

The Mercy Spiral

The Beatitudes

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Well, as we continue our study of the Beatitudes tonight, we have a very rich text in front of us that has so many broad interconnections to the New Testament that it's really hard to know where to begin. I invite you to turn to Matthew 5, and we're going to go to several different extended passages this evening to help expound its meaning and I trust that it will be very clear, very practical in its implications, and very searching in our self-assessment as to where we serve the Lord, as we serve the Lord, and do we even know the Lord or not. And by way of context, let me just read the first five Beatitudes in Matthew 5, beginning in verse 3, as this will set a context. Matthew 5, beginning in verse 3,

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

That's our text for this evening, that final verse there in verse 7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Now, in just setting the context leading up to verse 7 in the immediate context, what you'll notice is that the first four Beatitudes really speak of vertical attitudes toward God and in response to God; the holiness of God has certain implications for the way that we consider ourselves when the Spirit opens our eyes and shows us our true condition in Christ and actually apart from Christ is what I meant to say. And so the first four verses we see, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," those who know that they are spiritually bankrupt and have no merit of their own. "Blessed are those who mourn," they mourn over sin, vertically they've come to understand that they are displeasing to God under the judgment and guilt and condemnation of God. They're poor in spirit, and they mourn over the spiritual filth of their condition. They mourn over the fact that they are unrighteous, and that creates in them an attitude when they've been born again of meekness, of spiritual composure, a mild spirit that is willing to trust God even in the midst of conflict and adversity. And then in verse 6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." The attitude of a Christian is that they want to grow in sanctification, they want to develop a sense of practical righteousness and to grow on that path. They're not content to live in unrepentant sin,

they're not content with with spiritual complacency, spiritual regression. No, there's this spiritual urging in them that propels them along toward a growth in righteousness. And these things are all in response to the holiness of God. They're attitudes before God that mark a true Christian, someone who has truly repented, someone that has been born again. These are the initial repentance and salvation under the influence of the Holy Spirit, it's as though a seed is planted in the soul that grows up and bears the fruit of these attitudes that we see, these multi-colored attitudes and spiritual dispositions and affections that we see: poor in spirit; mourning over sin; meek and hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Now, as you move to verse 7, you start to see a sense of how this works out on more of a horizontal level, how this developing Christian character works itself out before men. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." And we're going to ask and answer three questions about mercy here this evening as we look at it. Let me clear up a possible misconception and then also go to a passage that helps us see this from the perspective of the character of God himself, okay? First, to clear up a possible misconception. This verse is not teaching us how someone can receive mercy, how they can be forgiven of their sins, how we receive the forgiveness of sin. Well, if I'm merciful enough, God will forgive me of all of my sins. That's not what this verse is teaching at all. We often mention Ephesians 2:8 and 9, we're saved by grace through faith and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not as a result of works lest anyone should boast. You can't be merciful enough to your fellow man in order to earn mercy from God. It does not work that way. We don't obligate God to be merciful to us by showing kindness to others around us. That's not at all the way that it works. Our mercy is always flawed at best, it's mixed with bad motives and things like that and just makes it so that it could never be that we would receive mercy from God because we were first merciful to others. That's not the case.

Now, if you'll turn to Ephesians 2, I should have just had you turn there since I knew I was going there to begin with. Ephesians 2, this really brings a lot of things together for us, the things that we're about to just review briefly in Ephesians 2 and to reinforce the idea of spiritual bankruptcy, reinforce the idea of mourning over sin, the necessity of God's initiative in regeneration for anyone to be drawn to Christ. Look at verses 1 through 3.

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Now, beloved, when you read that as a Christian, it's important to understand that you're reading something that is autobiographical. This is talking about who you were before you became a Christian and if you are not a Christian, it's describing what you are now. Paul is writing to believers in the letter to Ephesians, and he is teaching them about the

way that God chose them and adopted them and redeemed them and sealed them with the Spirit, and he's reminding them here at this point in chapter 2, verses 1 through 3, that we were spiritually dead before he did that. It's not that we were sick. It's not that we were on the verge of drowning and sinking. No, we had already drowned and sunk to the bottom of the ocean. We were dead. It's not that we were sick, it's that there was no spiritual life in us at all, and there was nothing that we could do for ourselves. We were dead in trespasses and sins, we were under our master Satan, the prince of the power of the air, and he owned us, and he blinded us, and he hindered us, and we were in chains to him. And not only that, in verse 3 we see that we were living in the passions of our flesh, and we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. We were spiritually dead, destitute, and degenerate. There was nothing attractive about us to draw God to us at all. We were actually under his wrath, as Romans 1:18 through chapter 3, verse 20 teaches, Jew and Gentile alike. And so we're in this desperately sad and desperate condition where we're blinded by our sin, we are bound to Satan, and we are traversing toward the judgment of God as an unbeliever. That's a very, very bad place to be. It's a dangerous place to be. It's a sad place to be. It's a place of great, great need and we didn't even know that we were in need, did we, when we were in that lost condition? We thought we were okay.

