

Merciful

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[0 : 00] We might turn to the chapter we read in Matthew chapter 5 at verse 7. Matthew chapter 5 verse 7.

Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. As the New International Version has it, blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy.

In the Western world, mercy is an ideal which is widely recognized and accepted if not always practiced.

If you were to conduct a public opinion poll, you would discover that the vast majority of people expect others to act compassionately. Although, in fact, frequently this may not be the case. That due to the influence of our Christian traditions in this country, mercy is an ideal which is still fairly strongly implanted in the fiber of our society.

[1 : 12] But in order to bring out, to emphasize that mercy is in fact a part of our Christian heritage, I want to paint the background of the world before Christianity to root in it.

We think first of all of the Jewish culture and ideals, and then of the Gentile world, the ancient Greek and Roman world from which our civilization springs.

The Jews, first of all, tended to be hard and merciless in that attitude to the sinner, to the failure, to the trespasser, and also to the Gentile.

Jesus taught that there is joy in heaven over one sinner repenting. And that was an entirely new teaching among his own people.

The rabbis taught there is joy before God when those who provoke him perish from the world. For example, if a Jew denied his faith, other Jews were forbidden to summon medical attention for him, even should his life be in danger.

[2 : 27] Mercy was not to be shown to someone who was a sinner, to someone who was a rebel, spiritually speaking. A sinner, Jesus saw someone who needed to be saved.

But the Jewish ideal, as it was in his day, was that a sinner, a failure was someone to be punished and indeed obliterated. Now undoubtedly there were individual Jews who showed mercy. But the orthodox Jewish legal position was that Gentiles, all non-Jews, were not to be helped when they were in need.

Even a Gentile mother in the crisis of childbirth was to be left alone. Gentiles were to be killed as snakes are crushed, said one rabbi. And one even went so far as to say that they were created to be fuel for the fires of hell.

Now undoubtedly many individual Jews had higher ideals, but this was the official line that was taught in many schools of the rabbis. Little mercy, if any at all.

[3 : 32] The Gentile world of ancient Greece and Rome was little better. The Roman life particularly was merciless, especially to slaves and to children. The whole of Roman society, the whole structure of the Roman emperor was based upon the institution of slavery.

A slave was not considered to be a human being. Aristotle, the great philosopher of ancient Greece, taught that a slave is nothing but a living tool.

It was widely believed that masters could kill their slaves for trivial offenses. If a slave broke a plate, he could be killed. And sometimes was. True, there were some masters who were kind.

But officially, there was no such thing as sympathy for a slave. Children also were the victims of merciless violence. A child, if unwanted, was disposed of.

Was thrown out in the refuse. Refuse. There is a part of a letter which was written by someone who probably was a Roman soldier.

[4 : 43] He was living in Alexandria. His name was Hilarion. He was writing to his wife, Alice, who was in Rome and was expecting a child.

If, he said, it is a boy, let it live. If it is a girl, throw it out. The exposure, such as it was called, of children was a common fate in the ancient world, especially of girls.

An exposed child was left on the refuse heap on the city dump to die. If it did survive, it survived only because it was picked up by some unscrupulous person who would bring it up and train it for use in the brothels or deliberately maim it to be able to use it later in life as a professional beggar. To arouse sympathy and extract a-arms from passers-by in the streets. The sheer callousness of the pagan world is difficult for us to grasp.

It was the spread of Christianity which slowly produced such a profound change, especially in the last 400 years in the Western world.

[5 : 57] Now we see the kind of treatment that people who are opposing the faith, the official faith of Iran have been receiving recently. One can see there the stark contrast, the total lack of mercy in many cases.

We see there the absence of this Christian virtue. We see how Mohammedanism, which is drawn largely, or partly anyway, from the Old Testament, and of course has a great deal from Mohammed himself, that it knows so little of Christ.

And this faculty of mercy, this ideal of mercy, is one which is scarcely there at all. William Barclay, in his commentary on the Beatitudes, tells of a famous medical missionary in Keta, Sir Henry Holland, who was a famous eye surgeon.

He spent his life healing, or seeking to heal, the eye diseases of people in Keta. And Sir Henry Holland tells how sometimes he would see a patient who was beyond surgery, there was nothing he could do.

The people, the onlookers, the bystanders round about, would laugh. They would laugh. They would tell the doctor to stop wasting his time.

