

Series: "More Than Happiness"
(Part 4) "The Merciful"

We're looking in this series of messages at the Beatitudes – Jesus' prescription for happiness. But *more than happiness*. How we can experience a preview and a taste of the deep joy and satisfaction of God's kingdom, even already. Today's beatitude is found in Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy." *O blessedness of the merciful!*

What is mercy? It's defined as "kind or compassionate treatment, a disposition to pity or forgive". If we're merciful, we won't penalize or punish someone even though they might deserve it. One of the Hebrew words often translated "mercy" carries the idea of trying to get inside another person until we can think as they think, see things as they see things, feel as they feel. In other words, *to empathize* with that person.

The Bible says that God is merciful. The Lord is full of mercy! There are many Scriptures that tell us that. Here are just a few. Psalm 86:5 says, "For you, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call on you." Psalm 103:8: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy." A little side note: In some of the newer translations, instead of the word "mercy" the words "kindness" or "loving-kindness" are used, but the meaning is the same. Titus 3:5 says we are *saved* only by God's mercy, shown us in Christ: "He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of *his own mercy*". Our God is a merciful God!

Since God treats us with mercy, that is the way we are to treat one another! Jesus said, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Time and again God's people had to be reminded to be merciful in the way they treat others. For example, the prophet Hosea lived in a time when God's people had forsaken God. Among their sins listed, it says: there is no mercy in the land (Hosea 4:1). The people were religious. They went to the temple and offered sacrifices. But God says through Hosea, "I desire *mercy* and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6).

The prophet Micah stressed the same point: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings...He has shown you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to *love mercy*, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6, 8). Coming to church and going through rituals of worship are not enough. God wants us also to be merciful in how we treat other people.

Jesus embodied God's mercy, and showed us how to treat people with mercy. Someone has said, "Christ Himself is the mercy of God in human form."

Jesus encountered religious leaders who had forgotten how important mercy is. "And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no

need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9:10-13).

By the time of Jesus, Judaism had degenerated into a religion that shut people out. Religious leaders insisted that one had to keep hundreds of rules and regulations, and they despised people who didn't. Jesus associated with these “outsiders”, and blasted religious leaders for their lack of mercy. Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’” (Matthew 9:13).

Let's think more about what it's like to show mercy to others. But before we do, here's a point that should be made: *Mercy is no mere sentimental emotion that overlooks the hard realities of life.* There are times when we need to be tough on people, and call a spade a spade. For instance, if a medical student is in training to be a surgeon, and simply doesn't have what it takes to succeed, we would hope an instructor wouldn't just overlook this and say, “Well, you're a menace to society when you have a scalpel in your hand, but I'm going to be merciful and let you graduate from medical school.”

Sometimes what people need is tough love, not soft indulgence. If a person is caught up in an addiction or some kind of destructive behavior, covering for the person, constantly letting him or her off the hook, only worsens the problem. In that case we need to hold people accountable, and allow them to face the consequences of their behavior. (In the long run, that is the wise and merciful thing to do!).

If there is to be law and order in society, there has to be *justice*. At times, people need to get what they deserve! If someone is brutally murdered, or a store owner is shot and paralyzed by an armed robber, you don't just leave these criminals off the hook, and excuse their crime. The same Old Testament prophets who called for *mercy* also said God wills *justice* in society!

But there are times when mercy is in order. A rather vain lady, convinced of her own beauty, went to a studio to have her picture taken. When she looked at the proofs, she lashed out at the photographer, “These photos don't do me justice.” The photographer looked at her a moment, then said, “Lady, you don't need justice. You need mercy!”

I don't know about you, but I need mercy. Mike Slaughter, who led the Ginghamburg UMC in Ohio from a little country church to a very large, dynamic congregation, talks about mercy, and this beatitude. He says, “For most of us, the older you get the more you become aware of your brokenness. Are we not in touch with our brokenness?” Mike tells of helping his parents move into a condo. He was helping them move things out of the basement of their home, and his dad said there was a box that had a bunch of Mike's stuff in it that he might want to take. Here was this box, under the stairway in their damp basement for 20 years, and Mike starts to go through it. In there was a card his wife Carolyn had sent him about 7 months before they got married. He looked at that yellowed card and read what was on the inside, and he couldn't believe it. Carolyn had written, “I asked for miracles and found you.” And Mike says, 33 years later, after years of struggle when their marriage almost ended, he thought, “Oh, I blew it! Here I've been

married 33 years, and this is the way I've acted...and the way I've treated her at times...my indifference...twenty years of pain. This is what she prayed for? A miracle?"

I mean, I look back over my life, and some of the stupid things I've said and done. The ways I've not been a very good husband, or father. The mistakes I've made as a pastor. The high standards I've set for myself, and then fallen short. I don't know about you, but I need mercy!

