BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

Not Giving Others What They Deserve | TheAttitudes (Pt 5)

Text: Matthew 5:7; 18:21-35; Ephesians 2:1-5

The Sacred Triangle

I invite you to think with me today on the personal significance of Jesus’ famous statement: “Blessed are the merciful; for they will receive mercy” (Matt 5:7). I want to challenge all of us to think about our own need of mercy, our current practice of mercy, and what may need to change if you and I are to enter more fully into that blessed way of living that Jesus calls the Kingdom (or the reign) of God.

Let me begin by acknowledging that MERCY is one of those words it’s hard to appreciate fully without placing it in relationship with two other words. Like the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, mercy exists in a sort of trinitarian communion with two other important concepts or attitudes. It’s hard to appreciate the full significance of the one without also understanding something about the others.

To grasp the meaning of mercy, you need a central sense of justice. JUSTICE is about giving people what they deserve. It’s about aligning things (think left-justified paragraphs) with some high standard for the way they should normally be. Social justice, for example, is about arranging a society’s resources, structures, and pathways in such a manner that everyone has authentic access to the opportunities or outcomes we’d want for ourselves or our children. Legal justice is about aligning behaviors with consequences or wrongs with recompense so that there is order and accountability according to a particular legal system. Biblical justice is about aligning our actions with God’s scripturally stated vision for the flourishing of his creatures and creation. You get the idea; while people may and do differ on what the ultimate plumbline is, justice is the quest to line things up in such a way that people get what they deserve.

When I was growing up, my Mother was that ultimate standard of JUSTICE. She was the one who distributed the portions of supper fairly, and kept track of who was or wasn’t doing their chores, and worked to help make sure each of her kids got what they deserved. But she was also the person who first helped me grasp the second key concept necessary to understanding what MERCY is. My mom was a wonderful dispenser of grace. In its simplest form, GRACE is about giving people a good they don’t deserve. For example, there were probably entire years where the four of us kids didn’t come close to having manners that merited us being served dessert at the end of a meal. But, most nights, our Mom ladled it out just the same – homemade pies and fresh-baked cookies, chocolate fondue and strawberry ice-cream camels When and from whom have you received a good you didn’t deserve?

When you understand justice and experience grace, it prepares you to recognize mercy and grasp how wonderful it is. Let me try to put it all together. If justice is giving
people exactly what they deserve; and grace is giving people a good they don’t deserve; MERCY is about not giving people the bad they do deserve.

Perhaps you were caught cheating on a test, and the teacher could have flunked you for the semester or brought you up for expulsion, but didn’t. Maybe you were pulled over for speeding and the police officer let you off with just a warning. Perhaps you made a terrible, costly mistake in your workplace, but instead of firing you, your boss let you stay on. Maybe you went through a period of time when you treated your spouse or a child or a parent deplorably, but he or she refused to treat you as your behavior deserved. Perhaps someone discovered a secret or a vulnerability about you that they could have exploited, but chose not to. Maybe you misused or abused your power with someone in a way that could make you the target of a #hashtag story, but that person has chosen not to report it. Perhaps there are things about your personality or habits that really bother people around you, and you don’t even know it, because others have chosen not to lash out or gossip about you, as they could have. When and from whom have you received MERCY?

**Converging at the Cross of Christ**

The central story of the Christian faith is about the convergence of these three realities – Justice, Grace, and Mercy – at the Cross of Christ. God’s perfect justice required that a great sacrifice be made to pay the price for countless generations of sin, for all the ways that human beings have broken the laws of God and offended against the creation and creatures he loves. God couldn’t just shrug sin off or let it go. The relationship between Him and humanity could not be realigned without something that displayed the awful price that blind and willful sin deserved. There had to be a shedding of blood to demonstrate the heinousness and horror of what human beings were doing to one another and to God. The key question was: What death could possibly be big enough to balance the scales, to close the gap, to realign the cosmic order?

Maybe God should just wipe out a million of us. As William Shakespeare confessed in his famous play, *The Merchant of Venice*: "In the course of JUSTICE, none of us should see salvation..." The Apostle Paul puts it even more bluntly: “[We] were dead in [our] transgressions and sins... gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath (Eph 2:1-3).

