

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Matthew 5:7*

This morning we continue in our walk together through the opening verses of the Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, specifically verses 3-11 of Matthew 5, which form what has been historically known as the Beatitudes, the content in which Jesus’ speaks of the heart attitudes of those who have surrendered their hearts to God. This, of course, would stand in stark contrast to the heart attitudes of our fallen, human nature - as well in stark contrast to the heart attitudes of the world we live in. This is why an abbreviated title for the Sermon on the Mount could be: “Be different.” This is Jesus’ message to those who yearn to be members of the Kingdom of God. If are we truly following Jesus, we will be different.

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”* This verse is the fifth of the eight beatitudes, and like the four others before it, we are initially faced with seeking the true definition of a key word in God’s terms rather than our own. Our word for today is “*mercy*.” Now the dictionary defines “*mercy*” as “compassion or sympathy or leniency towards an offender” – yet if we understand “*mercy*” by that definition, a quick glance into the self-centered, rights-oriented, entitlement-minded culture of our day reveals that we need not go very far to encounter a lack of mercy in the world we currently live in. If anything, in today’s culture we have taken “compassion or sympathy or leniency towards an offender” to mean that we must be *tolerant* - and tolerant to the point of allowing or even endorsing one other’s sinful behavior, regardless how divisive or destructive it may be. The argument for this says that “Well, we are all sinners and so we shouldn’t be judging each other. We must show mercy and be tolerant.”

Well, that is not what *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”* means. Tolerance is defined as putting up with that which one believes to be objectionable. But Jesus is not telling us here that we will be blessed when all get to do what we want to do. This verse has nothing to do with being tolerant. *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy”* does not mean we are to have compassion for ungodly behavior or sympathy for those who live destructive lifestyles or tolerate what is objectionable to God. The truth be told, the concept of *mercy* has much more in common with the concept of *justice*, which is light years removed from the idea of tolerance – as tolerance is practiced in an atmosphere of moral ambiguity, while justice is practiced according to the standard of what is right and just. Yet even then, we as fallen human beings still struggle with the tipping point between mercy and justice.

On April 5, 1951, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted and sentenced to death for the crime of treason against the United States for selling the secret as to how build a nuclear weapon to Russia. In his summation at the end of the long and bitter trial, the lawyer for the Rosenbergs cried out, “Your Honor, what my clients ask for is *justice*” to which Judge Irving Kaufman calmly replied, “The court has given what you ask for—justice! What you really want is *mercy*. But that is something this court has no right to give.” A story is told of a mother who approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death. “But I don’t ask for justice,” the mother explained, “I plead for mercy.” Napoleon replied, “But your son does not deserve mercy” to which the woman cried, “Sir, *it would not be mercy if he deserved it*, and mercy is all I ask for.” “Well, then,” the emperor said, “I will give him mercy.”

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”* What is this “*mercy*” Jesus speaks of? In the context of the previous four verses we see that “*mercy*” begins by first being keenly aware of the depth of our sin, and then truly grieving over our sin, which will cause us to completely surrender and totally submit to God through Jesus Christ, causing within us a hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God – *where we then will be overwhelmed by God’s mercy*. Brothers and sisters, once we catch of glimpse of God’s righteousness, which demands the ultimate payment death for sin - we then see the preciousness of God’s mercy towards us, through the mercy of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

The principle of mercy is a prominent theme throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus tells us that “*mercy*” is necessary in having our prayers answered; “*mercy*” is the condition by which God forgives us; and “*mercy*” is the measure by which God will judge us. Mercy is one of the most breath-taking attributes of God, whereby He looks upon at us in the rebellion of our fallen, sinful depravity and *does not give us what we truly deserve*. All of these aspects of “*mercy*” are spoken of in terms of our relationship with God. But in our text for this morning Jesus leads us into a step deeper in our walk with God, as a subtle shift in focus occurs as we turn to the fifth blessing of “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*” Just as the first four commandments of the Ten Commandments concentrated on our relationship with God and the remaining commandments on our relationship with people, so it is with the Beatitudes. After the first four blessings focus on our relationship to God - our verse today and the remaining Beatitudes will focus on our relationship with our fellow human beings.

