

Title: Happy are the Merciful  
Text: Matthew 5.7  
Theme: The mercy of God and his people  
Series: Matthew #16  
Prop Stmtnt: Mercy is given if mercy has been received.

Read Text:

As long as there have been movies, there have been superheroes. One of the great things about being a parent is that I get to use my kids as an excuse to go see superhero movies. But through the years of watching Spiderman, Batman, Superman, Ironman, I have noticed a predictable theme. The villains are despicable because they show no pity, while the superheroes are vulnerable because they do. In every storyline that I can remember, the superhero's pity is used against him. The villain knows that the superhero is moved with compassion by the needs of people and will lay down his life if he has to in order to save them. In the history of this world, that is not the norm. Rome had no use for pity. If you were weak, you were useless. If you were miserable, you were discarded. Rome was not unusual. The Greeks shared the same sentiment. Aristotle wrote that pity was a troublesome emotion.

Mercy is a hallmark of Christianity. In so many ways, mercy is our flag; it is our calling card. Mercy is our badge of honor. In the history of the world, the vast majority of orphanages, hospitals, homeless shelters, rescue missions, soup kitchens, food programs and other charities were started by Christians. Our world today wants to get rid of Jesus, just like they did when Jesus was here on earth. If they did, this world would become a very cruel place.

### 1. What is mercy?

We use the terms mercy and grace and there is some overlap between them. I have often defined grace as being given something that we do not deserve because grace is a loving response toward someone when love is not deserved. Grace is love being poured out on the undeserving. Mercy is similar, though it emphasizes a slightly different aspect. Like grace, mercy is a loving response, but the response is generated by the misery and the helplessness of a person. So, while grace responds to the undeserving, mercy responds to the miserable. There are two aspects of mercy. 1) Mercy is moved to grant pardon to the one who is in the wrong and 2) Mercy gives kindness to the one who is in need. Sometimes, these are combined when someone who was an enemy is in need of help.

Let me give you an example that will help. Later on in Matthew 9, Jesus calls Matthew to follow him. Matthew worked for the Roman IRS, and it was just discovered that he was investigating all 501-C3 Jewish non-profit organizations, and challenging their tax exempt status (not really). But, as a tax collector for Rome, Matthew was considered to be a traitor and was profiting from his position. So, now Jesus calls him, of all people, to come a follow Jesus. Matthew not only followed Christ, but he threw a dinner at his home for Christ and invited many tax collectors and sinners. He's got the entire branch

office there. The Pharisees, whom we met in chapter 3 are apoplectic. And they call out his disciples and say, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus responds by saying (notice this) *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.’”* That’s huge!

Jesus is saying here that the opposite of mercy is sacrifice. Sacrifice is what most of religion is built on. Give up chocolate for lent and Jesus is saying, “I am not impressed with what you give up!” I want you to see the needs of people. Here, he is calling the wealthy movers and shakers – sick. They may look successful. They may look powerful. But they are sick and I have what it takes to make them well. Do you care about people getting well?

The Good Samaritan did. Jesus gave us another example of this when he told the story about a man who is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and is robbed, beaten and left for dead. A priest, walking by, sees him injured on the side of the road and does nothing. A Levite sees him and does nothing. But a man from Samaria, and part Jew, part Gentile, outcast, sees him, he has compassion on him. He sees the misery and he responds to the misery by doing what he could to relieve this man of his misery. He owns this man’s misery as his own. Mercy is actually feeling the very sorrow of another and taking it upon yourself as if it is your very own. The Pharisees had developed so many rules as to why they did not have to show mercy, that their lives were machines who hid behind religious codes which enshrined their self-centeredness. They looked for failure as a reason to disassociate with another, while Jesus looked at failure as a reason to pour out pity because he felt the failure in himself. He took the failure upon himself. He owned the failure and the brokenness as his own. The more we study the reactions of Christ, the more we see this. He feels the sorrows of others and takes them on himself as his own. His healing of others was personal and caring. His feeding of others, his teaching and kindness was driven by his mercy. And of course when he died on the cross in our place, he did so as the ultimate act of taking all of our brokenness upon himself.

