

Mercy Me

Message #7 in the series, "Blessed (for Chaos)"

Matthew 57-86 and Matthew 18:23-35

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*⁵"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
(Matthew 5:7-8)*

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18:23-35)

So, last week, as we looked at the fourth Beatitude -- "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."-- I mentioned, almost in passing, that we cannot give away what we do not have. That statement -- "**we cannot give away what we do not have**" -- is a profound statement, for sure, one that I wish I personally could take credit for. It's actually something that one of my mentors, Dr. John C. Maxwell, taught me a long time ago . . . and it has stayed with me over the years ever since. Now, John Maxwell probably was not the first person to put those words together into a memorable piece of wisdom. In fact, one could say that the principle behind that statement actually is a lesson found repeatedly in the Bible. We see that wisdom played out over and over in the stories of the Old Testament, and also in the letters of Paul, Peter and John -- and most definitely, in the Gospels, in the teachings of Jesus Himself.

You cannot give away what you do not have.

That simple truth is also found embedded within today's Beatitudes -- two of them, actually -- "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy*" . . . and "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*"

As a quick reminder, the Beatitudes are character traits that Jesus is teaching His disciples – traits that are to be reflected within the lives of those who would be His followers, members of the New Community that Jesus inaugurated at the beginning of His ministry. As we've been learning, these character traits are rather subversive within culture – in that they remind Jesus's followers that they are to live differently from the world, and by doing so, they will ambassador a hope that will upend the value systems of society.

Our culture doesn't really put a high priority on those who are poor in spirit, but Jesus does. Our culture doesn't really give space for those who are grieving, but Jesus does. Our culture does not honor the meek, but Jesus does. Our culture pursues instant gratification, feeding off of empty promises, but Jesus gives us Himself as the Bread of Life that truly satisfies our deepest cravings.

As with each of those other character traits, "mercy" and "purity of heart" come to us at great cost. A very great cost.

Let's start with mercy. Mercy is never offered within a vacuum. Rather, those who are merciful offer mercy to others because at some point in their lives they needed mercy -- and they had received mercy.

Mercy fundamentally is cyclical. We offer mercy because we have received mercy. And when we offer mercy, we will receive mercy again. In fact, in order for us to become merciful – in other words, mercy *givers* – we most likely will have been in a place of vulnerable humility at some point in our lives, a place of brokenness where we had been guilty of a charge, deserving of punishment, but had been forgiven instead.

To illustrate the point, look with me at a biblical example that makes this case – actually from the reverse perspective. Turn with me in your Bible to Matthew 18, starting at verse 23.

As you're turning there, let me first give you a definition of the word "mercy." According to the Oxford dictionary, **"mercy" is defined as "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm."**

In simpler terms, **mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone who doesn't appear to deserve it.**

Hold on to that definition for a few moments and turn with me now to Matthew 18:23-35. This is what it says . . .

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mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Did you ever hear the axiom, "**What goes around, comes around?**" Did you ever say it? While it's quite common to hear someone say that in our modern day, whether we realize it or not, it's actually rooted in the biblical principle of "sowing and reaping." In essence, the principle is pretty straight forward -- you reap what you sow. You sow bitterness, you reap bitterness. You plant seeds of division, you reap a culture of conflict. "Sowing and reaping." This principle also illustrates the cyclical nature of mercy. You sow mercy, you reap mercy. You don't sow mercy, you won't receive mercy. The parable that Jesus tells here is His way of telling the listener that there are always ramifications to the way we treat other people. Mercy produces mercy. A lack of mercy produces a lack of mercy.

And let's not miss the final point of the parable in verse 35 – Jesus says, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Clearly, Jesus is making a strong point here about forgiveness – and about mercy. It's the same point He made when He taught the disciples what we now know as "The Lord's Prayer" – "forgive us our sins [or trespasses, or debts – whichever version you prefer to use, it's all the same point] ... forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Mercy is cyclical in nature.

