

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 shown but struggle to show. We believe we're saved by mercy *but scream at our kids when they mess up*. We thank God for a friend *but hold them in contempt for a disloyalty*. We believe mercies new every morning *but come home an ogre to the family at night*. Mercy. Nature of mercy, Need for mercy, Experience of mercy.

The Nature of Mercy

What is mercy? Overlooking a wrong, accepting others beliefs, supporting others feelings? Someone who is easygoing? Actually, it's deeper than that. Mercy doesn't overlook a wrong; it acknowledges wrong *but chooses to withhold punishment, retribution*. The spouse who has been deeply hurt but refuses to give the cold shoulder. The child on the playground who is bullied and doesn't retaliate, 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, to know his very essence, God revealed himself 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 his big reveal, his self-revelation isn’t the “wrathful God of the OT.” No, the God of the OT *is* the God of the NT. His self-revelation is frontloaded with *mercy*: a God merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. He shows us mercy isn’t just an idea; it’s a personal quality, a part of his nature. Mercy can be part of our character because it has always been part of God’s character. 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 and justice permits mercy. When one of my kids was young they got in trouble and had to receive a spanking. I explained why they were wrong and deserved discipline. They tearfully agreed and prepared for the spanking but then, I said, I am going to show you mercy because God has shown me mercy. God didn’t wink at our sin; he punished Jesus to show us mercy. So you spank me I will show you mercy. Mercy upholds what’s right. 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 that our heart? When someone makes an offensive comment, you’re misunderstood, or your kids don’t cooperate is your impulse to show mercy or demand justice! Jesus says, “Be

merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” (Mt 6:36). To give what we receive. 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! His mercy is greater. The beatitudes are not spiritual equations—do this and you get that—they are *eternal promises*. This future *shall receive mercy* was rolled back into the present through the cross in a cosmic act of mercy. This should make us merciful: But does it? The degree to which we’ve absorbed God’s mercy is the degree to which we show mercy. How can we better absorb and give God’s mercy?

The Need for Mercy

One way to become 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. Most do this. 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, at least not to God; it's a prayer to Self. 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. You see this in posts today, people declaring this or that in proud comparison. His 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 agree the villains. He's valorized his contempt, sanctified his hate. 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*, the fist sinks into his chest not bounces off. 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). The merciful are those who are in touch with their deep need for mercy.

Experience of Mercy

One way to experience mercy is to grasp our own deep need for mercy. In his sermon on this parable Kierkegaard says we need: to be alone with God. I invite you to be alone with God. Where are you like the Pharisee? Are some of your prayers actually lists to Self? Who have you held in contempt? ... 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 to such a degree *that we might experience the very 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? 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. Jesus bloodied so he could say, *Lord please show these bullies your mercy*. When you come face to face with this God, with this Christ, you *experience mercy*. Several years after the mercy

lesson with one of our kids, a couple of our kids got in big trouble. After talking things through with them, it was obvious one child was the culprit. I told them they would receive a spanking when suddenly, the other sibling cried out, *Show her mercy; show her mercy!* Why? Because he'd *experienced* mercy he was inclined to give mercy, because he'd been spared years ago, and others to be spared. *Mercy begets mercy.* Jesus died and rose to put mercy in our chest. At his own expense he opened the heart of God so mercy could pour out on us. Will you absorb that mercy this morning? So your children know mercy, your 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.