so **JUSTICE** demanded **death**. *"I didn't ask for JUSTICE,"* the woman replied. *"I pled for MERCY."* The emperor objected, *"But your son doesn't DESERVE mercy."* *"Sir,"* the mother replied, *"it wouldn't BE mercy if he DESERVED it, and mercy is all I ask."* Her son got the **pardon**!

Because mercy can only be granted to the indebted who **don't deserve** it, mercy always seems much easier to **receive** than to **hand OUT**. When I **receive** mercy, I know that I have nothing to **lose** and **everything** to **gain**—it's my only **hope**! But what happens when someone indebted to **YOU** says something behind your **back** or takes **advantage** of you? How merciful do you feel **then**? How do you feel when you do something for someone and they forget to **thank** you? Or suppose that ungrateful person is a fellow member of your **congregation** and claims to be a follower of **Jesus Christ**? Suddenly, this "being merciful" stuff isn't quite as easy as it **sounds**, and the debt becomes one we're not so eager to **dismiss**... which leads to the **SECOND POINT** about mercy...

2. MERCY also implies LOSS.

Mercy assumes that I'm willing to write off the debt that's owed me as a **LOSS** that I won't **regret or gripe about later**! The clue to seeing this from **God's** perspective is found in the nature of the **blessing** that Jesus pronounces in this beatitude: *"Blessed are the merciful,"* says Jesus, *"for they will be SHOWN mercy."* I can easily see how we might be tempted to understand Jesus' promise as a statement of **polite reciprocity**. Perhaps all He means by this is, *"If you show OTHERS mercy, they'll show mercy to YOU."* Maybe this beatitude is just **Jesus' version** of what your **mother** taught you when she first sent you off to school: *"If you're nice to others, they'll be nice to you."* The trouble with Mom's "advice" is that it probably took only about **five minutes** for you to find out she didn't know what she was talking about! **Sure**, there were some kids who were nice to **you** when you were nice to **them**. But there **also** was that school **bully** who stole your **lunch**! You could be nice to him **all day long**, and he'd **still** take your peanut butter and banana sandwich!

Don't get me **wrong!** It's **good** to be nice to people. It's even **Godly**. But **you** know as well as I do that it's no guarantee they'll be **nice** to you. Nor when you extend **mercy** to other **people**, does it necessarily mean they'll extend the same mercy to **you**. In fact, they **MIGHT** take advantage of you, which is precisely why it's so **difficult** for us to extend mercy in the **first place!**

What **is** it then that keeps us from joyfully and willingly **abandoning** ourselves to the Godlike mercy Jesus talks about in this **beatitude**? Isn't it our unwillingness to **accept LOSS**? **Otherwise**, why do we mentally keep **account** of the offenses committed against us and try to accrue daily **compound interest** on those debts? Is it because we don't really **UNDERSTAND** mercy? **Possibly**. But maybe it's because we really **DO** understand it! Perhaps we're reluctant because we realize that if we respond in the same way Jesus describes here in this **beatitude**, we'll suffer **LOSS**—that our **debtor** will get away without having to pay for what he's **done**. And let's **admit** it: There's something deep within us that **recoils** at this thought—even if God **HAS** done much the same for **US!**

Deeply ingrained in the human heart is an innate hunger for what we refer to as **JUSTICE**. Maybe it's a vestige of **the image of God** imprinted on our nature. True, it's a longing that's been distorted by **sin**, but it's still **there**—a **smoking ember** to remind us that ultimately, there's an **account** that needs to be **settled** for anything owed.

C. S. Lewis called this, "**The Rule of Fair Play**," and it's **most** evident when people are **arguing**. "*When people are **quarreling**,*" Lewis writes, "*They say things like, "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?" "That's **my** seat, I was there **first!**" "Why should you cut in line before **me?**"*" Lewis goes on to write that that someone who says such things "*...is appealing to some kind of **assumed standard of behavior** which he expects the other man to **know** about."* Amazingly, the other person usually doesn't **disagree**, **BUT...** "*Nearly always he tries to make out that what he's been **doing** doesn't **really** go against the **standard** or that if it **does**, there's some special **excuse**."* So, in **each** of us there's this innate thirst for **JUSTICE**, the fundamental law of **ALL** debt—the **Lex Talionis**, "*An eye for an **EYE** and a tooth for a **TOOTH**."*

But it's here where things start to **break down** for us: Even if I **can** call in your debt against me, I still have debts of my **OWN**, so for the sake of **justice**, if I ask the judge to pronounce a sentence on **YOU**, then I also convict **MYSELF!** This is the fundamental dilemma Jesus addresses in this beatitude. On the flip side, I **also** can show mercy, but if I **DO**, I relinquish my **claim** on what's owed me and risk suffering **LOSS**. **Frankly**, my sinful **nature** doesn't much care for **EITHER** option...which leads to the **FINAL** thing we need to recognize about mercy...

3. **MERCY** fundamentally assumes **GRACE**.

