September 20, 2015

“Blessed Are the Merciful”

Matthew 5:7

**FCF**: Struggle with being merciful

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ has shown us the path for our lives.

(magnet) We should heed and pursue this.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Our inclination to the pain of others – whether at home or abroad – is to insulate ourselves. Our inclination to the sin of others – whether occasional or repeated – is to hit back and seek revenge. That inclination often brings with it a realization. We want to change, to be merciful. But we fail at change, at being merciful. We realize there’s a coldness to our hearts.

For what we do flows from what we are. A sobering thought. I’m not merciful because I’m not merciful. What do we do with that? Do we just give up? Or is there another option?

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:1-12

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

We all have a need for input and advice. Why? Life is complicated and no one is omni-competent. That’s why we have people trained and paid to help. That’s why we have doctors, lawyers, financial advisors, physical trainers, counselors, contractors, and even technical support.

But how do we know where to turn? Specifically, when there’s much at stake, when the questions are of an ultimate nature – the meaning, purpose, direction of life – who should you trust? I would commend the input of the One who made us, the One who became one of us to save us, the One who thoroughly knows and feels for us and even now is with us – Jesus.

He is the One speaking in the Beatitudes, these eight statements about those who are said to be blessed. What does that mean? Jesus is not speaking of what it is to be happy. This is not a description of subjective feelings. Rather, Jesus is saying, “*This is who you should admire, envy, imitate, and emulate*.” He is giving an objective description of their lives and experience.

And each of these is to be true of every one of His followers. We are not given the liberty of picking and choosing our favorites. And each of these eight builds on the one before. There is a logical progression, a cause-and-effect as you move through the list. This is the path.

Christ has shown us the path for our lives. Part of that has to do with being people of mercy. We should heed and pursue this. But what does that mean? What does that look like?

There are three parts. First, who are they? Who is Jesus speaking of? Second, why are they described this way? Why are they blessed? And, third, how can such things be true of us?

1. **WHO ARE THEY?**

(READ Matthew 5:7) Who is Jesus speaking of here? Who does He have in mind?

1. *Seeing the Needs*

These are people who see the needs of the people around them as He does.

1. A true understanding

They have a true understanding of the needs. It is not a soft mercy but a true mercy. They see the source of the suffering around them and its course. And they feel sorrow for the sufferers.

1. A full understanding

But they have not only a true but a full understanding of the needs. They see the pain and misery and the affliction it brings. Even more, they see the sin and guilt and the burdens people bear.

1. *Addressing the Needs*

They see the needs of the people around them as Jesus does. And they address them.

1. Definition

Mercy – it is not just a surge of emotion. It is an outward expression of deeply felt compassion.

1. Expressions

When confronted with physical needs, they respond with help and relief. When confronted with spiritual needs, they respond with true forgiveness. Mercy is shown. Wounds are bound up.

Who then is Jesus speaking of? Those who give not just niceties. But something solid.

*Illustration:*

These are the children of the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. These are disciples of Jesus, the only One to truly embody the mercy of which He speaks. This is what compelled Him to act. It is how He saw the crowds (READ Matthew 14:14). From there, He fed the 5,000. And we read much the same in His feeding the 4,000. We read last week of Mark’s account of the healing of Bartimaeus. Listen to Matthew’s (READ Matthew 20:29-34).

*Application:*

In essence, we are then being told in the Beatitudes, “*Go and do likewise*.” Not “*Go and miraculously heal people*”, but “*Go and offer to help*”. It’s why, as a church, we prepare the mercy packs, participate in the FUEL program, maintain a mercy fund, take up relief offerings. It’s why, as individuals, we should be asking of our neighbors in need, “*How can I help you?*”

Go and do likewise with material needs. And spiritual needs. Not giving eternal pardons but still offering our own forgiveness. Mercy is how we are to respond to an insult, a careless remark. It’s how we should absorb the promise that was broken, the trust that was betrayed.

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1. **WHY ARE THEY BLESSED?**

Which takes us to the second question. Why are they blessed? (READ Matthew 5:7) They are blessed because they shall receive mercy – not from others but from God. Why?

1. *Mercy Not the Grounds of Mercy*

Understand that it is not they are merciful to others and so God is then merciful to them.

1. Argument

This would be a “quid pro quo” – one thing done in exchange for another. This would be an arrangement in which “to the extent we’re merciful to others, God will then be merciful to us.”

1. Implication

Think of the implication of that. Could you be at rest? There would be no hope for any of us.

1. *Mercy As the Fruit of Mercy*

No. Our mercy to others is not the grounds of God’s mercy to us. Our mercy to others is the living fruit of our knowing His great mercy to us. It is the result, the overflow of that.

1. God’s mercy to us

Think of it this way. God’s mercy to us comes through our faith and repentance.

1. Our mercy to others

The mark then of true faith and repentance is our mercy to others. The more we grow in Christian maturity, the more we will move toward the material and spiritual needs of others.

Why blessed? Growing in their understanding of mercy, they are extending it to others.

*Illustration:*

Still, there is an element of warning here. Jesus told a story (READ Matthew 18:21-35).

*Application:*

Christians are the most forgiven people. And they should be the most forgiving people. Christians are the best supplied people. And they should be the most generous people, the most merciful. Always predisposed to say “yes” in the face of need, whether material or spiritual.

