

Matthew 18:21-35

Making Sure We Gain the Benefit of Mercy

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy – Mt. 5:7

If there is one thing that should come across very clearly in our study of the beatitudes so far – it should be this: that if we are to gain the kingdom of heaven then we are dependent upon the mercy of God. If God doesn't show us mercy then we are forever lost. We know this to be the case because we're poor in spirit. We've acknowledged our spiritual poverty. We are altogether lacking in that which qualifies a man for the kingdom of heaven. *Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, Christ says in v. 20 ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

We have no righteousness of our own. What we do have is sin and this makes us mourn. We were created righteous but we've lost our original righteousness and we've inherited a sinful nature and the proof of that nature is in the pudding. We sin. We sin often and we fail to measure up to God's law. The knowledge of this leads us to mourn and as we've seen it also works within us a willingness to submit to whatever terms God would lay down for salvation. We've become meek, in other words.

And in this spiritual progression of the first 3 beatitudes we've also begun to hunger and thirst for what we lack. *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they shall be filled.* In our last study we noted that this beatitude is the one that takes us from the valley of humiliation and lifts up to the mountain top of fulfillment. We hunger and thirst for righteousness – and what we lack in terms of righteousness – Christ provides based on the merit of His life and His atoning death.

Here, then, is the greatest manifestation of mercy that can be conceived. What we lacked and what we could not gain for ourselves, God in His grace has freely provided. He gives us the righteousness of Christ. And so we read in Isaiah 61:10 *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness.*

It's no wonder the psalmist on a number of occasions in the Psalms exults in God's mercy:

- Ps 59:16 *But I will sing of thy power; yea, I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning: for thou hast been my defense and refuge in the day of my trouble.*
- Ps 86:13 *For great [is] thy mercy toward me: and thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell.*
- Ps 103:11 *For as the heaven is high above the earth, [so] great is his mercy toward them that fear him.*

The vastness of the universe, according to this last reference is to be used as the measuring rod for God's mercy. And just as surely as we cannot plumb the vastness of the heavens – so are we unable to plumb the depths or scale the heights of God's great mercy.

At this point of our study in the beatitudes, however, we can't help but notice what appears on the surface to go against the grain of the gospel. *Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.* All of a sudden there appears to be a condition to the blessing another point of qualification. If I am to obtain mercy – then I must be characterized as merciful. Can this be? Have we scaled the heights in our studies only to have our hopes dashed by a standard that seems to take the blessing back from us that we just thought we had obtained freely?

The thing to note here is that as sinners we don't measure up to the standard of being merciful any more than we measure up to the standard of being righteous. I think the epitome of mercy is expressed in what our Lord called the second greatest commandment which is *thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.* This is what mercy amounts to and we are no more closer to meeting this requirement than we are the first and great commandment of the law *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind and soul and strength.*

We see, then, how important it is to understand exactly what the Lord Jesus is saying and what He's not saying. It becomes very important at this point in our studies to interpret the words of Christ not only in their immediate context but in the broader context of the entire teaching of scripture.

I found it interesting to note that when Dr. Cairns began his study of this beatitude he did so by saying *The devil is never more dangerous than when he is quoting scripture in an effort to confuse and corrupt the souls of men.* He goes on to note that this particular beatitude is one of the devil's favorite verses for accomplishing that aim.

All of which underscores the need to understand this beatitude aright. The failure, you see, to understand this beatitude aright places us in the awful position of missing the mercy of God. You could say that a misunderstanding makes us vulnerable – the way the Christians at Galatia had become vulnerable to denying the very gospel that they had only recently confessed.

And so I want to focus today on the theme of understanding this beatitude aright. And I want to analyze this beatitude with the specific aim of making sure you've obtained the mercy that is promised by this beatitude.

How Can We Be Sure that We've Gained the Benefit of Mercy?

I. The Foundation for this Beatitude is a Changed Life

Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. You cannot fit the qualification of this beatitude apart from the new birth. Men are not born into this world with the kind of character trait that this beatitude sets forth. Since the fall of man – man has been born with an inbred sense of selfishness. And it's not hard to see in our culture how everything caters to this selfishness.

We are taught to assert ourselves. We are taught to think highly of ourselves. We are taught by example, if not by precept, that the way to get to the top is to do whatever it takes to lift yourself up and pull anyone down who gets in your way. This is one of the problems I have in the realm of politics. In order to gain high office you must present yourself as infallible and you must convince others that your opponent is the devil incarnate. Narcissism is a term you sometimes hear that describes our culture today. Narcissism is defined as *excessive admiration of oneself*. What a fitting description of our time.

Now this is not to say that even within our fallen natures we can't do kind things for others or have pity on others. We're aware of charitable institutions that seek to alleviate suffering. And many of these charities are not even Christian. It is possible, you see, to be self-centered or narcissistic and be charitable as well. In such cases being charitable actually contributes to a sinner's excessive admiration of himself. He pats himself on the back for what he thinks is an admirable trait that he detects in himself. In his pride he condescends to give of what he has to others who may have less.

