

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

Matthew 5: 1-12; I Corinthians 13: 1-4

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There is a story told about a mother who approached Napoleon asking for pardon for her son. Napoleon replied that the woman's son has twice committed a crime for which justice needed to be done – the boy deserved to die. The woman said, 'But I do not plead for justice, I plead for mercy.' But, your son does not deserve mercy," said Napoleon. "But it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask of you," replied the mother. Because of the mother's very clear and sound reasoning, Napoleon said, "Well then, I will give him mercy," and he spared the woman's son. Mercy is given to those who do not necessarily deserve it. Here is a definition of mercy: *"compassion or forgiveness shown to someone when it is within one's power to punish or harm."* Sometimes people are not deemed worthy of mercy because they are not valued.

Who are valued? Theologian and author, Jean Vanier, in his book "Becoming Human" states: *"we are in a culture of competition. The strong, the beautiful, the intelligent, and the capable are magnified and extolled. The weak and the vulnerable are often put aside."* This is the mentality of our western society today, but multiply that a number of times and you get close to the Roman context Jesus was born into. Roman society was one of brutality against the weak and vulnerable.

Eric Kolbell, in his book *What Jesus meant, the Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, wrote that Jesus was so familiar with the word 'Mercy' in the Hebrew scriptures as either a description of God or as an instruction to us. Kolbell stated, *"In Jesus world, vengeance came more quickly than forgiveness, and punishment more frequently than pardon. An eye for an eye was the rough equivalent of retributive justice. The imperialists thought nothing of taking the life of a slave for the mere sport of it. Mercy was a lesson easily lost, and I believe this was the one reason Jesus singled out the merciful for blessing. Nor should the lesson be lost on us (pg. 84)."* Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

The defense of the defenseless: In 1996, Preacher and Christian author Fleming Rutledge spoke with the Jewish author Arthur Hertzberg about an inter-faith meeting Hertzberg had recently attended. The participants at that meeting represented the different world religions. They came up with a commitment that all who were around the table could agree on. After the discussion, they agreed on this commitment: "The defense of the defenseless". There certainly would be different ways this would be applied, but the commitment was there. Both Rutledge and Hertzberg agreed the reason this is so important (the defense of the defenseless) is because in the end, it includes everybody. Rutledge then went on to write this: *"The tables can turn at any time. Even a rich and powerful person can become defenseless and weak at any moment."* At the very least, at birth we are totally vulnerable and dependent, and also at the time of needing help at the end of our lives, we will be totally dependent on others.

Your neighbor shares your humanity. Eric Kolbell said that no one has improved on Henri Nouwen's definition of compassion (Mercy): *"it grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. The partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the*

same dust, subject to the same laws, destined to the same end.” A surviving family member at the end of World War 1 asked why we are fighting one another- we have the same red blood!

Eric Kolbell continues to articulate this sharing of humanity: *“The truth is, each one of us is a rich pastel of hopes and wishes, fears and uncertainties, aspirations and disappointments. We all want to be treated with respect from strangers, affection by friends and devotion by family (as Nouwen says) to meet our fellow human beings, with whom we share the weighty burdens of love and hate, of life and death. (Pg. 86)”*

Having an understanding of other people’s pain; We have so much societal pressure to be more successful than the person next to us, that we have forgotten how to be good and kind to them. We pursue excellence with the thought that the more competent we are in our work, or the better we are as an athlete, for example, the more freedom we will have in terms of jobs we want, social recognition, power, etc. Kolbell states that this sense of freedom is a myth, and actually the reverse is true. That is, we find freedom when we are able to embrace our imperfections, our flaws and our shortcomings. The pressure of always needing to be more perfect at what we do - can be challenging on the very short term, but restricting in the long run. It is in self-acceptance that the seeds of mercy are sown – our struggles can breed compassion and our failing forgiveness to others. When we know our short-comings we can be more understanding of other people’s pain.

Being merciful is a ‘win-win’. Everyone wins when you are merciful. Not only for others but for you as well! Jesus states it clearly in the 5th beatitude: *Blessed are those who are merciful, for they shall receive mercy!* The Hebrew word for ‘mercy’ is ‘hesed’ (The Hebrew Old Testament was the scripture Jesus used). Hebrew has a word for life-long love that is richer and deeper than English has ever conceived of—*hesed* (HEH-sed). Based in a covenantal relationship, *hesed* is a steadfast, rock-solid faithfulness that endures to eternity. For example: *“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love (hesed) for you will not be shaken (Isaiah 54:10.)”* The word *hesed* is a pure description of God in the Old Testament. The word ‘hesed’ speaks of a completely undeserved kindness and generosity done by a person who is in a position of power. This was how the Israelites experienced God. God revealed himself to them when they were not looking for him, and he kept his covenant with them long after their persistent breaking of the covenant had destroyed any reason for him to continue to keep it.

Unlike humans, this God was not fickle, undependable, self-serving, and grasping. Instead he was faithful, true, upright, and always generous. When we give mercy (*hesed*) to others, a relationship is built and the reciprocation of mercy is a natural response. This nature of God (*hesed*) was found in Jesus through his life, death and resurrection from the dead. Jesus is ‘God with us’ in relationship to all people of the world.

What do you want to be? In July of 1985, our first born Luke came into the world. Sitting on the side of the bed beside Jackie and our first child, I said to Jackie, “What do you think he will become? Do you think he may do something great, be a scientist or a influential leader?” Jackie’s response caught me straight between the eyes: She said, “I want him to be kind.” ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’. Amen.

(Eric Kolbell: “What Jesus Meant – the Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life” Westminster, John Knox Press, 2003.)