

June 14, 2015

THE MERCIFUL

Matthew 5: 1-12

THE BEATITUDES

It is said that the Beatitudes comprise the several stages of the Christian course. They are the successive steps which a Christian takes in their journey into the Kingdom. They are like stages in the "naturalization" process of citizenship in the Kingdom of God. And, in a way, we are all spiritual immigrants, voyaging toward a common goal: Blessedness, or, happiness. But happiness is both our goal and a manner of traveling. Happiness does not depend on things or possessions, but on how we look at them. To measure our happiness by certain conditions is wrong. We can't keep saying, "If only....," and then wait for happiness to come when that condition arrives. Happiness is as much an attitude as an experience. And attitudes are more important than circumstances. Robert Schuler called the Beatitudes the Be-Happy-Attitudes.

Think of the child who goes on vacation with her parents. It rained the whole time. The air-conditioning at the motel wasn't working right. Everybody got sick from something they ate. The transmission on the car was leaking fluid and had to be replenished a couple of times on the road. All in all, from an adult point of view, it was a miserable time, and yet, the child, once home, was able to say, "That was a great vacation!" She had seen new places, and done new things, and enjoyed the whole journey (except for getting sick). God bless the children for having such an optimistic attitude.

Such inner attitudes become much clearer as we begin to talk about mercy and purity. John Wesley, in his sermon on the Beatitudes, reiterates the process by which faith unfolds in an individual. As he speaks on the pure in heart, he says that we are ultimately purified through our faith in the Blood of Jesus. Through the power of His grace, the pure in heart are those who are purified from pride by the deepest poverty of spirit: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.* The pure in heart are those who are purified from indifference and detachment by holy mournfulness: *Blessed are the mournful, they shall be comforted.* The pure in heart are those who are purified from anger and from every unkind or turbulent passion by meekness and gentleness: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!* The pure in heart are purified from every desire but to please and enjoy God, to know and love Him more and more by their hunger and thirst for righteousness which soon engrosses their whole soul...so much so that now they love the Lord their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their mind, and with all their strength. And it is at this point, the point of love, where the pilgrim of faith becomes the blessed merciful!

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

John Wesley suggests that the more we are filled with the righteousness of God, the more tenderly we will be concerned for those who are still without God. Out of our tender-hearted compassion, we will so grieve for those who do not hunger and thirst for God that we will want to serve their souls, seek the salvation we have known...for them. It is like the desire to defend the defenseless, to stand up for the accused, and help them find justice. We will want to "do unto others what we would want others to do unto us." (Matthew 7:12), and we will want to "love our neighbors as ourselves."

In John Wesley's sermon, he then unfolds the vast importance of love in recounting the beautiful passage from 1 Corinthians 13, where...

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends!

In its patience, love realizes that, perhaps, God is not finished with any of us yet. In its kindness, love overcomes evil with good. In its lack of jealousy, love is not hasty to pass sentence. In its lack of boastfulness, love honors others. In being neither arrogant nor rude, love is never patronizing, nor is it ever willingly offensive, but up building and nice. In not insisting on its own way, love does not think of itself, but of others. Love does not have room for being irritable, but stands fast, unprovoked; and love has no room for being resentful, it does not think unkindly of others. Love does not rejoice at wrong, at mistakes, or, at errors in judgment. Love rejoices in right, in the truth, in what is good. Love bears all things – love can resist the temptation to be judgmental and merciless. Love believes all things – love is convinced of the goodness to be found in others. Love hopes all things – even when proven to the contrary, love still looks for that spark of good will. And finally love endures all things – love can take abuse and not be crushed!

It's impossible to have thoughts of resentment and jealousy, anger, hate, or ill-will, and feel blessed! You cannot sow these negative seeds and expect to raise a happy garden. Not if you're normal.