This is definitely not what our Lord had in mind when He said *blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy*. And here once again the context or the spiritual progression of the beatitudes must be kept in view. And from the very first of these beatitudes we can see that nothing short of the new birth is necessary.

The world scoffs at the idea of being poor in spirit. It goes against the grain of excessive admiration of oneself. And the world certainly doesn't mourn over sin. Quite the contrary – the world is ever endeavoring to legitimize sin. The world has become very aggressive in recent years to legitimize the sin of sodomy. This follows legitimizing the murder of unborn babies and the legitimizing of adultery and fornication and the legitimizing of divorce and marital infidelity. This is a far cry from mourning over sin. The world is too busy trying to deny or excuse sin.

And to think in terms of being meek is utterly repulsive to the world. In the chain of evolutionary development it's the survival of the fittest which means those that are meek are not fit to live or certainly not fit to get ahead. And how can the self-righteous world hunger and thirst for what sinners think they already possess?

You see, I trust, that each of these beatitudes presupposes a drastic change in the life of the sinner. If we would measure up to any of these beatitudes then all things must become new and old things must pass away. And I believe this truth becomes a point of emphasis in the beatitude that we are currently studying – *blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy*. I believe that the reason our Lord expresses this beatitude the way He does is that He might emphasize the truth that salvation brings change to the life of the sinner. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation and that power becomes evident in the transformed life of the sinner.

And especially is this the case when it comes to the Lord's mercies. Our greatest need was for mercy. God was under no obligation to save us. We had no claim on God or on

heaven once we had sinned. God's gracious provision has come through His mercy. He's been mindful of our misery and our guilt and has made provision for both. But to think you could be the recipient of this costly provision – this manifestation of mercy which would cost Christ His life blood and to be unaffected by it so that your life is not changed by it – this is outside the pale of the kingdom of heaven. Such a thing becomes a flagrant denial of the power of the gospel.

This is why I read this morning from Mt. 18:21-35. In that parable the Lord Jesus tells of a servant who was indebted to his king and had no way to pay his debt. Upon his petition for mercy his debt was forgiven. But then the recipient of mercy refused to show the same mercy to those that were indebted to him – and so the mercy he received in the end was forfeited. The moral of the story is that you cannot be the recipient of the Lord's great mercies without having your life transformed in such a way that you become merciful. The failure to be transformed amounts to a denial of the mercy you've sought God for. God does not bestow mercy on those that remain so unappreciative of it. At the end of the day such deniers of the gospel are proven to be hypocrites who were never really saved.

James in his epistle is very direct in this matter when he writes in 2:13 *For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.*

We must understand this beatitude, then, in the context of the other beatitudes and in the broader context of the gospel. The Lord has an aim when He bestows His mercy. The Lord has a purpose behind salvation and that purpose or aim is not to leave us where He finds us but to transform us by the power of His love and grace and mercy. To those that have known such love – their lives will be effected by it – they will be transformed by it. To those who do not undergo such transformation – mercy will not prove to be their portion. In the end it will be seen that they never really had true saving faith to begin with.

Like the previous beatitude, then, this one becomes a matter for heart-searching. Have you gained an appetite for righteousness so that you hunger and thirst for it? – that's a mark of grace. Upon receiving the imputed righteousness of Christ by faith have you found your life so transformed by this provision of God's mercy that you have become merciful yourself? Let each one examine himself before God.

We see, then, that the way to be sure we've obtained mercy is to see the foundation for this beatitude in a transformed life. Consider with me next that:

II. The Motivation for This Beatitude is Christ's Love

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. If this beatitude is isolated and viewed apart from the context of the other beatitudes and apart from the broader context of the entire teaching of the word of God, then you might come away with the impression that I must earn mercy from God by being merciful myself.

Dr. Cairns makes the observation that if this was the real meaning of this beatitude then it would have to read *blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain justice*. God would become indebted to the one who showed mercy.

We know, of course, that such thinking runs contrary to the teaching of the gospel. Salvation originates with God. Every manifestation of grace originates with God. Every response to the gospel of grace is the result of God first doing something toward us or in us.

And so we can say as John says in his first epistle – *we love him, because he first loved us* (1Jn. 4:19). Or we can say based on Eph. 1:4 *we chose him, because he first chose us*. Or we can say – We sought Him, because He first sought us. You find this truth graphically illustrated in the story of Zaccheus. This Jewish tax-collector who heard that Christ was passing his way exercised what seemed to be great cunning and skill in finding a way to beat the crowd in order to see Christ. He anticipated the path of Christ and then climbed a tree in that path in order to behold Christ and when Christ passed by He called Him down and said that He must abide at his house. You might get the idea from such a story that Zacchaeus was the one doing the seeking – but at the end of the narrative in Lk. 19:10 we read *For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost*.

We have a hymn in our hymn book which reads: *I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me; It was not I that found, O Saviour true; No, I was found of Thee*. And so it follows that we can say – we show mercy to others because Christ has shown mercy to us. We are motivated, in other words by the love and grace and mercy of Christ.