“*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*” The original Greek word here for “*mercy*” is translated to mean “to be to compassionate by word or deed.” But there is a much deeper meaning here in that the original Greek word has a comparable or parallel Hebrew word which is literally translated to mean “having mercy or sympathy for someone because you have been able to get inside the other person’s *skin* - seeing things with their eyes, thinking their thoughts, feeling their emotions.” Mercy here means much more than an emotional wave of pity but rather a deliberate effort of the heart, mind, and will to get as deep as possible into another’s soul until you are in a position to be completely immersed in a shared experience with them. In one sense the word “sympathy” is much closer to the true meaning of “*mercy*” here. Sympathy is derived from two Greek words - “*syn*” which means “together with” and “*paschein*” which means “to experience or to suffer.” What “sympathy” means then is “experiencing life of struggle and suffering together another person.” Literally sympathy means going through the same experience that another is going through. What Jesus is saying here is “blessed are those who are able to experience life together with others, even the same struggles and sufferings that they go through.” But the “*mercy*” Jesus is talking about here is more than just feeling compassion and experiencing the struggles and suffering of others. *Mercy only exists when we do something to help*. Jesus made this abundantly clear when He told the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

*And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”*

“*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*” The mercy Jesus speaks of here is not mere sympathy, it is the deliberate act of experiencing someone else’s need and then sacrificially committing yourself to relieve it. Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian who taught for years at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But at the height of his career Nouwen resigned his post at Harvard and moved to Toronto, Canada into a community called Daybreak, which is a care facility for the severely disabled. Henri moved there so he could serve and minister not to the intellectually elite but to the castaways of society.

Henri spent much of his time at Daybreak serving a young man named Adam. In the culture of society today Adam would have been aborted before he was ever born. Adam could not speak, dress or undress himself, walk alone or eat without help. Adam did not cry or laugh; and it was only occasionally that Adam made eye contact. His back was distorted, his arm and leg movements twisted. Adam suffered from severe epilepsy and despite heavy medication, he saw few days without grand-mal seizures. Sometimes, as they would come, Adam would suddenly grow rigid and scream a howling groan. At other times he would just stiffen up, grit his teeth, and shed tears. Henri Nouwen got Adam up every day. He gave Adam his medication, carried him to his bath, washed him, shaved him, brushed his teeth, dressed him, walked him to the kitchen, fed him his breakfast, put him in his wheelchair and bring him to his place in the activity room. It took Henri almost two hours every day to go through this routine. Henri was often asked - considering his vast talents, gifts and skills - if taking care of Adam was the best use of his time; considering that he could have been doing more productive things. Nouwen's response was always the same: "I am not giving up anything. It is I, not Adam, who gets the main benefit from our relationship." All of the hours Henri had spent with Adam had given him an inner peace, far more than any high-minded task or self-centered activity ever would have. In getting inside the soul of Adam, who was alone and totally helpless, Henri Nouwen came to realize how driven and obsessive his life had been – driven and obsessed for success, recognition, comfort and acknowledgment. In Adam's simple, desperate, helpless nature Henri realized how we must first become empty of ourselves before we can be filled with God. In being immersed in the severely disabled community of Daybreak, Henri Nouwen came to realize his own spiritual poverty. "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*"

In 1999 Nancy and I spent the month of August in the Philippines, as the president of the Baptist Conference of the Philippines had invited me to preach a series of evangelistic crusades throughout a number of fishing villages and remote communities on the islands. While we were there, we made a stop at the Children's Shelter of Cebu, where I had spent some time ministering there the year before. The shelter is an orphanage that optimizes "*blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*" in that they specialize in adopting out siblings and taking care of the severely disabled of the street children on the island of Cebu. The year before I had laid hands and prayed for a newborn baby that had just been found in a dumpster. The year before I had also met a young man, much like Adam, was brought before me, his twisted and severely formed body as result of being literally throw away by the doctor who delivered him. Physically deformed and brain damaged, without much hope to live, he was brought to the Cebu shelter where had been loved and cared for the last 18 years, far beyond his life expectancy.