But there in that place where every human being should have gotten what we deserved, we received a good that we didn’t deserve. In his amazing GRACE, Jesus (like a remarkable mother looking at her children) said: “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” In his stunning MERCY, Jesus did not give us what we deserved, but, rather, accepted in his own body the penalty that should have been ours. As Paul says: **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** (Ephesians 2:1-5).
Does the Cross Make a Difference?

The significant question now, is: Will the reality of what Jesus has done, make a difference in you and me? Will what has been done for us, affect in any way, what we do with others? In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel, the same book in which we find the Beatitudes, there is recorded a stunning story. Jesus describes the tale of a servant who is called before his King to settle up a debt he owes. The servant begs for a little more time to pay the debt. “‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything’” (Mat 18:26) He really meant it. And the first listeners to Jesus’ tale had to have burst out in side-splitting laughter.

You see, “[The servant] owed him ten thousand bags of gold” (Mat 18:24). At the average salary of a servant during this period of history, it would have taken the man 150,000 years to pay what he owed. In other words, it was impossible. The guy was not even close to grasping how deeply he was in the hole. He would never have what it took to balance the scales. It’s this way with human beings still. We don’t understand how badly we need MERCY. But, in a foreshadowing of what Christ would do on the cross, Jesus went on to say the “The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (Mat 18:27).

And then comes the stunner. “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ ”But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened (Mat 18:28-31).

What do you suppose the King did? Did he extend more mercy? No, he did not. The King said: Shouldn’t you have had MERCY on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. And then Jesus turned toward his disciples and said something that absolutely rocked my world when I first read it and has frankly changed my heart toward other people. Jesus said: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Mat 18:33-35).

Up to Our Armpits in Mercy

Many years ago there was a poor Scottish farmer named Fleming. One day, while trying to scratch out a living for his family, he heard a desperate cry coming from somewhere nearby. Dropping his tools, he ran toward the sound, only to find a terrified boy, mired up to his armpits in the sucking black muck of a bog. Fleming saw that the boy was a
nobleman – precisely the kind of person that typically treated farming families with contempt and disdain. For a moment, the farmer considered just leaving the boy to a slow and terrifying death. Given his stupidity in trying to walk across that bog and the arrogance of his kind, he deserved his fate. But something better moved in Fleming, too. And, at the risk of his own life, the farmer saved him.

The following day, a fancy carriage arrived in front of the Scotsman's simple cottage. Out stepped a well-dressed nobleman who introduced himself as the father of the child the farmer had saved, and offered to repay him. "No, I can't accept payment for simply doing the right thing," said Fleming. At that moment, the farmer's own son appeared in the door. "Is that your son?" the nobleman asked. "Yes, "the farmer replied proudly. "Well, then, let me provide him with the education my own son will enjoy. If the lad is anything like his parent, he'll grow to be a man of whom we'll both be proud."

And that he did. The son of the merciful father, went on to attend the very best schools and finally graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London. In time, he became known throughout the world as Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin. Years afterward, the same nobleman's son originally saved from the bog was stricken with pneumonia, partly brought on by his own health habits. What do you suppose saved his life this time? That's right -- Penicillin. What was that sick man's name? It was Winston Churchill. And the mercy he had received, became in him a gratitude and courageous will that God would use to help save an entire nation.

If the Bible is correct then, much like Winston Churchill, you and I are standing up to our armpits in MERCY. The question is: Will we get that or will be like the servant in the parable Jesus tells? There are surely times when we ought to demand justice and accountability from the people we know who have boggled themselves down in black muck due to their own stupidity or arrogance. As Agatha Christie famously observed: "Too much mercy... has sometimes resulted in further crimes which were fatal to [those] who need not have been victims if justice had been put first and mercy second." There are days when the Devil must suffer his due.

But I’m living today with the witness of Jesus and the word of Jesus ringing through the air. "Blessed are the merciful," he says. Blessed are those who do not give others the bad they do deserve. For mercy begets mercy. And in a world of growing self-righteousness and hostility, perhaps we need more of this attitude. Having stood before the King today, and heard of the vast debt he has forgiven us, how will you and I treat the others we meet outside these doors?

Please pray with me...

Lord, we care about justice. We don’t believe you ask us to be doormats. You call us to be champions of the good wherever we go. But it sobers us that you have also said in your Word that with the measure of mercy and grace we use toward others, it will be measured unto us (Mat 7:2). So, as we go forth today, give us both wise and generous hearts – like that of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.