

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, January 30, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:7

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #5
THE GIFT OF MERCY

Have you ever found yourself in a position where you were entirely at the mercy of someone else? Maybe you were standing before a judge because of a traffic violation or something else. Maybe you were in a tough spot financially, and you needed the one to whom you were beholden in debt to show mercy on you. Maybe you wounded someone with your words. You couldn't take them back. You wished deep inside that they had never come out. You didn't really feel the way that you said that you did about the person, but you knew that they felt that there was a little bit of truth in everything that you say, and now you hope that they can find it in their heart to forgive you.

I could go on and on. The examples are endless. Part of the human experience is pain. When we are the cause of that pain in someone else's life, or when our circumstances have brought us much grief, the gift of mercy can be one of the sweetest experiences that we will ever behold. And the one who shows mercy, the merciful; that person becomes one of the greatest gifts that God has given to us.

Jesus understood mercy, because He is the embodiment of true mercy. None of us deserve the mercy of God in our lives, but He has given it, and in His list of instructions for Kingdom living, has instructed His followers to be people of mercy.

Kent Hughes begins his chapter on mercy in his book, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, with the story of two twin brothers. It's a powerful story that demonstrates the importance of being people of mercy.

Years ago a small-town merchant had identical twin boys who were inseparable. They were so close that they even dressed alike. It was said that their extraordinary closeness was the reason they never married. When their father died, they took over the family business. Their relationship was considered "a model of creative collaboration."

Because he was busy, one of the brothers neglected to ring up a sale and absentmindedly left a dollar bill on top of the cash register while he went to the front of the store to wait on another customer. Remembering the dollar, he returned to deposit it only to find the bill was gone. He asked his brother if he had seen it, but the brother said he had not.

An hour later he asked his brother again, but this time with an obvious note of suspicion. His brother became angry and defensive. Every time they tried to discuss the matter, the conflict grew worse, culminating in vicious charges and countercharges. The incredible outcome was the dissolution of their partnership, the installation of a partition down the middle of the store, and two competing businesses. This continued for twenty years – an open, divisive sore in the community.

One day a car with an out-of-state license pulled up in front of the stores. A well-dressed man entered one brother's shop and asked how long the store had been there. Learning it had been twenty years, he said, "Then you are the one with whom I must settle an old score."

"Some twenty years ago I was out of work, drifting from place to place, and I happened to get off a boxcar in your town. I had absolutely no money and had not eaten for three days. As I was walking down the alley behind your store, I looked in and saw a dollar bill on top of the cash register. Everyone else was in front of the store. I had been raised in a Christian home and I had never before in all my life stolen anything, but that morning I was so hungry I gave in to the temptation, slipped through the door, and took that dollar bill. That act has weighed on my conscience ever since, and I finally decided that I would never be at peace until I came back and faced up to that old sin and made amends. Would you let me now replace that money and pay you whatever is appropriate in damages?"

When the stranger finished his confession, he was amazed to see the old store owner shaking his head in deep sorrow and beginning to weep. Finally the old man gained control and, taking the gentleman by the arm, asked him to go to the store next door and tell its owner the same story. The stranger complied. Only this time two old men who looked almost identical wept side by side.¹

Can you imagine what it would have been like to be one of the two brothers on that day? For years you have held hostility towards those one who had been not only your brother but your best friend and business partner. The hearts that were not willing to forgive had destroyed so much of their life. If these men were Christian, they certainly didn't understand the mercy of God, because when we understand God's mercy, we become people of mercy.

Listen to the words of Jesus as He shares the fifth Beatitude in Matthew 5:7.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Remember, this study has shown us that every time we see the word "blessed" in the Beatitudes we are reading about the person who is approved by God. Every time we read

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), pp. 45-46.

the word “they” we are really reading the Greek word for “they and they alone.” So, God has approved the merciful and they and they alone will be shown mercy. If you want to experience God’s mercy, you must show yourself to be a person of mercy.

So, what is mercy?

Well, not long ago, our Creative Arts Worship Team put together a video where two of our own members were asked to share what mercy means to them. Check it out. (“Mercy” Video – 3:58)

Grace is where God gives us what we don’t deserve. Mercy is where God doesn’t give us what we do deserve. Let me expand on that a bit.

