

“The Merciful”

Introduction: Shortly after Jesus began his public ministry, we heard him declare: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mk. 15). This declaration was followed up a few years later as the church began to form with statements such as these: “For [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col. 1:13). And so the question, what does it look like to become an inhabitant of this kingdom? What does it look like when the grace of God grabs hold of you?

The place we’ve begun our search for answers is that great body of Jesus’ teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount. In particular, we’ve been looking at his introductory beatitudes, or blessings, to see not how we get into the kingdom of God, but what it looks like when the kingdom gets more and more into us.

We’ve explored the character traits of being poor in spirit, of mourning, of being meek, of hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The character trait that Jesus will highlight for us this morning is that of mercy. What is mercy? What does offering mercy involve? What might it reveal in us when we have difficulty extending it? [READ]

I. The Presence of Mercy

A. Let’s begin by observing how mercy runs throughout the biblical record.

1. In the OT, for instance, as Moses was preparing to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, he reviewed for them, and probably for him, too, the character of the God who had been guiding them: “For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget [you] . . .” (Dt. 4:31). The psalmists cry out, on numerous occasions, as we heard earlier, for God to remember his great mercy and love (cf. Ps. 25:6; 28:2). The prophets call God’s people to show mercy to the widow, the fatherless, the alien and the poor, and in the midst of calling the Israelites to be faithful in these areas, hold up God’s mercy for them as an example to them (Zech.7:8-10; cf. Dt. 24:17-22).

2. In the NT, we hear Paul explain Christ’s new life being formed in us coming as a result of God’s mercy: “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 our transgressions...” (Eph. 2:4-5). The writer of Hebrews describes the work of Jesus on the cross on our behalf as that of a “merciful and faithful high priest,” (Heb. 2:17). And it doesn’t take long when reading the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus to see that mercy was on the top of his agenda of that which he had come to offer the world and that which he was calling his followers to give.

As one poignant example, when the religious leaders were getting tweaked about the “sinners” Jesus was hanging out with, including Matthew, a hated tax-collector who he had just called to follow him, Jesus directed these religious folk: “Go and learn what this means, *I desire mercy, and not sacrifice*” (Ma. 9:9-13). Jesus was quoting words of God from the prophet Hosea in which God was saying to Israel that their religious rituals were empty if not accompanied by mercy toward their neighbor (Hos. 6:6).

Mercy is a significant character trait of those who have been grabbed by the good news because it is a significant aspect of the heart of the God of that good news.

What, then, does mercy involve? In his teaching, Jesus reveals that it involves offering both pardon and provision. To get these truths into the hearts of his listeners, Jesus explained mercy in terms of two fairly famous parables.

II. Two Parables

A. The first, which we heard a few minutes ago, is called the parable of the *unmerciful* servant. Jesus tells it in response to a question by Peter about the extent of forgiveness. Peter thought he had done pretty well by his willingness to forgive someone seven times, for within Judaism, offering forgiveness three times was considered sufficient. Peter thought by doubling it and adding another he was being super generous! Jesus responds, however, that mercy is not about keeping score.

When the king in the parable went to settle accounts with his servants, and one was brought to him that had maxed out on every credit card offer he had received in the mail and had no hope of repaying, the king instructed him to sell all his assets, including himself, his wife, and his children. But when the servant begged for the king to be patient until he could pay it back, the king, remarkably, just canceled the whole thing. That, says Jesus, is what the kingdom of heaven is like. It is characterized by pardon for a debt of sin that we can in no way pay.

But sadly, the servant struggled to take this to heart. In fact, he actually went searching for a fellow servant who owed him money (far, far less that he had owed the king), not to bless him, it turns out, with the same mercy he had just received, not to celebrate the incredible, merciful heart of their king, but to put this second servant in a choke hold and demand what he was owed. Like the first servant, the second servant begged for patience until he could repay. But he got no patience, and no mercy, just a jail sentence! There was outrage throughout the palace which resulted in the king asking a key question: “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (v. 33). And so the king placed the first servant in a bit of a timeout until he could get his heart properly around the answer.

