

Where Blessing is Found  
#6 – “In Being Radically Merciful”

Matthew 5:7 and 8: 21-35

At one point in Frederick Buechner’s lovely novel, *Godric*, which is written as if it were the life memoir of the title character, a medieval monk in England, Godric cries out an anguished prayer to God to have “daylight mercy on my midnight soul.” I love that prayer for it resonates so deeply with both our worst reality and most wonderful hope.

First, the reality. Who among us, if we have done any honest self-searching, does not shudder at the poverty of love and the absence of that nobility and selfless goodness which we would long to behold within our hearts? With any degree of candid self-examination, have we not recoiled at what we see within: a veritable snake’s nest of sin, deceit, bitterness, cruelty and desperate miserableness? Kathleen Norris, in her book, *The Virgin of Bennington*, acknowledges our true condition when she writes: *I will always regard it as an example of God’s great mercy and inexhaustible creativity that so unpromising a creature as I might begin to turn her life to the good.* Who among us, unpromising creatures that we are, who have turned each of us to our own ways and who fall so short of the glory of God, who among us cannot, does not, or should not, lament the midnight soul that dwells within?

Yet here’s the remarkable thing. While the reality is that of our midnight soul, still, hope we have. We have a hope which has nothing at all to do with any imagined scraps of goodness, any protested noble intentions or self-justifying rationalizations that we might try to assert as some balance-swinging sufficiency which would overcome the ugliness of our midnight souls. What hope we have, and glorious hope it is, is the daylight mercy that flows from the heart of God. The daylight mercy of him who so

loved this rebellious, arrogant, sin-immersed and sin-tossed world that he would give his only Son to suffer and die for us is the only hope we have, yet a hope so big and glorious and powerful and good, we need none other. For the daylight mercy of our God is more than sufficient to bring healing and cleansing, forgiveness and salvation, to the midnight soul of this whole desperate old world, and even to you, and even to me.

It is this wondrous daylight mercy of God given to the midnight souls in all of us which becomes the starting point for understanding the promise and challenge of the fifth Beatitude. To understand the Master’s words that blessed are the merciful, we begin with the greatest hope in the world which is the amazing, undeserved and utterly precious mercifulness of God.

To understand what mercy is, we must begin in the Old Testament, where we find one of the most beautiful Hebrew words, *chesedh*, or mercy of God, which occurs more than one hundred and fifty times, almost always to describe the action and attitude of God towards his people. I’m sure many of you are familiar with the distinction that is often given between mercy and grace. Mercy, so the adage says, is not getting what we deserve while grace is getting what we don’t deserve. That is, mercy is not getting the punishment and rejection of God which we deserve because of our sins, while grace is the receiving of that compassion and love upon which we can in no wise make a claim based on any merit of our own.

But such distinction, while helpful, tends to cast mercy in a rather negative form – as a decision not to treat someone with the severe justice that they deserve and instead to relax the debt owed or to erase the sentence that should be inflicted. But *chesedh*, mercy in the Old Testament means so much more, for it refers to what William Barclay called the outgoing kindness of the heart of God. We often talk about the outgoing personality of some charismatic person, which causes them to be always reaching out with inviting welcome and attracting power. That is

what Barclay means when he talks about God's mercy as this outgoing kindness that cannot help itself but to be searching out with contagious compassion all who are broken and who despair, to be pursuing with enveloping love all who are helpless and afraid, and to be doing all and sacrificing everything to capture and bless this fallen yet never forsaken world.

Thus we read in the prophet Isaiah (62:12) that mercy belongs to God, while Micah (7:18) said that God delights in mercy. The Psalmist variously sings that the mercy of God is so infinite that it reaches to the heavens and so enduring that it lasts forever or endures forever. Not only was the mercy of God demonstrated in every act of deliverance of Israel throughout history, from the exodus to the return from exile, the very nature and structure of creation reveals the mercy of God. The Psalmist said that the earth is full of the mercy of God while Job affirmed that it was from the mercy of God that come even the rain and sunshine. It is this outgoing mercy of God which is the ground of our every appeal to the Lord for him to come and save us in time of trouble. It is to his mercy that we appeal when we have sinned and disobeyed. When Moses cried for God to forgive the perversity and stubbornness of Israel, he asked God to remember his own great mercy. The Psalmist variously says that God's *chesedh*, God's mercy, is what alone provides us with confidence, joy, hope, strength. God's mercy, which in the Old Testament is very often linked with God's truth, is declared steadfast and true, giving light and wisdom and direction and power to the lives of all who trust in him. Indeed, it is because of God's mercy above all that his people have learned to trust in him alone. Mercy is the outgoing love of God to his covenant people, an outgoing love and kindness to which God will ever be faithful and true.

We find the same themes echoing through the New Testament where the Hebrew word *chesedh* becomes in Greek *eleos*. In the letter to the Ephesians, we read that God is rich in

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mercy, while in his letter to Titus Paul affirmed that it is mercy that has saved us. The letter to the Hebrews says that it is mercy which we find at the throne of grace, while the first letter of Peter declares that it is mercy which gives us hope through the resurrection of Jesus. In Jude, we are told that it is by his mercy that Jesus gifts us with eternal life. In his letter to the Romans, Paul especially emphasizes that it was because of mercy that the gospel of Christ was given to the Gentiles, and the extravagant, outgoing loving kindness of God that refused to settle with just the covenant people of Israel but sought to embrace and save all people and all creation. Thus is the greatness of God's mercy, that is revealed so beautifully and powerfully and completely in the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross for you and for me. Thus the command and promise that blessed are the merciful, they shall receive mercy.

