

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Much And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

Blessed Are The Merciful

October 31st, 2021

Matthew 5:7

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I'd invite you to open it now to Matthew chapter 5. I want to talk to you this morning about something that could literally change the world. It could rock your world, but then if you get this – if WE get this together – it could open a door of witness and welcome to this next generation, the likes of which we have never seen in our days.

We're taking a long, slow walk through the Sermon On The Mount and we are zooming in today with particular interest on the 5th beatitude:

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

We're going to take a pretty straightforward approach today: We'll talk about mercy defined, mercy as a test of faith and mercy as a witness to the world.

Let's begin with the matter of definition.

Mercy Defined:

What exactly does the Bible mean when it talks about mercy? I said a couple of weeks ago that MEEKNESS is what you would get if you put gentleness, patience and trust in a blender, well similarly here, I think we could say that MERCY is what you would get if you put forgiveness and compassion in a blender. As we work our way through the teachings of Jesus, these two things do seem to constitute the main ingredients in this concept.

Let's start with the more obvious of those two. Whatever else it means to be merciful, it obviously means to forgive others their debts and trespasses.

1. To forgive others their debts and trespasses

Flip forward in your Bible to Matthew 18 verses 21 – 35. Jesus tells a story in response to a question from the Apostle Peter. Verse 21 says:

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21 ESV)

So notice that. This parable – often referred to as the “Parable of the Unmerciful Servant” – is given in response to a question about forgiveness. How FORGIVING should I be towards those who wrong me? Should I forgive as many as 7 times? That's the question that Peter asks and this is the story that Jesus tells by way of response. Look at verse 22:

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed,

and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ **And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’**³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:22–35 ESV)

So whatever else this parable is saying – clearly, to be MERCIFUL is to forgive others their debts and trespasses.

Mercy and forgiveness are ALMOST perfect synonyms – to forgive is a LOT OF WHAT IT MEANS to be a merciful person – but there is more. To be merciful ALSO means to be actively compassionate towards those who are in misery.

2. To be actively compassionate towards those who are in misery

Again we get that from one of the parables that Jesus told – perhaps the most famous of all the parables that Jesus told, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You’ll find that one in Luke 10:30–37. The story is told this way:

“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.³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.’³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”³⁷ He said, “**The one who showed him mercy.**” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.” (Luke 10:30–37 ESV)

So in this story Jesus is answering a question from a young lawyer – and after the story has been told both the young lawyer and Jesus himself agree that the story has perfectly demonstrated

what it means to be merciful. To be merciful in this sense means to move in active compassion towards those who are in misery.

The movement depicted here is all the more remarkable because it involves crossing OVER some significant social barriers. Samaritans and Jews generally didn't interact – but IN MERCY this man was compelled to respond. He CROSSED OVER and he incurred significant cost and inconvenience. He put him on his own animal – he had to walk the rest of the way. He had to get his hands dirty, he had to put his own money on the line – but that's what mercy is. Mercy is costly, inconvenient, compassion towards those in desperate need.

And in both of those stories – as in the wording of the 5th beatitude itself, it appears, that mercy functions as a test and indicator of faith.

Mercy As A Test Of Faith:

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it isn't the Priest or the Levite who are commended – it is the Samaritan. That's Jesus saying that our compassionate actions toward those in misery are better indicators of our faith than our tribal identities or our external religious observances. You can be a part of the right group and you can perform a bunch of pious actions – and still not be a real person of faith – and that shows up in your failure to show MERCY to those in need.

You see the same thing in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant – the lack of mercy on behalf of the servant is CONDEMNED by the Master in the story – and by Christ himself in terms of the application. Listen again to the end of that story:

Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.'" (Matthew 18:32–35 ESV)

Failure to SHOW mercy results in the forfeiture of mercy. It serves to demonstrate that the INITIAL mercy failed to penetrate the heart of the intended recipient. That's exactly what Jesus is saying here:

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

That's exactly what Jesus says one chapter later in the Sermon on the Mount after teaching on the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 6:14-15 he says:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14–15 ESV)

So is Jesus saying that WE EARN forgiveness by forgiving others? Is he saying that we EARN mercy on Judgment Day by extending mercy to others in the here and now?

No, of course not. Rather it appears that what Jesus is saying is that our failure to show mercy to others indicates that we have failed to appreciate and appropriate the mercy that was offered to us in Christ. There can be no other explanation. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones says here:

“If I am not merciful there is only one explanation; I have never understood the grace and the mercy of God; I am outside Christ; I am yet in my sins, and I am unforgiven.”¹

That's the only thing it can mean. Why wouldn't you extend mercy to other people – as a blood bought, born again believer in Jesus Christ? What would that have to say about you? It would have to say first of all that you have dramatically underestimated the size and scale of your own sin.

