



Ministry of the Word

Wednesday 15th July 2020

by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Matthew 5:7

Subject: Part 18 - The Merciful shall obtain mercy

“Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy”

R.W. Scott, in his very brief commentary, gives us a very good understanding of the main word found in this verse, which is mercy. In fact he quoted Richard Lenski who made the distinction between mercy and grace as **“Mercy always deals with what we see of pain, misery and distress, which are the results of sin. Grace on the other hand, always deals with sin and guilt itself. Mercy extends relief, the other (grace) pardons. In other words, one cures, heals, helps, the other cleanses and reinstates”**.

I thought that very helpful especially as we look at the history of the believing church. Both were needed and required, and still are today. Both characteristics, mercy and grace, often show themselves in very practical ways just as the fruit of the Spirit is evident in the believer’s life, as it works out from the heart into situations. These things were never meant just for our own selves to admire and benefit from. They reflect the work and presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit for the benefit of others but to primarily glorify God. This is not Hindu Karma or Christian Legalism or exclusively the law of sowing and reaping. The Bible does teach if we show mercy and sow mercy we obtain mercy. Why? Because Christ has been merciful to us. Mercy is a quality of God.

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We've noted that the first four beatitudes deal with inner principles, principles of the heart and mind. They are principally the way we see ourselves before God, similarly to the first four commandments in Exodus which demonstrates the same thing. If we don't get them right, we are indeed floundering and in danger of not getting the rest right. The beatitudes are in connection with our relationship with God.

Many people today have different thoughts about God and some even suggest that He is not merciful. This is not a new trend. In Jesus' day there were those who believed that God was not merciful! The Pharisees and The Sadducees were legalists and condemned people for not keeping the law, even those that were brought about by tradition and not from the Torah. No mercy required, just the sentence. They were proud of being Sabbath observers, and enforcers. They were proud of the judgmentalism based in man-made tradition which helped them feel superior and self-righteous.

Proud and arrogant people view mercy as weakness. It seems like they always have. A Roman philosopher wrote that mercy was *"the disease of the soul."* If you showed mercy, it was a sign that you did not have what it takes to be a real man, especially a real Roman. The Romans glorified manly courage, strict justice, firm discipline, and, above all, absolute power. Mercy was looked down on as a weakness, and weakness was despised above all other human limitations.

During Roman Times, in Roman society, a father had the right of "patria opitestas" (Latin), deciding whether or not his new born child would live or die. If he indicated death, the child was immediately drowned. Roman citizens had the same life-or-death power over slaves. At any time and for any reason, they could kill and bury a slave, with no fear of arrest or reprisal. Husbands could even have their wives put to death on the least provocation. Today abortion reflects the same merciless attitude. A society that despises mercy is a society that glorifies brutality.

The underlying motive of self-concern has characterized men in particular, even societies in general, since the Fall. This self-concern doesn't always see others' needs. In other words, men like to receive mercy, but don't always see the need to give it. Men are not naturally inclined to repay mercy for mercy.

People listening to Jesus might have thought that mercy was the least of all the virtues. The attitude or practice of only loving those who love you and showing mercy on those who show you mercy was condemned by Jesus later on in the same chapter, in verse 43. In fact, the parable of the unjust servant in Matthew 18:23-35 tells us a lot about this. Jesus told that parable in relation not just in response to Peter's question on forgiveness, but in showing mercy. This is not the teaching of most religions today, for example, you will not find this teaching in the Koran and millions in the Islamic faith can confirm this.

Many people have interpreted this beatitude in another way. They view it selfishly and humanistically. They maintain if you show mercy you have a right to mercy. Mercy given means mercy received. For such people, mercy is shown to others purely in an effort toward self-seeking. One writer sentimentally said, *"This is the great truth of life: if people see us care, they will care."* Yet neither Scripture nor experience bears out that idea, and this is not what this verse is teaching. God works that way, but the world does not. With God there is always proper reciprocation, and with interest. If we honour God, He will honour us; if we show mercy to others, especially to His children, He will show even more abundant mercy to us. But that is not the world's way.