I am so glad God is a merciful God! I'm so glad for the times I've received mercy from people, and didn't deserve it! Someone has said, "Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle". We are usually so prone to make hasty judgments about people, but we don't know what's going on deep inside of them, and the battles they may be fighting.

There's was a house in my former neighborhood, a nice new home, with a meticulously manicured lawn. There's a little sign on the lawn, "Keep Dogs Off the Grass". That's OK, I guess, but it kind of made me feel negative about this place – like I was trespassing if I walk the dog by that house, or passed it when I went jogging in the mornings. Besides, I've seen an older man there. He never talked. He has a big dog that's either kept in the garage, or on a chain outside, and the dog barks at you when you go by.

One evening I'm mowing my lawn, and a man and his dog walk by. I think it's this guy, and my impulse was to look the other way. But I like dogs, so I say something like, "What a beautiful dog" – and she is. The guy's not too friendly, and looks like he's going to leave, but I stoop down and the dog comes a little closer and sniffs at me. I ask how old she is, and I comment again on how beautiful she is. And that gets this man started. His dog is 8 months old. They had another dog. She died Thanksgiving night. She had a heart attack. She was dying, and they had to take her to a clinic in Lancaster, because it was hard to find a vet on Thanksgiving night, but before they got there she died." "What a shock," I say. "Yes....". And he talks a little more. As he leaves, he says, "It was nice talking with you." I reply, "It was nice talking with you. Have a good evening." *"Blessed are the merciful..."*.

Mike Slaughter tells how he flunked 4th grade. Miss Kappleman, his teacher, called him aside. It was her first year of teaching, and she was probably this 22 year-old kid just out of college. How do you tell a kid that he's going to fail 4th grade? So, she sent him to the principal, Mrs. Caldwell. She was probably in her 50's, an experienced, seasoned principal. He says how he still remembers sitting there in her office, and looking at that light colored oak desk and the green trashcan. What's he going to do? Go home and tell his mom he flunked 4th grade, when his mom is the President of the PTA? So Pat Caldwell looked at him and said, "Mike, you failed fourth grade...but you are brighter than this. What's wrong with you? I'm going to override Miss Kappleman and pass you to the fifth grade." That's what mercy is. You don't deserve to pass...but I'll pass you. *"Blessed are the merciful..."*.

Imagine what life would be like if nobody ever cut anyone else a break!

We can be merciful in the way we talk about people (or don't talk about them). When I was a

teenager, I idolized a young, dynamic pastor-evangelist. A spellbinding preacher. Then one day he got into moral trouble, lost his ministerial credentials. After a period of rehabilitation, he came back into the ministry in another denomination. Years later he served effectively on the staff of a church near where I served. He was part of our ministerial association. Few, if any, in that area knew what I did about his past. I kept my mouth shut, and never said anything to my colleagues. *"Blessed are the merciful..."*.

We can be merciful to those in our own family. I was in the grocery store. There was this lady there with 2 kids. Everything her children did, the woman yells at them, smacks them, criticizes them and threatens them. In her eyes, her children can't do anything right. Can you cut your kids a break? Cut your mom a break? Cut your older relatives a break, even if they're old and keep repeating the same stories over and over again? *"Blessed are the merciful..."*.

One night I was working late at the church I was serving. I left perhaps 10:30, close to 11:00. Tired. Anxious to get home. About 4 blocks from the church, I notice this flashing red light behind me. Crap! It was a cop. He informed me that I had failed to come to a full stop at 2 stop signs, and didn't put my turn signal on when I made a turn. I'm thinking, "why aren't you out looking for the *real* criminals. He gave me a.....warning. No ticket! *"Blessed are the merciful...."*.

I'm not saying police should never write out tickets! This reminds me of the pastor who was stopped by a police officer for speeding. As the cop was writing out a ticket, the pastor said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." As the officer handed him the ticket, the cop said, "Go thou and sin no more."

You want to live like Jesus? You want to be God-like in your character? When you're relating to the people around you, be merciful!

What's the promise in this beatitude? "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). *First of all, if we are merciful, we will be shown mercy by God.* In the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus described a man who was forgiven an incredible debt, but later showed no mercy to someone who owed him a tiny amount of money. In the parable, Jesus taught that if we want God to forgive us and be merciful to us, we must forgive and show mercy to others. James 2:13 says "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy."

Also, merciful people are more likely to obtain mercy from others. Look at what Jesus said: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:37-38).

What goes around, comes around. If I am harsh and unyielding to others, people will tend to treat me that way. If I treat others with a generous and understanding spirit, they will much more likely show mercy to me when I need it.

