

Title: The Mercy of God  
Text: Matthew 5.7  
Theme: The Mercy of God  
Series: Matthew #17  
Prop Stmtnt: You cannot reflect God unless you reflect his mercy.

Last Sunday I preached on the mercy of God, but I do not think that I did an adequate job, so I am trying again. And yet, even at the outset, I recognize that I can never preach a sermon that is a sufficient match for the mercy of God. His mercy endures forever. And though my sermons are generally long, they are not that long.

My temptation is to take what I think and experience and assume that it is normative for everyone else, when it isn't. However, the longer I live and the more that I discuss the issue of the mercy of God with people, I do believe that most of us, if not every one of us struggles with grasping God's mercy. I did as a child, and I still do as an adult.

As a boy, I developed the habit of reading a chapter of the Bible every night before I went to sleep. My dad bought me a Bible when he was in Israel. The front and back covers were made from olive wood and I faithfully read from it, every night for several years, but one. That night, I was so tired; I fell asleep without reading my Bible. I woke up in the middle of the night and was sick to my stomach and threw up. Immediately I was overwhelmed with guilt. I was convinced that God was punishing me for not reading my Bible. I was so sorry for what I had failed to do, that, in spite of how sick I was, I found my Bible and read a chapter, fully believing that if I did, then I would feel better and everything would be fine. So, I read the next chapter and was still sick. Obviously, that wasn't enough; at least that was what I concluded, at the time.

What was I thinking? I believed that the wrath of God was like a hair-trigger (define), just waiting for the slightest touch, the smallest provocation to trip it, in this case to afflict an 8-year old boy with the flu. One false move, one wrong thought, and BAM, the assault would come. That was my view of God and there were some stories in the Bible that, in my mind, supported that view of God such as; Noah and the ark, Sodom and Gomorrah, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Achan, along with Ananias and Sapphira.

## **I. Assumption and Experience**

What I did not realize is that I was interpreting the Bible through my own lens. My view of God was based upon my own assumptions and experiences, which selectively picked out the parts that reinforced those views. I had no idea, but I had created God in my image. I was the creator, and God was the product of my own creation. My word was above his word. But, I did not know it. I was blind. I had the Bible, but I read the Bible through my grid.

### **A. God is a God of law**

I understood that God had rules. And there is clear evidence in the Bible for that. At the time I did not understand the purpose of those rules, but I simply knew that there were rules. I also knew that

### **B. God is a God of punishment.**

If you break the rules, then God renders a verdict. If you live like Sodom and Gomorrah, fire comes down and destroys you. If you are rebellious to those in authority, the ground may open up and swallow you. If you take something that is forbidden, you will be found out and if you lie, then God might just kill you. The problem was, I could never keep the all the laws. So, I lived with

### **C. Shame and Fear**

Even though I was told that God would forgive me when I sinned, I had a much greater difficulty believing that, than believing that he would judge sin. I would ask forgiveness over and over and over and over, never certain if I used the right words, and always fearful that I was asking forgiveness with the wrong motives. Shame and fear are powerful and enslaving. And they are very effective at motivating works-based righteousness (which is no righteousness at all). You want relief from shame. You want to be rid of fear. You look for the things that you can do, the steps that you can take, the rules that you can follow, the code that you can keep in order to gain the approval of God. How do you know if you have the approval of God? Well, if you are not sure, get the approval of people who appear to be spiritual. That's the next best thing – right? Isn't that how we think?

This was my view of God, and my view of myself. How do you think this affected the way I viewed people? If this was how God treated me, then how was I going to treat others? I was a ...

## **II. Natural born lawyer**

My view of God impacted my view of myself and my world. If I had to try to keep God's law in order to gain God's approval, then when I was put into a position of authority, I naturally assumed that I had to enforce God's law and demand obedience to it in order to gain God's approval. But, again, how would I know if I gained God's approval? Once again, if you are not sure, then get the approval of the people who appear to be spiritual. Who are the people that appear to be spiritual? They are the ones who live by the rules. If you can get the approval of the people who live by the rules, then you will have the approval of God – right? Actually, NO! But, that is what we think.

So, what happens, when you put someone, who is an approval junkie, into a position of leadership over people who are looking for approval by how well they all keep the rules? Unless the gospel is informing and influencing all aspects of our lives, we are schizophrenic Christians. Since, we are living under a law that we cannot keep, we tend to put others under a law that they cannot keep.