Hughes points out that “the basic idea of the Greek word translated *merciful* is ‘to give help to the wretched, to relieve the miserable.’ Here the essential thought is that mercy gives attention to those in misery. From this we make the important distinction between mercy and grace. *Grace* is shown to the undeserving; *mercy* is compassion to the miserable. Thus the synonym for *mercy* is *compassion*. Mercy, however, is not simply *feeling* compassion. Mercy exists when something is done to alleviate the distress.”²

If you are a not taker, I want you to write the following in your notes: “Mercy is . . . compassion in action.”

God wants His children to be people who are actively involved in showing compassion to others. Do you remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan? It’s a beautiful story. But, perhaps you don’t remember that before the story was given, a question was asked. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 10:25, where we find the parable in its context.

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered, “‘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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came

² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (NIV 2011)

We don't have the time to dig deep into this parable today, but let me share something with you. For years, I read this parable and tried to understand who Jesus was saying that true Christians were in the story. And for years, I assumed that we were the Good Samaritan. Several years ago, after spending a great deal of time in the parable, it became clear to me that you and I are the man who was beaten. We are the one who was left for dead on the road. The Good Samaritan is a picture of Christ. He shows mercy to us. And, He has called us to model our lives after Him, showing mercy now to those in our lives.

So, how can you show compassion in action?

- Compassion International – One practical way is to sponsor a child in another nation. It only takes \$38 a month to give a child in a foreign country all the food, clothing, education, and medical care that they need. Many of you are involved in showing this type of compassion. Some have even visited the children they sponsor on mission trips.
- Volunteer – Did you know that each year Washington County Community Services conducts a homelessness survey? The goal is to put a face and name to the homeless in our own county and to take practical steps to help these folks. Last year 276 homeless persons were counted in our county. This included 68 homeless families (85 parents and 131 children), 41 homeless adults, and 15 homeless youth. There are a host of organizations that are working with those in our own backyard who need compassion shown to them. If you are looking for a way to be involved in compassion ministry, don't hesitate to contact the church office.
- Look Around – My guess is that if we kept our eyes open, we'd find opportunities to show compassion in action each day. It's as easy as shoveling a neighbor's driveway, helping a pregnant woman put her groceries in her car, doing the drive-thru-difference and paying for the bill of the car behind you in the drive-thru-lane.

And there is a host of other ways. The Apostle John wrote the following in 1 John 3:17, “17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (NIV 2011)

James wrote, “13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:13)

James also wrote, “27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27)

I’m not saying that showing compassion in action is a prerequisite to salvation. It’s not. Ephesians 2:8-9 is clear, “8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Our works of compassion won’t save us, but they are an evidence that we have been saved. Kent Hughes writes, “If we have no mercy toward those who are physically and emotionally in distress, we are not Christians.”³ Christians are people who show compassion in action.

Mercy goes beyond compassion. It is also forgiving. Just as a Christian is someone who must show compassion, a Christian must forgive. Jesus said, “14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15)

Joseph, the Old Testament young man who was sold into slavery by his brothers had every reason not to forgive. If it had not been for an opportunity for his brothers to make money by selling him as a slave, Joseph would have been murdered by them. Years later, when his brothers were desperately in need of compassion and forgiveness, Joseph showed it to them. He had already helped them through a famine, but his brothers wondered if Joseph’s mercy was on behalf of their father. When Jacob, Joseph’s father died, Joseph’s brothers feared for their life.

Look at Genesis 50:15-21, “15 When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” 16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: 17 ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

19 But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

What a beautiful example of forgiveness. Joseph knew what it meant to be a man of mercy. And, those of us who have been shown mercy should know too.

Remember, there is purpose in the order of the Beatitudes. We begin with recognizing our spiritual poverty, recognizing that there is nothing in us that deserves God’s grace. The intellectual understanding when brought to the heart produces mourning over our sin. This leads us to meekness and the recognition that in myself I am nothing, in God I am everything. And that leads to hungering and thirsting for God’s righteousness. When I see myself like this, then I recognize that those around me are in the same condition, and need that same type of grace shown to them.

Jesus talked about those who fail to show this type of grace in his Parable of the Unmerciful Slave. The story is found in Matthew 18:21-35. The slave is shown incredible mercy from his master. He is forgiven a debt that would have been impossible to pay back. The sum, in today’s dollars is equivalent to \$20 million. Then upon being forgiven the slave remembers someone who owed him the modern day equivalent of \$2,000. Instead of forgiving that man, the former slave throws him into prison for not repaying him.

