

Merciful and Happy

Matthew 5:7

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Good morning. It is a blessing to see you today on Palm Sunday! A few weeks ago we began to study Jesus's sermon on the mount. Our teaching on the sermon will go through August, but for the past few weeks we have been looking closely at the first section, the Beatitudes. These are attitudes of the Christian's heart. So our series is called Focus on the Heart.

Remember, Jesus is speaking directly to his disciples and indirectly to the crowd. He is showing those who have already believed in Christ, those who are already saved, what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God under the rule of Christ.

Today, we will study the fifth Beatitude of our series. It is one that relates directly to the Christian's heart-attitude toward God, but also his or her heart-attitude toward fellow man. So, let's read it together. In Matthew 5:7, Jesus says,

Matt. 5:7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

What is mercy? There are a few definitions that would work: kindness, loving-kindness, compassion, forbearance, forgiveness, and benevolence. But today I want us to focus on two ways to define mercy: generosity and goodness. More specifically, I propose this definition:

Mercy is unearned generosity and undeserved goodness.

Would you say these are prevalent characteristics of our world today? What about our country? Is America more generous now than a decade ago? Is there an overall characteristic of goodness that guides our culture?

Instead, we find a culture that is hungry for instant justice, but has lost its appetite for mercy. The cancel culture is a prime example: people are like wolves wanting to set someone straight who doesn't think the same way as them and they seemingly lack any generosity or goodness in their dealings with people.

But, if we are honest, there is a level of gratification in our own flesh when we see someone get what we think they deserve. Sometimes it makes us feel better about ourselves. However, if the pursuit of justice is not measured with mercy, then it can be very dangerous. It can even be sinful.

Now, I'm not saying that we should be opposed to justice being served. If the response to sin in this world is all mercy and no justice, then we would have anarchy. And, we can certainly see some of

that happening in America. But, if the response to sin in this world is all justice and no mercy, then the result is legalism and cruelty.¹

So, it is a godly characteristic for us to seek justice - for us to be about the business of righting wrongs - either the wrong that someone is experiencing, or the wrong that someone has committed toward another. But where does mercy come in? God's Word tells us in Micah 6:8. I love the way my kid's Bible translation states it:

Micah 6:8 The Lord has shown you what is good. He has told you what he requires of you. You must act with justice. You must love to show mercy. And you must be humble as you live in the sight of your God. (NIRV)

We must act with justice, but love to show mercy. Justice and mercy work together in God's kingdom. I asked you this the first week that I preached: "How many of you want to be blessed? How many of you want to be happy? Jesus gives us the answer. If you want to experience true happiness in this life, be merciful! But, How do I do that? Happiness will come when you embrace God's mercy for you daily.

How do I experience true happiness?

1. Embrace God's Mercy for You Daily

In the spiritual justice system, God alone sets the law. He alone determines who is guilty. He determines the punishment to satisfy justice. He determines how to right the wrong. Let's look at an example of this in Ephesians 2:1-3:

Eph. 2:1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

Eph. 2:3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Because of OUR sin, we were like the rest, deserving of wrath. Since God is just, he punishes sin. To right the wrongs of sin, God's wrath is poured out as punishment on the sinner, and this scripture says that by our nature, we all deserve it. That is justice. Justice is getting what we deserve.

But praise be to God that he does not just pelt us with unrelenting justice. Praise be to God that he doesn't just constantly look into our past and drag up our wrongdoings and settle old scores.

Praise be to God he doesn't put us in spiritual shackles for the wrong we have done without giving us a plea deal. He gives our relief in the next verse:

¹Thomas Aquinas is credited for the quote, "Justice without mercy is cruel."

Eph. 2:4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

There it is. Mercy. Our relief from unrelenting justice is mercy. Before we became Christians we were deserving of wrath - justice. However, God has extended his mercy to us (unearned generosity and undeserved goodness) by giving us access to life through faith in his son, Christ Jesus.

