

## BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

Text: Matthew 5:7

Psalm 103:1-13

LHUMC 3/16/14

### I. Introduction

- A. We've been starting each week of our Beatitude series with a basic question raised by each. Questions that we have to deal with somehow if we are going to fully appreciate what Jesus had in mind with these radical statements of blessing. Today the question is simply, "How would you define "mercy"?"
1. This question came to my mind as I saw the video that we played at the beginning of the service, when I realized again that that may not be as simple of a question as it might seem.
    - a) As I saw all of those verses that spoke somehow to the topic of "mercy", I realized once again that "mercy" can be hard to pin down.
    - b) I remember when my grandma used to exclaim "Mercy!", it could mean just about anything, and as I saw all those verses, I was kind of thinking the same thing.
    - c) I did try going to my trusty friend the Microsoft Word Thesaurus, but that only muddied the waters, because it gave me this big, long list of synonyms for mercy (including compassion, pity, clemency, forgiveness, kindness, sympathy, understanding, leniency, benevolence, etc.).
  2. So the point is that in all of these possible answers, it can be difficult sometimes, for if we are to not just live out mercy, to be "merciful", we need to know what we mean by that.
  3. And we also have to understand all the ways that God blesses us with mercy, each and every day.

### II. All of which led me to thinking about other reasons why the whole concept of mercy and what it stands for and what it looks like sometimes is difficult for us. And it wouldn't have been easy for Jesus' original audience either. Back then, to show "mercy" in whatever way was seen as a weakness. One Roman philosopher of the time was famously quoted saying, "Mercy is a disease of the soul." As I've thought about that quote, I'm realizing that not a whole lot has changed—to be merciful in our time is not necessarily a way to get ahead in life in worldly terms, at least.

- A. Another of the difficulties that the first audience of these words would have had that translates across the centuries has to do with the original word used there.
1. The word there for "merciful" is an action word, implying that our mercy is to be lived out, not just talked about or felt.
  2. And for any of us, so often it tends to be easier to feel sorry for someone than to actually help them.

3. So often mercy, however we define it, is an idea that never leaves the launching pad of our good intentions.
  4. That's what I love about ministries like Family Promise—an idea that was talked about for a long time in this community to reach a real need for short term housing for homeless families.
    - a) But eventually, it took the efforts of a lot of people to launch this merciful idea into action.
    - b) And this morning, as we set up the beds and sign up to help, we become an example of "mercy" as an action word.
    - c) And if you've had the opportunity to spend the evening or the night with our guests, or brought in a meal, you have experienced the blessing that comes from that. Not just for them, but for us, too. After all, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful"
    - d) So if you want to experience that kind of blessedness, see Allison Keessen!
- B. Another reason why living out "mercy" can be difficult is simply because it tends to be so rare in our culture. As one commentator says, "These days, true acts of mercy make the headline news." And the reason for that is that news shows are always looking for unique stories. And so the sad commentary is that when someone shows mercy, it is often big news.
1. This past week, I saw a couple of examples of mercy from the sports world—that if you just sort of looked at them objectively, would have seemed to be about situations where a little mercy was obviously called for, and yet the fact that I kept seeing them over and over in the news loop made me wonder if the reason I kept seeing them was that they were so unusual in the bigger scheme of things.
    - a) The story of the Grandville High School hockey team that tragically lost their captain the night before their state semi-final game.
    - b) They lost the game, but at the end the clip you saw was the Detroit Catholic Central team joining them in prayer after the game.
    - c) And then there was a high school basketball game between two Christian schools in California, where it showed the end of the game when one of the teams was way ahead and they put in a player who had autism who had never scored a point in his career. Right at the end, before the final buzzer, the clip was of the other team letting the kid score a basket.
    - d) It's kind of interesting that both of the teams that showed mercy were from Christian schools.
    - e) Which maybe goes to show that we Christians are or certainly need to be the ones out in front with our acts of mercy, that we need to be the ones that show the rest of the world how to define and then live out mercy.

- f) Wouldn't it be cool to live in a world where mercy was so common that when it happened, it wasn't treated like this amazing, rare thing?
  - g) Until that happens, we may have our work cut out for us.
- C. The other thing that might make this whole mercy thing a little difficult for us sometimes is simply because God sets the bar so high. As I was reading about this Beatitude, there were a couple of other Bible stories that kept popping up.
1. The first is the story of Jonah
    - a) What we all remember about the story of Jonah is the part where he winds up in the belly of the big fish.
    - b) We don't always remember what came before and after that part of the story.
    - c) The story begins with God calling Jonah to go and minister to the Ninevites.
    - d) Now the Ninevites were citizens of Nineveh, the capital city of the hated Assyrians—so these would have been the last people Jonah would have wanted to deal with.
    - e) And that's exactly how the story begins—with Jonah trying to escape God's call by getting on a ship going in the opposite direction.
    - f) Eventually the sailors on that ship blame Jonah for a huge storm that blows up, and they throw him over the side, whereby he winds up in the big fish.
    - g) Eventually, the fish spits him up and he does wind up in Nineveh, where he does what God told him to do originally, to preach to the Ninevites.
    - h) And then to make a long story short, at the end of the story, God spares the Ninevites.
    - i) And this does not make Jonah happy. At the very end, he quotes the words that we heard in Psalm 103, saying to God, "That's why I ran in the other direction—for I knew that you were slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.
    - j) In other words, "That's why I didn't want to go to Nineveh, because I knew that in the end, you'd show mercy to those darn Ninevites.
    - k) All of which begs the question—"What happens when God's definition of mercy is bigger and wider and more inclusive than ours?"
    - l) Do we sit and sulk like Jonah? Does that make us less likely to widen our own definition and our own acts of mercy?
    - m) Or do we follow God's lead, and be merciful to those we've previously thought didn't deserve it? Who are the Ninevites for you? Do you often feel like being merciful to them?
    - n) When I read that list of synonyms for mercy that Microsoft Word gave me, did you catch the words "clemency" and "leniency"?

