

The Merciful

Essay 6 in the series “The Beatitudes”

“Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.”

With this, the fifth Beatitude (Matthew 5:7), Jesus contests, among other things, our every egoistic tendency whereby if a person hurts us but once we will forget all their previous kindnesses to us and remember only the one time we feel they failed us.

So what does it mean to be merciful? The Hebrew word for “mercy” is *hesed* – a word that is not easily pronounced or translated. Whatever English word we use for it does not quite catch its spiritual transcendence. It always means more. So it does not simply mean to feel sorry for someone who is in trouble. Instead it mean to deliberately identify with the one in trouble, to get so inside the other’s perspective that we can see what they see, think what they think, and feel what they feel. So if a person snaps at me, or is irritable or discourteous, I stop to realize that they may be feeling overwhelmed themselves. If a person treats me badly, it may be because they themselves are under great pressure. And if only I understood, if only I could see what they see and feel what they feel, nothing would come more naturally to me than to be merciful.

To be merciful is to be happy with those who are happy and sympathetic with those who are unhappy. It’s to not be envious of the good or hateful to the bad. It’s the opposite of malice. It’s to assume the best about another – to put the best possible construction on what another says or does. It’s like a mother’s love for an ailing child. It’s like Jesus instead of judging and destroying his executioners asking God to forgive them in realization that they had no idea what they were doing. It’s seeing in others the fragile, wounded children they still are who often have no idea what they have done, but who do have the same hopes and fears we have and who hurt as easily as we do.

The theme of mercy runs through the whole New Testament, but especially in the Gospel of Matthew. So Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to be open to those who need us (Matthew 5:38-42), to not judge, to suspend our automatic likes and dislikes, to curb our knee-jerk tendency to be critical of others, to realize that the way we judge others will be the way we too are judged (Matthew 7:1-2), to do to others only what we would want done to us (Matthew 7:12). And when Jesus was criticized (in Matthew 9:9-13) for eating with tax collectors and “sinners,” he responded, “Go, and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

And the New Testament says over and over again that to be forgiven we must be forgiving. It’s part of the Lord’s Prayer, and then by way of emphasis the principle is repeated again immediately afterwards, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15). Essentially God can’t. Not forgiving is like moral sludge that clogs our spiritual arteries, and nothing good can

happen, no progress can be made, no way forward can be found, until you let go. So when Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” he must have felt that he was doing well. And he was doing better than average. But Jesus answers, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times,” or as the footnote has it, seventy times seven, that is: Forgive infinitely. Forgive everything. And so James, Jesus’ brother, would later write (in James 2:13), in essence summing up his brother’s message, “Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

It’s the powerful truth classically illustrated by the Story of the Woman Caught in Adultery in John 7:53-8:11, how when one day in the temple courts, a woman caught in the act of adultery is brought before Jesus by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, rather than siding with her accusers, he refuses to condemn her. Or it’s the prophet Elisha, himself uncompromisingly monotheistic, telling the Syrian commander Naaman, “Go in peace,” when he ask the Lord to forgive him when he’s accompanying his king in bowing down in the temple of Rimmon, the Syrian storm god (2 Kings 5:17).

Or from more recent times, do you remember the story of Charles Roberts, 32 years old, who on October 2, 2006, entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, with an automatic rifle and four hundred rounds of ammunition and killed five little girls and left five others critically wounded, and then shot himself? Do you remember what happened next? How parents of the little girls attended the killer’s burial, greeted his widow and her three children and supported a fund for his family? It was covered by *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *NBC Nightly News*, *CBS Morning News*, *Larry King Live*, *Fox News* and dozen of other media outlets from the United Arab Emirates to Australia. Because this was a game-changer. Such is the power in mercy.

No, it’s not easy. One Wednesday evening in The Jesus Class we talked about this – how difficult it is to be merciful when Al Qaeda flies planes into the World Trade Towers, or when a parent consistently over the course of your lifetime always puts you down, or when the person you count on most lets you down, maybe even betrays you, or when someone at work seems intent on making your life miserable. But we also talked about how freeing, how liberating, how exhilarating it is to lay down feelings of resentment and anger, to just lay the burden down, to quit carrying it.

Some of you are being called in the circumstances of your life to be merciful. You’ve been wronged. Justice is on your side. But you are all torn up inside. For a while you actually felt good about it. You felt righteous. But then you felt something else – a shadow, a darkness, a heaviness. And you are called to let go and be merciful. Some of you. Let me think that through. Probably all of us – to a greater or lesser degree. And God in heaven looks down and grieves. The freedom that could be yours! The liberation! The joy! The unshakeable joy that comes when we lay our burdens down! The euphoria. The openness. The way we can get on with our lives. The state called beatitude.

That's one side of the picture. The other side is of a new world, a better world in which people come to us and stretch our limits, our notions of how things ought to be. They come to us in the midst of life's thorniest messes, their heart on their sleeves, looking deep into our eyes, reading every movement of our body, fearing rejection and condemnation, faith hanging by a thread, hope almost extinguished, and if we are wise and if we understand the grace of our God, if we understand this sacred quality of mercy, we will stop and look and think. We will look past our creeds, past our traditions, past the approval and disapproval of others, past even the principles we generally hold to (as Elisha did with Naaman, and as Jesus did with this woman), and we will say to them, "Go in peace." And we will have only done what Jesus, the friend of tax collectors and sinners, did with the woman caught in adultery in John 8, taking her part, siding with her and not her accusers, and not condemning her. And we will have played our part in the creation of a world in which everything is made new.

So we are aggrieved. Maybe we are rightly aggrieved. We have been wronged. Our voices rise. Our blood races. We clench up inside. We are all knotted up, twisted up. And God says to us, "I know, my child. But why would you not be free? Why would you not experience the joy – the profound soul relief that comes when you lay your burden down? Why would you not sense the openness all around you? The euphoria? The state called beatitude?" And then imagine if there were in this world millions of people who know this is core truth. What kind of world might then be possible?

– Dale Pauls