We all need God's mercy. It doesn't matter if you feel you don't deserve it or think you don't need it. I want you to do something for me. Take a look at the people across this room. Look around. There is not one person in this room who needs mercy any more than the person who looks upon them. We all need mercy. And the character of God is mercy. God is merciful which means we all need God.

In his mercy, God has provided us with a way forward. Our sin used to restrain us, but God's mercy has reclaimed us. Justice only shows us the destruction of our sin in our past and locks the door to our prison cell. God's mercy is the key to a brighter future. Because of his mercy we have a pathway for restoration in our lives.

The truly happy, the truly blessed, are the merciful. The merciful are those who have first embraced the mercy of God daily. But, true happiness is also found when you extend God's mercy for others.

How do I experience true happiness?

- 1. Embrace God's Mercy for You Daily**
- 2. Extend God's Mercy for Others Daily**

Have you ever used your watch to shine light on someone? If you have, you know that the angle by which you receive the light is the angle by which the light will be projected. So it is with God's mercy. If you are embracing God's mercy for yourself daily, your heart will be in just the right position to extend his mercy to others. But, who are the intended recipients of this mercy?

We could say everyone, but through his life and ministry, Jesus narrows it down to two categories - The Weak and the Wicked. So when we apply our definition of mercy to these two categories, we see that God wants us to be his conduit to extend unearned generosity to the weak and undeserved goodness to the wicked.

Extend God's Mercy for Others Daily

- 1. Unearned Generosity to the Weak**
- 2. Undeserved Goodness to the Wicked**

Jesus Christ is our supreme example of extending God's generosity to the weak and his goodness to the wicked. I want to show you two examples of him doing this. As you know, today is Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday is a special day for Christians in which we recognize and celebrate an event that happened over two thousand years ago - when Christ Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time

before his crucifixion. The King of kings rode into town on a donkey, and the people greeted him by laying palm branches on the road.

Jesus knew his time was near when he would pay the price for the sins of the world, but there are two events that provide bookends of mercy, parentheses of mercy to the passion week. These two events, one of the front side of Palm Sunday, and one right before he dies on the cross, help us to see that the ultimate purpose for which Christ came is totally wrapped in mercy.

The event right before Palm Sunday is in Mark 10 where Jesus extends mercy - unearned generosity to the weak. Let's look at it:

Mark 10:46 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus"), was sitting by the roadside begging.

Mark 10:47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Mark 10:48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Mark 10:49 Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." 50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

Mark 10:51 "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

Mark 10:52 "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Jesus, on his way to fulfill his ultimate purpose, has mercy on the weak. He extended unearned generosity to this blind beggar, and this man continued following Jesus on the road. And, the next event in Mark's gospel is Jesus entering Jerusalem, so it is quite possible that Bartimaeus had followed Jesus there and witnessed Palm Sunday.

Bartimaeus had done nothing to earn Jesus's mercy. He just called out for it, and Jesus stopped what he was doing and had mercy on him. Let me ask you a question: "When you are going about your day, fulfilling the purposes of your day, do you extend mercy to the weak.

We come across people all the time who are weak. I'm not just talking about beggars, although we have quite a few of those in our community. I'm also talking about the mom or dad who sits next to you at the ballfield who is going through a divorce?

I'm referring to the coach who just lost two family members in one week, but who frustrated you because he was late giving you the practice schedule? Students, I'm thinking about the young woman sitting next to you in class who wears long sleeves because she cuts herself? What about the young man who walks alone in the hallway because he just moved to town?

I'm talking about the coworker who just found out that his wife has cancer. What about the teacher across the hall who is crying during her lunch break? What about the dozens of residents at the nursing home who never get a visit from anyone.

The weak among us are not just the poor. Generosity is more than just giving money. It also looks like friendship for example. There are many lonely people who have never had a friend hold their hand. There are many uneducated people who have never had someone teach them to read.

There are kids at the Good News Club on Monday afternoons who have never had someone read Bible stories to them on a consistent basis. There are sick people in the hospital. There are residents in the nursing home who would be deeply moved for someone to come to their room and pray for them and read scripture to them.