- o) I hear those words and the first image that comes to my mind is people getting let off the hook.
  - p) When governors or presidents give people “clemency” (which is when you pardon someone who has committed a crime) it drives us Jonahs absolutely nuts.
  - q) We can handle a God of compassion and forgiveness, but a God of clemency and leniency?
  - r) But as Jonah discovered, God’s definition of mercy includes those synonyms too.
  - s) And so for us too, to raise the bar as high as God does in showing mercy, can be a difficult thing for us sometimes. We can have a hard time setting our own personal bar that high.
2. Which brings me to the other story that kept popping up in reference to this Beatitude—and that is the story of the Good Samaritan.
- a) We all know the story—a man is robbed and beaten along the road. A priest and a Levite, when they come along, pass by the other side. The Samaritan then comes along and helps the man.
  - b) At the end of the story, Jesus asks the lawyer who started the whole thing with a question about neighbors, “Which of these three, you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”
  - c) And the lawyer answers the question correctly by saying, “the one who showed him mercy.” (he uses the same word Jesus uses in the Beatitude)
  - d) And at that point, we realize that the story wasn’t just about being a good neighbor, but also about mercy.
  - e) And we understand that in Jesus’ world, to be “neighborly” equals being “merciful”.
  - f) And we know from what Jesus says elsewhere, that he has wide-to-the-point-of-being-universal definition of who our neighbors are, and so therefore, apparently we are to show our neighborliness by being merciful to that wide of a group of people as well.
  - g) This story also makes the further point, that sometimes for us “religious” folks, maybe it’s even harder sometimes to do that than if we weren’t
  - h) It was the Priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side of the road, after all. They were about as “religious” as you could get.
  - i) Do you ever wonder why they did that?
    - 1) One commentator says that maybe they were too “caught up in the mechanics of religious activity”
    - 2) I’m thinking that may be going a little too easy on the priest and the Levite. Maybe they did it because to show mercy to the man

threatened the boundaries they had put on their own definitions of mercy.

3) Maybe in the end they were more like Jonah than Jesus.

- j) As ironic as it may sound, sometimes it is our religion that gets in the way of the kind of no-holds-barred mercy that both Jesus and his Father keep showing us in the scriptures.
- k) I wonder sometimes if we are afraid somehow that Jesus is looking over our shoulders judging us in who we are being merciful to instead of realizing that Jesus is always there watching us, but when he is, he is always urging us on to destroy the barriers we've erected around our mercy, the same ones that he already tore down a long time ago.
- l) When we get caught up in the mechanics of not just our religious activities, but in perceived religious rules and regulations, that is always the danger.
- m) "Mercy!" (to quote my Grandma) So what are we to do when showing mercy can be so complicated for us?

### III. Conclusion

A. That brings me to the other thing I'm realizing about this Beatitude.

1. Which is that perhaps more than any other of the Beatitudes, maybe if we're going to figure this one out, we need to read it backwards.
2. What if we were to read this Beatitude like this? "Because we have been blessed with God's mercy, we can be merciful.
3. Because until we turn it around, it's hard to be really merciful.
4. Until we do that, there is the real danger that this Beatitude becomes "prescriptive" instead of "descriptive".
  - a) Remember we talked about this the first week—that Jesus never meant these Beatitudes to be prescriptions for how to live, but simply to be descriptive of how things already are.
  - b) If we read this Beatitude as it is, and stop in the middle, and try really hard to be really merciful to all people in order to earn God's blessing, it will never work.
  - c) Because we are imperfect humans living in a very imperfect world, where acts of mercy are still often seen as acts of weakness, we can never do it on our own.
  - d) But what if we read the Beatitude backwards?
  - e) What if we begin with the realization that God has already shown us mercy in all of its definitions, from compassion to forgiveness to sympathy to understanding and even to clemency and leniency?

- f) What if we realize to begin with that we have already been blessed with God's mercy, that this Beatitude really is a description of how things already are?
  - g) If we do that, then our own acts of mercy that we show to others aren't about earning God's mercy in return, they are about responding in joy to God's blessed gift of mercy to us that we have already and will continue to experience every day of our lives.
  - h) When we read it backwards, there is hope that we can show the kind of mercy that God shows to us—that we can take the blessing that we have been given and share it with others.
5. So it is in that spirit, we give thanks for the blessing of God's mercy.
  6. We give thanks for the opportunities we get to not just share that blessing with others, even with those we would have considered far outside the boundaries of our mercy, but to be the blessing to others as we live out all the definitions of what it means to be merciful.