



THE MIRACLE OF MERCY

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:7

Fifth Message

Gary Vanderet

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As we come to the fifth beatitude of Jesus this morning, we are going to focus our thoughts on the subject of mercy.

Mercy is the great friend of the helpless and the weak. When I think of mercy, I remember one of my favorite Charley Brown cartoons. Lucy is walking down the street, saying to herself:

"That Chuck. He's something else...

I don't even know why I think about him...

Chuck doesn't seem to understand a girl's emotions...

In fact, Chuck doesn't seem to understand girls at all...

Chuck is hard to talk to because he doesn't understand life...

He doesn't understand laughing and crying...

He doesn't understand love, and silly talk, and touching hands, and things like that...

He plays a lot of baseball, but I doubt it if he even understands baseball..."

Then she knocks on Charley Brown's door, and says,

"I don't think you understand **ANYTHING**, Chuck!"

As she is walking away, Charlie Brown replies:

"I don't even understand what it is I don't understand!"

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matt 5:7, NASB).

Mercy is compassion for people in need. Richard Lenski distinguishes mercy from grace, in this helpful word: "the noun *eleos* (mercy)...always deals with what we see of pain, misery, and distress, these results of sin; and *charis* (grace) always deals with the sin and guilt itself. The one extends relief, the other pardon; the one cures, heals, and helps, the other cleanses and reinstates."

To go back to the Charley Brown story, Charley is helpless: he needs mercy; Lucy needs grace.

The fifth beatitude marks somewhat of a turning point in our Lord's discourse. In a sense, the first four beatitudes speak to believers in terms of their need and their consciousness of their need. Beginning with the fifth beatitude, we now look at the Christian's disposition, the fruit that flows out of a clear view of ourselves and our need.

We have already seen that everything begins with a proper view of ourselves. In the first beatitude, we see

that we must acknowledge our complete and utter bankruptcy before God. Next, we are to mourn over the cause of that: our sin, our fallen nature, and all the sins that flow out of that. Third, we are to be meek, humble and gentle toward others, allowing our spiritual poverty (which we have admitted to and grieved over) to condition our behavior toward others as well as God. Fourth, it is the "meek" who are also the "merciful." To be meek is to acknowledge to others that *we* are sinners; to be merciful is to have compassion on others, for *they* are sinners, too.

The quality of mercy, therefore, arises out of our own failure and sin. Unjudged sin has the effect of hardening us and separating us from others, but sin acknowledged and repented of sensitizes us to their frailty and draws us closer to them. Common sin is our common ground; publicans and sinners become our kind of people.

Jesus, of course, was the very essence of mercy. Throughout his three short years of ministry, he reached out to the sick, the blind, and the deaf, and healed them. He found prostitutes and tax collectors and drew them into his circle of love. He cared for the lonely, the destitute, and the fatherless. Never was there a person on the face of this earth with the mercy of Jesus. On one occasion, he came upon a funeral procession and saw a mother weeping over the death of her son. She was already a widow, and now she had no child to care for. Jesus cared for her. He stopped the funeral procession, put his hand on the casket, and raised the child from the dead.

Mercy is compassion in action for people in need. Jesus did not specify the categories of need. It may be someone overcome by disaster, like the traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho to whom the "good Samaritan" showed "mercy." It may be the hungry, the sick, the outcast, or the lonely. It may even be those who wrong us. Justice cries out for punishment, but mercy for forgiveness. Our God is a merciful God. He shows mercy continuously. His children, the citizens of his kingdom, will do likewise.

I have been learning much from Henry Nouwen concerning mercy. Dr. Nouwen is a priest who used to teach at Harvard University. At the height of his career, he left Harvard and moved to a community called Daybreak, near Toronto, in order to take on the demanding chores required by his friendship with a man named Adam. Henry Nouwen now ministers not to intellectu-

als, but to a young man who is considered by many to be a useless person, someone who perhaps should have been aborted. Nouwen describes his friend:

Adam is a 25-year-old man who cannot speak, cannot dress or undress himself, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without much help. He does not cry or laugh. Only occasionally does he make eye contact. His back is distorted. His arm and leg movements are twisted. He suffers from severe epilepsy and despite heavy medication, sees few days without grand-mal seizures. Sometimes, as he grows suddenly rigid, he utters a howling groan. On a few occasions, I've seen one big tear roll down his cheek.

It takes me about an hour and a half to wake Adam up, give him his medication, carry him into his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, put him in his wheelchair and bring him to the place where he spends most of his day with therapeutic exercises.

Many who visit Nouwen and watch him perform his duties wonder whether he is putting his time to the best use. If you have heard him speak or read his books, you know he has much to offer the world. Couldn't someone else take over the menial tasks involved in caring for Adam? Yet, if you broach that subject with Nouwen, as many have done, he will inform you that to think that way is to misunderstand completely what is going on. "I am not giving up anything," he insists. "It is *I*, not Adam, who gets the main benefits from our friendship."

One writer who spent time with Nouwen lists the benefits that Nouwen has gained through his work of mercy:

The hours spent with Adam have given him an inner peace so fulfilling that it makes most of his other, more high-minded tasks seem boring and superficial by contrast. Early on, as he sat beside that helpless child-man, he realized how marked with rivalry and competition, how obsessive, was his drive for success in academia and Christian ministry. Adam taught him that "what makes us human is not our mind, but our heart, not our ability to think but our ability to love." From Adam's simple nature, he had glimpsed the "emptiness" necessary before one can be filled by God.