Now, beloved, in that spiritually separated condition, separated from God, having no claim on him, having nothing about ourselves to attract him to us, there was nothing in us to evoke anything from God, then with that in mind, look at verse 4 and see the word that is the subject of verse 7 in Matthew 5,

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

Now, if we could only grasp something of the great significance of this we would melt in tears of gratitude toward God, we would be overwhelmed with a sense of our unworthiness, and yet joy over what the Lord had done for us in that condition. There we were in great spiritual need being completely unable to help ourselves. That is crucial. We were not able to help ourselves. We did not even have the power to repent and believe. We were dead. There was no power, no life pulsating in us spiritually whatsoever. Absolute straight line dead on the heart monitor. Nothing. And what did God do? God looked on you in your dead condition, your sinful condition that deserved his judgment and what did he do? He had mercy on you. He showed kindness to you. He had compassion on you and it was oriented, and the motivating factor in that was nothing in you and everything in the nature and perfections of God. Because he is merciful, he showed mercy to you. Because he is love, he showed love to you. Because he is gracious, he showed grace to you. Out of something completely motivated within himself and not by you, God had compassion upon you, saw you in your great danger and your great need, and he took care of you. He reached out. He instilled new life in you. He drew you to Christ. He forgave all of your sins and made you alive in Christ and seated you positionally in Christ in the heavenly places. Now that's mercy. That is kindness and

patience and love, and that's what God has done to every true Christian. He's shown that kind of mercy to them. When they deserved judgment, he showed mercy, grace, and love instead and on the basis of the shed blood of Christ poured out in sacrificial death for sinners just like you and me, God saved you as something that he wanted to do, out of who he is, and showed mercy to you in your need.

Now, beloved, that's fundamental to understanding everything that's woven through the remainder of tonight's message. You are a Christian only, solely, and only because God had mercy on you and gave you a mercy that he doesn't show to everyone. Not everyone is saved. Not everyone receives mercy like that. And though you were equally lost and equally guilty and equally condemned as everyone else who goes to hell at the end, God, for reasons known only to him, for purposes of love that he wanted to show on you, showed you individual, particular mercy, and by name drew you to Christ and helped you in your need in a way that not everybody else receives. Now that's biblical salvation and it makes us profoundly grateful and humbled before God to realize that I didn't deserve that and I'm receiving and I have received blessing and gifts from God that not everyone else receives. And so that does not make us proud, it makes us profoundly humbled and grateful to God for what the kindness that he has shown to us and how that has manifested itself. Mercy! You in profound eternal need and God graciously meeting that need out of his own resources, for his own motivation, for his own reasons, and now here you are in Christ, if you are a Christian. If you're not a Christian, that mercy is offered to you tonight. Jesus calls men to himself, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I'll give you rest." This mercy is indiscriminately offered, though not all receive it. It's indiscriminately offered to everyone, and the mercy of God is offered to you tonight, if you're not in Christ, to come to him and receive this mercy and to be delivered from the guilt and condemnation that are on your soul.

Now, with that said, we come back to Matthew 5 now. Go back there with me. And we realize that as we understand and as we look at this in light of other Scriptures, that realize that our salvation is rooted ultimately in mercy and that it was mercy that led to us having life, now we start to have a perspective on this verse, verse 7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Well, let's answer our first question this evening. Just what is mercy? What is mercy? What does that term mean? And in light of what we've seen, how God dealt with us, we already have a good running start to move into it here this evening. Here's a simple definition for you, a very simple definition for you: mercy is compassion in action for people in need. Mercy is compassion in action for people in need. There's this inner sense of sympathy looking upon someone that is in trouble, that is in difficulty, that has need, this inner matter of sympathy for those who are suffering but mercy isn't simply – oh, this is so critical to understand, my friends, this is so critical to understand – mercy is not simply an inner feeling that moves on without having done anything to relieve the need that it sees. True mercy does what is in its power to relieve the suffering that it sees. True mercy does what is in its power to relieve the suffering that it sees, so that there is an inward sense of sympathy and identification with the one that's in need that motivates the merciful person to do something to relieve that suffering if they can. Stated differently, mercy acts to benefit someone who needs help. Do you see how simple and clear and direct this is? Mercy acts to benefit someone

who needs help. It's compassion in action that reaches out to assist someone that has need beyond their ability to meet.