One of the key elements in the parable of the unforgiving servant was the sheer contrast between the vastness of debt owed by the first servant, of which his master completely forgave him, and that owed to this servant by the second. Jesus deliberately painted a picture of extremities. The debt of the first servant in modern dollars would be something just shy of one hundred million dollars, while in contrast the second servant owed something like one hundred fifty dollars. One hundred fifty dollars compared to one hundred million. The point of such an outrageous differential was to describe how incomprehensibly vast is the debt of sin which God in his outgoing mercy, has forgiven us, most especially through the sacrifice of his Son. Don't forget, you and I stand in the position of the first servant in the parable. Ours is not the little debt owed by the second servant, though in our great sinfulness we often want to minimize the blackness and poverty of our midnight soul as if it were just a trifling matter. No, ours is the multi-million, multi-billion and multi-trillion debt of evil, disbelief, selfishness and sin that has been already forgiven and erased, completely and forever, by

the precious blood of Jesus Christ. We are those who, then, having received mercy beyond measure beyond imagining, are called to yield mercy with the same measure and loveliness, the same power, graciousness and generosity as with which Jesus brings God's mercy to us.

Because the risk of not doing so is so great, as evidenced by the terror and tragedy of the first unforgiving servant, whose lack of mercy despite his experience of mercy left him utterly bereft of mercy. It is the tragedy John Meier named when he said that a Christian cannot win God's forgiveness, but he can lose it by refusing to extend it to a brother. It is the warning which the apostle James offered when he wrote that he who has shown no mercy will inherit judgment without mercy, and both this parable of the unforgiving servant and Jesus' teaching of the Lord's prayer end with the stern promise that unless we forgive from the heart, unless we show mercy as mercy has been given, we will not be able to receive mercy.

What Jesus seems to be saying in this beatitude, I think, is that the very sickness of sin and selfishness that drives us to minimize our sins all the while maximizing the sins of others, or that drives us to demand a callous, unrequited judgment against those who have wounded us even if we would never want such a yardstick to be weighed against us, is the same sin and selfishness that simply refuses to be in awe or refuses to give thanks for the vastness and power of the mercy God offers us. You know the old expression: it is hard to be full of God's mercy or joy when you are too full of yourself. Divine and outrageously lavish mercy, God's *chesedh*, surrounds us at every moment, yet until we receive, rejoice and revel in the wonder of that mercy that wants to seize hold of us, there shall be no mercy in us to give. Only when we are humbled prostrate and powerless and in rapt adoration and love before the cross, utterly ruined by and rapturous with the mercy that Christ Jesus pours out to us, shall we begin to have both the wisdom of mercy by which to see

others with the compassion with which Jesus looks upon us and have also the power of mercy with which to yield kindness, forgiveness and care to those others in the way Jesus has poured out to us.

So where might mercy shine? Let me suggest two directions and one encouragement. The Second World War martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* said that *the merciful will be found consorting with publicans and sinners, careless of the shame they thereby incur. In order that they might be merciful, they cast away the most priceless treasure of human life, their personal dignity and honor. For the only honor and dignity they now is their Lord's own mercy, to which alone they owe their very lives.* Where are we called to show mercy? To all and any who don't deserve it, as we do not. But perhaps we owe and are called to show mercy especially and immediately to all and any and to the one to whom right now we most assuredly do not want to give such a gift, be it the grace of forgiveness, the work of reconciliation, the word of blessing, the act of generosity. Simply ask your own heart, and if in doubt, ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to the one who needs mercy from you; yield it, and be amazed at how much more wondrous becomes your awareness of, dependence upon and gladness in the mercy of God for you.

But where else might we be called to show mercy? Georges Bernanos, in *The Diary of a Country Priest*, encouraged the remembrance that *God wants us to be merciful with ourselves. [And this also:] our sorrows are not our own. He takes them on himself, into his heart.* Blessed are the merciful, including when we show true kindness and forgiveness towards ourselves. The most damning and unmerciful judge we will ever face is the heartless tyrant of our own self-despising, which lives again in our own midnight souls. Perhaps the most difficult work of grace is always that of leading us to forgive ourselves, and accept ourselves as merely human, and not God. Perhaps most

blessed are those who have learned to yield mercy to the sinner that we all of us are. God is gracious and kind and has forgiven us of all our sins; may we dare, in his power and in the light of his mercy, forgive ourselves, and begin to hunger and thirst for more and more of that healing mercy with which we might be set fully free and be brought fully alive.

And here's the encouragement: do not ever forget that God has for you, God has for me, not a measly, paltry little bit of mercy to give us, and that grudgingly meted out in parsimonious, hesitant fashion. In Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, a million, billion, trillion dollars worth of mercy has been poured out for you and for me, a treasury of grace and love beyond description, and it has been paid out in full. It is out of the power and wonder and vastness of that wealth of mercy that is already ours with which we in turn, and in the name of Jesus, can be the mercy-givers who bring healing to hearts and healing to the world, to our own eternal joy.

Let us pray:

○ Thou who has indeed shone daylight mercy on our midnight souls, enable us, we pray, in spite of ourselves, to be of so much use to your glory, that by your mercy to our sin, other sinners may see how much sin you truly can pardon. Humble and fill our hearts with such joy to overflowing that living in your mercy and living out your mercy becomes our truest worship and highest obedience. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.