

Blessed Are the Merciful

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



The Seven Acts of Mercy, Caravaggio (1607)

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, in you are hidden
all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word;
and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose
the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 5:7 (NRSVue)

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Blessed Are the Merciful

Hendrik Niclaes lived in the 16th century and was both a merchant and a mystic. He lived most of his life in Amsterdam and northwest Germany. Hendrik founded a religious order called the Family of Love. When he preached a sermon on this fifth beatitude, there was a phrase that he repeated throughout: “Mercy is the stretching out of the hand.” The stretching out of the hand to the poor. The stretching out of the hand with warm hospitality. The stretching out of the hand with forbearance and forgiveness.

Another 16th century Christian, Erasmus’ of Rotterdam, described the multi-layered nature of this beatitude beautifully, saying that Jesus declares blessed those who:

*Out of brotherly love consider another’s misery their own,
who are pained at the misfortunes of a neighbor,
who shed tears for the calamities that strike other people,
who feed the needy out of their own wealth, clothe the naked,
warn the erring, teach the ignorant, forgive the sinner—in short,
who use whatever resources they have
to lift up and restore others.*

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive what? ...mercy.”

This beatitude is unique: the reward is the exact same thing as the deed. Mercy for mercy. If you extend mercy, you’ll receive mercy. It’s an interesting life principle. When you are kind, you are often treated with kindness. If we’re suspicious, we will be treated with suspicion. We see the world, not as the world is, but as we are. We experience the world *as we are*.

We know Jesus was a Bible reading man. Jesus didn’t read the New Testament—it *wasn’t written yet!* But Jesus did read the *Hebrew Scriptures*. Jesus read the book of *Proverbs*. It’s pretty clear Proverbs 14:21 influenced him here: *“Blessed is the one who has mercy on the poor.”* Mercy on the poor is one of *the defining ethics* for Jews and Christians. It’s one of the most repeated themes in Scripture.



So mercy was an important theme for Jesus. In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant he says, *“Should you not have mercy on your fellow servant as I have had mercy on you?”*

Then there’s the Lord’s prayer. Jesus included this: Forgive us our debts, as we forgive what?... our debtors. He goes on and says: If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. That statement should give us all pause. Think about it.

Opening your heart to your brother or sister, is also opening your heart to God. Closing your heart to your brother or sister, is also closing your heart to God.

Do you see the inter-connection?

To bless others is in our own best interest.

To curse others is to curse yourself.

To hate someone is to hate yourself.

Unforgiveness has been described this way: It's like drinking poison... and waiting for your enemy to die.

This link between mercy and being forgiven and forgiving others is found throughout Jesus' teachings. Let's take a quick tour:

- Jesus says, "Judge not lest ye be what? ...judged."
- By the judgment you make, you will be judged. "Condemn not, and you will not be what? condemned," says Jesus.
- "Give and it will be given to you."
- The measure you give, will be the measure you receive. The law of reciprocity is at work here—it's baked into grace. With grace comes responsibility. We've been made response-able.

Forgiveness is a big part of mercy. Healing can only begin when we begin to forgive. There's a link.

Unforgiveness is so unhealthy because it sees a *person* as evil, rather than their hurtful acts as evil.

Don't believe that you are an exception to this spiritual law. Forgiveness is one of the hardest things to do, and one of the most important things we can ever do. Sometimes repeating Jesus' words on the cross can help us:

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Forgiveness is a process, not a merely one-time event, but an ongoing commitment.

There are other expressions of mercy. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we understand the definition of being a good neighbor: "having mercy on a person in need." Jesus then says, "Go and do likewise."

- Mercy is compassion in action. Acting upon your feelings of compassion.
- Mercy is not theoretical. It's concrete.
- Mercy gets its hands dirty. It gets into the muck and mire of suffering, of broken hearts, and uncomfortable situations.

Mercy is able to slow down, get perspective, and see the real needs around us. Then mercy seeks to meet those needs practically.

The eyes of mercy see a stranger or enemy or immigrant as a brother or a sister in need, a fellow human being, traveling on the same road as us.

Mercy applies to individuals, but also collectively, even to systems.

- Do you contribute to a merciful family system in your home?
- A merciful work environment?
- A merciful tone to your relationships?
- Are the societal structures we have in place merciful? Or do they keep people hungry or deprived of clean water? Does the immigration system make it difficult to welcome strangers? Do our criminal justice systems disproportionately imprison men of color in America?
- Mercy isn't afraid to bring up the tough conversations.

The reality is, we all have a need for mercy. This is matched with our need to *be* merciful. Receiving and giving mercy humanizes us, enlivens us. Mercy "softens our souls," said Gregory of Nazianzus centuries ago. To be merciful looks a lot like Jesus and God. "*Be merciful,*" says Jesus, "*just as your Father is merciful.*"

Be discerning, be wise, don't be naive, but *let go of* judgmentalism. Be merciful. Stop the fault-finding and blame game. Mercy is open—not defensive.

The Latin word for mercy is *miser cordia* rooted in the word *miser y*. A heart of misery. When we're merciful, our heart breaks with the heart broken. We care about the Ukrainian people, about the destitute. Misery...and mercy loves company. Mercy enters into solidarity with others.

There's a Hasidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts.

- One of them asked, "Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?"
- The rabbi answered, "Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading the sacred text can put it *on* your heart, and then when your heart breaks, the holy words will fall inside."