## 2. Why is it so important?

### a. **Mercy is foundational to who God is.**

Do you remember what happened with Moses and God after Israel had sinned so egregiously by making the golden calf? (Exodus 34) God told Moses to take the children of Israel and leave Sinai, but God was not going to go with them. He was going to send an angel to accompany them instead because their sin was so serious. Moses goes before God and pleads with him. God, in response to Moses’ cry, forgives their sin and relents. Moses is so moved by this response of God, that he asks God if he could see his glory. God says no, but, God says that he will let Moses see the trail of his robe as God walks past him. Moses then goes back up into Mt. Sinai, and hides in a cleft of the rock, where God covers him. It is an incredible picture of salvation. God saves Moses from being consumed by the righteousness of God. That is what God does for us through Christ. God’s mercy saves us from God’s wrath. So, as Moses is hidden by God in the cleft of

the rock, and is covered by God there, God causes his glory to pass by Moses. As God does this, God tells Moses about himself. This is pure of theology. This is God revealing his very essence to Moses in a description of self-disclosure. Here is what God says about himself. *“The LORD, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (chesed) and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...”* Mercy is foundational to who God is. Therefore, since God made us in his image, he made us that we might reflect him. We are more human when we are moved with pity by the needs of others. We are more human, because we are more consistent with our Creator and Designer who is fundamentally moved with pity by our needs.

I find that fascinating! God does not have to be convinced or coerced to show mercy because God IS merciful. This why Hebrews 4.16 invites us, calls us, compels us, entices us, even commands us, by saying, *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need.”* So, here, Jesus is saying that if you are going to be part of his kingdom, you need to understand that his kingdom, his people look like him. This is a kingdom and these are a people who are marked by mercy.

#### **b. Mercy is a fruit of gospel repentance**

We cannot earn mercy by doing mercy. Just as we will see in the next chapter when we study the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, that we cannot earn forgiveness by being forgiving because we cannot receive mercy and forgiveness unless we repent and we cannot claim to have repented of our sins if we are unmerciful towards the sins of others. If I have repented of my sin that means that I have repented of my self-righteousness. If I have repented of my self-righteousness then I will be merciful towards the sins of others. Reflecting on how much I have been forgiven will pour high octane racing fuel in our mercy engines. Those who have been forgiven much, love much and have much mercy. Anyone who is stingy with mercy does not understand his own sin and the amazing depth of God’s grace. We will study this more in depth when we get to chapter 18, where Jesus tells the story about the unforgiving servant, who had been forgiven a staggering debt, but refused to have pity on someone who owed him a rather small amount in comparison. To be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness is to admit to God that we are sinners. To be merciful is to admit that others are sinners, just like us. That is why...

#### **c. Jesus longs for us to know and reflect mercy.**

The more we learn about Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, the more we are going to see how these beatitudes are so foundational for everything in life. Jesus longs for us to know and reflect mercy because he longs for us to know and reflect him. Mercy is so very important to him. He is merciful and longs to be believed as such. If you believe that God is merciful, and if you believe that you have received mercy, then you will be merciful, not only to people that you like, but even to your enemies (5.43-48).

Earlier I mentioned the challenge that Jesus gave to the Pharisees when they were having a meltdown over Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners at Matthew's home. Jesus told them, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (9.13) Apparently they forgot their homework assignment, because 3 chapters later (12.7) Jesus confronts them again and said, "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." I think this is very important for us to understand. Twice Jesus chastises people who do not know that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Christ commands them to "go and learn" this which means that we do not know this naturally.

We may have pity on people whom we like, but revenge is more of our default response on anyone else.

### 3. **How does one become merciful?**

What does Jesus say about that? He doesn't, does he? Keep in mind at this point Jesus does not tell us everything. This is very beginning of Jesus ministry. He has come to provide a solution to a problem that most people do not realize that they have. And the fact is, you cannot give answers to questions that people are not asking. Unless someone understands their need, they will never be ready to embrace the solution. So, while Jesus is explaining about what life in his kingdom is about, he is primarily attempting to help people understand that they have a need that they cannot fix. So, how does one become merciful? Remember that this is a statement, not a command. Jesus is not saying, "Go do deeds of mercy!!" He is describing the very being of a person who is on the receiving end of God's mercy. Our being merciful towards others comes in direct proportion to us having experienced mercy from God.

It is like this. (A) Those who are merciful will receive mercy. That is all that Jesus is saying at this point. But, there is more to the story. (B) Those who are merciful have themselves been recipients of mercy.

#### **a. Relate with God**

Being merciful starts with understanding and accepting the mercy of God toward you. When you recognize that God did not condemn you as you deserved, but he condemned his Son in your place, you are beginning to understand that you have been given incredible mercy. God looked at us and saw us in our pitiable condition. He saw us trapped by our sin, condemned by the law, in bondage to our desires, enslaved by our fears. Over and over we read in the Bible that God was moved to action by the cries of his people. The supreme example of this is indeed the cross. The mercy of God is more than a feeling of pity; it is an action of sacrifice that is driven by a desire to rescue the one who is suffering.