And based on what it is, there's also a cost to mercy. **The cost is that mercy always involves loss** of some sort. You have to give up or surrender something – your pride, your pain, your confession of guilt, your admission of brokenness – you have to give up or surrender it as a price tag for mercy. Why is that important for the follower of Jesus? – Because each of us must face the Cross of Christ – that place where we acknowledge our brokenness, our sin and our need for a Savior – that place where we see Jesus taking onto Himself what our sin deserves. His act of love and sacrifice on the Cross is a gift of divine mercy. And each and every one of us has received that sacrifice as a gift of forgiveness that we don't deserve. Mercy. That gift of mercy that we have received, changes us on the inside – enabling us then to offer it to others.

As the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 . . .

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, ⁴ who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

Mercy is respecting – indeed, valuing -- the people whose losses are deeply felt, whose losses are both tangibly and intangibly real, and whose losses are seen as part of God's greater plan for us. **Mercy is seeing the person behind the behavior and respecting the story that led to that person becoming who they are, and doing what they have done . . .** and then moving toward them with an honor that they don't deserve.

Now remember -- **You cannot give away what you do not have.** God showed us mercy on the Cross of Christ so that we, in turn, would be able to offer mercy to others – whether they deserve it or not.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." The principle of sowing and reaping. What goes around, comes around. Mercy offered leads to mercy given.

But we have another Beatitude to consider today, as well. And they are both intimately linked together: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."* Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Research has shown that consumers (that's us) are **bombarded by between 3,500 to 5,000 marketing messages every day** -- all trying to get us to buy their products or buy into how we're just not good enough unless we have what they're selling. One of the goals of advertising is to get us to be so dissatisfied with something about our life that we end up actually talking ourselves into needing their product. It's a very effective sales strategy called "SPIN selling." Television commercials, social media feeds, magazine covers, movies, billboards, radio programs . . . all of it bombards our minds and our souls with messages that try to influence us to buy into whatever our culture is trying to sell us about who we are supposed to be, what we're supposed to look like, what we're supposed to believe, what we're supposed to value . . . and how we're not good enough unless we buy, look like, believe and value what "they" say we should buy, look like, believe and value.

The problem is – when we listen to those messages and tune our souls into those voices, we actually begin to give those messages power to define us, power to evaluate our happiness and satisfaction, power to shape our character. By giving power to those voices, we've actually created a culture where we're just never good enough. No wonder depression and loneliness have rapidly become major mental health crises today.

When we give defining power to these messages, **we actually start living our lives from the outside in, rather than from the inside out.** We allow outside influences to tell us who we are, rather than the Holy Spirit, who actually created us.

But that's not what Jesus wants for His followers in the New Community. **God wants us to live the abundant blessing of a life lived inside out.**

Jesus said, **"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."**

What does Jesus mean by "pure in heart"? Well, we know from the Scriptures that in order for us to stand in God's presence, we must have a pure heart. Psalm 24:3-4 says, "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart." Is He talking about our actual physical heart? No. Being pure in heart means that we are **blameless** in thought and action. Blameless.

So, what we learned last week is that for us to be righteous, blameless, is impossible apart from a relationship with Jesus, the only One who is righteous. But through that relationship with Jesus, by virtue of the blood that He shed on the Cross on our behalf, we can be people who are pure in heart. God actually wants us to live life from the inside out.

In Luke 6:45 (NLT), Jesus teaches His disciples a lesson that actually has great wisdom for us today:

⁴⁵ A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.

In the two verses prior to this one, Jesus uses another metaphor to make the point:

⁴³ "A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ⁴⁴ A tree is identified by its fruit.

So, in essence, what Jesus is teaching is that our behavior says something about the condition of our heart, our soul. In other words, our behavior always says more about us than it does anyone or anything else. Bad behavior reveals something painful, some kind of internal conflict taking place in the person's soul. If the fruit is bad, Jesus says, the tree is not healthy. But good behavior testifies to a heart that is good, a soul that is at peace with the Lord.

Notice also the word choice that Jesus uses in verse 45: "A good person produces good things from **the treasury of a good heart**, and an evil person produces evil things from **the treasury of an evil heart**." A treasury is a place where we accumulate and store something valuable. You might say, "well, I get the valuable part for the good heart, but what about the evil heart?" Great question! So, a person who accumulates evil in their heart is a person whose pain recruits pain wherever they go. This is the person who sees only the brokenness in others because they have not made peace with the brokenness in themselves. The person is actually valuing pain and evil in others as a way of justifying their dark view of themselves and of their world. The pain and evil become a treasure for them that's stored up as a legacy. In order to find healing and hope in the midst of their accruing darkness, they need the penetrating, healing light of Jesus's love. Until then, evil and pain in one's heart gives birth to evil and pain in how we treat others.

