

- e. Jesus' fifth declaration expands the Beatitudes' scope by implicating the realm of interpersonal relationships; the kingdom of heaven is characterized by **mercy** (5:7). Like its four predecessors, mercy implies an inward disposition, but Jesus also highlighted its active aspect ("*they shall receive mercy*"). This is as it should be since there is an inherent connection between mercy as a character trait and merciful actions. At the same time, the relationship between them is crucial to note: In its biblical usage, mercy speaks first and foremost to what a person is rather than what he does; nevertheless, the person characterized by a merciful disposition will inevitably manifest merciful behavior.

The importance of this distinction becomes evident when one considers the way mercy is conceived by the natural human mind. As with all the individual Beatitudes, the fundamental problem is viewing mercy from the perspective of the estranged creation. This misconception expresses itself in two primary ways:

- 1) The first is the common tendency to view mercy purely as a way of treating people rather than an inward principle of being. Two bad outcomes result: First, conduct is isolated from character, and then conduct is allowed to become defining. In this way people come to be regarded as merciful (and therefore the individuals Jesus spoke of) when they manifest certain actions. The result is that this beatific quality is reduced to a natural human phenomenon well within the capability of fallen men and the kingdom of heaven is thereby cast down to earth.
- 2) The second is the tendency to view Jesus' words from the standpoint of a cause-effect relationship. His declaration that the merciful will receive mercy is taken as indicating that showing mercy to others is the ground for receiving mercy from God. If one would hope to obtain divine mercy, he must first show mercy to his fellow man.

While this text, considered in isolation, could justify this conclusion, it results more from "natural-mindedness" than biblical exegesis. From the earliest age people learn that human self-centeredness expresses itself in social contexts through the dynamic of give-and-take. When others enter into the picture, personal utilitarianism takes the form of reciprocity: *Scratching another's back is always done with the expectation of getting one's own back scratched.* Even the most seemingly selfless acts are never entirely free of the fundamental human motive of self-concern.

Not only does this ubiquitous human dynamic help to explain why it's such a grave error to define mercy in terms of observable action, it also shows why people tend to understand Jesus' words in a cause-and-effect way. In the fallen "kingdom" of this world, the law of reciprocity reigns unchallenged: When I wish to obtain something from someone, my thoughts naturally turn to ways to "win him over"; similarly, when a person acts in my behalf I'm prodded by an immediate (if non-specific) sense of indebtedness, even if it's only the obligation of gratitude.

The universality of human estrangement insures that all people everywhere think and live in accordance with certain innate principles. And being universal, those principles are virtually invisible: Like the fish that doesn't know it's wet, men have no frame of reference to conceive of a world other than the one they know.

This means that, like the other beatific qualities, men conceive of mercy according to what they know; they understand it through natural eyes and common human experience. But, again, Jesus wasn't setting in front of His hearers a polished version of what they already experienced; He was punctuating the transcendent, inaccessible nature of His kingdom: Anyone can "do" merciful deeds; only Christ's work of re-creation effects the human renewal that is the ground of authentic mercy. Unlike the "kingdom of this world" in which mercy is defined and determined by so-called merciful deeds, in the kingdom of heaven mercy is who men are in themselves and only then in their actions.

Being characteristic of the new creation, the mercy Jesus intended transcends its natural counterpart. Though there may be no apparent difference in merciful conduct, the fruit is ultimately determined by the tree; not all "mercy" is the same.

- As to its essential nature, true mercy is preeminently *spiritual*; that is, it is an aspect of Christ-likeness. Mercy must be defined by the attitudes and practices of the Last Adam alone and not by those of men in their fallen condition. The pseudo-mercy evident in this world functions under the determining principle of estrangement and so is ultimately self-referencing and self-serving; authentic mercy is of the nature and operation of love.
- And being spiritual, true mercy seeks spiritual ends. However much human pseudo-mercy may seek to address people's difficulties and alleviate their need, it is limited by natural sight: Such mercy cannot think outside of temporal categories and concerns (even where spiritual issues are in mind) and can only apply natural remedies.

"The good-natured generous man of the world pities and relieves the temporal wants of his fellow-creatures; but he thinks not of their spiritual state, their everlasting prospects. He feels tender compassion, it may be, for minds uninstructed in that information which is requisite to enable men to obtain a creditable subsistence for themselves in the world, but he feels no pity for souls perishing in ignorance of God, and under the condemning sentence of His holy law. This cannot indeed be expected; for how should he feel for others, when, in reference to such subjects, he has no feeling for himself?" (John Brown)

If one would understand the mercy Jesus spoke of, he must discern the person of Jesus. As incarnate deity, Jesus manifested the mercy that characterizes God Himself. Mercy is a characteristic of the divine nature, but, because man bears the divine image and likeness, it equally characterizes human beings in their authentic humanness. The mercy of Jesus testified to His true humanity as much as to His true deity. And a consideration of Jesus' mercy yields the following observations:

- 1) It is not an easy-going, tolerant attitude that grants “grace” at every turn; it is not a whimsical, emotional compassion devoid of godly discernment and wisdom. *Christ’s mercy cannot be separated from His mind* (ref. 1 Corinthians 2:14-16; cf. also 7:25, 39-40; Colossians 1:25-28, 3:16).