“Without thy sweet mercy I could not live here;  
Sin would reduce me to utter despair;  
But, through Thy free goodness, my spirits revive,  
And He that first made still keeps me alive.”

As I reflect on how merciful God has been to me, a sinner, this now enables me to think that way about others.

**b. Relate with people**

When someone wrongs us, or is simply in the wrong, our natural tendency is to play judge and jury. When something bad happens to them, we tend to rejoice, even if we do it privately. However, if, instead of considering ourselves as judge and jury, we think of God as Judge, and we recognize that he is a merciful Judge and has pardoned us and provided for us freely, immeasurably, and eternally all that we could ever need, and that He receives great joy in pouring out mercy upon others, then we are in a position to consider God’s demonstration of mercy to be more valuable than my sense of justice and retribution.

Who do you think needs to be taken down a notch or two? Who do you think has wronged you, or appears to be getting away with something? Out of all the people in the world who will get a flat tire today, whom do you think ought to get one? If, this person, like the prodigal son, came home to the Father, would you happily volunteer to be on the party-planning committee? How could you?

**c. Spend time knowing Jesus**

Jesus had enemies and he assumes that we will too. Having an enemy is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, if you are persecuted by your enemies for righteousness sake, then you are blessed. However, in order for us to get to that place in our thinking and reacting, we have to consider Jesus. Jesus was merciful even to his enemies. When he was on the cross, he prayed for those who crucified them that they might be pardoned. Is this even possible? It was for Stephen. But, this is not a natural reaction, nor can it be coerced. This is a response that comes from being under the gracious influence of Jesus.

**4. What difference does mercy make?**

I will conclude with a little history. Calcutta, India has a population density of about 122 per acre. Manhattan, NY is about 100. In the days of the early church, Rome was not only the largest city in the world, but probably had an incredible population density of about 302 people per acre. This meant that buildings were all jammed together and were built higher. The fact is, they were built higher than they should have been and were subject to falling. This meant that the poor people lived at the top. The streets were incredibly narrow. How do people, that tightly packed together, eat? Most families used pans that would hold coals and would cook over them, which was why the dread of fire was a constant problem. Even though falling and burning buildings was a constant problem, I

cannot begin to help you imagine the level of filth in the city. Soap had not been invented yet. Water had to be carried into each dwelling in jugs from public fountains, which meant that there was not much left over for washing floors, clothes or bathing, after it was used for cooking. People could use the public baths, but the water was so contaminated in those places that it you probably were dirtier when you were done than before. Sanitation was virtually non-existent. I will not sicken you with some of the details that they lived with on a daily basis, other than to remind you that given the limited water, non-existent sanitation, the incredible density of people and the narrowness of the streets, you can only imagine what life was like in the city as those streets were constantly traveled by horses, donkeys, oxen and flocks that were on their way to be being butchered. The smells of sweat, waste and decay were thick and nauseating along with the millions of flies and mosquitoes and other bugs. In the city, there was no escape. All of this was a breeding ground for disease. Most people had parasites.

In the midst of these despicable conditions was the church. Christians lived and worked in Rome. History records that by 251 A.D. the church in Rome was supporting 1,500 widows and other needy people. Christianity is the birth place for mercy ministry. Christians cared for one another and for those that the city neglected. In 165, an epidemic swept through the Roman Empire, possibly the first appearance of smallpox in that region of the world. It lasted for 15 years and somewhere between a fourth and third of the population of Rome (450,000) died. 100 years later another plague ravaged the city.

People did not know how to treat the sick. So, they didn't. If you had enough money, you left the city. If you were poor, you stayed and tried to avoid contact with those who were sick. When someone first showed symptoms of being sick, they were often thrown into the streets where the dead and the dying laid in piles. But, not the Christians. Instead of deserting them, the believers cared for them. This meant that many of the believers were exposed to the plagues and died in their attempts at caring for others. But, it also meant that they were able to save many who otherwise would have died. In so doing, the reputation of the church spread throughout the city as people who embrace mercy. How did the gospel outlast the Roman Empire? In part because mercy captured the hearts of the common people. But also, because, quite frankly, their care for one another meant that as a people, they lived longer than anyone else.

This is why the Islam religion will never take over the world. Islam is based on fear, retribution and revenge. There is nothing supernatural about it. It codifies the worst of man's instincts and therefore is wholly incapable of capturing the heart. It may enslave a life, it may give structure to a dislocated soul, but it cannot capture the heart.

If you want to make a mark in your world for Christ, if you want to put Christ on display, if we, as a church, want to reflect God's glory to the nations and our community, then mercy must be our calling card. And that will only come about as we seriously consider the incredible mercy of God for us.