In order for us to be what the Beatitude says – namely, "pure in heart" – we have to move from living outside-in, to living inside-out. And the only way that can happen is through a heart transformation -- by surrendering our heart to the life giving Lord, Jesus Christ.

Pastor and author, Dallas Willard, once wrote, "The aim of spiritual formation is not behavior modification, but the transformation... of the heart." You see, in Christ, our hearts are re-formed by the Holy Spirit – enabling us to "see" God at work, enabling us to "see" God's handiwork – in ourselves, in others, and even in creation. And "seeing" God allows us to walk in His presence and move in His renewing power. The Holy Spirit actually empowers us, as Paul says in Philippians 2:13 -- "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

That is what I mean by living the inside out life. When the work of God is done on the inside, you'll truly see the effect of heart transformation on the outside, in our behavior, in our choices, in how we treat others . . . the way God intended.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (NRSV), the apostle Paul writes:

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

These quick verses tell us a lot. First, Paul lets us know that heart transformation is something that *God* does in us. We don't do it ourselves. This is not behavior modification, as Dallas Willard indicated. It's a total re-forming of the heart – from the inside out. God is the One who works this renewal in us. Second, notice the word, "**entirely**" – "May the God of peace himself sanctify you **entirely**." When we invite Jesus to have our hearts, the Holy Spirit moves in and starts to clean house. He goes into every nook and cranny of our life, every storage closet, every basement and attic (metaphorically speaking), and He begins to sweep out the crud, the things that no longer deserve the space we have given them in our souls and lives.

In theology and spiritual formation language, we call this process, "**sanctification**." Literally, it is **the process of being made holy**. And it's all being done in us by God in order to prepare us – to make us "blameless" – at "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," as it says in these verses.

In Greek, the word for “coming” is the word **parousia** – and it refers to the Second Coming of Christ, the day Jesus returns to claim the Church as His bride. Until that Day of days when Christ returns, the Holy Spirit continues to work in us. He transforms us, equips us, empowers us to live our lives from the inside out. When our hearts are transformed by God’s grace, our behavior follows.

Finally, notice verse 24 – “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.” Do you see that strong statement of purpose – “**He will do this.**” God is faithful to His word. When God makes a promise, He keeps it. God is able to take the most wretched person and re-form them from the inside out. *God* does this. We don’t. God does. The Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and transforms us from the inside out. It is God’s gift to each of us who put our trust in Jesus Christ. He prepares us to stand in His presence. It begins with salvation – confessing our need for a Savior, acknowledging that Jesus is that Savior – and then moves to our allowing the Holy Spirit to sanctify us, purify us from the inside out. God wants us to live into the full blessing that He has for us.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Mercy and Purity of heart ---- they start with YOU. You can’t give away what you don’t have.

Are you living outside in or inside out?

Today, we celebrate Pentecost – the birthday of the Church – where the Holy Spirit came down and filled those first disciples, empowering them to be Jesus’s witnesses in the world. That same Holy Spirit is wanting to fill you today. And all you need to do is ask Him to come into your heart. Give Him access to your heart and He’ll transform your whole life. Allow Him to fill you with His peace as He purifies your heart and life. You may have accepted Jesus as your Savior, receiving His gift of forgiveness by virtue of His crucifixion and resurrection. Now, I invite you to trust Him with your life. Allow Him to be your Lord as well as your Savior.

Let me pray for you . . . Holy Spirit, come upon each person who hears this message and opens their heart to You. Purify their heart, Lord. Transform them from the inside out. Make them new creations in Christ Jesus. Empower them with a deepening desire to walk as Jesus walked, to love as Jesus loved, to value what Jesus valued, to forgive as Jesus forgave, and to live in the joy that Jesus died to provide. Thank You that we can trust You. Thank You for loving us. In Jesus’s name I pray. Amen.