Illustration: You hear accounts from time to time of remarkable forgiveness, like the couple from Dearborn, MI who went to visit the man being held in prison for their daughter’s murder. “We love this special person from the bottom of our heart,” the parents said. “We harbor no hatred, no revenge.” Is this couple crazy, we ask? No, I think they’re just a pair in whose hearts Jesus has done some remarkable work. “We had the normal human reaction of grief and anguish,” the mother revealed. “Didn’t I have the right to be filled with red-hot hate? But where would it have gotten me? It wouldn’t have brought my daughter back. . . God led us on this journey. You don’t have to commit a horrible crime to be lost. You just have to ignore Jesus.” This couple was living out the kingdom – offering mercy – demonstrating that the good news of Christ’s healing power had grabbed hold of them.

Simply put, but not always simply to live out, mercy is about offering pardon to those who have wronged us, a pardon like we ourselves have received.

B. Mercy is also, as the second parable paints it, offering provision to those in need, regardless of the reason for their need, or the address of the needy. You know this parable well – the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I preached on it last spring and I’m told that both of our pulpit suppliers preached on it over the summer...maybe God is trying to tell us something?! In any event, very briefly, as man traveled the sometimes-dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, he was attacked, stripped, beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Two, Jewish, religious professionals passed by without lending a hand.

The man who did help was a Samaritan, a people group which didn't get along with the Jews; in fact, they despised one another! But this fellow was the one who stopped, tended to the injured man's wounds, put him on his own donkey, took him to an inn, watched over him throughout the night, left some money with the innkeeper so that any additional care could continue, and promised to return and reimburse the innkeeper for any extra expense. This was the man, the expert in the law with whom Jesus had been speaking was forced to admit, who had shown mercy (Lk. 10:25-37). "Go and do likewise," Jesus instructed.

Notice that the Samaritan did not ask the man lying by the side of the road what he had done to get himself into this condition. Nor did he worry about where this man was from, what color his skin was, or what his religious beliefs were. He simply, mercifully, met the need in front of him. He endeavored to relieve the consequences of sin, however they had come about.

"Mercy," as a writer named Sinclair Ferguson puts it, "is getting down on your hands and knees and doing what you can to restore dignity to someone whose life has been broken by sin (whether his own or that of someone else)."

Mercy is about offering pardon to those who have wronged us, and it is about offering provision to those in need, whoever they are or whatever their need.

III. Who will be shown?

A. If that's not challenging enough, the second half of the Beatitude may also not be easy to get our arms around for it seems as if Jesus might be teaching that mercy is something we earn or merit. That is, we won't be shown, or receive mercy, until we give it. The same kind of question arises later in the Sermon with Jesus' teaching on the prayer: Forgive us our debts, he instructs us, *as we forgive our debtors*. Two observations may be helpful.

1. First, mercy always begins with the King, as the first parable unfolds. He is the initiator of all things, including mercy. All we ever do is in response to him.

2. Second, the reason the unmerciful servant was unable to offer mercy is that he really hadn't taken to heart what the king had done for him. On one level, he might have known about what the kingdom of God offers, and may have even taken advantage of it. But on another, deeper level, he wasn't yet living in sync with it; it hadn't yet grabbed hold of his heart (v. 35). It seems as if Jesus is saying that the more the good news grabs us, the more we will get mercy, and the more we'll be able to give it to others, in whatever form. The unmerciful servant still had some heart work to do, pondering the depth of the king's mercy to him before he'd be able to offer it to others.

B. Perhaps that's a good take away for us. If we're struggling with offering mercy, either pardon or provision, can we stop and reflect on what we've first received? Perhaps our difficulty can serve as evidence as to the nature of the kingdom of God that still needs to surface within us.

Maybe, as we're struggling to believe that we could ever pardon, or provide for, *that* unlovable person, because, well, we are pretty sure they don't deserve it, it could help show us how very much like *that* unlovable person—like the mugged man or unmerciful servant—we really are, how much we don't deserve it, and how deep for us the pardon and provision of Jesus really goes.