

Introduction

[Read Text and Pray]

What is your favorite verse in the Bible? Goodness that is a hard one! There are so many! You just cannot narrow it down to one. But one verse that is on almost anyone's list is Lamentations 3:22-23. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Every single morning His mercies are new. Every single morning! Micah 7:18 declares that God delights in extending mercy. It is no wonder then that when we come to the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, that among these characteristics of the citizens of God's kingdom is the characteristic of mercy. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." What is this character trait which God displays every morning and in which he delights both in himself and in the lives of his people? This is what we are exploring this morning.

I. The Meaning of Mercy

A. What is the meaning of this prized characteristic? What is mercy? What does it mean to characterize a person as merciful?

It is a term that appears throughout the scripture to speak of a disposition of heart and action. Mercy starts in the heart but is incomplete without some corresponding action. It begins in the heart as pity and sympathy for one who is suffering, who finds themselves under distress. And flowing from an inward sympathy is an outward effort to relieve the distress experienced by the one in need of mercy. So mercy feels compassion and then demonstrates compassion. Out of sympathy it extends a hand to help, to feed, or to comfort.

Mercy is not based upon merit. It is free and gracious in nature. It comes as a kindness to eliminate the distress of sorrow, suffering, need, and even consequences of sinful behavior.

Mercy is distinguished from grace. Both are undeserved. Grace is primarily associated with God's bestowal of good gifts that are undeserved like righteousness, sanctification, glorification, and heaven. Meanwhile, mercy is primarily associated with relief from distress.

B. God displays mercy. He heard the despairing cries from the Israelites languishing in Egypt. Great was their distress. When the Lord called Moses, he said to him, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7-8). David's great plea for forgiveness in Psalm 51 is completely dependent upon his conviction that God is merciful. From the outset, he prays, "Have mercy on me O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions."

God displays mercy preeminently in the person of Jesus. Jesus himself is called in Hebrews 2:17-18 a merciful and faithful high priest. He has come to help the people in their distress. Listen to these verses, "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted he is able to help those who are being tempted." You see, his brothers suffer under temptation, and he is able to help his brothers by having become for them a merciful high priest. He can sympathize with them because he has suffered through temptation as well, yet without sin. In mercy he makes propitiation for them, and in mercy he helps them with the great distress of their sin.

Psalm 4:1 is a classic expression of the one who has received mercy from God. In this psalm, David consoles his heart before the Lord, saying, "You have given me relief when I was in distress."

On one occasion Jesus saw that the crowds continued with him for three straight days without food. He spoke to his disciples saying, "I have compassion on the people, and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." He took the loaves and the fish that they had

and fed the thousands that surrounded him there. That is mercy. It is compassion in action.

I just want you to stop for a moment and ponder the great mercy of God this morning. The one true God is a great God. He is mighty. He creates with the breath of his voice. He governs his amazing creation with indomitable sovereignty. He is uncompromisingly holy without spot or blemish. He is just when he judges and blameless when he speaks. And this God is merciful. He has tender compassion towards the weak and tender. His heart is touched by the sufferings even of the consequences of sin. As Psalm 103 says, he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him." Then, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are but dust."

Are you alive today? It is because God is merciful. Can you breathe? It is by his mercy. Are you well supplied with food? Do you have strength to work? Are you not consumed? It is all attributable to his mercy! Praise him. Thank him. And think rightly about yourself. You are alive because God has been merciful toward you.

And are you assured of heaven? Have you been reconciled with God through faith in Christ? It is because of mercy. If God should mark iniquity, behold who would stand? It is because of his mercies that we are not consumed. If we are able to look to the future and to the return of Christ with hope and excitement for all the joy that day holds, it is because of mercy. You and I deserve eternal punishment. We are miserable and unable to do a thing about our eternal destiny, BUT GOD. But God has had mercy on sinners. And this mercy affects not only our destiny but also our very disposition—the way we look at life and eternity and other people.

C. When we consider mercy, there are several ways in which mercy manifests itself in our relationships with people. And these are what Jesus would be talking about when he says, "Blessed are the merciful."

Manifestations of mercy would be at least three.

First, mercy appears when there is a non-judgmental spirit. It affects the very way in which you look at other people. If you have mercy toward others, you are patient with them in general. The Bible warns that you will be judged with the same kind of judgment with which you judge.

Jesus himself addressed the matter later in this sermon. Recorded in Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus says, "judge not lest you be judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured out to you." If you see specks in the eyes of others when there is a log in yours, you are not being merciful. The very characteristics Jesus has been extolling in these beatitudes would make that clear.

James 2:12-13 says to speak and act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

If you are poor in spirit and mourn over your sins, you will see yourself not others as the chief of sinners, and your ministry to others will not be to show them how much better you are than them. It will be to serve them for their spiritual well-being. Beware of the person who is always telling every body else what is wrong with them. They are not merciful. Beware of being too good to get down in the gutter with others in order to help them. Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to depict what it really means to love your neighbor. It does not mean to walk around with a sense of your own importance looking the other way when there is a dying man on the side of the road. Rather, mercy sees even an enemy lying there and renders to him the care he needs.