Listen to Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:32-35: 32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Listen to what Hughes writes about these words, “These are hard, violent, surgical words. But they are mercifully so. The Lord here warns the religious person who attends church, can recite the appropriate answers, leads an outwardly moral life, but holds a death grip on his grudges. Jesus warns the one who will not forgive his relatives or his former business associates regardless of their pleas. He warns the one who nourishes hatreds, cherishes animosities, and otherwise lives in settled malice. Such a person had better take stock in his life.”⁴

I love what Max Lucado writes in his book, *The Applause of Heaven*. “Grudge is one of those words that defines itself. Its very sound betrays its meaning.

Say it slowly: ‘Grr-uuud-ge’

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

It starts with a growl. ‘Grr . . .’ Like a bear with bad breath coming out of hibernation or a mangy mongrel defending its bone in an alley. ‘Grrr . . .’

Being near a resentful person and petting a growling dog are equally enjoyable.”⁵

But let’s be careful here. We can’t be Christians if we refuse to show God’s mercy and extend forgiveness, but sometimes the wound is too fresh. The pain is too raw.

There is a difference between being someone who isn’t ready to forgive and someone who won’t. You know your heart better than anyone else, save God. Is your lack of forgiveness due to the fact that you are still shell-shocked by the pain? Or are you ready for your revenge? To those who want revenge, remember the Apostle Paul’s words in one of the most practical chapters in the entire Bible. Romans 12:19 says, “19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.”

When we show mercy, we experience God’s mercy. When we don’t we experience misery.

Listen to this letter written to Max Lucado from a woman in his congregation.

“I caught my husband making love to another woman. He swore it would never happen again. He begged me to forgive him, but I could not – I would not. I was so bitter and so incapable of swallowing my pride that I could think of nothing but revenge. I was going to make him pay and pay dearly. I’d have my pound of flesh.

I filed for divorce, even though my children begged me not to.

Even after the divorce, my husband tried for two years to win me back. I refused to have anything to do with him. He had struck first; now I was striking back. All I wanted was to make him pay.

Finally, he gave up and married a lovely young widow with a couple of small children. He began rebuilding his life – without me.

I see them occasionally, and he looks so happy. They all do. And here I am – a lonely, old, miserable woman who allowed her selfish pride and foolish stubbornness to ruin her life.”⁶

Lucado went on to write, “Unfaithfulness is wrong. Revenge is bad. But the worst part of all is that, without forgiveness, bitterness is all that is left.

⁵ Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

Resentment is the cocaine of emotions. It causes our blood to pump and our energy level to rise. But, also like cocaine, it demands increasingly larger and more frequent dosages. There is a dangerous point at which anger ceases to be an emotion and becomes a driving force. A person bent on revenge moves unknowingly further and further away from being able to forgive, for to be without the anger is to be without the source of energy. . . and mercy is the choice that can set them all free.”⁷

So how do you become a person of mercy?

- Pray. Prayer acknowledges our dependence upon God. It makes room for God to do the impossible. For many of you, you’d love the freedom that mercy can bring, but you’ve tried showing mercy on your own strength. Ask God to give you the strength. He will. He always follows through on His promises to help us follow His commands. He wouldn’t tell you to show mercy if He wasn’t going to empower you to be able to do it.
- Look – Look for opportunities. Remember, mercy isn’t just about forgiveness, its’ about compassion in action. It may be that you need to show compassion to those you don’t know in order to be able to get the strength to show it to those you do know.
- Go – Don’t just look, don’t just pray. Go. Take the first step. I remember when I wanted to ask my wife Cyndi on our first date. It wasn’t enough just to think about her. It wasn’t enough just to talk. I needed to go to her. And then, I needed to ask. Which brings us to step four . . .
- Do – We become people of mercy when we show mercy. For some of you it’s raw, and new and you are not ready. But, some of you have been holding onto that excuse for too long. You know what I’m talking about. It’s time. You’ve been shown more mercy than you deserve. That’s what these Beatitudes have shown us. We don’t deserve what God has done for us. It’s time to let go and let God work in and through you. Give forgiveness. Show compassion. Be merciful.

Pray, Look, Go and Do. And, as you extend mercy, rejoice in the fact that God has shown mercy to you!

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.