



Matthew 5:7

6th Message

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BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

SERIES: THE BEATITUDES - LIVING RIGHT-SIDE UP IN AN UP-SIDE DOWN WORLD

The Merciful

Blessed are the poor in spirit

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed are those who mourn

For they will be comforted

Blessed are the meek

For they will inherit the earth

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

For they will be filled

Blessed are the merciful

For they will be shown mercy

Blessed are the pure in heart

For they will see God

Blessed are the peacemakers

For they will be called children of God

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven

(Matthew 5:3–10 NIV)

I love the story of Jim Elliot, missionary to a tribe located in Ecuador who were known back then as the Auca Indians, now known as the Waodani. I love his drive, his passion to reach unreached people, and his dedication to the task. From the time he was a young child, Jim knew he wanted to be a missionary and worked and studied and prepared for it. He even played sports in college to prepare his body for the physically strenuous life of a missionary.

The word *Auca* means savage, a name given by the surrounding tribes, probably because this tribe was known for killing any and all outsiders. Today they are known as the Waodani tribe, which means “humans”. Now, even though they had a fearsome reputation, Jim knew that God wanted him to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with these people. Finally, after several years of preparation and language training, Jim, along with a team of 4 other missionaries, made contact with the Waodani. Jim was so excited, and the first meeting seemed to go well, but they had to wait another 6 days before they had any further contact! And this time the contact did not go well; choosing not to defend themselves with their guns, Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Nate Saint, Roger Youderian and Ed McCully died at the hands of the very people they were trying to reach with the love of God.

Jim Elliot’s story keeps me humble, reminding me that though we may have great plans, it is the Lord who guides our steps. And I am forced to face the question, “if my death served the kingdom of God more than a life of service, would I willingly accept it?”

But a far more painful and imminently pressing question faced Jim Elliot’s wife, Elisabeth—how would she respond?

Though we may not want to admit it, our first response would probably be, “well God thanks for calling my husband to that,

obviously it didn’t work out and those ungrateful people can burn in hell for all I care.”

Showing mercy is hard. I think it’s alright to acknowledge that mercy is not our first response, our go-to. The character of Christ does not come naturally to us—you know, there’s the small matter of that little event commonly known as the Fall!

Still Jesus (never one to shy away from the difficult) says, “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7)

Then again, this isn’t the first “difficult to live out” beatitude. After all, if the beatitudes are known for one thing, it’s how hard they are to live up to. It’s a good thing that they’re not a standard we have to live up to; rather they are an identity, the person we now are, as a follower of Jesus. Still, it is a process, fully becoming that new person and living into our new identity. A process, and not an easy one, at that, which is why it is also good that we are not doing this on our own or in our own strength. The Spirit at work inside each one of us is enabling us to be that person, that new creation, to live into our new identity!

In addition to the difficulty of living into the beatitudes, actually doing them, each one seems to raise its own theological issue with which we must wrestle. In our beatitude today, we must wrestle with whether or not the mercy of God is free!

None of the other beatitudes have this stark reciprocity, the “give this, get that” idea that we face in Blessed are the Merciful. Usually, the thing to look forward to, the second half of each beatitude is the fulfillment of a particular longing (blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled) or the solution to a particular problem (blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted).

Yet here, the thing we look forward to (being shown mercy) is the exact same thing that we are doing if we live into this beatitude. And with it comes the implication that if we don’t show mercy, we ourselves will then not be shown mercy either.

And this makes us very nervous!

After all, grace is a free gift, and as Evangelical Christians, we work very hard to avoid any kind of salvation by works.

So is God’s mercy a free gift, or a reward we must earn by showing mercy to others? And if we must earn it, then how much mercy is enough, to get us the mercy we need from God?

To be completely honest with you, the Bible seems, at times, split on this subject.

On the one hand, we have clear examples that the mercy of God is completely free

In Ephesians 2:4–6, Paul says, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” And then a few verses later continues on to say this grace is not from

yourself, not by any work that you have done (like showing mercy). It is the gift of God.

In Titus 3:4–5, Paul is very clear: “

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

God’s mercy does not come from righteous things that we have done (like showing mercy!), it simply comes from God’s mercy.

And it’s not just Paul. Peter writes,

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. (1Peter 1:3)

We have a new birth, a living hope and an inheritance, all because of God’s mercy freely given.

These passages make it clear that God’s mercy is freely given! And not freely given so that we don’t have to worry about earning it, but freely given because it would be impossible for us to earn it. So it’s either freely given or we’re not getting it. Simple as that! Either God makes it a free gift or there is quite simply no way we will ever attain it.

Those verses make everything seem clear enough, until we get to a passage like James 2:13:

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Judgment without mercy—now that’s a scary thought.

Or what about our scripture reading, the parable of the unmerciful servant, a story that many of us are familiar with? In that parable, mercy is actually taken away, the merciful judgment reversed, all because of the unmerciful attitude and actions of the servant whose debt was forgiven.