The ancient rabbi Gamaliel is quoted in the Talmud as saying, *"Whenever thou hast mercy, God will have mercy upon thee, and if thou hast not mercy, neither will God have mercy on thee"* Gamaliel's idea is right. When God is involved there will be mercy for mercy.

"If you forgive men for their transgressions," Jesus said, *"your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions"* (Matthew 6:14-15).

Jon Courson wrote that the more mercy and grace that has been heaped on you, the more you are willing to extend it to others. Not judgment, or criticism or analysis. Jon Courson wrote *"I believe the more righteous a man is, the more merciful he will be; the more sinful a man is, the more harsh and critical he will be"* (see Courson's Commentary p. 90).

The best illustration of showing mercy is the Lord Himself. Jesus was the most merciful person who ever lived. He reached out to heal the sick, restore the crippled, give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and even life to the dead. He found prostitutes, tax collectors, the

debauched and the drunken, and drew them into His circle of love and forgiveness. We see this displayed time and again. For example, Jesus wept with those grieving and gave companionship to the lonely. He took little children into His arms and blessed them. He was merciful to everyone. He was mercy incarnate, just as He was love incarnate.

Yet what was the response to Jesus' mercy? When the scribes and Pharisees saw Jesus "***eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers,***" they asked His disciples why their Master associated with such unworthy people (Mark 2:16).

The more Jesus showed mercy, the more He showed up the un-mercifulness of the Jewish religious leaders. The more He showed mercy, the more they were determined to put Him out of the way. The ultimate outcome of His mercy was the cross. In Jesus' crucifixion, two merciless systems, the merciless government and the merciless religion, united to kill Him. Totalitarian Rome joined intolerant Judaism to destroy the King of mercy.

The fifth beatitude does not teach that mercy to men brings mercy from men, but that mercy to men brings mercy from God. If we are merciful to others, God will be merciful to us, whether men are or not. God is the subject of the second clause, just as in the other beatitudes. It is God who gives the kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit, comfort to those who mourn, the earth to the meek, and satisfaction to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those who are merciful shall receive mercy from God. God gives the divine blessings to those who obey His divine standards.

Hebrews 2:17 speaks of Jesus as our "***merciful and faithful high priest.***" Christ is the supreme example of mercy and the supreme dispenser of mercy. These are more than words, Jesus says in effect, "The people in My kingdom are not takers but givers, not pretending to be helpers but practical helpers. They are not condemners but mercy givers." The selfish, self-satisfied, and self-righteous do not bother to help anyone, unless they think something is in it for them. Sometimes they even justify their lack of love and mercy under the guise of religious duty. Once when the Pharisees and scribes questioned why His disciples did not observe the traditions of the elders, Jesus replied, "Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother' and '***He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death***'; but you say, '***If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God),***' you no longer permit him to do anything for his

father or his mother ; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down” (Mark 7:10-13). In the name of hypocritical religious tradition, compassion towards parents in such a case was actually forbidden.

Mercy is meeting people’s needs. It is not simply feeling compassion but showing compassion, not only sympathising but giving a helping hand. Mercy is giving food to the hungry, comfort to the bereaved, love to the rejected, forgiveness to the offender, companionship to the lonely. It is therefore one of the loveliest and noblest of all virtues.

In fact we see that the apostle Paul uses this word “mercy” in his letters he used it with “grace” even though they are very different. We see this in 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2 and Titus 1:4 where he also uses the word peace in the greeting. Our understanding of these words enriches these “salutations” or greetings, because they are prayerful expressions to his readers.

We see a good example of God’s mercy In Genesis 20, God spoke to Abimelech in a dream; in verse 6 God said - *“Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.”*

Abimelech had unknowingly taken Abraham’s wife Sarah into his palace. He did not know she was married. He did not know he was in danger of committing adultery. Somehow God prevented the King from touching Sarah. What mercy! We do not always see how God acts in mercy in our lives. We experience God’s mercy in times of disobedience. God’s mercy is not based on our worthiness.

Mercy is related to grace. Grace flows out of love just as forgiveness flows out of mercy. Mercy deals with the symptoms of sin, grace with the cause. Mercy offers relief from punishment; grace offers pardon for the crime. Mercy stops us from receiving what we do deserve, and grace gives us what we don’t deserve. Mercy eliminates the pain; grace cures the disease.

