

MATTHEW 5:7

INTRODUCTION

Remember that as we have been going through these beatitudes we have been learning whom it is that is blessed. To be blessed means to be truly happy; to have an inner happiness and contentedness that is not affected by personal well being or personal circumstances.

So far we have seen that it is those who are poor in spirit and mourn for their sin and are meek and hunger and thirst after righteousness that are truly blessed. Today we come to another aspect of being blessed and that is; the merciful are blessed people.

So far in the beatitudes we have dealt with inner principles and attitudes of heart. We have been concerned with the way we see ourselves before God and with our relationship with God. The final five beatitudes deal with the outward manifestation of our relationship with God.

For example those who are poor in spirit recognise their need for mercy and are therefore led to show mercy (v 1 &7). Those who mourn for sin are led to purity of heart (vs., 2 & 8). Those who are meek seek peace (vs. 3:9) and those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are always willing to pay the price of seeking righteousness (vs. 4 &10-11). Now let us seek to understand the beatitude that we are looking at today.

1. THE MEANING OF MERCY

The days in which Jesus lived were not days characterised by mercy. We need to see just how radical Jesus teaching is in these beatitudes. The religious Jews were not inclined to show mercy because mercy is not often found in the proud, self righteous and judgmental. To most of Jesus hearers showing mercy was considered one of the least of the virtues of life if it was thought to be a virtue at all.

If it was practised, it tended to be shown to those who had been merciful to you, a bit of tit for tat sort of attitude. Of course we are no better in our own society for it's all about looking after No. 1 in the knowledge that if you don't look after yourself no one else will. Such an attitude stops us showing mercy to others for to do so means thinking about them and considering them something not really encouraged in our society.

But what does Jesus mean by the word merciful? It comes from a Greek word from which we ultimately get words like beneficial or charitable. Obviously the perfect example of mercy is seen in Jesus Christ. He is described as our merciful and faithful High Priest (Hebrews 2:17). Jesus Christ is not only the supreme example of mercy but also the supreme dispenser of mercy.

It is from Jesus Christ that both redeeming and sustaining mercy comes. In the Greek translated of the Old Testament (Septuagint) the Greek word for "mercy" is used to translate a very common Hebrew word, which is used to describe God's character. That word is "hesed" and it is usually translated as lovingkindness, or mercy or steadfast love.

Its basic meaning is to give help to the needy, to rescue the helpless; mercy is compassion in action. But this is not an occasional action moved by some terrible situation but this is a settled conviction and attitude. This is a mercy that is consistent not an occasional action.

True mercy is not sympathy nor is it action to solve a guilty conscience like giving money to help the hungry in the world, nor is it action to impress others. Mercy is genuine love and compassion expressed in genuine action of help to others in need. It is selfless concern expressed in selfless

deeds. Jesus is saying that those who are blessed are those who consistently love in practical ways those who consistently give of themselves to meet the needs of people.

It is not simply feeling compassionate but showing compassion, it is not only showing sympathy but it is giving a helping hand. It is practical mercy, which gives food to the hungry, comfort to the bereaved, love to the rejected and forgiveness to the offender and companionship to the lonely.

God is merciful to us all the time. We who are Christians are forgiven because God showed us mercy. We were helpless in our sin unable to do anything to receive God's forgiveness and yet God comes to us and shows us mercy and forgives us all our sin. But his mercy does not end with salvation.

Everyday he shows us mercy when we sin but even when we are not sinning God is constantly being merciful to us reaching out to us to help us in all our weakness and need. His mercy to us never ceases, every day God pours out his love and mercy towards us (Lamentations 3:22).

2. THE SOURCE OF MERCY

Where does this mercy come from? Mercy is a gift from God for mankind is not naturally inclined to be merciful. In fact mankind is inclined to be selfish and ruthless not merciful. However for those of us who are Christians then we have received mercy from God. He has not dealt with us as we deserved but has had pity on us and as a consequence has been gracious to us and has saved us from sin and hell.

We are born again by His Spirit and as a consequence of this new birth we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who enables us to show mercy to others. We are enabled to show mercy because we have been shown mercy by God. We can show mercy consistently and with the right motives only because we have been shown mercy by God.

Those who have been shown mercy are those who have been enabled to have a poverty of spirit; they have been enabled to mourn for their sin. They are enabled by God through His Spirit to be meek to be brought under the control of the Spirit and are enabled to seek after righteousness. So God is the source of all mercy shown. No one can display this gift of consistent mercy to others until we have received this gift from God.

Once God shows us mercy and as a result transforms our lives then we will become merciful people. We will be inclined towards mercy rather than being hard-hearted and self centred. We are indeed blessed when we show mercy to others but we must always remember that we are able to be merciful to others only because we have received God's mercy in salvation.

