

Blessed Are the Merciful
Matthew 18:23-35 and Matthew 5: 7
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Those of you who were here three years ago for the sermon series on the Kingdom of God may recall that in one of those sermons I told a true story about South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and an event that occurred in an airport. The slight elder Tutu was walking through the terminal when a younger, much larger white man intentionally ran into him with such force that it knocked the Right Reverend right to the ground. Clearly, the man did not think much of Bishop Tutu's efforts to bring justice to apartheid South Africa. Let me ask you: what do you imagine you would have felt and done in a similar circumstance?

Desmond Tutu leapt back to his feet laughing. Now let me ask you another question: what kind of person would you have to be for laughter to be your most automatic, authentic response to being shoved to the ground by someone who considered you an enemy? And, here's an even harder question: can you imagine yourself coming to such a place within your own heart and mind that laughter would be your response and what would you need to do to get there?

The older I get the more I realize how culturally bound we all are in how we see the world. In the United States, we are taught from the crib onwards that we are measured by what we do, how successful we are, how hard we work, what we produce or some version of that. We are largely blind to how much our identities and sense of self-worth are bound to our "doing." Other cultures emphasize other things, like tradition or tribe, in which case one's self-worth is tied to one's loyalty to the family or to the past. In contrast to all of these, the Christian gospel places a primary emphasis on being rather than doing, on who we are rather than how well we perform whether that performance is in work or in our relationships. If you get the heart right, everything else will follow.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is describing what the reality of our hearts would look like if we were fully aligned with God's purposes for us. Often we get this completely backwards. People think that the New Testament exhorts us to try to be a "good" Christian in this way or that way, and to try to live as a Christian here in this area and over there in that regard. But, we are not meant to control our Christian faith; rather, our Christian faith is meant to control us. It's not that we hear a Christian truth and then apply it in some way or other in our lives. We are

to be so dominated by God's truth through the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that we become the embodiment of that truth, new men and women who are reborn, transformed people of God. It's a far cry from using Christianity as a sin management tool.

Desmond Tutu, I believe, is an example of a person who has deeply internalized the truths Jesus is giving us in the Beatitudes. He has faced the reality that he is a spiritual pauper, that in and of himself he can bring nothing to God to earn any grace or favor. He knows what it is to mourn over his sinful depravity, and he also knows what it is to be supremely comforted to the point of hilarious joy because of the forgiveness and grace of Christ. That is what compels him to such humility and meekness that he can't imagine being defensive or asserting his rights when someone knocks him to the ground. He has come to recognize that nothing is as important as hungering and thirsting after God which means it would be unthinkable to withhold mercy from anyone, even an enemy—because he profoundly grasps the mercy that has been freely and undeservingly offered to him by Christ.

“Blessed are the merciful,” says Jesus in the fifth Beatitude, but what is this mercy about which Jesus speaks? Theologian Arthur Pink says it is a “holy compassion of the soul whereby one is moved to pity and [to] go to the relief of another who is in misery.” It causes us to, in essence, walk in another's shoes so that we feel the burden or misery they feel and are so grieved by it that we are moved to act. It can also be described as a gracious disposition, a spirit of kindness and benevolence that sympathizes with others' sufferings.

The merciful person weeps with those who weep and mourns with those who mourn. She also keeps short accounts with others, not taking to heart any injuries or insults, intended or unintended, and he chooses to think the best about someone rather than the worst. The famous 19th century British preacher Charles Spurgeon put it like this: “I recommend, dear brothers and sisters that you always have one blind eye and one deaf ear. I have always tried to have them; and my blind eye is the best eye I have, and my deaf ear is the best ear I have.” (p. 99, *The Beatitudes*) Spurgeon is not advising us to stick our heads in the sand. It's not that we don't acknowledge the wrongs other people do or don't feel the impact of those wrongs; it is simply that at the same time we recognize the many wrongs we have done against God and others and what has been forgiven us. So, we are slow to anger over wrongs and quick to forgive, instead of quick to anger and slow to forgive which is how we do it most of the time.

You see, Jesus knows exactly how prone we are to judge for ourselves who “deserves” mercy and who does not. But, true mercy does not show partiality. It’s not compassionate towards some and harsh towards others we deem less deserving. In fact, the Christian is one who never wants to shut anyone off from the life-giving joy of mercy. So, it becomes clear that mercy is the antithesis to vindictiveness, retribution and retaliation. Here’s one test of whether we are giving the Holy Spirit room to create in us a merciful spirit: when you find yourself in the position of having in your power someone who is in your debt or has harmed you in some way, how do you feel towards that person? Do you relish the opportunity for pay-back, or to assert your rights against that person? Or, can you, drawing upon the mercy you yourself have received from Christ, look upon that person with genuine sorrow?