When the good Samaritan bound up the wounds of the man who had been beaten and robbed, he showed mercy. When he took him to the nearest inn and paid for his lodging until he was well, he showed grace. His mercy relieved the pain; his grace provided for healing. Mercy relates to the negative; grace relates to the positive. In relation to salvation,

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mercy says, “No hell,” whereas grace says, “Heaven.” Mercy says, “I pity you”; grace says, “I pardon you.” Simple I know but I hope that it is clear.

This leads us to look at how mercy is also related to justice. Although, on the surface, they seem to be un-harmonious, God’s justice gives exactly what is deserved; whereas God’s mercy stops us receiving the full effect of what we do deserve. It is difficult, therefore, for some people to understand how God can be both just and merciful at the same time to the same person. If God is completely just, how could He never punish sin? For Him to be merciful would seem to deny His justice. The truth is God does punish sin, however, in dispensing His justice, He offers mercy to those who are poor in spirit, mourn, meek and hunger and thirst for righteousness. In other words, He offers mercy to those who know that they are spiritually bankrupt and repentant, leaning totally on God, knowing that He is the only one that you can go to, and you have nothing to bring.

Mercy that ignores sin is false mercy and is no more merciful than it is just. It is exactly that sort of false mercy that Saul showed to King Agag after God had clearly instructed Saul to kill every Amalekite (1 Samuel 15:3,9). It is that sort of false mercy that David showed to his rebellious and wicked son Absalom when he was young. Because David did not deal with Absalom’s sin, his attitude toward his son was unrighteous sentimentality, neither justice nor mercy, and it served to confirm Absalom in his wickedness.

That sort of false mercy is common in our day. Often it is thought to be unloving and unkind to hold people responsible for their sins and wrong doings. But it is not just and is not merciful, because it offers neither punishment nor pardon for sin. And because it merely ignores sin, it leaves sin; and the one who relies on that sort of mercy is left in his sin. To cancel justice is to cancel mercy. To ignore sin is to deny the truth; and mercy and truth are inseparable. They “*are met together*” (Psalm 85:10, KJV). In every true act of mercy, someone pays the price. God did, the Good Samaritan did, and so do we. To be merciful is to bear the load for someone else.

To expect to enter the sphere of God’s mercy without repenting from our sin is but wishful thinking, and let me go one step further, a delusion. And for the church to offer hope of God’s mercy apart from repentance from sin is to offer false hope through a false gospel, which is not just a lie but heresy. God offers nothing but just judgment to those who will not turn from

their sin to the Saviour who has met God's judicial requirement. Relying on good works or hoping that God will overlook sin, won't bring salvation. Trusting in personal goodness or presuming on God's goodness, will not bring entrance into the kingdom. Those who do not come to God on His terms have no claim on His mercy.

God's mercy is grounded not only in His love but also in His justice. It is not grounded in sentiment but in Christ's atoning blood, which paid the penalty for and cleanses from sin those who believe in Him. Without being punished and removed, even the least of our sin would eternally separate us from God. James 2 verse 10 tells us - (BSV)

Whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

The good news of the gospel is that Christ paid completely the penalty for all sins, once and for all, in order that God justice would be met and that He can be merciful to all sinners. The cross demonstrates where justice and mercy meet. The good news of the gospel is not that God winked at justice, glossed over sin, or compromised righteousness. The good news is that in the shedding of Christ's blood justice was satisfied, sin was forgiven, righteousness was fulfilled, and mercy was made available. There is never an excuse for sin, but always a remedy. Mercy, therefore, is forgiveness and love. And what is true of God's mercy should be true of ours.

Mercy led Abraham to rescue his selfish nephew Lot from Chedorlaomer and his allies. Mercy led Joseph to forgive his brothers and to provide them food for their families. Mercy led Moses to plead with the Lord to remove the leprosy with which his sister Miriam had been punished. Mercy led David to spare the life of Saul.

Paul characterizes godless men as unrighteous, wicked, greedy, evil, envious, murderous, deceitful, malicious, gossiping, slanderous, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, and unloving. The climaxing evil of that long list, however, is being unmerciful (Romans 1:29-31). Mercilessness is the capstone marking those who reject God's mercy.

