

The Lord of Mercy

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Today we're looking at a compelling beatitude: *blessed are the merciful*. Mercy is one of those admirable qualities we love to be on the receiving end of but so struggle to give. What is it mercy? Nature. How do we get it? Need. How do we show it? Experience.

The Nature of Mercy

What is mercy? Overlooking a wrong, accepting others beliefs, supporting others feelings? Someone who is easygoing? Actually, it's much deeper than that. Mercy doesn't overlook a wrong; it acknowledges the wrong *but chooses to be kind*. The child on the playground who is bullied and says nothing back, but at the end of the day tearfully prays, Lord please help that bully to know your love, Amen. Where does mercy come from? It isn't plucked from the air. It's an attribute of God. When Moses asked to see God's glory, God revealed himself by 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" (Ex 34). God's self-revelation, his big reveal, isn't the Marcionite heresy "wrathful God of the OT." No, the God of the OT is the God of the NT. Notice his glory is frontloaded with *mercy*: a God merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. Mercy can be part of our character because it has always been part of God's character. This revelation shows us mercy isn't just an idea; it's a personal quality, a virtue. It also shows us something else. In the last third of the verse we observe *God is just*: not clearing the guilty. These two traits (mercy and justice) are not at odds. They actually have a very unique relationship: mercy upholds justice. Several years ago I was borrowed someone's new Audi convertible and backing out of the garage I heard a grinding sound. I got out and saw I had scraped the alloy wheel. I felt awful. I took a picture of the wheel, sent it to the owner with an apologetic text, and started researching the cost. I waited and waited and waited. Hours later, I followed up with another text. He replied, "Just got this. Things happen. Don't worry about it." *What?* Not what I expected. I expected justice—cough up several hundred dollars. Instead, I received mercy, Don't worry about it. But did he overlook justice? No he upheld justice by absorbing the cost of the wheel, and chose to show *mercy*. Our God is described as "the Father of mercies." His very heart is to be slow to anger, to abound in love, to forgive wrongdoing. Is it yours? When someone makes an offensive comment, you are misunderstood, or your kids won't cooperate. Is your impulse to show mercy or demand justice! Jesus says, "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Mt 6:36). He expects us to give what we've received. How? Jesus says Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. How does this work? Does it mean if you show mercy to others, then God will show mercy to you? Well, let's think about that. If God showed mercy to us only to the extent that we showed mercy to others, we'd be up a creek! It has to mean something else. The beatitudes are not spiritual equations—do this and you get that—they are *eternal promises*. This future *shall receive mercy* is rolled back into the present through the cross, where Jesus upholds justice in his death but shows us mercy to give us life. Christianity turns on this. Because God's mercy has broken in on us, we ought to be compelled

to show mercy to others. In fact, the degree to which we fail to show mercy is the degree to which we've failed to absorb God's mercy. So how can we better absorb and give God's mercy?

The Need for Mercy

One way to become more merciful is to more deeply grasp our need for mercy. Jesus tells a parable about two people who went to temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. His listeners would have immediately made some assumptions based on the characters. The **Pharisees** were the most theologically accurate among Jewish sects. The Essenes took the Benedict Option and withdrew to the desert; the Sadducees the liberal option denying resurrection. But the Pharisees were orthodox, the picture of godliness. They had great theology, kept the law: examples to others. *Tax collectors* weren't the IRS. They were appointed by the Romans to gather exorbitant taxes and keep whatever they gathered over and above. They were extortionists. Which is why the Pharisee says *I thank you God that I am not like extortionists.* Tax collectors used their power to exploit and oppress. Like a racist who uses their cultural power to oppress. So the good guy and the bad guy are obvious. *But things aren't quite what they seem.* Notice the Pharisee's posture. He stands by himself. Literally *praying toward himself*: God, I thank you—not for what God has done—but that I'm not unjust, adulterer, or even a white supremacist. I fast and tithe. Rolls out the resume. We all do this. Make mental lists of accomplishments. Have you ever noticed how you engage in an internal dialog to justify your week? *Got a lot done. Didn't lust. Not too much social media. Didn't snap at the kids. Cleaned the house. Singed a petition. Zoomed City Group even though I didn't feel like it. Killed it at work. Oh, and I autodraft my tithe.* Where is God? Nowhere. That's because it's not a prayer to God; it's a prayer to himself. In fact Jesus says he, *told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt* (9). The word trust means to convince or persuade. They've persuaded themselves of their inherent trustworthiness, developed a habit of self-flattery, undoubting of themselves. They're typically right. You can spot these people on SM a mile away. Now, notice how this prayer to the Self influences how he sees others. He treats them with contempt, disdain. His circuitous inner dialog has created a false reality in which he is the hero and those who don't align with them the villains. He's valorized his contempt, sanctified his hate like those awful messages wishing the president and his wife to die from COVID. What about the **tax collector**? His posture and prayer are noticeably different. His eyes aren't on himself or even toward heaven. He's in touch with his unworthiness, his lack of righteousness. It's evident in striking his breast. When we see this today it's often in celebration of scoring a touchdown or winning a match, a sign of bravado, personal accomplishment, tinged with pride. But in the 1st century beating the chest had a very different meaning. The chest was *the seat of the inner life*. His fist sinks into his chest not bounces off of it. He's beating the pride out not in, opening up his heart to God and saying, *I know I deserve judgment but please show me mercy.* It isn't prayer to self; it's prayer to a holy God. Notice his lack of contempt. He isn't looking to see who he condemn, who he can cancel, who he can call out. His inner eyes are on the Lord. He actually says *be propitiated to me.* He's begging for God's just wrath to be satisfied so he can enjoy mercy. His plea is for justice to be upheld but mercy to be shown. And God gives it. Jesus comments, *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted*

(14). Both want to be in the right, but only the one who is in touch with his deep need for mercy receives it. Justified. Made right.

Experience of Mercy

One way to become more merciful is to grasp our own deep need for mercy. In his sermon on this parable Kierkegaard says we need: to be alone with God, look down instead of up, and recognize our danger before God. I invite you to be alone with God. Where are you like the Pharisee? Who have you held in contempt? What lists of accomplishment do you need to burn? ... As you reflect, take heart, Jesus knows your frailty. Jesus has the *humility of tax collector*. He was [made like his brothers in every respect](#), felt the full weakness of our flesh-and-bloodness, the temptation to make something of himself, to forgo the Father's will, to look down on others. Jesus Christ felt the need for mercy, but *he also shows us the heart of mercy*. He was made like us [so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people](#) (Heb 2:17–18). This means Jesus became like us not only to validate our need for mercy but verify his mercy in our hearts. How did he do that? By propitiating God's wrath. Absorbing the just cost. The word "beat" the chest is also used of the soldiers "beating" Jesus' face (Lk 27:30). Jesus was beaten so we could be blessed. He's the answer to the tax collector's prayer, be propitiated to me. Show me mercy. Jesus bloodied so he could say, *Lord please show these bullies your mercy*. You see Jesus doesn't just help us grasp our need for mercy, in him we *experience* his mercy. He upholds justice and opens up the heart of the Father, his very own heart of mercy to welcome us into his ever-loving presence. Recipients of undeserved mercy, may we be quick to show mercy to others. May our children know mercy, our political enemies know mercy, the adulterers, the extortionists, and yes, even the racists—for we have a merciful and faithful high priest, and his name is the Lord of mercy.