While I was there I was asked to pray for him. And so, as I laid my hands on his disfigured head and prayed that God would continue to work in and through this young man's life, praying that God would pour into his life the abundant blessings of love, peace and joy that only Jesus can give. And I remember as I said "Amen" - I looked at him, and he looked at me - I remember that I saw a joyous sparkle in his eyes and a big smile on his face. Through tears I then looked around at the volunteers and staff who have committed their lives to living with and caring for the forgotten ones of society, and I also saw that same joyous sparkle in their eyes and the same big smile on their faces I had seen in that young man.

"*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*" Deep stirrings flowed through my soul during the time I spent at that shelter. While I don't exactly know what it feels like to be thrown away as a baby, I do know what it means to be unwanted; I never knew my birth father and my step father was distant and abusive. Such things create a heart connection with others who have walked the paths of struggle. I'm sure it's why I was drawn to minister in homeless shelters and prisons and slums - and the Children's Shelter of Cebu. Nancy has the same heart as she grew up in home with little means and the struggle of disabilities. Even today the burden of her Multiple Sclerosis is the means by which she can enter into the hearts and walk with those who struggle with infirmities and incapacities. What we have found is that while we have had our share of struggles, pain and suffering in life - we are always truly blessed when given the privilege of entering into the lives of those who are experiencing the same things.

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”* The truth of God’s Word here is that when we give up our lives to help those who are struggling with the burdens of life, when we make an effort to enter in the burden that they are carrying, will see with their eyes and hear with their ears and think with their thoughts and feel their feelings and carry their burdens and participate in their pains and share in their struggles and sufferings. And then God blesses us far beyond our wildest dreams. When you invest your life in being with someone in the deep pit of life, you will find that God will lift you both out. But this is hard for us - sacrificial sympathy does not make sense in a world where everything is about us. We are more concerned about our feelings, our opinions, our situations, our expectations, our comfort, our time, our money, our plans, our wants and our desires - than we are about the burdens of others. Our complaining and grumbling often drowns out the cry of those who are truly in need. But God tells us He will bless us when we sacrificially give of ourselves to help those who are in great need.

That is what Jesus did. Jesus Christ, in the most literal and absolute sense, came down from heaven and became a man, a human just like us. He saw the things we see, he felt the things we feel, he thought the thoughts we think. He struggled, he laughed, he cried, he hurt, he loved. Jesus knows what life is all about because Jesus came right inside human life, just like us. He knows exactly what we are going through, what we are feeling, why we act the way we do. He also struggled and suffered far beyond what any one of us has gone through. Jesus faced and experienced the ultimate pain of death itself as he sacrificially gave up himself to help us with our desperate need for a Savior. As a result, we are now because Jesus entered into our human struggles, suffering, pain and death – and he defeated them all.

The supreme act of *mercy* was Jesus’s death of the cross. Mercy is the opposite of justice. Justice is based upon what is right according to law. Justice demands people get the punishment they deserve for breaking the law. God’s Word declares breaking God’s Law demands the punishment of death. God’s wrath is required because of human rebellion against God. But mercy is grounded in compassion. Mercy confesses our desperate need for God. Mercy begs we not be punished for what we deserve. Mercy is the forgiveness wrought by sacrificial sympathy. Ephesians 2:1-7 tells us: *“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”*