The merciful have a broken, open heart, filled with the things that break God's heart. When you're merciful, you're not above it all. You have compassion towards yourself. You know you're broken too, but you're blessed in the broken places. And you can extend that same compassion to others. Mercy loves your neighbor, and it loves yourself too.



Mindfulness
Being aware of the physical, emotional, or mental pain of the moment.



Self-kindness
Treating ourselves with kindness, considering our own needs.



Common Humanity
Recognizing that these experiences are a normal part of being human.

Mercy is merciful to yourself. You know you can't save the world. You do what you can that's appropriate and sustainable. You don't punish yourself with a merciless schedule. Have mercy on yourself.

Mercy builds bridges, open doors, and mends fences rather than creating rifts or widening gulfs or building walls.



The Hebrew word for mercy is *chesed*. *Chesed* goes beyond pity or sympathy or feeling bad or sorry. It means to suffer with, to enter in. Mercy suffers with the suffering.

To be merciful involves listening, deep listening. Mercy tries to understand *why* people act and think the way they do. It's faith seeking understanding.

- Why is somebody grumpy? What's going on behind the anger?
- Why is the child acting out? What's going on behind the bad behavior?

Mercy walks in another's moccasins for a mile.

God did this for us—getting in our skin literally—with Christ.

- The Son of God had human eyes, human feelings, and a human mind, yet he was fully God.
- Jesus is mercy in the flesh, the Man of Mercy.



Mercy wants justice, joy, peace and freedom for not just me, but for you. It's interdependent. Relational. Thoughtful. Considerate. Empathetic. With mercy there's mutuality and connection, a to and fro. Mercy is not a one-way road. Mercy says we're all in this together, not each person for themselves.

Mercy can be defined as “an **external expression** of an **internal feeling** of **compassion for the unfortunate.**” Or, as Jesus put it, “If you’ve done it unto the least of these, you’ve done it unto *who?* ...”**me.**”

Do you do mercy? Have you done mercy to Jesus? That is what your life will be judged by—how merciful were you towards others—particularly the vulnerable. They are the least of these. We’re saved by grace. We can never earn grace. But we are *judged* by how merciful we are in our lives. James, the brother of Jesus, doesn’t mince words in his letter:

“For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” (James 2:13)

The good news is the gift of grace empowers us to be merciful. If we aren’t merciful, we can only hope God’s mercy will exceed our mercilessness. *God have mercy.*

But why risk it? Choose the blessed life of being merciful. To be merciful is to be thankful. What’s the French word for “thank you?” *Merci... Merci beaucoup!*

It’s not only thankful, but mercy is **sacramental**. One of the definitions of a sacrament is “an external sign of an inward grace.” And so, mercy is sacramental: “an external expression of an internal feeling of compassion for the unfortunate.” The sacrament of mercy.

Mercy is written over all the pages of *Scripture*.

- Think of King David and Psalm 23. *“Surely goodness and what? ...mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”*
- Jesus, the Son of David, talks about mercy all the time, too. *“I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”*
- Jesus declares that *the weightier matters of the law* are these three things: *“justice, mercy, and faith.”*
- Thomas Aquinas said: *“Justice without mercy is cruelty. Mercy without justice is laxity.”*

In *Scripture*, mercy is often found in pairs:

- *Justice and mercy are like:* peanut butter and jelly, salt and pepper, bread and butter, pickles and ice cream.
- *Goodness and mercy go together like:* Bert and Ernie, Kermit and Miss Piggy, Jack and Jill, Hansel and Gretel
- *Mercy and forgiveness are like:* The Lone Ranger and Tonto, Sherlock Holmes and Watson, Batman and Robin, Turner and Hooch.

You can’t have one without the other—like two peas in a pod.

Mercy multiplies and is beautifully different and new every morning.

- Mercy brightens life with a generous attitude, and a generous orthodoxy that’s willing to see things from another’s point of view. It’s not easily offended.
- Mercy doesn’t practice *shaa-duhn-froy-duh* (Schadenfreude)—gloating over others’ misfortune.

- Mercy breaks the vicious cycle of revenge and turns it into a virtuous cycle of *renewal*.
- Mercy sets us free from being bound to a hurt from the past. We can get emotionally addicted to obsessing about something that happened years in the past. And we get stuck in a rut.

But we don't have to live in the past, we're free to enjoy life now. Mercy helps us wriggle free from brooding and resentment. Mercy frees others from their past.

I can guarantee that there are people here that need mercy to break the chains of unforgiveness in their lives.

- A grudge is a crushing weight to bear.
- Let mercy take it off your shoulders.
- Extend mercy. Receive mercy.

Today is your day to begin the merciful journey of forgiveness.

Mercy also doesn't try to control people by the good we've done them—as if they are indebted to us or bound to us. That's giving with ulterior motives and isn't merciful. But when we're merciful we're free. Free to renounce our claims and control and demands and punishment of others. We wish others well. We pray for their welfare.

Mercy allows you to die to your desire to fix things. Instead of controlling or manipulating, Mercy extends hospitality:

- welcoming others as they are,
- being willing to sit down and listen with them,
- and let them go—mercy doesn't smother.

When we're merciful, we don't have a sense of superiority that we can hold over others.

"You reap what you sow" the Scriptures say. So be careful what you sow. Sow the seeds of mercy generously, and you'll reap a bumper crop of mercy.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "The Seven Acts of Mercy," Caravaggio, 1607, Church of Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples

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