Mercy should lead to mercy. We know what we deserve. And so we can never withhold mercy because we deem someone to be undeserving. For where would that have left any of us?

I have two thoughts here. First, an explanation. If we are merciful in any way, it is only because of God’s mercy to us. And so to Him be praise. Second, a warning. If we are not merciful, then we need to ask if we truly know God’s mercy to us. That is Jesus’ teaching.

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1. **HOW CAN THIS BE TRUE OF US?**

Which takes us to this third question. How can this be true of us? Our natural default is to be stingy, hard, and closed to others. How then can we become truly merciful people?

1. *Start at the Beginning*

We looked at some of this last week. We need to start at the beginning of the Beatitudes.

1. Trace upstream

To trace upstream – see our spiritual poverty, mourn it, become meek, then hunger and thirst.

1. Walk humbly

That is what will enable us to walk humbly – first regarding ourselves and then other people.

1. *Let It Flow from There*

So we start at the beginning, letting it flow from there. Letting the Spirit do His work.

1. The failings of others

Increasingly, we will find ourselves becoming more tender and patient with the failings of others. We’ll be slower to our old arrogance, quicker to say, “*But by God’s grace, that would be me*.”

1. The troubles of others

Increasingly, we will find ourselves becoming truly sympathetic towards the troubles of others. We’ll be slower to condescension, quicker to say, “*But by God’s grace, that would be me*.”

So how can this be true of us? We start at the beginning and let it flow from there. We breathe deeply of God’s mercy to us through Christ and then breathe it out towards others.

*Illustration:*

Sarah can often tell, without asking, what I’ve had to eat. I’ll get home at the end of the day, greet her, and she’ll ask, “*Where did you go for lunch?*” – already guessing at the answer. Especially if it’s purple onions. I don’t know the science of this. But what I take in comes out.

Which is true of all of us. The messages we take into us inevitably flow out of us.

*Application:*

Breathe deeply of God’s mercy to you and you will find yourself breathing it out to those around you. Ask yourself this question. “*What am I, what have I, that I do not owe to God?*”

That will pull the roots out of the condescending spirit that says of the person in material need, “*How could he let himself get into that?*” That will pull the roots out of the arrogant spirit that says of the person in spiritual need, “*How could she do that to me?*” The answer to both questions? The same way you could. “*What am I, what have I, that I do not owe to God?*”

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**CONCLUSION:**

But what are the marks of mercy? What would indicate our actions are in line with what Jesus has in mind? Understand that each of the beatitudes is unnatural, unearthly, inexplicable to the world. Which means that, as winsome as they may be, they can be unsettling. They can disturb people and make them uncomfortable. Even bring resistance. Jesus says as much later.

So how can we know our mercy is of the kind Jesus is after? It would have to stand out. And even be opposed. There is a scene near the end of *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo’s story that focuses on French investigator Javert’s relentless manhunt of a criminal named Jean Valjean. Valjean goes into hiding to avoid being captured by Javert, who is bent on returning him to prison. After many years of guarded living, Valjean has a chance at freedom when French rebels capture his pursuer. But instead of allowing the rebels to kill Javert, Valjean sets him free.

Even after this, Javert continues to hunt Valjean, determined to arrest him. Ultimately, he corners Valjean at the banks of the Seine River. Valjean assumes he has met his end. Javert pulls out his gun and looks at Valjean with a face furrowed with frustration. “*You’re a difficult problem*,” he tells Valjean and orders him to the concrete precipice overhanging the river.

Uneasily, Valjean asks, “*Why aren’t you taking me in?*”

Irritated by Valjean’s question, Javert crossly commands, “*You are my prisoner. Do what I tell you*.” Shaking his head, he continues, “*You don’t understand the importance of the law. I’ve given you an order. Obey it*.” The loaded gun now aimed at his chest, Valjean does as he’s ordered. He turns towards the river. Although he cannot see Javert, he can feel the barrel of his gun resting on his cheek. One click of the trigger, and Javert will finally be rid of his enemy.

But Javert is still puzzled. He asks, “*Why didn’t you kill me?*”

Valjean responds, “*I don’t have a right to kill you*.”

“*But you hate me*,” Javert declares.

“*I don’t hate you*,” Valjean continues. “*I don’t feel anything*.”

Miffed by this, Javert threatens, “*You don’t want to go back to the quarries, do you?*”

Valjean shakes his head. “*Then for once we agree*,” Javert concludes. “*I’m going to spare you a life in prison, Jean Valjean. It’s a pity the rules don’t allow me to be merciful*.” The barrel of the gun now corkscrewing beneath his chin, Valjean waits for his death.

But in a tone of resignation, Javert says, “*I’ve tried to live my life without breaking a single rule*.” Then, without warning, Javert drops his gun and undoes Valjean’s handcuffs. He shoves Valjean to the ground in frustration and sneers, “*You’re free*.”

But unable to live a life where the law is weakened by mercy, Javert handcuffs himself and plunges into the river. Valjean stands in disbelief as he watches Javert sink into the currents.

Why do I relay this scene to you? What am I saying? That if our mercy is outlandish, otherworldly, misunderstood, and maligned, that it might well be what Jesus is calling for? Yes.

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