Now, I want you to see some places where this concept of mercy is played out, and we're going to look at two or three different passages here. Look over a few pages to Matthew 9. Matthew 9, in verse 27, there were two men who had a physical need. They were blind. They could not see. They had heard at some point about Christ, and in verse 27 we read that Jesus passed on from there, and there were two blind men who were following him, and they were crying out after him, saying, "Have mercy on us, Son of David. Have mercy on us. Lord, we are blind and you have the power to deliver us from our physical blindness and so show mercy to us. We are in need here. We need your help. We need assistance and so we appeal to you to sympathize with the need that we have and to deliver us from our blind condition." Verse 28, "When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?'" See the idea of power there, ability, I'm able to do this? They said to him, "'Yes, Lord.' Then he touched their eyes, saying, 'According to your faith be it done to you.' And their eyes were opened." Jesus had mercy on them as they asked him to do. He looked on their blindness, he had sympathy for them, and he relieved them of their physical needs so that it no longer existed after he had departed from them. Mercy, compassion on those in need, that's the sense of the term.

Now, go over to Luke 10, where we see this in a more extended sense, in the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. In verse 25 we read, Luke 10:25, "behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" Jesus said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.'" The idea and the reason that Jesus spoke to him this way is because this lawyer was under no conviction of sin. He was not ready to be told about repentance and faith for forgiveness because he did not see himself as someone who needed to be forgiven and you see that in verse 29 when it goes on to say, "But he, desiring to justify himself," in other words, to declare himself righteous and to excuse himself from his failures, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" These lawyers, I tell you, just looking to quibble about semantics and terms, and evade the spiritual reality that's at stake and so Jesus is going to strip him of his self-righteousness on the principle of mercy. In verse 30, Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side." He saw the need, but he did nothing about it. Verse 32, "So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." These supposedly outwardly religious people in the nation of Israel, seeing someone in desperate need, he'd been beaten, he'd been stripped, he was half-dead, and they just callously walked by and did nothing to help him. "But a Samaritan," who in the Jews' eyes was a bad guy because they were sort of the spiritual half-breeds and weren't part of true Israel in their estimation, "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was," the beaten, bruised man. He came to where that man in need was, "and

when he saw him, he had compassion." He inwardly said, "That's a shame. That's not right. That's not good. He is hurting, and I feel for him." He had compassion on him and so what did he do in verse 34? He acted on his compassion. "He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine," the medicinal remedies of that day. "Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'"

Now, stop there for a moment. This beaten, bloodied man had no claim on the resources of the Samaritan, nothing whatsoever. He had nothing to commend himself to the Samaritan, nothing that he could do for him. The Samaritan, though, saw him in his need, felt compassion for him, and undertook extensive measures to make sure that he was taken care of. He did hands-on things, he helped him physically, he took him to others who could help him as well. This was a multifaceted intervention to this man having need, all driven by the compassion in the Samaritan who was the spiritual outcast of the day.

Now, Jesus' question, having told the story, turns to the lawyer who asked him and was just wanting to deal with things in a theoretical, abstract, academic way, Jesus said, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" There's no evading that question, is there? Notice the word that the lawyer used as he assessed the situation. "He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' And Jesus said to him, 'You go, and do likewise.'" He's not telling him how to have his sins forgiven. The point of that encounter is you go and do that; Jesus knowing that the man did not have that kind of mercy, he was not merciful and compassionate by disposition, he said, "You go and do that," and by giving him that command, he would expose the spiritual poverty that was actually inside the man that he didn't recognize when he wanted to justify himself. He said, "You go and help others in need." That wasn't appealing to him and so Jesus exposed his spiritual bankruptcy with that point.