Jesus gives us a vivid, striking illustration to make his point. There is a servant who is in debt far, far beyond his means to ever repay. The man would have spent his entire life in debtor’s prison, hopelessly slaving away to pay off what he owed. The wealthy master to whom he owed this vast sum took pity on him and in his mercy, forgave the entire debt. The recipient of this extravagant gift promptly went out and demanded payment from a fellow who owed him a comparatively trivial amount. The debtor pleaded for time and patience, but the one to whom he owed the money closed his heart and had the man thrown into prison. But, of course, that wasn’t the end of the story.

The servant’s actions were observed by others from the rich landowner’s household who informed the wealthy man about what his servant had done. The master summoned the ungrateful, wicked man and because of his failure to be merciful with his fellow servant, had him cast away into a prison from which he would never emerge.

Some have questioned whether Jesus is saying in this parable that God’s forgiveness is conditional, that we will only receive mercy if we give it and only be forgiven if we forgive. But, to see it that way would be to nullify the entire message of the Gospel, which is that God came *while we were still trapped in our sin* in order to extend mercy to us. No; what Jesus says in his parable is that we only experience true forgiveness when we truly repent. When we repent we realize that we deserve nothing but punishment, and so God’s forgiveness comes entirely as a gift of love and grace, and has nothing whatsoever to do with what I do or don’t do. Being the recipient of this unfathomable gift, how, then, could I even consider withholding forgiveness from others. No matter what they’ve done to me, I’ve done that much and more to God, and God has been merciful to me.

Like this parable, Jesus' life and teaching are full of paradox, and taking hold of paradox requires some spiritual maturity, some flexing of our spiritual muscles. We are depraved and at the same time we bear the divine image of God. We are sinners who constantly break covenant with God while simultaneously being God's precious children. We deserve God's judgment but at the same time God never stops enfolding us in love. We are the hands and feet of Christ and we are the ones responsible for the nails that were driven into those same hands and feet.

It is critical that we see and hold these truths together. To over-emphasize one half of the truth at the expense of the other leads us to domesticate Jesus' teaching into something we find tolerable and doable, rather than hearing it as the radical call that it really is—the call to let God change us so God can change the world through us. Paradox inevitably produces tension and discomfort which is why most people avoid it, but serious dangers result when we don't do the hard work paradox requires. On one end of the spectrum, the over-emphasis of our sinfulness leads to legalism which results in guilt and shame and the never-ending cycle of trying to measure up only to fall short time and time again. It produces joyless religion and a view of God as capricious and vengeful, always wagging a divine finger in our face.

But, at the opposite pole there are people who only want to talk about God's love. "I'm okay, you're okay, everything is okay because God loves us and wants us to be happy and besides, we're all pretty good people most of the time anyway." When we over-emphasize the love of God at the expense of God's holiness and righteousness, we belittle the cost of mercy and make cheap grace out of what Jesus did for us on the cross. The result is that our faith has no power, and we never really experience the freedom that comes with being liberated from sin and the profound joy of forgiveness.

The gift of paradox is that we see ourselves honestly as God sees us—we are the servant whose ledger is hemorrhaging red ink because of the debt we owe. And at the same time we are so valued, so loved, so precious that God rips out the ledger page, stamps "paid in full" across it and tosses it in the garbage. Friends, that calls for a celebration. We have been given a gift so extraordinary, so generous that no price can be put on it. Invite all the neighbors, throw open the doors, turn up the music, pop the champagne, let the dancing begin—we have been forgiven. There is no greater gift.

Can you, in the midst of this raucous party celebrating the mercy of God imagine, then, holding onto the grievances and insults and hurts that others have done to you? Or, can you imagine being so deeply, profoundly impacted by the love and mercy of God that someone knocking you to the ground would not even register as an insult? Could you instead see that person as Christ sees them, with “people eyes?” Could you imagine being able to say with Jesus, “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they’re doing”?

Being willing to see past the hurt they’re doing to us, to the hurt they themselves have experienced that would lead them to behave in this way—that’s what the love of God asks us to do. It asks us to be merciful, because of the mercy we have already received.

Amen.