Being informed and directed by godly perspective and wisdom, true mercy does not give unqualified comfort and support to all men under every circumstance. Mercy feels compassion for and seeks to remedy human misery and need, but it does so with insight and understanding. Mercy that ignores, denies, excuses, or otherwise facilitates the underlying causes and issues in human misery is no mercy at all.

- 2) Also, mercy doesn’t necessarily imply forgiveness. Forgiveness can be a fruit of mercy, but mercy exists apart from forgiveness. In some instances there is nothing to forgive, and other times godly mercy demands that forgiveness be withheld (at least at that time).
- 3) As a feature of the divine nature, *mercy is an expression of love*. It seeks the true and highest good of the person in need, which will not permit it to set aside the demands of righteousness and truth (1 Corinthians 13:4-6). God’s mercy never negates or eclipses His justice (Ephesians 2:1-7).

So also, while mercy isn’t unconcerned with temporal needs, love compels it to look beyond them to the larger, more important and determinative spiritual concerns. Thus Paul could, with a heart of sincere love and mercy, deliver a brother over to Satan – not with a view to his destruction, but to his deliverance and final salvation (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

- 4) Thus mercy is concerned foremost with addressing the core issue of human misery: It proclaims and promotes the gospel as the sole remedy for human estrangement and its disastrous effects (cf. Isaiah 52:1-10; Luke 4:16-21; Acts 13:14-39; also 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 2 Corinthians 4:1-5).
- 5) It likewise applies the balm of the gospel to the needs and weaknesses of the saints (Galatians 4:1-20; Colossians 1:24-29). Being concerned for the good of men’s souls more than their temporal comfort, mercy can admonish, rebuke, and discipline (cf. Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 4:1-15; Galatians 1:6-10, 3:1-5, 4:19-5:4; Colossians 2:18-22; 2 Timothy 4:1-5).

Mercy exhorts, encourages and strives with men, meeting them at the point of their weakness and need in order to “*present every man complete in Christ*” (Romans 12:1-2, 14:13-21, 15:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12). It is always sensitive and sincere, ready and inclined to provide true spiritual comfort to all men at all times and in every circumstance (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; 2 Corinthians 7:1-13). ***Not human sensibilities and convictions, but the mind and actions of Christ define mercy and must inform its activity.***

Given its spiritual nature as a fruit of the new creation, it's not at all surprising that mercy is closely related to the other beatific qualities. Again, the Beatitudes aren't a list of discrete "spiritual" behaviors, but a broad synopsis of the new humanity that finds its prototype in Jesus Himself. Understanding poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, and hunger for righteousness, it becomes readily evident why such a person is merciful.

- One helpful consideration is the relationship between mercy and grace. Both are *interpersonal*, and both are *unilateral*, moving from the greater to the lesser. Importantly, this greater/lesser distinction is not bound to such things as power or position, but can reflect even circumstantial distinction; the "greater" individual may simply be the one who, in a particular time and circumstance, has something to impart to another in need.
- Grace and mercy both involve benefaction, but, as D. A. Carson, observes, grace is usually associated in the Bible with a benevolent response toward the *undeserving*; mercy is the same sort of response toward the *miserable*.
- This greater-toward-the-lesser dynamic is an important key in the connection between mercy and meekness: The person who is *meek* doesn't hold himself above other men, and where he does enjoy superiority of any kind (positional, intellectual, material, spiritual, even circumstantial), he regards it as empowerment to serve rather than to exploit. This perspective is the very essence of what it means to be merciful.
- And to the extent that meekness accompanies poverty of spirit and a mournful heart, so it is with mercy. The one who perceives the tragedy and devastation of creational estrangement will not be able to hold himself above any other human being. If he has been delivered from the prison of his own alienation, it is only because of God's condescending power. Thus a person's privileged status as one set free and restored to God isn't the occasion for pride, but for the service of mercy toward his fellow man.

And so it is that men do not enjoy Jesus' promised reward of divine mercy on the basis of their own personal acts of mercy. *Rather, the pledge of ongoing mercy is grounded in the fact and effect of God's prior cleansing and enlivening mercy.*

- At bottom, mercy characterizes the sons of the kingdom precisely because it characterizes the King whose true humanity they now share. Those who are merciful have already partaken in the divine mercy that culminated in their rebirth and union with Christ in the Spirit.
- And having been ushered into Christ's kingdom through God's mercy, how much more will the saints' reception into it at the consummation be a matter of His all-sufficient mercy (Philippians 1:1-6)?
- In the meantime, the sons of the kingdom bear their Lord's fragrance in every place by manifesting His own mercy in their hearts and deeds.