



## Blessed are the Merciful

Jonathan K. Dodson | Matthew 5:7 | May 21, 2015

We've been moving through Jesus Beatitudes, his way to live the truly good life. And if you consider what he's saying, it can be overwhelming. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who live out of a sense of their fundamental poverty before God, those who mourn their sin and evil in the world, the humble who look up at God and not down on others, and those who *hunger and thirst* for the good and the right. Be like this and you'll be deeply satisfied person. The extraordinary flow of Jesus' words flattens us out and lifts us up all at once, if we'll let them. But the temptation is to avoid Jesus by giving up on being this person. To say, it's too hard. I can't be poor in spirit. I don't even know how to do it. Or to barrel down on it, making significant changes in your life, while silently congratulating yourself not becoming humble at all! If you're beginning to say, "I can't do this" you're starting to get the point. Because we can't live this sermon, not on our own. We all fail every one of us, which is where Jesus' teaching on mercy can come in and be so transformative for us. Let's see how mercy breaks out and mercy breaks in.

### Mercy Breaks Out

Whenever I see red and blue lights swirling in the rearview mirror, I start praying for mercy. When we deserve a traffic ticket, we plead for what I don't deserve—a warning. We love mercy in face of justice. We also love the more tangible expression of mercy—showing mercy to the poor, the downtrodden. This is a very popular idea, and many in our city love the idea of showing mercy to the unfortunate and needy. I know for a fact that some people choose our church of its "mercy ministry." The challenge of course is not pat yourself on the back because you are part of a church that does mercy but *to be a merciful person*. **It's funny how we often love mercy for ourselves but rarely for others [Robie & JD]**. When someone cuts us off, or in line, we think to ourselves, I hope they get caught. We tend to see ourselves through the lens of mercy and others through the windowpane of justice. Yet we "love" mercy...When Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful..." he rearranges our impulses, shatters our window-pane view. By saying, "**Blessed are the merciful, those showing mercy NOT those who receiving mercy.**" Could it be that we love receiving mercy but not showing receiving mercy? Are you *merciful*—a person in whom mercy breaks out toward others? Well, **what is a merciful person like?** Jesus told a story to an expert in Jewish law, often referred to as the Good Samaritan. In this story, someone is mugged on a dangerous road and left for dead. Three people walk by him. The first, a priest, avoids him by going to the other side. The second, a Levite a special class of priest also passed by the other side. The third, a Samaritan, came upon the injured man and had compassion. He bandaged his wounds, took him to an inn, and paid for his rest. Then Jesus asked which man proved to be a neighbor to the one who fell among the robbers. The expert in the law responded by saying, "**The one who showed him mercy.**" The Good Samaritan is actually the Merciful Samaritan. What can we learn about mercy from him? Three things: mercy feels, mercy acts, mercy sacrifices. *Mercy feels* – The Samaritan felt compassion for him. This is an important part of mercy, but Jesus doesn't say wait till you have the feeling. If we did that, we'd rarely make much progress in holiness. In fact, after telling this story Jesus simply says, "Go and do likewise." Not go when you feel gripped by mercy. 2. *Mercy acts* – he goes

beyond feeling to acting, bandages him and carries him to the inn. Very often our feelings trail behind our actions. But once we've acted in mercy, the feeling catches up. I often don't feel like serving the marginalized but *never* regret it afterwards. 3. *Mercy sacrifices* – The Samaritan could have wiped his hands there, but pays in advance for his stay at the inn, and then says to the owner “**and whatever more you spend I will repay.**” Mercy feels the pinch for someone else. Here, up to a weeks pay. With my wife, a trip to France. I'm often content to pat myself on the back for doing #2. You might be happy to have 1 or 3, but unless all three work together it's hard to express true mercy. Mercy feels, mercy acts, and mercy sacrifices. That's hard for us because while we love the idea of mercy, the lure of greed is always upon us. Greed is set against mercy. Greed is the disposition to get—get more time, more money, more comfort. Greed curves in on Self. But mercy, mercy curves out. Its disposition is to give—give more support, money, and help. Greed is ungodly but mercy is the heart of God. *Are you merciful or full of love for the idea of mercy?* Maybe you're coming to the end of your natural empathy and you're realizing that you need a deeper understanding of mercy. Some of you are quite engaged in tangible mercy ministry. You know that once you get into it, it has a way of asking more of you. More of your compassion, time, resources and this can be challenging when there's still a part of us that loves the idea of mercy more actually showing mercy. Or perhaps you're a person who has been hurt or snubbed? The thought of showing your enemy mercy makes you wince. Someone has done you wrong. And you just want to do justice. How do you push through the cost and still show mercy? To answer these questions, we need to know not just how mercy breaks out but how it breaks in, to us. We need to know what mercy is, down to the foundation.