But if God is the source of mercy then let us ask how is this mercy demonstrated within our lives and to our world? The most obvious way is through physical acts as for example the Good Samaritan. Jesus commands us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned and give any other practical help that is needed. In serving others in need we are demonstrating a heart of mercy.

God has always intended his people to show his mercy to our world. God's law within the Old Testament clearly commanded his people to show mercy to the poor and needy (Deuteronomy 15:7-8). So mercy is clearly shown in our deeds and we are therefore challenged to show God's mercy more consistently with our dealings with people in our church and in our world.

But mercy can also be demonstrated in our attitudes. Mercy for example does not hold grudges, it does not harbour resentment, and it refuses to take advantage of someone else's failures and

weaknesses. It refuses to publicise other people's sins instead mercy shows understanding, a willingness to forgive and a willingness to help those in various needs.

It is so easy to pass by on the other side in our attitudes to others in need like the priest and Levite did in the parable of the Good Samaritan. There is no blessing for those who are vindictive or indifferent in attitude towards those in need. It is only those who are consistently merciful who are blessed and those who show mercy demonstrate that they have received mercy from God.

But mercy can be shown spiritually as well. We can show pity for those who are spiritually lost. If we are to show mercy when someone is in physical need then surely we must show mercy when they are spiritually lost.

Of course there is a difference for when someone is in physical need they will appreciate the mercy shown towards them, whereas when someone is spiritually in need they will resent our mercy for they fail to see their need. Yet if we can be moved when we see physical need then surely we should be even more moved when we see the spiritual needs of sinners all around us. You see if we have received God's mercy as sinners and have been redeemed by the grace of God then do we not want others to receive that same mercy that we have received? Do we not want others to experience God's mercy and grace?

Therefore although sinners do not understand this, showing mercy to sinners' means telling them the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It means praying that God might be merciful to them and might work in their lives so that they know this wonderful blessing of being merciful to others because they have received God's mercy.

Of course showing mercy to sinners might mean that we have to expose their errors and seek to correct them in their thinking and understanding. It is not being merciful to be quiet when people are displaying wrong beliefs or are unknowingly sinning against the Lord.

It takes courage to do so but if we are merciful people we will show pity to them and show them in a loving and gracious way the error of their ways so that God in his grace might show mercy to them by granting them salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. THE RESULT OF MERCY

We are told that when we are merciful we will receive mercy. But what does this mean? Surely it cannot be a reward for showing mercy. Surely we cannot earn God's mercy? I think there are two ways of understanding this part of our verse. We see here God's cycle of mercy. God is merciful to us by saving us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As a consequence we begin to display God's mercy to others and God in his faithfulness to us gives us even more mercy, pouring out grace to us in meeting our many and varied needs.

The Greek here makes it clear that it is they who are merciful that will receive God's mercy. But we must be clear here for Jesus does not mean that our display of mercy earns us salvation. That is God shows us mercy in saving us because we have shown mercy to others. The bible is clear that we do not earn mercy by being merciful.

We must first be saved by God's mercy before we can begin to show true consistent mercy to others. We cannot work or earn our way into heaven; even if it were possible to give ourselves to merciful works it would not earn any of us salvation. But mercy is a mark of salvation; it demonstrates that we have been shown mercy by God.

When we fail to show mercy then God holds back the flow of his mercy into our lives and instead disciplines us so that we will learn to demonstrate God's mercy to us by being merciful to others.

But another way to understand this part of the verse is to see it as referring to the final day of Judgement. On that day God will show us mercy because we have consistently demonstrated that God has shown us mercy in salvation by the way we have showed mercy to others.

In other words people who consistently show mercy to others do so because they have experienced God's mercy in salvation and therefore on that final day they have no fears of not receiving God's continual mercy. The implication of course is that if someone is not consistently showing mercy to others, then they have not experienced God's mercy and have no right to think that God will be merciful to them on the judgement day.

There is a passage in 2 Timothy 1:16-18 that helps us here to understand this better. Onesiphorus had shown mercy to Paul in his time of need. As a result Paul prays that God will show mercy to his family and on that final judgement day Onesiphorus will find that the Lord who showed him mercy in salvation will continue to be merciful to Onesiphorus on that final day.

So in conclusion if we have received from a Holy God unlimited mercy and grace that cancels our unpayable debt of sin then surely we will demonstrate God's mercy to us by being merciful to others. We who had no righteousness of our own but were poor in spirit, mourning over our sin and in a helpless and wretched condition called out and received mercy then surely we will want to be merciful to others.

We who were brought under control by the Spirit of God and daily seek to live righteous lives before God because of his mercy and grace to us then surely it follow that we should be merciful to others. In so doing we will constantly experience and know the unlimited mercy of God towards us now and in the future.

One day we will find that the God who is consistently merciful to sinners and enables sinners to be merciful will in that final day continue to show mercy to all who have demonstrated God's mercy to others.

Amen