"The merciful man does himself good, but the cruel man does himself harm" (Prov. 11:17).

The way to happiness is through mercy; the way to misery is through cruelty. The truly merciful person is even kind to animals, whereas the merciless person is cruel to

everything. *“A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the compassion of the wicked is cruel”* (Prov. 12:10).

In His Olivet discourse Jesus warned that those who claim to belong to Him but who have not served and shown compassion on the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned will not be allowed to enter His kingdom. He will say to them, *“Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.”* When they say, *“Lord, when did we see You hungry,’. . . He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me’”* (Matt. 25:41-45).

In the midst of our corrupt, ego centred, and selfish society that tells us to grab everything we can get, the voice of God tells us to give everything we can give. The true character of mercy is in giving, that is in giving compassion, giving help, giving time, giving forgiveness, giving money, giving ourselves. The children of the King are merciful. Those who are merciless face judgment; but *“mercy triumphs over judgment”* (James 2:13b).

Let’s look at the Source of Mercy

Pure mercy is a gift of God. We cannot earn mercy but God prepares the hearts of the citizens of heaven to receive mercy. It is not a natural attribute of man but is a gift that comes with the new birth. We can be merciful in its full sense and with a righteous motive only when we have experienced God’s mercy. Mercy is only for those who through grace and divine power have met the requirements of the first four beatitudes. It is only for those who by the work of the Holy Spirit bow humbly before God in poverty of spirit, who mourn over and turn from their sin, who are meek and submissive to His control, and who hunger and thirst above all else for His righteousness. The way of mercy is the way of humility, repentance, surrender, and holiness.

Balaam continually tried to keep within the letter of God’s will while conspiring with a pagan king against God’s people. He presumptuously prayed, *“Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!”* (Numbers 23:10). As one Puritan commentator observed, Balaam

wanted to die like the righteous, but he did not want to live like the righteous. Many people want God's mercy but not on God's terms.

God has both absolute and relative attributes. His absolute attributes, such as love, truth, and holiness, these have characterised Him from all eternity. They were characteristic of Him before He created angels, or the world, or man. But His relative attributes, such as mercy, justice, and grace, were not expressed until His creatures came into being. In fact they were not manifest until man, the creature made in His own image, sinned and became separated from his Creator. Apart from sin and evil, mercy, justice, and grace have no meaning, as they are not required in a perfect sinless world. When man fell, God's love was extended to His fallen creatures in mercy. And only when they receive His mercy can they reflect His mercy. God is the source of mercy.

"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness [mercy] toward those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:11). It is because we have the resource of God's mercy that Jesus commanded, *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful"* (Luke 6:36).

Here is a most enlightening comment from Donald Barnhouse:

"When Jesus Christ died on the cross, all the work of God for man's salvation passed out of the realm of prophecy and became historical fact. God has now had mercy upon us. For anyone to pray, "God have mercy on me" is the equivalent of asking Him to repeat the sacrifice of Christ. All the mercy that God ever will have on man He has already had, when Christ died. That is the totality of mercy. There could not be any more.... The fountain is now opened, and it is flowing, and it continues to flow freely."

(Barnhouse D (1983) Romans [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 4:4).

We cannot have the blessing apart from the Blessor who is the source of all blessings. We cannot even meet the condition apart from the One who has set the condition. We are blessed by God when we are merciful to others, and we are able to be merciful to others because we have already received salvation's mercy. When we share the mercy received, we shall receive mercy even beyond what we already have. We never sing more truthfully than when we sing, *"Mercy there was great and grace was free; pardon there was multiplied to me; there my burdened soul found liberty, at Calvary."*

The Practice of Mercy

The most obvious way we can show mercy is through physical acts, as did the good Samaritan. As Jesus specifically commands, we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and give any other practical help that is needed. In serving others in need, we demonstrate a heart of mercy. It is helpful to note that the way of mercy did not begin with the New Testament. God has always intended for mercy to characterise His

people. The Old Testament law taught,

“You shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks” (Deut. 15:7-8).