We breezed by that little detail in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Do you remember the sum that the man owed to the Master? It was listed in Matthew 18:24 as “10,000 talents”. I have a little text note by that number in my Bible that says:

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 89.

“A talent was a monetary unit worth about twenty years’ wages for a laborer.²”

So I Googled “average annual income for a general labourer in Canada” and was told that it was around \$30,000. I then typed that number into my calculator and attempted to multiply it by 10,000 and my calculator tapped out – my calculator literally can’t handle a number that size. There aren’t enough digits in my digital display – and I think that’s the point. This is an unfathomably large number.

And the Master in his mercy, forgave it all.

How then could the servant go out and nearly choke to death a man who owed him a hundred denarii? A few thousand dollars in our terms? How could he do that? And why would he do that? Obviously he didn’t believe that the Master had forgiven him. He didn’t believe it, he didn’t receive it – the mercy of the Master clearly made no permanent impression upon him.

The same could be said for the person the Priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan. If they really understood their own brokenness – if they really understood how far they have fallen and how brutally they have been treated by their enemy and adversary in this world – and if they really understood the kindness and the mercy of God toward them over the course of their own history – then how could they walk by, how could they look the other way when they see a brother or a sister lying beaten and bloody on the side of the road? Their ability to do that must mean that they don’t really understand and they haven’t ever really taken the time to appreciate the nature of their own existence and reality in the world. They must have a different narrative – a totally different worldview – that in no way corresponds to what God has actually been doing for them – and is doing for them through the person and work of Christ.

And of course – the same basic standard applies to us. If we can pass by broken and hurting people in this world, and look the other way without a moment’s hesitation or a single pang of conscience then there is clearly something wrong with us. We must have a view of ourselves that doesn’t quite correspond with reality. We must have forgotten that we were once beaten up and discarded on the side of the road. We were handled roughly by our enemies. We were broken,

² ESV text note.

bruised and bleeding – but God had mercy on us. He came in the person of Jesus Christ, to lift us up, to bind us up and to restore us to our former health and strength.

He did that for us – and when we fail to do that for others in need then we call into question whether or not we have ever properly understood and appreciated that.

That’s what Jesus is saying in these stories!

When we fail to forgive others their offenses against us – when we fail to respond in compassion to the brokenness and helplessness of other people - it can only mean that we have failed to appreciate the scale of our sin, the depths of our own depravity and the undeservedness of the mercy of God towards us in Jesus Christ. To refuse to forgive another person who wrongs you or to be UNMOVED by the misery of the people around you requires you to be WRONG ABOUT YOU, WRONG ABOUT JESUS, WRONG ABOUT THE CROSS and WRONG ABOUT THE FINAL JUDGMENT. In other words, it requires you to be wrong about the substance and essence of the Christian faith.

It’s the perfect test.

Nobody seems to get that better than Lloyd Jones. He says:

“Our Lord is depicting and delineating the Christian man and the Christian character. He is obviously searching us and testing us, and it is good that we should realize that, if we take the Beatitudes as a whole, it is a kind of general test to which we are being subjected. How are we reacting to these searching tests and probings?”³

That’s a really good question. How are you reacting to these searching tests and probings? Are you running away? Are you coming up with excuses? Are you dismissing it out of hand? Or are you sitting in it?

I’m encouraging you to sit in it.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 81.

The Apostle Paul told his people to sit in it. He said:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

Listen, brothers and sisters, if you are reading the Bible honestly – if you are HEARING THE BIBLE PREACHED Sunday by Sunday with a humble and open heart, then there are going to be a handful of times in your life when God sits you down and makes you take a test. There are a going to be a handful of times in your life when for an hour, or a day, or a week or a month – you legitimately wrestling with whether or not you are saved.

That’s good.

Woe unto the person who is absolutely sure they are saved because they are a member of a church, or because they said a little prayer at camp or because their grandfather was a minister or because they love singing songs about Jesus.

Jesus himself warned us against that kind of complacency. He said:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46 ESV)

“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:22–23 ESV)

There are lots of people who THINK they are Christians – who are FOND OF JESUS and who have done many works of service in his name – WHO ARE NOT TRULY CHRISTIANS! WHO ARE NOT SAVED!

Why?

Because they never took the test! They never look inside their hearts – they never evaluated their own fruit – to see – to really, truly, honestly SEE whether or not Christ was being formed in them. So don't do that. TEST yourselves brothers and sisters, to see if Christ is in you.

And so I'm going to make a really strange request today. I'm going to ask that you NOT come up to see me after service if you are looking for me to talk you out of taking this test seriously.