Do you know someone who is weak and in need of mercy? Even if it is not audible, is there someone in your life who is crying out to you from their circumstances: "Have mercy on me?" Perhaps they have never done anything for you. Even if they haven't earned your generosity, is your heart merciful toward them anyway?

Many of us know personally the quickness of weakness. In a moment, without any warning, any one of us could be weak. The loss of a job; the death of a loved one; a health issue comes out of nowhere.

Our brother Sonny would be able to testify to the last one. And, there are many of you who have shown, and are showing your heart of mercy toward him, just as Sonny has shown his heart of mercy towards others throughout the years.

But, Jesus is our ultimate example of mercy, and he said "blessed, happy are the merciful." You will find this to be true as you follow his example. Some of the happiest people I know, and some of the happiest faces I've ever seen are from those who show mercy, those who are generous to the weak.

Extend God's Mercy for Others Daily

- 1. Unearned Generosity to the Weak**
- 2. Undeserved Goodness to the Wicked**

If you want to experience true happiness in life, you must embrace God's mercy for you daily and you must extend God's mercy for others daily, which includes unearned generosity to the weak, and secondly, undeserved goodness to the wicked.

We live in a wicked world. Every day, we learn of horrible atrocities. Many of you heard of the tragic school shooting in Nashville this week. That is an awful thing to happen. There is wickedness everywhere you look. Why? Because there are people everywhere you look. Where there are people, there you will find sin as well.

As Christians, we are not immune. We still have to deal with the old sinful flesh - wickedness lurking in us. The Apostle Paul explains this in Romans 7:21-25

Rom. 7:21 So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law;

Rom. 7:23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

Rom. 7:24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

But, what is the remedy for wickedness? Well, Paul goes on to say in Romans 12:21

Rom. 12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

There is no greater example of this than what Jesus did on the cross. On the front end of passion week, we see Jesus having mercy on the weak by healing blind Bartimaeus right before Palm Sunday. But, on the back end of the passion week, we see Jesus being merciful to the very people who nailed him to the cross. Luke 23:34

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

From the mercy in his heart, Jesus asked for forgiveness for the very people who killed him. Jesus shows us that one of the greatest acts of undeserved goodness we could ever give to the wicked is forgiveness. And in the New Testament, we often see mercy and forgiveness taught as twin virtues.

The classic example of this is the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matt. 18. Peter asked Jesus, "How many times shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" Jesus answered him, "seventy-times seven," which really means "without limit."

Then to illustrate his point, Jesus told the parable of the servant who was forgiven of a huge astronomical debt he owed to his king. After this, the servant goes to another servant who owes him twenty bucks, and demands payment. When the servant couldn't pay, he had him thrown into prison.

This parable teaches us what mercy is; it is forgiving one who is in debt to you.² We can't forgive a debt that someone owes to another person. We can only give mercy in this way when someone owes us a debt, when someone has wronged us.

So, who in your life has wronged you? Who is within your power to forgive? Some of you have been wronged terribly by another and you have been holding on to revenge and retribution for years. For others, something smaller may have happened, but it wasn't small to you, and as a result it has cast a huge shadow over your relationship.

It's very difficult to extend the goodness of forgiveness. Because in doing this, we have to get underneath the wrong they did, and see that person as God sees them. The reality is this person is in one of two categories.

The first, is a non-Christian, who has never experienced the mercy of God through salvation. He sins because he doesn't know better. In Ephesians 5:8, Paul writes this to the Christian:

Eph. 5:8 For you were once darkness

The person without Christ IS darkness. He has no light in him, and the wrath of God is the justice this person will endure if they never come to faith in Christ. Now, if the wrong committed against you was severe, you might say, "Well good, I hope they get the wrath of God in full!"

But, if you are a Christian, you must remember that you once were darkness too, and God had mercy on you. So, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us see that person as someone in need of the same forgiveness that God has given us.