It is by the mercy of God that God sent his only begotten Son Jesus Christ into the world to die in our place on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins, so that we might know forgiveness and rescue and redemption and healing and joy and hope and restoration with God today, tomorrow and forever. In Jesus, we see that *mercy is the source of forgiveness and forgiveness is the expression of mercy*. Jesus came to offer forgiveness to fallen humanity for their sins, but instead of gratitude he found hostility and hatred. The hostility of his enemies only increased as his ministry moved forward, in fact the closer He got to Calvary the more His enemies opposed Him. Yet to the very end Jesus’ mercy increased to match the intensity of his enemies’ hatred. He even extended mercy to those who drove the spikes through His wrist and feet. *“Father, forgive them,”* he cried out as they crucified him, *“for they know not what they do.”* (Luke 23:34). This is the mercy our Lord Jesus speaks of further on in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:43-44: *“You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”* In these words we hear Jesus telling us that we must show mercy and grant forgiveness to those who oppose us and seek to harm us. Those who have hearts of mercy demonstrate that they have received God’s mercy by being merciful to others – regardless of the situation of the circumstance.

This is the mercy and forgiveness we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are to extend to *everyone*. But the reality is many times we don't do so *because of the hardness of our own hearts*. But we need to remember what Jesus said: "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*" Now some believe this means if we don't show mercy to others, God will not show mercy to us. But nowhere in the Bible does it say mercy or forgiveness can be earned. Earned mercy would be a contradiction. Mercy is not a human virtue predicated upon the expectation that mercy given will lead to mercy received. Some argue, "that is what it means" and they quote Jesus in Matthew 6:14-15: "*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" Does this mean that only those who forgive others will be forgiven by God? Well, if you and I were to be judged strictly on those terms, none of us would receive mercy or forgiveness – which means none of us would ever see heaven. But what Jesus is saying here is that forgiveness and mercy are not the *conditions* of being forgiven and merciful - *but rather evidences of it*. We forgive *because* we've been forgiven. We show mercy *because* we've been shown mercy. If we are not forgiving or merciful, we need to repent and turn to God - because we haven't accepted God's mercy nor received God's forgiveness in our lives. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount John Stott puts it this way, it is "...not because we can merit mercy by mercy or forgiveness by forgiveness, but because we cannot receive the mercy and forgiveness of God unless we repent, and we cannot claim to have repented of our sins if we are unmerciful towards the sins of others."

"*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*" There are times when it is hard to show mercy and forgive. And oftentimes we experience the reality that when we do show mercy and forgive others – we do not receive mercy or forgiveness in return. But in our text for today Jesus is not trying to get us to be merciful *so that* others will be merciful to us. He is *demanding* that we be merciful and forgiving to others *regardless of the outcome*. God will put this to the test in our lives. If we claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, there can be no doubt that we will be given plenty of opportunities to extend mercy and forgiveness to those around us. In his poem "The Rainy Day" Henry Wadsworth Longfellow writes: "Into each life some rain must fall, Some days must be dark and dreary." Well, that is often true when it comes to the weather in Port Alberni, but it is also true of life. There will be times when showing mercy and forgiveness will tax our temper and our patience. But we are not asked to be merciful and forgiving out of the blue. It is as such times we need to remember we can show mercy and forgive *because* we have received mercy and forgiveness from God through the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:3-9*

Mercy is the generosity of heart and kindness of soul that is moved to alleviate the struggles and sufferings of others, by sacrificially giving of ourselves to help those who are in great need. This is the blessing of sacrificial sympathy which reflects the mercy and forgiveness we have received through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his book "Outrageous Mercy" William Farley writes: "The Cross is our teacher. The cross is a window through which we learn everything we need to know about God, humanity, wisdom, worship, the purpose of suffering, the purpose of life, and a host of other issues. If you knew nothing else but the cross, but you knew it thoroughly, you would know everything essential for this life and the next." Jesus sacrificially surrendered his life on a cross to satisfy the justice of God so that we might know the blessing of the mercy of God. I pray we would share that blessing!

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