The interviewer left, convicted of his own spiritual poverty. He wrote: "I who so carefully arrange my own writer's life to make it efficient and single focused. The merciful are indeed blessed, I learned, for they will be shown mercy."

So the fundamental idea of being merciful is to give help to the wretched, to relieve the miserable. Mercy is compassion in action. We must be careful to not think that we are being merciful simply because we *feel* compassionate toward someone in distress. The story is told of an Englishman who happened across a friend whose horse had just been accidentally killed. While a crowd

of onlookers expressed words of sympathy, this man stepped forward and said loudly to the others, "I am sorry five pounds. How much are you sorry?" One of the great ploys of the evil one is to get us to feel, but not to act. If we *feel* long enough, soon we will stop feeling.

Mercy, therefore, is demonstrated in acts of love and compassion. Mercy will notice and get involved in the needs of others. It cannot stay uninvolved in the face of genuine need. It has to respond; it is compelled by something deep inside. There are needs all around us, including undiscerned needs in this body. It is possible that you can meet some of them.

The beauty of the early church was their genuine concern for the needs of their brothers and sisters. No possession was held back if by its disposal some need might be met. Describing the first century Christians to the Emperor Hadrian, Aristodes wrote:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God.

Mercy is not only compassion in action; the act of being merciful describes someone who forgives and pardons another who is in the wrong. The merciful person forgives. He remembers his own sin and God's mercy to him, and he understands the weaknesses of others.

We need to be clear about what Jesus is saying. He is not suggesting that mercy has any purchasing power which somehow obligates God to show us mercy. The mercy that we demonstrate is merely evidential; it shows that we understand the basis of our own acceptance before God. If we fully understand the depth of our own need for mercy, we will extend mercy to others. If we are not merciful, we are indicating that we do not realize how much we ourselves have been forgiven.

That is what is behind our Lord's comment in response to Peter's question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Peter's natural inclination (and ours, too) is to establish a finite limit to the number of offenses a man can endure. Seven times, and then we've had it! Jesus says, in effect, that forgiveness and mercy have no limits. There is never a time when we can legitimately say, "I've had enough," or "That's the last straw." God himself never treats us that way; he has forgiven us *all* our transgressions. The hymn states it well:

*His love knows no limits,
His grace has no measure,
His power has no boundary known unto men.
For out of his infinite riches in glory,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.*

These are hard words, but they are mercifully hard words. It is possible to attend church, lead an outward-

ly moral life, know all the answers, and yet hold a death grip on grudges, such as unwillingness to forgive a relative or business associate. No matter what someone does to reconcile, you continue to nourish hatred, cherish your animosities, and revel in malice.

Our Lord is really saying that we are truly forgiven only when we are truly repentant. To be truly repentant means we realize that we deserve nothing but punishment, and that if we are forgiven, that is to be attributed entirely to the love of God, to his mercy and grace, and to nothing else at all. But it goes further. It means this: If I am truly repentant, if I am aware of my position before God, and realize that I am only forgiven in this way, then of necessity I must forgive those who trespass against me.

Now it may be the case that bitterness and hatred recur even after you have forgiven someone. The fact that you have forgiven, and continue to forgive, is a sign of grace, despite the ambivalence and imperfections of your forgiveness. Perhaps you find forgiveness difficult because the offense is recent; you are still in emotional shock and cannot respond properly. The warning of Jesus is not addressed to such. It is for those who *will not* forgive. The point is this: If we are Christians, we can forgive, and we will forgive, however imperfect our forgiveness may be.

I recall Corrie Ten Boom's confession in her book *The Hiding Place*. In one passage, she describes a postwar meeting with a guard from Ravensbruck concentration camp, that dark and evil place where her sister had died and she herself had been subjected to horrible indignities. She writes:

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing, "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them, Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and

through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

Ultimately, compassion is a gift from God. People offer seminars for the purpose of making us sensitive to others, but true compassion can never be the product of systematic study or self-effort; it is the fruit of intimacy with the God who cares for us (1 Pet 5:7). His caring begets caring for others. His compassion rubs off on us. His love becomes ours, and our love grows mightily in his love.

This word "mercy" is perhaps the most important word in all of the Old Testament. It is the Hebrew word *hesed*, a term we have heard much about in our studies in the life of David. The King James Version of the Old Testament translates this word twelve different ways. It is so rich that we cannot find an English equivalent. But its definition, I believe, is the essence of this beatitude. Bruce Waltke, a noted Old Testament authority, says this about *hesed*:

It has three ideas. First of all, it means that two people have a relationship; they are bound together. Secondly, it means that one party in that relationship is in a desperate situation where he cannot save himself, but the other party can; and the idea is that the stronger party, out of mercy, out of loyalty, out of love, out of compassion, saves that person.

That is the quality that we need in our lives.

We will end our service this morning by partaking of the Lord's Supper. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the supreme example of mercy in action. The perfect act of mercy and being merciful is God's sending his only Son to die for us. He saw our pitiable estate, and he was moved to action. He came and dealt with our condition.

Jesus was the One who never sinned. He never did any harm to anyone. He preached the truth, seeking to save those who were lost. As he was being nailed to the cross, what did he say as he looked upon the people who were responsible? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is not they who were doing it; it was Satan. They were the victims; they were being governed and dominated by sin.

Mercy is the quality that we need to demonstrate in our homes. Mercy looks beyond the actions of others to the need that is represented by those actions. Jesus said, "He who is forgiven much, loves much." Ask God to break your heart this morning with the sin that breaks his heart. Ask him to let you see yourself the way he sees you. Out of that brokenness, and because of his cleansing and forgiveness, you will look upon others with new eyes.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

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