You might recall from our last study that I pointed out how we hunger and thirst for righteousness. And in the gospel of Christ the good news is that God freely provides what we don't have and could never gain apart from God's grace. And once we've gained it – we hunger and thirst for it because it's been freely given. We strive for it because we have it. Our desire is to strive to measure up to what's freely given.

The same holds true for mercy – we desire to practice it because we've received it. We can analyze the beatitudes now in this way. We begin by looking in and we see that we are impoverished – we're poor in spirit. As our gaze is focused inward we are aware of our sins and this leads us to mourn. In our meekness we begin to look up to Christ for mercy and in His mercy He provides for us His righteousness. So we go from looking in to looking up and then as a result we look out. Mercy is something that can only be manifested by looking out on the needs of others.

And the greater our awareness is of the greatness of God's love and mercy then the greater will be our desire to show the love and mercy of Christ to others. This becomes a challenge, then, to how aware we are of God's mercy. We would all say, of course, that we believe in His mercy. Our hope is in His mercy. The cross of Christ teaches us His mercy and it's a part of our creed.

That's all well and good as far as it goes – the question, however, is how far does it go? Do you believe as you say you do? If that belief is measured by the way you show mercy to others how strongly can it be said that you believe?

If you're like me then you'll have to acknowledge that you find this beatitude challenging. It's alarming to have to admit that I'm more like the servant in the parable of Mt. 18 who received mercy but didn't show mercy than what I want to be. All too often the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches rob us from the word of God bearing fruit in our lives and when that happens it becomes all too easy to harden our hearts to the plights of men and especially the plights of sinners who, after all, have brought their misery upon themselves.

What's the need in such cases? The need is for our motivation to be renewed by a fresh apprehension of the mercies of God toward us. May the Lord, therefore, stamp on our hearts the truth of Lam. 3:22 *It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.*

Very often the Lord brings us low in order that we may gain those fresh apprehensions of His mercy. So in the case of Jonah it was from the belly of the whale while he was in the deep that he had to confess *they that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy*. And I believe it was while he was in the deep that he gained a renewed appreciation for the greatness of God's mercies toward him. How often do we forsake our mercy by being too attached to the vain things that charm us most. May the Lord indeed bring us down if that's what's needed for our appreciation of His mercies to be renewed. For only then will we become merciful – only then will we *do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with our God* (Micah 6:8).

The foundation for this beatitude, then, is a changed life. The motivation behind this beatitude is the love of Christ. Consider finally:

III. The Practice of This Beatitude Must be Governed by Our Sense of Need

We could apply the golden rule to this beatitude and quote Mt 7:12 *Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.*

When it comes to the practice of showing mercy by taking others to heart and endeavoring to minister to their needs whether those needs are spiritual, physical, or both it would be easy to reason in terms of Mt. 7:12 and say I will do for them what I would have them do for me if our situations were reversed.

I would suggest to you that the standard of this beatitude is even higher and that there's a spiritual test we can put to ourselves when it comes to when and how and how much and to whom we should minister in terms of mercy. The test question is this: *How readily do I desire God's mercy to be available to me?* When I approach the throne of grace in order to obtain mercy and grace to help in time of need – how readily do I want God to bestow that mercy and grace?

Do I want Him to have to think about it first? Do I want Him to search me with great scrutinizing discernment before He decides to provide for me – if He decides to provide? Do I want Him to place a limit on what He'll bestow or on how often I can apply? Do I want Him to make sure that I'm meeting certain conditions so that He can be sure that I'm not just taking advantage of Him?

We know, of course, that when we sense our need for mercy and grace we want Christ to answer and to answer fully and freely and we don't want any strings attached. And that is the way that God bestows grace and mercy. But now comes the test of the beatitude – are we willing to bestow mercy in the same fashion in which we expect that we'll receive mercy from God?

Certainly the awareness of our constant need and the awareness of God's constant provision should govern the way we put this beatitude into practice. There's another portion in scripture that shows us how high the standard is when it comes to bestowing mercy. It also reveals to us the many practical ways in which this beatitude is to be practiced. In Mt. 25 we have the account of the last judgment. The nations appear before Christ and there is a division between those that belong to Him and those that don't.

Cf. Mt. 25:34-40

Our missions of mercy must be viewed as service that is rendered to Christ Himself. Doesn't this passage illustrate for us the truth of our beatitude? Those on Christ's right hand quite naturally and spontaneously performed these deeds of mercy without even being aware that they were rendering their service to Christ. They were doing spontaneously what always will be the result of being the recipient of God's mercy. They showed mercy, in other words, because they received mercy and their lives were transformed by that mercy and as a result they gain mercy in that final judgment day.

I wonder today – can you describe yourself as being merciful? This is just another of asking – has your life been transformed by the gospel of Christ? If it has then you'll see yourself as a debtor to mercy alone and your heart's desire will be to pay that debt of mercy by being ever watchful for opportunities to show mercy to others.

May the Lord help us, then, to be mindful of the mercies we've received. May He keep us from ever taking His mercies for granted. May we find the motivation that comes from His mercies to show mercy and may we practice mercy in accordance with the freedom and fullness with which His mercies flow to us.