

## THE BEATITUDES: JESUS' CALL TO HAPPINESS

Matthew 4:17-5:12

*“Blessed are the Merciful...”*

Matthew 5:7

Mercy! Compassion! Mercy has two arms. The first arm is forgiveness; to pardon those who have done wrong. The second arm of mercy is kindness shown to those who are in need. Forgiveness and kindness! Bottom line—Mercy is the suspension of judgment. Of all the beatitudes today's, *“Blessed, happy, are the merciful...”* is probably the one that we struggle with the most.

One day the religious leaders brought a woman to Jesus who was a prostitute—she had been caught in the very act. The religious leaders reminded Jesus that the religious law said she should be stoned—put to death. They asked Jesus what he thought. His answer was not liked any more then than it is now, *“Whoever is without sin let that one cast the first stone.”* The amazing thing is, no one cast a stone. Once they were reminded to look at their own lives, instead of becoming focused on and judgmental about someone else's life, they turned and left. Then Jesus said to the woman, *“Neither do I condemn you—go and sin no more.”* Jesus did not condone her sin but neither did he judge her. Mercy! Compassion! Forgiveness! Kindness! The suspension of judgment!

What would we do? What do we do? What happens when someone's sin comes to light? Do we throw stones by joining in on the gossip? Do we throw stones by saying, *“I really expected something like this, and I hope they get what they deserve?”* Or like Jesus suggests do we examine our own lives and then demonstrate mercy, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and the suspension of judgment?

One of the clearest biblical examples of mercy being extended to one who is in need is Jesus story of the Good Samaritan. Listen now as I read this very familiar story. (Read Luke 10:30-37) Whenever I read or hear the story of the Good Samaritan I am reminded of John's strong words in I John 3:17, *“How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees another in need and refuses to help?”* Jesus says, *“Happy are the merciful, those who demonstrate the love of God, for they shall receive mercy from God.”*

Perhaps the most moving and yet disturbing Jesus story about mercy and justice is found in Matthew 18. Listen as I read. (Read Matthew 18:23-35) How interesting it is that we so often desire mercy for ourselves while demanding justice for others. Jesus said, *“Happy are the merciful, for they shall receive*

*mercy.*”

Mercy, my friends, was not just a concept for Jesus. It was something he lived. Mercy was something he extended to others even as he was dying. *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”* We claim to be followers of this same Jesus who prayed mercy for his executioners yet we are prone to ask as Peter once asked, *“How often should I forgive my brother or sister? Perhaps seven times?”* Jesus answer to Peter is one that often makes us uncomfortable, *“No! Not seven times. But seventy times seven.”* Seventy times seven? That is going to require a lot of record keeping to tally up 490 times of forgiveness. And that my friends is just Jesus’ point. Do not keep records of how often forgiveness is given. Just keep forgiving! No matter what!

Mercy demands that we surrender vindictiveness, retaliation, revenge, jealousy, resentment, and selfishness. Mercy does not seek to humiliate, to keep a person in their place, to harbor blame, to make a person first crawl before you, or to even prove themselves worthy. Mercy is the suspension of judgment.

*“Happy are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”* Jesus was merciful; yet, look at what happened to him! So how can Jesus say, *“Happy are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy?”* No one offered Jesus mercy.

In order for us to understand Jesus mercy beatitude as recorded in Matthew’s gospel we need to read how Luke records this beatitude. *“Be merciful, just as your Heavenly Parent is merciful.”* To be merciful is to be more godly in our dealings with others. To be merciful is to extend to others what God has extended to us.

In the Old Testament book of Proverbs the kindness to those in need arm of mercy is voiced from the negative: *“The one who closes their ears to the cry of the poor, will themselves cry out and not be heard?”* James also writes from the negative, *“For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy, mercy triumphs over judgment.”*

Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reiterates his mercy beatitude from the positive and the negative when he says, *“If you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Parent will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Heavenly Parent forgive your trespasses.”* And of course whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer we say, *“...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...”* Do we really believe these statements? Do you know what all of this sounds like to me? It sounds like when we refuse to be merciful, when we refuse to forgive the wrongs of others, when we refuse to demonstrate kindness to those in need, it sounds like we are revoking our own privilege to be a part of the family! And that does not feel very good.

Being unforgiving, and being unkind to those in need, being unmerciful, prohibits one from experiencing God’s mercy. Receiving mercy and giving mercy

are connected like Siamese Twins that cannot be separated. Friends, God takes very seriously how we treat one another.

The state of happiness that Jesus calls us to in the Beatitudes is an inner peace, not a state of constant elation. Certainly Jesus was not happy dying on the cross; yet, I believe he had inner peace for living life as he did—as a person of mercy.

Mercy gives one the opportunity to begin again. Mercy is a word of hope. It is a word of encouragement and renewal. Mercy is about a fresh beginning. Mercy is about inner peace. Mercy is the suspension of judgment. *“Blessed, at peace, are those who are merciful, those who demonstrate kindness and forgiveness, for they receive mercy from God.”*