To John Wesley, the merciful have the love that's needed in order for us to place ourselves in another's position and know the care they lack, the care they need. Mercy is a sympathetic appreciation of others that enables us to see their point of view, and feel with them. The Good Samaritan showed mercy. Jesus ends this teaching by saying, "*Go, and do likewise.*" Mercy is that outgoing, out-reaching, and out-looking love that is the great characteristic of the relationships of Christians with their fellow men and women!

In a legal sense, mercy is the remission of a deserved penalty. To be merciful is to agree not to treat someone badly when they may, by worldly standards, deserve it. It is to agree to suspend judgment *and* offer care. In a world that seems callous and unsympathetic, mercy is more than emotional pity. It is more than just giving help. Mercy is an identification with others. To be merciful is to express the incarnation. God became human, identified with His people. Mercy is as part of God's likeness. Jesus Christ is the mercy of God sent "*not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.*" (John 3:17) We, too, need to carry on that incarnation through sacrificial loving kindness!

Kindness...The basic idea, here, is kindness. Too often we live with a win/lose posture. If I win, you lose; or, if you win, I lose. To be merciful is to take a win/win posture. You win, I win too. I serve your gain. Jesus even said that to gain your life, you must lose it. It's a win/win situation. To be merciful is to help another person win, but you win too because the merciful shall obtain mercy! Someone once said that the greatest virtue is to lessen the misery of others. This was the attitude of Mother Theresa. She even said once to Muggerridge, a reporter, who thought the joyful look on her face was a put-on, that nothing makes you happier than when you really reach out in mercy to someone who is badly hurt. It's like doctors...they don't make themselves feel better, but they still win!

Kindness is the basic foundation of God's relationship to His creation. *God delights in mercy.* (Micah 7:18) *God's mercy reaches the heavens.* (Psalm 57) Mercy is God's steadfast love. (Psalm 36:7) *How precious is Thy steadfast love, O God! The children of men take refuge in Thy wings...With Thee is the fountain of life. In Thy light do we see light.* Read Psalm 136. It says 26 times that God's steadfast love endures forever. Without mercy there is no trust. Mercy is connected with truth, fidelity, commitment, and loyalty. Mercy is God's loyalty to those who are loyal to His purpose. Mercy is founded on the promise of God to be with us... always. And a world without God is a world without mercy. A world without mercy is a world without God

THEY SHALL OBTAIN MERCY

The evil show no mercy. To a pagan world, where unwanted children or infirm adults were discarded, where the stoic mind was seen as virtuous, Christ proclaims the blessings of mercifulness. We are to be merciful with one another, not only seven times, but seventy times seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22) Paul teaches us that we reap what we sow. (Galatians 6:7) In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus says, "*If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses.*" Matthew 7:23 says, "*With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.*"

The merciful are too aware of their own sins to condemn others. They are penitential through merciful deeds, having learned the truth in love and then doing unto others as they would have others do unto them. And so they obtain God's mercy. Mercy is something that is received when it is given. To be merciful is to think of others the way God does; to feel for them as God feels; and to act toward others as God acts toward us. And God might even act through us. To be merciful is to let God work through us.

The one great requirement of God in Micah 6:8 is to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. "Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this that power belongs to God; and to Thee, O Lord belongs mercy. for Thou dost requite a man according to his work. (Psalm 62:11-12) A world without God is as world without mercy.

This Beatitude is an attitude. It's the attitude that "*goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...*" Mercifulness is a choice to react positively and hopefully in every negative situation. The Prodigal Father chose to be merciful. If you want people to be good to you, be good to them. If you want people to be nice to you, be nice to them. If you want God to be merciful to you, be merciful to His other children. And God's care will carry you, so you can then carry others!

Robert Schuller says that the opposite of mercifulness is self-centeredness. Self-centeredness turns life into a burden. Unselfishness turns burdens into life. The best thing to do for our inner wounds is to live a life of mercy. Don't nurse your wounds. Don't curse your wounds. Don't rehearse your wounds. Immerse them in loving deeds of mercy. And in doing so, your wounds will reverse. Your wounds will make you more sensitive, compassionate, considerate, gracious, and merciful!

In effect, mercy is what purifies us!