These seeming contradictions can leave us confused at best and, at worst, worried about losing God’s mercy in our lives. So let me say four things as we try to resolve the tension between the two.

Firstly, the weight of scriptural evidence is on the side of free mercy. There is *more* free mercy, if you will. There are many more passages speaking of mercy as a free gift and the free grace that God lavishes upon us, than there are passages like James. It’s a minor point, and not one that I would hang any arguments upon, but worth noting, nonetheless.

Secondly, we know that God loves mercy. We find this throughout the Old Testament, especially in the prophets, because God’s people just aren’t getting it. In Micah 6:8 we read, “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

What does God require of us? Well where shall we start? There are a thousand things that God could say here but He chooses these three. These are the key things that God wants from His people. And notice it’s stronger than simply showing mercy, it’s loving mercy!

It is good for us to be challenged by how seriously God takes mercy. The prophet Hosea even says on behalf of God, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” That’s huge! The sacrificial system was an integral part of Israel’s worship. In fact it’s the foundation upon which their relationship with God was built. It was the system that

kept them in relationship with God. Every time they sinned and messed things up, it was the sacrificial system that gave them a way back. In theological language, it’s the sacrificial system that atoned for their sin.

And yet, God is saying that he would prefer mercy. Mercy is what God really wants from His people. Mercy is more important to God than religious gestures, no matter how sincere they are.

The truth is that mercy tends to fall pretty far down on our sin priority lists. We often approach mercy with the attitude of, ‘yeah we should probably work on that, but there are more pressing issues we need to deal with.’

But as we read these verses and others, it becomes very hard to ignore just how high on God’s priority list mercy is. God loves to show mercy. Micah even says, “God *delights* to show mercy.” God delights to show mercy, and He wants His people to be like Him and to delight in showing mercy, too. And so He led the way. He set the example for what that looks like.

Because (and this is my third point) God’s mercy came first!

This is clearly seen in the parable of the unmerciful servant. First, the servant is given mercy from a huge debt that he owed the king, then straightaway he goes out and shakes down his fellow servant and throws him in prison for the much smaller amount that he is owed.

The greater mercy comes first! And that’s part of what makes it so shocking that he would then go and throw his fellow servant in prison right after he had avoided that same prison himself.

But our shock is taken up a notch when we see the amounts of money involved. The fellow servant owes 100 denarii, that is 100 days wages for a day labourer (think minimum wage), so about a third of a year’s salary. Now whether you want to make your calculations based on minimum wage or average bay area salary or some other number, it becomes completely irrelevant when we then consider how much the first servant owed the king; 10,000 talents of gold. Each talent has a value of 20 years’ wages for a day labourer. So each talent is worth over sixty times the entire debt owed by the second servant. Sixty times. And there are ten thousand of those talents owed. So it would only take a day labourer 200,000 years to pay off the debt.

The number is staggering, the comparison in debt size is enormous, and the ingratitude of the servant is beyond belief. The numbers are so crazy, so exaggerated for effect, that it’s really not comparable to our own experiences... Except that we do exactly the same thing. All. The. Time.

You see the size of the debt owed the king is actually quite small in comparison to the debt of sin that has been cancelled for us. And yet so often we react like the unmerciful servant; we get the benefits of the mercy of God, and then we turn around and set out to collect all the very small debts owed to us.

We are not being asked to be merciful in a vacuum—just because God says it’s a good thing to do. We are being asked to be merciful because of God’s incredible mercy shown to us.

If we cannot find it in our hearts to be merciful, then we have not understood the gospel. Somewhere along the way, we have seriously missed something. I’m talking about the grudges, big and small, that we hold onto, the unmerciful attitudes that lead to a critical heart that’s quick to judge, and even the attitude that some people are deserving of hell. We need to repent of these unmerciful attitudes,

and ask that God would work on our hearts—and in them—to allow us to live into our Beatitude identity to a fuller degree.

Because fourthly, and lastly, Beatitudes describe who we are!

This is such an encouragement to me. That on my bad days, I can rest in this knowledge that I am not a total failure just waiting to have mercy taken away from me. I am a beatitude person. Because of God's mercy, this is my new identity! And though I may not be living into that new identity right now, that doesn't take away my new identity.

Yes, there is a requirement from God that we show mercy. But because of what God has done for us through Jesus, we are now merciful people! And the Spirit is making that more and more true for each one of us, day by day as He works in our lives to make us more like Christ.

So, if I can attempt to sum this up, in our tension between free mercy and the obligation to show mercy in order to receive mercy, we see that there is far more focus on the free gift of mercy, with many scripture texts supporting free mercy compared to only a couple that even suggest that mercy must be earned. Those that do seem to pull in that direction are important in that they show how much mercy matters to God. But above all that is the fact that God went first; He showed His mercy before there's ever talk about any kind of obligation on our part. And finally, and most importantly, Jesus has made us Beatitude people—so we are merciful, no matter how many times we fail and act in unmerciful ways.

So what does this mean for us today?