### **A. My law**

I live with the fear of failure. Therefore, I look to my world to provide my security. I demand obedience from my world. I demand obedience from those under my authority. I put my world, under my law. If my world does not obey, then, they get my punishment.

### **B. My punishment**

And I am ready to punish. I live ready to pounce. I am the driver finding fault with all other drivers. I am the neighbor, continually agitated by my neighbors. I am the parent whose kids are never good enough, while at the same time, I am the parent who is constantly criticizing the parenting of others. I am the church member for whom nothing at the church ever meets my standards. I am the cynic, the critic, the disapproving and distant judge who can find fault in everyone and can smell heresy in every sentence. No one measures up to me and I am skilled at making that clear. I know the power of shame, and I am not afraid to use it.

### **C. Shame**

If I smell a weakness, or spot an inconsistency, it is my job to point it out. I know how to shame you. I know how to belittle you, to freeze you out, to cut you off, to make it clear, you do not measure up.

Watch how this works out in parenting. I want God's approval. I believe that in order to get God's approval, I have to keep the law (or my law or someone's law). I have to perform. If I do the right things, then God may be okay with me. So, how do I know if I am okay? I idolize the approval of others around me, who appear to me to be law-keepers. So, I have to keep the law as well, or better than they do. And, if I am a parent, then I have to rule my kids by the law and teach them to keep the code so that others will think well of me because my kids are so well behaved. Therefore, I have to teach my kids the rules and threaten them if they do not perform.

What are the rules? The rules are developed by the rule-keepers. It may be the rule of home-schooling. Good parents, especially, good moms, loving moms, protective moms, home-school. Moms who do not care about worldly influences send their kids away to be educated. This brings another set of rules. What curriculum do you use? Good moms are organized, task-driven, efficient, competent and learned in all of the curriculums and can pick and chose at will the perfect course variety that will help their kid be the over-achieving rule-keeper.

Now, whether it is educational performance, manners, athletic accomplishment or musical achievements, if a parent is driven by the fear of disapproval, he will generally use that same fear to intimidate and control those around him. And it works, while your kids are young. But, the older they get, and the more they realize that no matter what,

they will never be good enough, it will crush them. If every card that you are going to play is going to get trumped, why play?

Shame “works”. At least, shame appears to work. Shame is a powerful motivation to control others, or be controlled. But, as powerful as shame is in enslaving people, love is stronger to set them free.

Late one night I sat with a man at National Coney Island. His wife was at the end. She was broken and had nothing left to give. No matter what she did, it was never enough. She could not do anything that would please him. He wanted a “good” family, no matter what. A successful family would make much of him. It was his god. Why? Because, he was not good enough for God. His family became his salvation. He placed upon his family, a weight that only Jesus could carry. But, until that moment, that was not how he saw it. So I said in a question, disguised as a statement, “It must be tough, being you.” (and I waited) “How do you handle failure?” This tough, arrogant, demanding dad began to weep. He didn’t know.

### **III. Theology and Reality**

If, however, we allow God’s understanding of himself and God’s presentation of himself to be our view of God, then we are in a position for everything else to fit into place. Last week I drew your attention to Exodus 34, where God revealed his glory to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And as God passed by Moses, God said, “The LORD (Yahweh), the LORD (Yahweh), 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 will by no means clear the guilty...” This reads, in a way like the ingredients on a label. The first ingredient listed is the ingredient that there is more of, than anything else. So, when you hear God describing himself in Exodus 34, God is making it clear that while he is both merciful and righteous, gracious and just, he LOVES to be known by his mercy. He will demonstrate his justice and righteousness when he has to, but he loves to show his mercy. This is what God says about himself. Will you believe it? Do you need more evidence?

#### **A. God IS Merciful.**

There is an old rule in education. "Don't smile til Christmas." In other words, if you want to maintain control of your class, then you have to get them to fear you. Make sure they fear you, and then you can show them your nice side. Is that how God works? Is that how he began his relationship with Adam and Eve? No! God was exceedingly generous to them. How did God begin his relationship with Israel when they were in Egypt? Did he start with threats or with mercy? What did the ministry of Christ look like? The more we lay it all out, the more we see that God’s mercy, not his anger, is on a hair-trigger. When Jesus was in Jericho, he turned and headed for Jerusalem to die. On the side of the road were two men who, hearing that Christ was going by, began to cry out. The people were embarrassed by these “needy” men and tried to get them to shut up. But they only cried out more. Matthew says (chapter 20) that they said, “Lord, have mercy on us.” If you

