

## ***Blessed Are the Merciful • Matthew 5:7***

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”*

When I read these words of Jesus’ they remind me of an article that I once read in a national magazine, a story from the Shaw United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. The people of that church were gathered one evening for a meeting when they heard gunfire broke out in a drug turf war on the street. Two young men were mortally wounded. Seeking sanctuary, they crawled up the steps of the church building and through the doors. While they lay there bleeding, with help on it’s way, the people of that church gathered around them and prayed for them.

The two young men were taken away to the hospital were they later died. The people of that church were so moved by the conflicts in their neighborhood and throughout the District of Columbia that they made a decision to ban together with four other D.C. churches in what they called “Saving Stations.” These were ministries, programs, outreaches — whatever you would choose to call them — to those whose lives are particularly impacted by drugs.

As I read Jesus’ words, I recalled something that happened in the state of Wisconsin. Some pro-choice picketers were protesting in front of the pro-life organization headquarters. The media was there to cover the event and the Christian woman at the head of that pro-life program had to decide what to do. She chose to get cups of hot coffee and breakfast rolls she took them outside to serve breakfast to the picketers who were objecting to her and what she believed in her organization.

As I read Jesus words’ I thought about Victor Hugo’s famous story of Les Miserables. It tells the story of an escaped prisoner who broke out and went to the home of a bishop and stole some very valuable silver candlesticks and was caught. His crime meant that at least he would go back to jail and in all probability it would cost him his life. And so

the bishop had a life and death decision to make. He decided that the thief could have the candlesticks — they were his. No charges — no theft.

As I read Jesus’ words I thought about a Minnesota businessman who was asked a while back to lend thousands of dollars to a friend whose business was in trouble. He was assured that the money would be repaid within just a few months. But months became years and the business got worse instead of better. The borrower couldn’t pay so the lender forgave the debt.

As I read Jesus’ words, I remembered a time some years ago sitting in a living room at a routine social gathering with a lot of the small talk that often takes place. The mood suddenly changed as one person began to verbally attack another, making serious and severe accusations. Hardly anyone moved or blinked, we just all sat in our places frozen. The words that were said and the accusations that were made were vicious. Because of some confidential information that I had gotten before, I happened to know that the accusations that were being made were absolutely not true and this was a terrible misunderstanding. But I was not free to intervene or give an explanation.

What amazed me was the way the person being attacked kept his mouth shut and just took it. I mean, he just took it! Afterwards I took him aside and asked, “Why did you take that kind of abuse? Why didn’t you defend yourself? You could have explained everything — I don’t understand.” Then he explained to me. Showing sympathy for his attacker he

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said, “You know, that guy is really hurting and the last thing that he needs is to get into an argument and lose face and be embarrassed in front of his friends.”

When I read Jesus’ words in his fifth beatitude as he preached the Sermon on the Mount, I think of these and many other stories. He said, “*Blessed*

*are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”* Contrary to what some people may think when they read these words, the Bible is not here in any way composing a formula for winning the mercy of God. It’s not saying that if I’m merciful to you and to everybody else, God will be impressed and be merciful to me or I’ll get my sins taken care of, buy a ticket to heaven and everything will be okay. That is not what Christianity teaches at all.

Mercy is the distinguishing characteristic of Christianity in comparison to all the other religions of the world. For while all the religions of the world share a recognition of our alienation to God and a desire to get back to him and with him, Christianity is unique in saying that we can’t get there on our own. It is not based on something great or good that we do or some mercy that we show. The only way that we can ever get right with God is for God to take the initiative and be merciful to us.

It is well explained by St. Peter in I Peter 1:3-9. If you understand these words, you’ll understand the core of what the Christian religion is all about.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! 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 — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

Now let me rephrase that. As sinners we’re dead to God — as dead as if we are in a coffin. And dead people can’t do things for themselves. God has chosen to bring us from death back to life again with a new birth. That takes extraordinary power. It happens by the power of the resurrection of Jesus

Christ which is the only power that can make dead people alive! God in his mercy applies that to anybody who chooses to take it, to become a Christian. Then we become alive to God forever. And that’s not all; we also get an inheritance that God has set aside for us in heaven that is utterly fantastic. It is too good and too much for us to imagine or begin to describe.

