

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

**Beatitudes 5: Mercy; *An Immediate Call To Action***

**SCRIPTURE READING – Matthew 5:3-12**

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is  
the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all  
kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for  
your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the  
prophets who were before you.

~~~~~

**INTRODUCTION**

This is part 5 of our series focusing on the Beatitudes. These are eight short sayings that Jesus preached in his very first sermon as recorded in chapter 5 of Matthew’s Gospel. Each one of these blessings brilliantly distils down the sum total of all the teachings that Jesus will be expand on throughout his entire ministry. The Beatitudes are like the preface to a book or the thesis statement of an essay. Each of these teachings reveals God’s point of view on humanity and also teach us what characteristics the beloved of God possess.

Please pray with me...

*Holy God of all blessing, thank you for sending Jesus and preserving these sacred teachings for us to absorb. Open our hearts to understand. Help us to grasp the full meaning and may we have the courage to truly follow in the Way of Jesus. AMEN.*

**“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”**

I have never met anyone who would willingly choose to be in a position of asking for mercy. It’s humiliating and shameful to be in need of mercy from someone. Thinking about it this week, I remembered when I was a young boy in rural Maine. My big brother and I would wrestle in the back yard of our childhood home. Now Steve was 2 years older and (at the time) quite a bit taller. In no time, he would tie me up in the most painful positions and tighten his grip further and further until I said the magic word...the word that was the very name of the game. Any guesses?

”Mercy”.

“What? I didn’t hear you!”

“Mercy!” I’d be forced to scream.

I think that’s commonly the way many of us view mercy. It’s a transaction between one who has power and one without. The one who shows mercy presumably feels the sudden ego-boost of benevolence and a self-satisfying sense of superior generosity, while the one who receives mercy limps away beaten and humiliated, but relieved of the pain.

In a culture that celebrates power as the ultimate path toward wealth, freedom and happiness, we might easily think that to be merciful we first must be powerful and to receive mercy we must be miserable, desperate failures. But Jesus is teaching from an altogether different playbook. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” he said, and those who mourn, and the ones who are meek. Jesus is saying that it is precisely those who know their own powerlessness that are the one’s who are blessed by God.

I don’t know about you but that is the complete opposite of what I was taught in the culture I grew up in. But, as the years passed, I encountered the bigger wrestling matches life challenged me to, I was eventually tied up in knots again and forced to turn my face toward God and cry, “mercy”. But, this time, mercy came not as humiliation but liberation. God’s mercy came as restoration and reorientation. It was not at all about power, it was all about grace, and I have never been the same since.

I have come to believe that to truly access the deep wisdom embedded in these beatitudes and all of the Gospel, we must go deep into the uncomfortable reality of our own inherent, existential powerlessness. We must honestly face the unresolved guilt and grief we have locked away, those things we did and said that weigh us down and fuel our insecurity. Those things that were done to us and said to us that enflame our fear and affirm our self-doubt. Because throwing light on that cold dark hidden place is where we will find a God who is mercy.

It's called hesed in Hebrew and it means a steadfast enduring love, which is unbreakable. It means loving-kindness. In the Hebrew Scriptures, hesed is God's primary attribute. Steadfast, unbreakable and enduring love is who God actually is. Hesed is the primary way that God relates to all of us, all the time.

You might remember about 10 years ago there was a tragic shooting at a one-room schoolhouse in a small Amish community. For no conceivable reason, a mentally ill man who lived near the town burst into the school and took the lives of 5 innocent young girls before shooting himself. Very soon after, the world was stunned when the entire Amish community publicly expressed forgiveness toward the killer and compassion for his family. They attended the man's funeral and even donated money to his widow and three young children. From the depths of their powerlessness and gut-wrenching grief they had a supernatural capacity to be genuinely merciful. The world was stunned.

It is mercy that paves the road to forgiveness. It is mercy that demonstrates the reality of grace as a healing balm.

Long before this unthinkable tragedy crushed their heart, this Amish community practiced a devotion to the God of loving-kindness. They lived in the deep and abiding knowledge of who they were and whose they were. They nurtured their soul the way they nurtured their farms, with great care and joyful discipline. So, when disaster came to call, their first instinct was not revenge and outrage; it was hesed, mercy and forgiveness.

True mercy offers us an alternative choice to our deeply entrenched, culturally shaped understanding of justice, vengeance, power and retaliation. To choose mercy is a daily practice that reorients us toward God's unconditional love and absolute acceptance. To know God we must practice acts of mercy as frequently as we can. Every single day we are given small opportunities to be kind and generous toward those who we may think do not deserve it. You

don't have to wait until your opponent is forced to say the word. Simply extend mercy because you can.

There's a story of a woman who had this strange dream where she walked into a new shop here in Concord Center. It looked like Deborah's Gourmet, but you know how dreams go. Anyway, to her great astonishment, she found God behind the counter.

She tentatively asked, "What do you sell here?"

"Everything your heart desires," God replied with a smile.

Quickly, the woman composed a mental list of the very best things anyone could ever want. She blurted out, "I'll take some peace of mind, and true love. Oh, and happiness along with wisdom, and lastly... I want freedom from fear!"

God held her gaze, knowing there was more to come.

"And not just for me." she added, "For everyone on earth."

God smiled and gently replied; "I think you've got me wrong my dear. We don't sell the fruit here. Only the seeds."

~~~~~  
These Beatitudes of Jesus are the seeds that we can choose to plant and then nurture. If we don't practice these blessings, they are merely cute little aphorisms of no real consequence. To be blessed and happy and at one with the God of *hesed*, we actually have to attempt putting them into practice in our everyday lives.

Jesus is saying that we can actually enjoy the fruits of God's realm here on earth, but first we must reorient our lives.

Where in your life can you be merciful? It is always a choice.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." AMEN