Even in the year of release, when all debts were cancelled, Israelites were to give their poor countrymen whatever they needed. They were warned, *“Beware, lest there is a base thought in your heart, saying ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing”* (v. 9).

Mercy is also to be shown in our attitudes. Mercy does not hold a grudge, harbour resentment, capitalise on another’s failure or weakness, or publicise another’s sin. The vindictive, heartless, indifferent are not subjects of Christ’s kingdom. When they pass need by on the other side, as the priest and the Levite did in the story of the good Samaritan, they show they have passed Christ by.

Jesus’ last words from the cross were words of mercy. For His executioners He prayed, *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34). To the penitent thief hanging beside Him He said, *“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise”* (v. 43). To His mother He said, *“Woman, behold your son!”* Then He said to the disciple [John], *“Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household”* (John 19:26-27). Like his Master, Stephen prayed for those who were taking his life, *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”* (Acts 7:60).

Second, we are to show spiritual mercy by gently confronting a person who has done wrong. Paul says that, as Christ’s servants, we should gently correct *“those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth”* (2 Timothy

2:25). We are to be willing to confront others about their sin in order that they might come to God for salvation or for those who are already believers, a chance to put things right and forgiveness. When certain teachers were “upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain,” Paul told Titus to *“reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith”* (Titus 1:11, 13).

As Jude closed his letter with the encouragement to *“keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life,”* he also admonished, *“And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh”* (Jude 21-23). Extreme situations require extreme care, but we are to show mercy even to those trapped in the worst systems of apostasy.

Third, we are to show spiritual mercy by praying. The sacrifice of prayer for those without God is an act of mercy. Our mercy can be measured by our prayers for the unsaved and for Christians who are walking in disobedience.

Fourth, we are to show spiritual mercy by proclaiming the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, it is the most merciful thing we can do.

This leads us to the second part of verse 7 - **The Result of Mercy**

Reflecting on the fact that when we are merciful we receive mercy, we see God’s cycle of mercy. God is merciful to us by saving us through Christ; in obedience we are merciful to others; and God, in faithfulness, gives us even more mercy, pouring out blessings for our needs and withholding severe chastening for our sin as should be. Remember what we read in Hebrews 12 verse 5 and 6: *“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”*

But let’s just underline this, we do not get the discipline that we do deserve, but God is merciful to us, to discipline us lovingly.

As in the other beatitudes, the emphatic pronoun autos (they) indicates that only those who are merciful qualify to receive mercy. David sang of the Lord, *“With the merciful You will*

show Yourself merciful; With a blameless man You will show Yourself blameless;” (2 Samuel 22:26). Speaking of the opposite side of the same truth, James says, *“For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy”* (James 2:13). At the end of the disciples’ prayer Jesus explained, *“For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions”* (Matthew 6:14-15). Again the emphatic truth is that God will respond with chastening for an unforgiving disciple.

Neither in that passage nor in this beatitude, is Jesus speaking of our mercy gaining us salvation. We do not earn salvation by being merciful. We must be saved by God’s mercy before we can truly be merciful. We cannot work our way into heaven even by a lifetime of merciful deeds, any more than by good works of any sort. God does not give mercy for merit; He gives mercy in grace, because it is needed, not because it is earned.

To illustrate the working of God’s mercy Jesus told the parable of a slave who had been graciously forgiven a great debt by the king. In that parable Jesus gives a picture of God’s saving mercy in relation to forgiving others (w. 21-22). The first man pleaded with God for mercy and received it. The fact that he, in turn, was unmerciful was so inconsistent with his own salvation that he was chastened until he repented. The Lord will chasten, if need be, to produce repentance in a stubborn child. Mercy to others is a mark of salvation. When we do not show it, we may be disciplined until we do. When we hold back mercy, God restricts His flow of mercy to us, and we forfeit blessing. The presence of chastening and the absence of blessing attend an unmerciful believer.

If we have received from a holy God unlimited mercy that cancels our unpayable debt of sin, we who had no righteousness but were poor in spirit, mourning over our load of sin in beggarly, helpless condition, wretched and doomed, meek before almighty God, hungry and thirsty for a righteousness we did not have and could not attain, it surely follows that we should be merciful to others.

Amen.