But in the meantime before we get to heaven, the Bible explains, it can get tough. There can be grief. There can be suffering. The fact is, Christians do suffer. We lose our jobs. We have divorces. We have pain. We have broken friendships and relationships. We have our share of problems. Sometimes people resent this not realizing the positive purpose of these problems. The Bible explains that it is the endurance of problems that proves to us and to anyone else who wants to check us out that we are Christians. Problems and sufferings show who is a Christian and who is not. Not only that, but the difficulties also help us to sort out our priorities in life. When we lose some of the things we think are most important, we recognize that the most important thing that we have is our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Like you, many times I see people who hurt and I hurt with them. It’s always hard. Many times I’ve been amazed though to see what the fires of adversity do. They tend to show what’s made of gold and what is not. I have discovered through my observation of people’s lives and what they tell me, that the things that they thought were such a big deal — money, job or a house or something else — that when those things are lost, they realize for the first time just how precious is their relationship with God. And that discovery is, in fact, a proof that that person is a Christian. By contrast, those who are not Christians — who get the same blows, who have the same difficulties and problems — may shake a fist at God and blame him for allowing the car to crash or the boat to sink or the garage to burn.

You see a Christian is someone who realizes that he or she was lost in sin and dead to God until God was merciful and rescued that person. It’s the man or the woman who admits that he or she deserves nothing but punishment. A Christian is someone who is surprised by God’s mercy! A Christian is someone who realizes that salvation from sin and eternal life with God is worth more than a marriage,

a child, a job or even life itself. God's mercy to us is everything!

Let me make a personal comparison. The first time that my wife Charleen ever told me that she loved me was when we were in high school and started going together. We were fifteen years old and she wrote me a note on a church registration card. (Even though I want to go on record that I don't approve of people writing notes during church services on registration cards, I consider this to be a valid exception!) I remember exactly where we were sitting — it was in the balcony. There's something about adolescence that draws you to a balcony. She wrote, "I love you" on the card. I could have floated down from my place in the balcony that day! Since then, through the years of dating, engagement and our many years of marriage I suppose she's written those words a hundred thousand times. Yet I never tire of her "I love you" and I never cease to be amazed — because she knows me a whole lot better now than she did when I was fifteen!

But let me tell you something far more amazing, and that is that God loves me and that God is merciful to me. Because he knows me far better than she will ever know me. He knows my heart and my intentions. I can stand here on Sunday morning all dressed up and make a good impression on the congregation, but God knows what I'm really like. He knows my secrets, my thoughts. He knows the sinfulness of my heart and my intentions. He knows the stuff of which I'm made yet he loves me and he's merciful to me and gave his Jesus to die for me. I will never cease to be amazed.

And if you're a Christian then I assume you know exactly what I'm talking about. For you, too, have received the mercy of God and you, too, are amazed at that mercy.

Mercy is an interesting word. It's used frequently in the Bible and most often to describe God. It is sometimes translated as "kindness" and it especially applies to those who don't deserve it or are particularly pathetic. What God asks us to do since we've received mercy is to show mercy to other people. He says it repeatedly. For example, in the little Old Testament book of Micah,

Micah 6:8, God summarizes all his expectations of humans: "*And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*"

Matthew 9:13 records Jesus' priority: "*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*" Sometimes it would be easier for us to sacrifice something and thereby placate God but he says, "I prefer mercy." In other words, the God who has been overwhelming kind and loving and merciful to us expects us to be kind and loving and merciful to others.

That's not always easy. Sometimes when we look at other people it's tough to be merciful toward them. It is only when we recognize God's kindness to us that we probably have any kind of a chance of exercising that kindness toward other people.