### **Mercy Breaks In**

To get down to the foundations of mercy, we have to first clear the air. There is a flabby sense of mercy out there that misconstrues its meaning as a person who overlooks wrong. It is not popular today to be a person of conviction, unless of course it is a liberal conviction that is open to change, which is really no conviction at all. Quite the opposite. A merciful person is a person who is convinced that a wrong is a wrong and needs to be righted. A merciful person has an anchor in justice. Mercy and justice are not enemies but cousins. In fact, mercy cannot exist without judgment. But judgment is not fashionable either. Planet Fitness boasts a “judgment free zone” where you can work out without the fear of Mr. Muscle looking down on you. But at the same time, Planet Fitness judges gym rats. The gym works hard to keep body-builders out so you don't have to feel inferior about your body. Even in advancing no-judgment you make a judgment. Austin, as progressive and judgment-free as it thinks it is, is quite judgmental. You're judged on whether or not you shop local, if you recycle, on what kind of music you listen to, how hip your clothes are, how strong your resume, whether you can balance a career and a family. We're judged all the time. So on what basis *should* we judge? If we follow the no-judgment policy, if no one is to judge, and we abandon justice, the orphan will have no rights, the weak will be overlooked, the abused child unprotected, the battered woman continually abused, the unborn deleted. We don't really want a judgment free society. The alternative is chaos and total injustice, a society where people will cease to be recipients of mercy because the standards of justice have been dissolved. **If we abandon judgment we abandon mercy.** So where, then, does judgment come from? Before Plato and Aristotle God was “I AM.” That's the personal name

of God. When I AM or YHWH gave Moses the 10 Commandments, he established a basis of for judgment. Don't commit adultery, murder, and so on. As Moses receives the 10 Commandments, we're told that YHWH comes down in a glory cloud and passes before him proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." What does this momentous event tell us? When God appears he reveals two essential, foundational, interrelated qualities: mercy and justice. The Lord IS merciful, gracious, steadfast in love, forgiving sin. AND does not clear the guilty. Then I AM comes in the flesh in Jesus, and he gets underneath the 10 Commandments with the SOM. Instead of adultery, the one who lusts is condemned. Instead of murder, the one who speaks against his brother is condemned. **Jesus pops the hood on the 10 commandments to show us the purring, powerful purity of God that drives the engine of justice.** What drives it? The all-consuming glory of God. His glory reveals our darkness. And the darkness **we're guilty of isn't just a failure in action**, to not commit adultery and not murder. **It's a failure in disposition, to love his glory** (justice+mercy). It's a failure of the heart. Jesus says if you've looked at a person lustfully you have committed adultery in your heart. If you've insulted someone in your mind, you've committed murder in your heart. Under the hood of our actions and thoughts is a purring self-glory, an evil that leads to adultery and murder. We're all a step away. Now, if he's just, and he is, we must be punished, the evil put down. God cannot clear the guilty...unless their guilt is cleared for them. Enter mercy. **While judgment declares guilt, mercy begs for innocence.** Mercy cannot contravene justice—they are cousins—but it can redirect justice. *So how does Israel fare? God enters into a covenant relationship with Israel where they pledge obedience to him. If they break the pledge, a set of judgments follows including darkness, abandonment, and death, all promised to covenant breakers. If they keep it, a set of blessings follow.* Now, listen to Jesus' Beatitude again. *Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.* Jesus is saying there is a day of mercy coming to the merciful, which also means there is a day of judgment coming to the unmerciful. All will be held to account. Now, look at what Jesus does with his life. He redirects justice by absorbing our judgment day. In the middle of history, he climbs on the cross to receive our punishment. The prescribed set of covenant judgments—darkness, abandonment, and death—all fall on Christ. **Mercy meets judgment at the cross, where our deserved rejection results in undeserved acceptance.** Jesus stands in for us in the most painful of ways. When Jesus says blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy, he looks forward to a day when both justice and mercy will be in full garb. Judgment will fall on those who refused Christ, and mercy on those who received Christ. How do you know? How does he know? He follows our works back to our hearts. If we haven't demonstrated a life of mercy, then that shows our heart hasn't be gripped by mercy. Actions reveal the heart. And Jesus judges our impulses from a place of utter justice. So you see, the foundations of justice and mercy are traced back to God, in his very self revelation, I AM. Mercy for the merciful, judgment for the unmerciful. How will I avoid judgment day? Jesus says, **accept mercy and show mercy.** The person who realizes and accepts God's forceful judgment and true mercy is flattened out and lifted up all at once. We are flattened by our failure, but lifted up his mercy. We see in Jesus the



mercy that feels, acts, and sacrifices for us. Let it get into you. And the more God's mercy gets into you, the more it breaks out of you, onto others. It's transformative. You'll begin to feel, act, and sacrifice for your friends, your enemies, and your neighbors. If you're beginning to say, I can't do the SOM, you're right but God can do it through you. Let mercy break in and mercy will break out of you.