The second category may be a Christian who has wronged you. When you look underneath the surface of the wrong committed, you might find a person who has hindered fellowship with God. Perhaps he or she has gone back to some old destructive habits. Perhaps they are so consumed by guilt that they are wondering if they even know God. In 1 John 1:6, God says to the Christian,

1 John 1:6 If we claim to have fellowship with [God] and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

This person has a relationship with God that is not as close as God wants it to be. They are lying to themselves and because they do not have close fellowship with God, they are stuck in a cycle of not living out the truth.

But I want to show you something that happens to us if we don't extend the undeserved goodness of forgiveness to someone who has wronged us. 1 John 2:10-11 says,

²This summary of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant was taken from Fred Fisher, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1976), 37.

1 John 2:10 Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble.

1 John 2:11 But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

As a Christian, it is a dangerous situation if you are withholding mercy from someone who has wronged you. The light that God has been shining on you becomes dim as you walk around in the darkness of bitterness and hatred. Your fellowship with God begins to fade and you get to the point where you are blinded by your own sin of unforgiveness.

You might even say this statement either audibly or in your heart that's an indicator that you are trouble. "I have forgiven, but I won't forget." Or, "I forgive him, but I'll never let him forget." But, this is just another way of saying, "I won't forgive and they don't deserve mercy."

While a statement like this speaks of present forgiveness, the second half of it still just promises future unforgiveness? Can we really say that we have forgiven or that we are working toward forgiveness if this is that attitude of our hearts? In his book, *Take Heaven Now*, Robert Hastings writes,

Mercy is most meaningful when you have power over someone who has injured you, or who might injure you, and refuse to exercise that power.

To forgive is to forego private revenge, to give up the power to retaliate or get even. To forgive is not the same as to excuse, condone, or pardon. Only God can pardon, but man can refuse to be vindictive.

The unforgiving man remembers insults and allows grudges to fester. But mercy is the fragrance a violet sheds on the heel that tramples it. The question is not, "Was I wronged?" but "What can I do, redemptively, to right the wrong?"³

I read a story this week about George Washington Carver that speaks to forgiving and forgetting. Born into slavery, George Washington Carver became one of the most well-known agricultural scientists of the 20th century who rose to fame at the Tuskegee Institute.

If you have ever had Worcestershire sauce, used peanut oil for cooking, or put salad dressing on your salad, you can thank him. But for Carver, the road to success was difficult.

After graduating high school, he was accepted by Highland College of Kansas and enrolled in the fall semester of 1885. However, on his first day, he walked into the principal's office, and was told that a mistake had been made. The "mistake" was that he was a black man and he was rejected.

³ Robert J. Hastings, *Take Heaven Now* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1968), 76-77.

He would later graduate from a different college, but this was certainly a setback for him. Later on in life, after he achieved fame, reporters asked him on various occasions to reveal the name of the college that rejected him. He would brush it aside and say, “Oh, that doesn’t matter.” And he wouldn’t tell.

Not only had he forgiven the principal at Highland college, but he also tried to forget. Eventually, he became successful at this too. In the latter years of his life, an American missionary named E. Stanley Jones asked him the same question: “Which college rejected you?” Carver replied, “I can’t remember.”

George Washington Carver is an example of how you can extend the mercy of forgiveness to others. Listen to how powerful this quote is from him⁴:

“How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these.” - G.W. Carver

Jesus promises a great reward if you are merciful, let’s look at our verse again:

Matt. 5:7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Not only will you be truly happy, but you also will continue to be shown mercy. This doesn’t mean that we can buy God’s mercy, nor does it mean that if you are merciful to others, that they will automatically show mercy back to you. It doesn’t work this way.

You see, God’s mercy is like a spring continuously providing water to the river of your life. As you give mercy to others, he has a constant supply that he has already given to you in salvation and continues to give you as you live out your salvation.

When we consider extending unearned generosity to the weak, or undeserved goodness to the wicked through forgiveness, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to remember this daily:

God has given and intends to give more mercy to you than you could ever extend to others.

Do you want to experience true happiness, embrace God’s mercy for you, extend God’s mercy for others and you will be shown mercy.

⁴ This story is partially adapted from Hastings, *Take Heaven Now*, 79-80 and <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/george-washington-carver>.