Because I know myself. Up here in the pulpit, my job is simple. I just read the Bible and tell you what it means. But down there, when we sit together, and I see you, and I love you, and I can tell that you're struggling, I want to tell you that it's ok. I want to tell you that you're probably fine. But maybe you're not fine. Maybe you need to take this test and ask yourself some really hard questions and deal honestly and bravely with what you find.

Don't come to me to make it go away. Sit in it. Sit all week long if you have to. It would be the perfect way for you to prepare for communion next Sunday. Sit and ask yourself some questions: Am I merciful? Am I quick to forgive when others wrong me? Am I quick to move and to act in compassion when I encounter someone who is broken, beaten and in misery? Or am I hard, unmoved and unforgiving?

Those are the questions you need to be asking – that's the test. TAKE IT. And deal honestly and courageously with what you see.

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

Mercy As A Witness To The World:

Now we could end there, and probably some of us will end there – and that's ok. I realize that probably 20% of in here are going to miss the last section of this sermon. They're going to be taking that test, and that's perfectly ok. But for the rest of us – who've maybe already had that conversation with the Lord – there is one more aspect of this disposition that I'd like for us to explore. I'd like to talk for a few minutes about mercy as witness.

There is a sense in which ALL of the beatitudes have a witnessing function. If we are truly Christian – if we are transformed into the very image and likeness of Christ – the church will be

truly and properly ATTRACTIVE. Jesus will talk about that later in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:14-16 – right after the section on the beatitudes he says to the disciples:

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14–16 ESV)

So the church is supposed to be attractive. If we live out TRUE CHRISTIAN CHARACTER then people will see that and they will be drawn to that like people walking towards the light of a city up on a hill. The church is supposed to REFLECT HOPE and GOODNESS and GODLINESS in a dark and broken world.

So all of the beatitudes have a witnessing function – but I would argue this beatitude has that in spades.

If you want to be truly and rightly attractive to the world, brothers and sisters, then let’s make the church a place that believes in and practices mercy. And to be clear, that doesn’t mean making the church a place where we don’t take sin seriously. You can take sin seriously; you can maintain a high bar for righteousness and holiness – and still be a place that is characterized by mercy. These things can go together. In Luke 17 Jesus says to the disciples:

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” (Luke 17:3–4 ESV)

Isn’t that beautiful? Don’t you want to go to a church like that?

Brothers and sisters, the church should be a place where sin is confronted, where sin is confessed, where forgiveness is granted, where weakness is anticipated, where progress is expected, where the past can be forgotten and where a brighter future is assumed.

Do you want to be a part of a church like that?

I do and I bet you a lot of people out there in the world do as well. The world out there is not a merciful place. The world out there is nasty and tribal. The world out there is all about the front runners – it's all about the in crowd. It's good to you when you're on top – but it's brutal to you when you fall down.

If you doubt that for a second just go on Twitter and search for Alec Baldwin. A few months ago he was on top of the world because he was making fun of the right people. But now, when he's down – when he's at his absolute lowest, then it's feeding time at the local zoo. Some of the jokes that have been made about this man over the last week and a half fall outside the bounds of humanity.

And it's not just celebrity – it's everybody.

The modern, online world, with its permanent memory and addiction to outrage and vitriol will never let you move on from your worst mistakes – it will store them, screenshot them, display them, forward them and enshrine them in infamy forever. The world out there has never been a less merciful and forgiving place than it is right now.

So let's create a witness of distinction!

Brothers and sisters – given how bad the world is at this – if we could just be a little good at this, we would overwhelm the world with that distinction! The world out there loves **CATCHING PEOPLE** at their absolute worst. They screenshot angry, hasty outbursts – so that they can share that later even if you come to regret it and want to take it down. So let's be the complete opposite of that. Let's be the church where:

“love covers over a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8 NIV11)

Let's be the church where when someone says, does or posts something foolish, rash, ignorant or ill considered, we send them a private message suggesting, in love, a better way.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine how GLORIOUS that church will LOOK and FEEL to burnt out millennials in 5 or 10 years?

That church will look like heaven! So let's build that church! By the grace of God let's build it here!

Let's make this church a place where it's easy to be a failure.

Let's make this church a place where you don't have to lie about being in process.

Let's make this church a place where you can truly outlive and outrun your past.

Let's make this church an image and reflection of Jesus, the ultimate display and manifestation of mercy:

He forgave us our sins – so let's NEVER withhold forgiveness from any other.

He was gentle with our weakness – so let's never be brutal toward people at their lowest.

He was active in his compassion – so let's never be indifferent toward those in misery.

Brothers and sisters:

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32 ESV)

This is what saved people do, this is the way of Jesus, and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.