[7 : 35] Mercy. Let's make no doubt about this, is a child of the Christian faith. And it cannot live without its parent. And we see in our own society today, which is becoming increasingly secularized and less and less Christian, mercy, although it is still there, and we thank God for that, it's being chipped away.

And particularly, perhaps the most alarming area, is the area of abortion. Now there is such a thing as therapeutic abortion, when the mother's health is in danger.

But what we are witnessing today, is in fact, in many cases, abortion on demand. And children, fetuses, are being aborted simply for the reason that they're not wanted.

And the attitude of our society today is increasingly becoming that of the soldier Hilarion. And he wrote to his wife that if it's a girl, we don't want her.

We don't want her. And so we see how mercy is, as it were, beginning to disappear in our society.

And we can see the polarization in industry, for example, between management and the unions.

[8 : 49] Again, losing this temper, tempering a quality of mercy. We can see our society in danger of pulling itself apart and becoming ruthless, becoming a kind of wild west.

And this, alas, will be our fate unless we rediscover the Christian faith. We know only too easily what can happen when the Christian faith is overthrown.

Hitler, for example, he dismissed those who preached the gospel. He wanted the church to sing hymns to him. He claimed that he was the Holy Spirit.

And he perpetrated the most merciless acts that this century has seen. Mercy, I repeat, is the child of the Christian faith.

It is Jesus of Nazareth who said, Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. In any other religion or in any other culture, a person who is merciful is considered to be weak, is considered to be an oddity.

[10 : 07] Only in the teaching of Jesus is the merciful person considered to be great. What then is mercifulness?

What does it mean to be merciful? Three things. First of all, it is an attitude. You say that's obvious. It may be obvious to you, but it is not obvious to a great many people today.

Many people think that being merciful is to exercise mercy. Now, in a sense, that is true. But Jesus does not say here, Blessed are those who act mercifully.

Jesus is saying, Blessed are those who are merciful in themselves. You see, you can act mercifully in a situation just to suit yourself.

You can act mercifully in a situation to save your own skin, to make an investment for the future, and so on. Now, Jesus is not referring to that kind of thing at all.

[11:08] He's saying, Blessed, happy are the merciful. Those who are merciful in their characters. Those who are merciful in their attitudes. It is the attitude rather than the action that Jesus is referring to here.

You see, the gospel makes it quite clear that people do not become merciful by doing merciful deeds. People do not become merciful by doing acts of mercy.

In fact, it says the opposite. The gospel tells us that you can do truly merciful actions only if and when you yourself are merciful. And it lays primary stress on being rather than on doing.

Doing is important. But doing does not make you merciful. You must first of all become merciful by God's grace.

Attitudes come before actions. Dispositions come before deeds. Dispositions come before actions.

[12:39] devotional your life. In fact, it is God's grace. Now, Jesus, in fact, tells us very, very clear terms that we should be generous with our money.

Now, Jesus makes it absolutely clear that being generosity does not, in fact, make us new people.

The whole point of the gospel is that God must make us new people.

The whole point of Jesus' coming into the world is that we cannot make ourselves new people. and that's why he came and lived and died and rose again acting as a Christian does not make us a Christian, it is God who makes people Christians we do not make ourselves Christians he does, we of course must have faith we must ask him, we must come to him we must cast ourselves upon him, but it is he and not we who make ourselves Christians and who therefore make ourselves give us the attitude of mercy, of mercifulness Paul said to the Corinthians that the natural man, that is the person who is not a Christian does not receive the things of the spirit of God he cannot as it were pull himself up by his own boot laces we need the grace of God, we need the power of the gospel it is impossible, let me repeat for a person who, for a person through behaving like a Christian to become a Christian it's impossible just as it is impossible for a person through behaving like a dog to become a dog a person is a person now you can bark you can crawl about in all fours but that does not make you a dog now there are some people there are some people who have an illness in their mind who think that they are dogs think that they are lions and they do bark and they do bite but they are not dogs you know, biting and barking does not make us make any person a dog and similarly it is impossible for us to make ourselves Christians because as we are we are sinners we do not receive the things of the Spirit of God we must ask God to do it and that is the whole point of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour

Jesus Christ people who because they bark and because they bite and because they chew a bone think that they're a dog are deluded and people who simply by coming to church by supporting the church even by being elders and ministers of the church are deluding themselves if they think that that makes them Christians it is God and God alone who makes us Christians it is he and he alone who can make us merciful and so what Jesus is talking about here is an attitude is an attitude which is God given it is an attitude which is a gift of his grace it is an attitude the second point and we're very touchy in this is that mercifulness is an addition it's something extra it's not something which we have inherent in ourselves which is latent within us and just has to be drawn out of us it is a gift of God it is not a natural characteristic now when many people speak about a merciful person today they in fact are thinking of mercy in terms of natural characteristics if this were the case then in fact Jesus would be very unfair because some people would have an unfair advantage you see when we say today when people say today that such and such a person is merciful they really mean that he's easy going and that he'll overlook things or she will you know won't bother too much they're not very strict that's what it means now some people have a disposition which is easy going other people have a disposition which is not easy going and in fact if the popular view is true it means that Jesus is being grossly unfair here he's saying some people it's easier for some people to be Christians than others but that's not what Jesus is saying Jesus is in fact saying that that that whatever our disposition may be we need to receive this gift of God's grace and we need to become merciful by his grace and that mercy mercy is or mercifulness is far more than an easy going tolerance

[17:31] Jesus does not say blessed are the easy going blessed are the tolerant this is to read our meaning into into this text what then does the word merciful mean what does it mean in the Bible well it is applied particularly to God in the Bible the Hebrew word for mercy is found 150 times in the

Old Testament and 90% of these occasions it refers to God or to the actions of God God is a God a God to whom mercy belongs Isaiah tells us it is in that mercy that God delights Micah reminds us God's mercy is so infinite as we sang in Psalm 36 that it reaches to heaven it is so enduring that it lasts forever and one of the most common refrains in the Old Testament is that the mercy of the Lord endures forever mercy is an attribute of God it is his gift it is his attribute and it is a communicable attribute it is one which he imparts he shares with others as a gift of his grace

Paul tells us writing to the Ephesians that God is rich in mercy now this does not mean that God is easy going God is a strict God Jesus made no bones about that God is strict God will not let anyone off God will sweep nothing under the carpet but nevertheless God is merciful and God is merciful in the sense of being kind and when God exercises his kindness towards us it is not that he sweeps things under the carpet and he bends the rules but that he has provided his son to keep the rules for us and to bear the consequences of the broken of the rules which we have broken and so quite honourably quite strictly we might say God is exercising his mercy he is demonstrating his kindness kindness and in particular the kindness of God is seen in his attitude and in his actions towards his enemies we see God's love and God's grace in that while we were still sinners

Christ died for us said Paul writing to the Romans and this is what it means for us to be merciful too it means not to be kind to those that we like being kind to but it means being kind to our enemies the people we hate the people we can't stand the people we can't tolerate it means being kind to them another word which is used with a similar meaning in the New Testament is the word love we are to love our enemies to show kindness to be good to them and this is what it means here to be merciful it is to treat our enemies kindly and this is not something natural it is something quite unnatural it is not something that we are born with it is something which only God in his grace can give us and what Jesus in fact is demanding of us when he says that we must be merciful is that we should be something which in and of ourselves we cannot be which we cannot make ourselves to be and that is absolutely the true he is demanding that we be what

God is willing to make us Jesus is not unfair in this demand because with it he is offering us a new nature he is offering us a divine nature he is offering us an inbuilt capacity to be kind to be merciful he is offering us if you like access to the life of Christ we see Jesus the only man who lived an utterly totally merciful life and when you become a Christian you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ there is a sense in which your life is incorporated into the life of Jesus Christ or we might say today it's plugged in plugged into the life of Jesus Christ so that just as when you plug in your electric appliance when you put the plug in and put the switch on the current flows from the mains to your appliance so when you become a

Christian then you have this connection with Jesus Christ your life it's not simply that you become a believer and that you're justified that is the beginning that also you are in Christ as Paul would put it you are incorporated you are plugged into the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that his grace flows to you and you receive this gift now we don't receive it all at once in the sense that we become Christians today and we are 100% merciful tomorrow no we receive it slowly we receive it through trial and error as we try to practice it throughout our lives we take the whole of our lives living it out and practicing it what the Shorter Catechism calls sanctification it's a lifelong process it's not something that happens instantaneously it's not something that happens from one day to another it is the life calling of a