want to get God's attention, appeal to his mercy. God is merciful. And when Jesus heard that, he stopped and spoke to these men and asked them what he could do for them. They said that they wanted to be able to see. Then Matthew says that "Jesus *in pity* touched their eyes and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him." Jesus told the story about the hated tax collector and the Pharisee who both went to the Temple to pray. People would have looked at the tax collector in those days with condemnation, wondering what is a guy like that doing in a place like this. The Pharisee, however, was the rule-keeper. In fact he made up more rules to keep, he was so good and he reminded God of how good he was. Meanwhile the tax collector would not even lift his head up, but pleaded with God, based on God's mercy. The Pharisee assumed that God relates to us based on rules, while the tax collector banked on the fact that God was merciful. Jesus said, to the utter shock of his audience, that the tax collector went home justified, not the Pharisee. God's mercy is ready, at the slightest bump to respond, while his anger is like a gun lock. It is secure. It is safe. It will be used, but only when he absolutely has to. (blind men) But, isn't God a God of law as well? Yes, but again, we must see the entire picture.

#### **B. God's mercy compels him to establish a covenant.**

When Israel cried out to God from Egypt, God had (mercy) pity on Israel and delivered her from slavery. His mercy drove his rescue that he might establish a covenant with her. The laws that God gives to Israel are given in the context of establishing a covenant with Israel. Therefore, the laws that God establishes are driven by his mercy. These laws are designed to help inform Israel of how incredibly merciful God is. No Israelite could keep the laws. The laws were given to remind Israel that God cared for them, not because they were good enough, or better than the other nations. Far from it! The laws were given to help Israel know that she needed redemption. She needed salvation. She needed forgiveness. She needed to be pardoned. Now, keep in mind, that all of this in the OT was given that we, the New Covenant people of God would understand how merciful God is. So please, look at his mission so that you can grasp his heart. For God so LOVED the world, that he sent his one and only Son. The mercy of God drove him, compelled him, motivated him to send Jesus to come to us. God initiated the relationship. God, in his mercy, secured your salvation in the death of his Son, who died in your place so that the punishment for your sin was paid. When you trust in Christ, you become part of his family. God is then, is your Father. When you trust in Christ you become part of his kingdom. Christ then, is your King. There are commands that our King gives to us. He is, after all, the King. Listen carefully! Seeking to obey the commands of our King is not legalism, if you recognize that our citizenship and standing is not rooted in our obedience. We seek to obey his commands BECAUSE we recognize that these commands are rooted in mercy. We seek to obey his commands because we are motivated by his mercy, which after all, is more powerful than fear. In fact, we are secure in Christ because...

#### **C. God's mercy protects and sustains his covenant.**

God sees your need of him as an opportunity to put his mercy on display. The ministry of Christ on the earth was a mission of mercy. He came to us, in our need. His acts of

healing were done because he is merciful and to make it very clear that Jesus is the conduit through which the mercy of God flows. He did not come as a judge, but as a Savior. He came to carry our sin and to bear our wrath when he died on the cross in our place. Therefore, in Romans 9, those who trust in Christ, are called, “vessels of mercy” because that which distinguishes us from others is that we have received mercy, while others receive justice. Peter said, “once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Once you were not a people, but now you are a people.” Do you see the connection? Do you see the glue that holds us together? Do you realize that we are bound together by the mercy of God? The mercy of God is what defines us as the people of God.

Conclusion:

1. My failure (admitted and confessed) is an opportunity for God’s mercy to be put on display.

The only way that I could become a follower of Christ, a member of his church and a citizen of his kingdom is to admit that I am a failure. I am a sinner who cannot fix himself. I need a Savior. If I were to ask for all sinners to stand, every person here who has trusted in Christ, would own that. Therefore, I do not hide my failure from God or others because in my confession of my sin, I become a recipient of God’s mercy. While, my sin grieves me, it no longer condemns me. Jesus was condemned in my place. While, in one sense, I am a sinner, I am not a sinner forever. I am justified forever. I am forever, a recipient of his mercy. This frees me to speak of my sin without being crushed by my sin.

2. The failures (and needs) of others are opportunities for God’s mercy to be put on display through me/us.
3. The more that I pour out mercy upon others, the more I understand and enjoy the mercy of God.
4. The more that I understand the mercy of God, the more I receive the mercy of God.

What needy and broken people has God put in your life so that you can put him on display by showing them mercy?