You don't have to listen or look very far or long in order to find how much unkindness there is in the world in which we live. People love to put other people down. We have a whole catalogue of jokes that make fun of people, belittle them and disparage them because of some handicap, the color of their skin, the language they speak or because they don't share our political convictions. Meanness oozes out of the human heart. That's because humans are sinners and I think that we expect that in the lives of people who are not Christians. But it is a shattering thing to see and to hear meanness rather than mercy coming from Christians.

I hate it when I witness the lack of mercy in me. I'm ashamed when I treat other people less than with the mercy with which God has treated me. It's an awful thing when I speak to other people

unkindly and unmercifully. I hate it in myself and I know that God hates it in me and in you. I'll tell you as straight as I can say it. There is no place for unkind-

ness among Christians. It is never right to put other people down. It is never right to treat someone else unkindly or disparagingly or unsympathetically. Yet it is a frequent happening. So how do we change that?

There are two ways to grow in the practice of

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mercy. The place to begin is to recognize how much mercy we have received from God. When we realize how good God has been to us we are motivated to be good to others even when they are wrong and don't deserve mercy.

The other way is to empathize – to sort of crawl into their skin to see things from their perspective. And that's what Jesus did, that's what the incarnation is all about. Jesus crawled into our human skin. He lived on earth and spoke our language and ate our food. We can do that. The next time you are feeling critical, unkind, unforgiving, harsh or unmerciful toward someone, try to crawl into the other person's life and see things from their point of view.

Mercy does not mean condoning sin. If fully recognizes when another person is wrong. Indeed, mercy sees sin very well but chooses to be kind and loving anyway, to be just like God.

That's why Jesus said, "*Blessed are the merciful*" because God's happiness is given to those who are like God. We can try it in the simplest of ways. We can practice being merciful in very practical ways. Next time you go to a restaurant, if you usually leave a ten percent tip, why don't you make it a twenty or twenty-five percent tip — not on the basis of the service that you get but simply on the basis of kindness and mercy? Or the next time someone treats you rottenly, treat that person with kindness. Rather than return evil for evil, do what God has done with us and return good for evil. When you hear of someone who is sick or who has been ripped off, don't say, "She deserved it." Instead, offer support and help and mercy. Mercy doesn't condone sin, but it chooses to be kind to the sinner – just like God.

Practice being like God. Because those who are merciful will be shown mercy. An extraordinary thing happens when you show mercy. The more mercy you give out, the more mercy you get in turn — because that's the way God operates.

Now, I want to explain something that I'm uncomfortable saying because it's scary but true. If we do not show mercy to others, God stops showing mercy to us!

In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus said, "*If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*" And in Matthew 7:2 he said, "*For in the*

*same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*" It's even more pointed in James 2:13 saying, "*Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.*"

We are like sponges that need water to live. It's as though God has hooked up a large hose to every Christian's life and through that hose flows pure mercy. It's wonderful to drink up the mercy, but the only way to get more is to let it flow out the other side. The more that flows through us, the more we get.

If you visit the land of Israel you will see two famous bodies of water in the Jordan Valley, one in the north and one in the south. The one in the north is the Sea of Galilee and the one in the south is the Dead Sea. Fresh water flows abundantly into both. The Sea of Galilee is deep, loaded with fish, surrounded by beautiful trees and vegetation. It is the source of livelihood for many and it really is a beautiful place. The other body of water is the Dead Sea and it is just that – dead! There isn't a fish in it because of the heavy mineral content and the surrounding land is barren dessert with few inhabitants.

The interesting part is that the same fresh water flows into both of them from the Jordan River. The difference is that the Sea of Galilee lets the water flow out and the Dead Sea keeps it.

And so it is with Christians. We are blessed with a fresh and abundant supply of God's mercy. Don't be like the Dead Sea, only taking in mercy but never letting it out. Instead, be like the Sea of Galilee and give away mercy as fast as it flows in to you so that others are blessed in turn.

Never forget Jesus' words, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

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