[23 : 30] Christian but the point is that it does happen and that God offers this as a gift to be merciful God is merciful he delights in mercy his mercy is forever when you become a Christian when you are justified by faith your life is plugged into the life of God and his mercy can flow to you for the first time in your life you can become merciful in the sense in which Jesus uses this word here if any man be in Christ said Paul he is a new person he is a new creation he is a new person altogether and this is what Jesus demands of us we are to love our enemies and you and I will be judged according to this commandment because you see this is what God has done and God is our judge this is what Jesus has done and he is his standard is the standard by which we will be judged his life is our pattern and he has done this what good is it says Jesus in loving those who love you if you love them that love you he said what reward have you if you salute your brethren only what do you more than others do not even the publicans who were the crooks the mafia of the day they do that they love those who love them now then there is honour among thieves says Jesus no what do you more than others and that's the crucial point what do you more than others

Christian men and women and young people have got something that other people don't have they've got this addition God's grace God's mercy God's love and that has to be seen and should be worked out as we were thinking this morning it's not something that stays up here as a concept in the mind the grace of God is a dynamic not simply an ideal it's a dynamic which flows from Christ by the Holy Spirit to us what do you more than others said Jesus to his disciples or as the new English Bible puts it idiomatically what is extraordinary in loving those who love you there's nothing extraordinary in that and you and I were called to follow Christ are called committed to extraordinary living and that is to be merciful to receive that mercy from God and that's where it must begin and that is why you see in the society in which we live although there are attempts being made and rightly being made to reconcile opposing factions in our society various issues go to arbitration and so on but it don't last for a little time because it's really patching over the cracks and if we're going to really become merciful then we must receive this mercy from God as a gift of his grace in Jesus Christ and this leads us to the third point about mercifulness that it is an attestation it's an attestation blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy or they shall obtain mercy now this does not mean Jesus is not meaning here that if we are merciful toward others then God will be merciful towards us he's not saying that that God will show us mercy if we show mercy to others because this would conflict with the clear teaching of the rest of scripture while we're still sinners God loved us God has loved us before we became merciful and this is the pattern again it would be impossible to be saved on this basis because on these terms no one could ever be forgiven none of us could hope to be saved if we had to forgive every person that we would forgive every single person who has wronged us if we had to live our lives 100% merciful in order to be saved we could not do it no one would be saved

Jesus would be mocking us rather than saving us but what in fact Jesus is saying here in a striking and in an ear catching way is simply that when we are truly forgiven we are forgiving others who have wronged us or if I am forgiven by God of necessity I shall forgive others who wrong me in other words what Jesus is saying is that if I am merciful by the grace of God I must show that mercy I cannot hide it indefinitely I must show it I must demonstrate it it must be something which works its way out and that's why Jesus challenged his disciples and he said what do you do more than others you must love your enemies you must have this attestation in your life it's not simply enough to say I am a Christian you must live out the life of Christ and demonstrate in terms of flesh and blood in a life situation what it means to be a

Christian what it means to be merciful you must demonstrate and practice the love of God and the mercy of God surely therefore this beatitude is one of the most searching of all as we think of what Jesus is saying here and then as we think of our lives let us ask ourselves is there someone or are there some people we have never forgiven if there are then Jesus is saying here that there is a possibility that we in fact might not be forgiven ourselves is there a hatred a resentment which smoulders in our hearts is there a bitterness which is poisoning our spirit if it is says Jesus we must examine ourselves and get right with God because our relationship with God has gone wrong if this is the case how can we claim to be forgiven by God if we are unwilling to forgive others we must come to

[30 : 07] God anew and come to God afresh and ask him to put right what has gone wrong and so mercifulness is an attestation of the grace of God an evidence an authentication that God has done a work of grace in our hearts blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy mercifulness is an attitude it's an addition it's an attestation or an authentication I wonder is this is this a beatitude which we take seriously do we really know the happiness because that's what blessedness means do we really know the happiness of being forgiven by the grace of God and forgiving others so that by the grace of God we're brought to the point where we forgive everyone everyone who has wronged us people who have hurt us people who have wounded us people who have trodden upon us people who have used us as a doormat people who really hit us below the belt and hurt us now it's not easy it's not easy to forgive we do not become forgiving overnight and it always will be a struggle in this life but have we come to the point where by the grace of God we can say before him that we have forgiven we've really forgiven and forgotten you see there are some people who say well I forgive but I can't forget and I would doubt whether that person is really forgiven

I know it's not easy to forget but I believe it by the grace of God it is possible to forget we must ask God to enable us to forgive in the fullest sense of the term but forgiveness is a gift which he gives and we receive it when we are forgiven by him and your greatest need and my greatest need is that