Second, mercy is manifest when there is forgiveness of sins. Think with me about another parable of Jesus. The one about the unforgiving servant is

telling. A king wishes to settle accounts and he calls before him a servant who owes an unsurmountable sum, one which he could not repay in two life-times. The king orders the man and his family to be sold and payment to be made, but the servant gets down on his knees and begs the king for some time to repay. Jesus speaks with precision. He said, "Out of pity for him, the master released him and forgave him the debt." But then the forgiven servant upon release finds a fellow servant who owes him but a small sum. He begins choking him and commands him to pay what he owes. The fellow servant falls down on his knees and pleads for patience so he might repay, but the first servant refuses and puts him in prison. Word of what happened comes to the king. He is greatly disturbed and summons the first servant. And he speaks to him in this way: You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? Jesus concluded the parable with this statement: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

The merciful please their Father who has forgiven them because they forgive others in like manner.

Third, mercy is manifest when a person seeks to relieve misery and distress experienced by another. Food, shelter, comfort in sorrow, assistance when overwhelmed, and encouragement in all these and more. Mercy is sensitive to others in distress. Mercy reaches out to those in distress, seeking to apply the balm of encouragement and seeking to meet needs and beyond. When you close your heart to these opportunities, it displays a lack of mercy. James underscores this principle saying, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

John writes in 1 John 3, "if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth."

That's what mercy looks like.

II. The Gladness of Being Merciful.

A. The striking facet of what Jesus says here is that those who are merciful are blessed. Remember that the root idea of blessed is happy. It speaks of more than happiness and certainly not a shallow happiness but at the foundation of blessedness is happiness. So Jesus continues with each of these beatitudes to confound common fleshly-ordered sense.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the hungry. And now blessed are the merciful. Now here is the thing. The world wants people who are merciful, but nobody by nature wants to be merciful. And the matter that is at stake is happiness. Men and women might admire mercy, but we think that if we extend mercy, our happiness will be compromised.

If I forgive someone who has done me wrong, and they do not get what is coming to them, then that's not right and I cannot be happy about that. It will interfere with my happiness.

If I become aware of someone in need and I have the resources to help them, it is going to cost me. It might be money. It might be time. It might just be the hassle. But then I experience the inner struggle. My flesh is telling me, just like it always does, that if I give up something, I will give up happiness. How can I be happy if I am going without while they have? I mean in order to be happy, I just need a little more not a little less. That's what my flesh says.

The world in which Jesus was preaching and the world in which we live are in one sense quite different from one another. Transportation. Production. Communication. Fashion. Healthcare. Plumbing. Conveniences like refrigerators and washing machines. Then and now are worlds apart. Yet as different as life is now from what it was then, some things haven't changed a bit. The flesh then and the flesh now are ruled by the same lies. Jesus chided the self-righteous of his day who were snooty and unwilling to help others. They had no mercy. Those same people exist in our day. And we are sometimes them.

So here is Jesus doing what he does. He rocks the world and the sinful flesh. And he says that the people who are truly happy and honored by God are not the selfish but the merciful. So if you really want to be happy, then be merciful.

III. The Necessity of Mercy.

A. Those who will receive mercy are those who are merciful. The converse is true as well. Those who are not merciful will not receive mercy. This is so because you will be judged with the measure you use to judge.

B. This beatitude is not teaching what to do in order to receive mercy. The Bible does not teach that we are saved based upon we do nor that God gives mercy to people because they are good. Rather reconciliation with God is based upon God's own purposes of grace. But those who experience the grace of God are changed. They are created in Christ for good works that God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. And mercy is one of those good works. It arises out of the merciful and transforming work of God. Mercy coincides with the other characteristics of kingdom citizens. They are poor in spirit, thinking realistically about their spiritual poverty. They mourn over their sin. They are meek. They hunger and thirst for righteousness. You can't be those things and do those things and not be merciful.

Being merciful, then, is not an attempt to receive mercy. Rather it is the outflow in the life of one who has already received mercy. Mercy in our lives is motivated and produced by the mercy of God. We see God's mercy in the world. We see God's mercy in our lives, in his saving grace through Christ's death on the cross. We realize that if we got what is coming to us, we would have been in hell a long time ago. We see a principle at work in us that is not in accord with the sinful flesh but with the Spirit of God, and we realize that God has been merciful to us. We are moved to display the mercy of God to others. We know in our hearts that having received mercy, there is only one fitting response, and that is to display mercy to others in his name. This is why John reasons the way he does. If someone is able to see another in need and close his heart to them, then the love of God does not abide in him. No when you behold another in need and open your heart to him, then that's what demonstrates Christ's love in you.

IV. Conclusion – The Motivation of Mercy

I have three exhortations for you in light of these truths concerning mercy.

First, flee to God for mercy. You have no hope of really being merciful until you first receive the mercy of God. So realizing that you by nature are a breaker of the law of God, go to God and plead for mercy. Say like David in Psalm 51, "Have mercy on me O God according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy blot out my iniquities and cleanse me from my sins."

Second, be merciful. Because of the merciful and transforming work of God in your life and motivated by the mercy of God, be merciful to others. Cast far away from you a judgmental spirit. Forgive as God in Christ has forgiven you. And bring mercy into the lives of the hurting and weak and sick around you. It may mean a phone call, a card, or a meal. It may mean a visit, a prayer, or a hand on the shoulder. It may mean food or clothing. For sure it means kindness to relieve distress.

Third, be evangelistic. What greater display is there of mercy than to tell the gospel to those who are separated from God by their sin. They may not believe it. They may not like it. They may reject it, but they need the unmistakable revelation of their sin that the law of God brings. And they need the glorious good news of God's provision for law-breakers. They need the happy news of the atoning death of Jesus more than they need their next breath. So be merciful and tell them.