Since this Beatitude, like all the others, is not something we have to strive to achieve, it is therefore simply a matter of submitting to the Spirit's work in our hearts and living into what is now our identity!

Many of you know how Elisabeth Elliot's story ends. How two years later, having met two Waodani, Elisabeth Elliot chose to take her 3yr old daughter, Valerie, and go to the tribe again to reach them with the Good News of Jesus. The result: Many Waodani came to know Jesus.

They were stunned that, though they killed her husband, Elisabeth would reach out to them. Despite the heartbreak and anguish she must have been feeling, Elisabeth Elliot understood the gospel. She knew that God's incredible mercy to her had set her free to show incredible mercy to the very people who had murdered her husband.

As we ponder, for ourselves, how to live into this Beatitude mercy, we must begin with this foundation:

God's mercy sets us free to show mercy.

You would understand the unmerciful servant in the parable if he was chasing down the guy who owed him money because he was desperately trying to gather up every penny he could find to somehow try to begin to pay off his own debt. But the king, by forgiving his debt, had actually freed up the servant to show mercy as well. Do you see? By taking away the servant's biggest money problem, he now didn't need to collect the much smaller debt that he was owed.

More than an obligation to show mercy, by taking the weight of guilt and shame and the burden of our own sin off our backs, God has renewed us and set us free to show mercy to others, and to be a part of relieving their burdens as well.

We are so small-minded, and we so often want to just figure out the bare minimum; What's the least we can do in order to check those God boxes? And we end up causing trouble for ourselves. The whole parable itself comes out of Peter asking just how many times is enough times to forgive someone before he can stop. And so we too say, God requires mercy? Okay, well then I'll just have to put in some effort and try to be merciful, or else I might lose my own mercy. Let's figure out just how much mercy I have to show in order to avoid losing the mercy I want from God...

NO!

We don't have to think like that! We are new creations. God's has recreated us as merciful people. And rather than feeling obligated and limited, we can instead choose to show mercy out of the freedom that we have been given.

Personally, I love paying off debts! And when I'm able to make that last payment and clear that debt, it's such a good feeling! It brings a lightness, a spring in my step. If you've ever experienced that, that's what I'm talking about here, but even more so! A debt that you could never pay has been forgiven, cleared, the slate has been wiped clean. You don't have to worry about it anymore. That should fill us with such a lightness and joy that we want others to experience that same feeling!

We don't owe a debt, so now we don't need to go chasing down those indebted to us.

Secondly, getting down to specifics here, grudges are a big deal to God! And this, I think for most of us, is where the rubber actually hits the road. Stories like those of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot are wonderful examples of huge acts of mercy, where being merciful is life-changing. But that's not the kind of situation that faces most of us, most days.

Instead we are faced with smaller and medium-sized annoyances, slights and offenses. For many of us, these lead to resentment and holding grudges. It's very easy to let resentment build up, and once you start holding onto a few grudges, it's not long before they start to pile up.

Take a moment to ask yourself, how many grudges and resentments are you hanging on to? How long is the line that you're dragging round behind you?

You may be so used to them by now that they've slipped into your "that's a sin I can live with" box. After all, we have many problems and struggles vying for our attention each day, so it's no surprises that grudges and resentments slip down the sin priority list. And yet it seems pretty clear that Grudges are a big deal to God. Refusing mercy and forgiveness is a big deal to God. Not only because of what it does to the other person, but also because it puts us back in bondage again. God set us free to be able to show mercy. When we refuse to show mercy and hold a grudge, we're basically walking ourselves back to prison and kindly requesting to be let back into our cell.

This seems to be an area where the difference between God's values and our values is very large.

I plead with you today to consider who you're withholding mercy from, and to let God change your heart. You may not think that it's Elisabeth Elliot levels of mercy, but that doesn't mean it won't be life changing—both for you (as your mercy sets you free once again) and for the person to whom you show mercy.

And lastly, does our mercy cause us to act?

To the Greeks, mercy was an emotion. And not one the Stoics liked! But in scripture, and to the Jews, mercy always involved action. Specifically, God's mercy always involved action. In fact, the Greek word used for mercy here is the one used to translate the Hebrew word *Hesed*.

Think about it; you never hear of God having loyal love and feeling compassion for His people and then doing nothing about it. God's mercy causes Him to act on behalf of His people.

And I believe that God calls us to do the same. For us not to just feel compassion for the world around us, but to act.

Act. Not because we feel an obligation, but act, inspired by the greatest of all mercies, the Mercy of God, shown to us when we were His enemies—helpless, hopeless and powerless to do anything to change it.

Showing mercy is an act of God, so let's not pretend we can do it in our own strength!

Many of us need God to do a mighty work in our hearts for us to even consider letting go of that grudge. So take advantage of the wonderful prayer team we have. Take a risk and let God change your life today!

And now, May the Father of all mercies, who through His Son, Jesus Christ, has forgiven us a debt we could never repay, work in our hearts by His Spirit, that we might delight to show mercy, too.

Amen

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