As **followers of Christ**, we're comfortable with the language of **GRACE**—God's attitude of totally **undeserved** love and kindness toward us. It's a part of our **vocabulary**. We sing, "*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*" But it's one thing to **SING** about being a wretch. It's quite another to have to worship in the same **PEW** with one! So, while we **sing** about grace, what we **practice**, in many cases, is **retaliation** as we—**metaphorically speaking**—rush out of God's presence in worship to seek out our fellow servant who **owes** us and then...grab him by the **neck**, and begin to **throttle** him crying, "*Pay me what you **owe** me!*" Then there's the person who slips out the church door every Sunday rather than greet the person who **offended** him or her months **earlier**. It's not that we **despise** the notion of mercy—how **COULD** we? But mercy isn't something that comes **naturally**, even for **Christians!**

Please remember this definition: *"MERCY is GRACE put into ACTION"*...so there can be no mercy without **GRACE** or without **Christ!** Here in our text, the **blessing** is the same as the **condition**: the **merciful** are **shown** mercy. In the four beatitudes that precede this in Matthew 5, the **condition** is the **ANTITHESIS** of the blessing: the **poor** in spirit are given the **riches** of God's kingdom; those who **mourn** are **comforted**; the **meek** inherit **the earth**; those who **hunger** are **filled**. In other words, the **blessing** answers our **need**. But in **THIS** beatitude, mercy stands as both the blessing **AND** the need!

I'm often reluctant to show others mercy, because I can't bring myself to let go of what's **owed** to me. And yet, if I call in someone **else's** debt, I put myself in a position where my **own** debts **also** are brought to light. Sometimes I deal with this dilemma by trying to have it **both ways**. I resort to a kind of **counterfeit** mercy. I try to **minimize** the debt. I say, *"Oh, it was **nothing**. It doesn't really **matter**."* But all the while, my inner **bean-counting brain** is keeping track of **EXACTLY** how much is owed me.

It's like the 60-year-old woman I heard about who felt embittered by things her younger sister had done to her ever since she was a teenager. She had never said a **word** to her sister **about** these things, but from **youth on** still kept a record for **herself**. She said, *"I've written down **everything** she's done to me and put it in my **safety deposit box** with instructions that it be given to her **when I DIE**."* And so, we might be willing to renegotiate the **terms** of what's owed us, but cancel the debt **altogether**? Wipe it **clean**? Not so **much**. The debt incurred by that person who's offended me is very **real**, so deep within my soul that there's a raspy voice crying, *"Somebody's got to pay for this **eventually!**"*

Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, we've been hardwired to **BLAME**, because **blame** comes much more naturally to us than does **APOLOGY**. If you do a Google search on **BLAME**, you can buy a **button** with the words, *"Blame my parents"*; or a **bumper sticker** that says, *"Don't blame **ME**, I voted for the **other** guy"* or a piece of **pop art** featuring four people, each pointing at the **other**, with the caption, *"Don't blame **me**, blame **them!**"*

The truth is we know the language of blame all too **well**, and we need an **antidote**. We need a force powerful enough to **break** this cycle of resentment. And it's **Christ alone** Who **gives** it to us in this beatitude: *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."* The only force powerful enough to break this deadly cycle of blame and bitterness is **the mercy of God** personally shown to us in our Savior.

In God's economy, **grace** is the **motivator**, and **mercy** is grace's tangible, responding **ACT**. **GRACE**—*"God's undeserved love and kindness"*—**RESULTS** in mercy...God's action of **forgiving** even the **unforgivable**. Does God do this so that we'll show mercy to **HIM**? Hardly! He doesn't **need** mercy! And neither should the acts of mercy we redeemed children of God show to **others** arise from self-seeking motives, **either**. They emerge from **grateful, grace-filled hearts** eager to translate that grace shown to **US** into **OUR** acts of mercy to those **around** us.

René Girard, Head of Anthropology at Stanford University, studied the nature of **cultures** for many years. In the course of his research, Girard made a discovery that astonished him: That the thing that holds **all** cultures **together** is the need for a **scapegoat**. **Everybody**, he discovered, needs somebody to **blame!** Girard found this principle deeply embedded in every culture he examined. When he came to the culture of the **Old Testament**, he found this principle of the

scapegoat acted out in the law of **Leviticus 16**, where the priest confesses Israel's sins over a **literal** goat, a **scapegoat**, that's then driven away from the people into the desert. As Girard read on into the **New Testament**, he discovered something even **more** incredible: the scapegoat had a **name!** And so does **OURS**. What was only **symbolized** in the Law of **Moses** was **personified** in the death of **Jesus Christ**. **HE** was the ultimate scapegoat. He is **God's Son**, Who **Hebrews 9:28** says was "*offered **once** to bear the sins of the **many**.*" This is the One Who didn't just **preach** about mercy but freely **administered it** to each of us on the cross, so that **now**—by the power of the Holy Spirit—we who've **received** God's mercy can share it with **others**.

So, may God grant we **DO** this every chance we **GET** in our merciful Savior's Name, Amen.