Now, this is in the realm of physical needs. We see it as Jesus healed the blind man. They said, "Have mercy on us." The good Samaritan comes along and no one could say anything but said he had mercy on him, compassion, inaction that relieved the need according to the ability of the one who saw it. The Samaritan had the resources, helped him out of his own resources. Now, you can see the same principle in the spiritual realm also in the book of Jude, if you'll turn to the last little letter of the Bible just before the book of Revelation, Jude, and let's just read from verse 17. We'll lead up into this. In some ways, this is the easiest beatitude to preach so far because Scripture just interprets it for us. It just falls out for us like well-cooked meat off a bone and you can just pick it up and taste the succulent juices that are in the nutritious food that is there, the spiritual food, as it's so clear what mercy is. There's a need, someone sees the need, feels compassion, meets the need. Jesus with the blind man, the Good Samaritan with the man who had been robbed and beaten, this is obvious. This is obvious that it's not simply a feeling, but using your power to relieve the need that is in front of you.

Now, in verse 17, we're ultimately going to verses 22 and 23, but in verse 17, it's good to get the context leading up here because you see that this shows us that there are often sick elements within the church that have to be addressed. And in verse 17, Jude speaks to the believers and says, "But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you," that is, the apostles warned you in advance, Jude is writing after much of the apostolic ministry had already taken place, "They said to you, 'In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.' It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit." He says in your experience within the body of Christ, you will encounter people who cause divisions, who are worldly and by their conduct show that they do not have the Spirit of God within them. This is within the visible body of Christ, scoffers that are doing this. You've been warned. Be aware of this. Take heed.

What do you do? What's the church to do? Verse 20, "But you, beloved," you're not like that. By contrast, here's what you are to do. I've identified the ungodly elements, now let me speak to the remnant within the church that needs to hear how to respond. "But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." Beloved, mercy appears in the next verse as well. As we walk through this life, we have our struggles, we have our difficulties, there are difficulties personally, there are difficulties corporately within the church, and sometimes there's a sense of where you just go, "Oh," and you've just groan under the weight of it, don't you? You've just groan under the weight of it, groan under the weight of living in a fallen world and the conflict that comes with that. And we're waiting, we're waiting for something better. We're waiting for the mercy of the Lord who sees us in our need, who has compassion on us, and one day will meet our need by delivering us into his eternal kingdom where conflict and sin and division are no more. That's going to be great. That's going to be great. I can't wait for that time and it will be the mercy of God. He who sees us and sympathizes with us in our weakness, the Lord Jesus Christ who became flesh and knows what it's like to walk on this world and sees us in our need and our suffering, and having identified with it personally in his humanity, knows what it's like, has sympathy on it, and the time is coming where in the mercy of God, he will relieve us from that and deliver us into his heavenly kingdom and that deliverance will be another act of mercy upon us. He had mercy on us at the beginning of our salvation when he drew us to Christ and delivered us from guilt and condemnation, and there's coming a still future time to us when we will see more mercy for us, and we'll be translated out of this wicked world and into that kingdom of peace where tears and sorrows and death and conflict are gone forever, and we're going to see how much, then we're going to see even more clearly the compassion and mercy the Lord had on us in our salvation. No more doctors poking you with things. No more watching a spouse waste away under disease, having to say goodbye. No more dealing with sinful, I don't like the term, addictions. But you know what I mean. No more conflict in the home. No more sorrow. No more pain. All of the things that weigh us down, that the Lord knows about, and I get weighed down too, beloved, and to know that ahead there is an act of mercy where the Lord releases us from all of that and brings us in and says, "It's time to come home." That's going to be great and that's going to be an exercise of the mercy of the Lord on us in our need. And that

mercy, don't miss it, that mercy is going to be ushering us into the presence of Christ. Spiritual need, spiritual mercy.

Then we see it in verse 22, that in light of that, that there's a mercy for us to have upon those within the body that are struggling. So we're instructed in light of the mercy that we have received, that we will receive, verse 22, "And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh." Mercy, mercy, mercy, three times in that text. Verse 21, verse 22, verse 23, mercy, mercy, mercy. And so, you know, on the one hand we're reveling in the mercy of God to us as we contemplate all these things, and at the same time we're just getting a sense for what the term mercy means and the term mercy can be reduced to this simple formula: someone has a need, someone who can help meets the need. See a need, meet a need. There's mercy for you. See a need, sympathize with the person in it, and meet their need if it's in your ability to do it.

That's all mercy is. I mean, I say that's all mercy is, you know, I don't mean to diminish it that way, but it's that simple. It's that simple and if you've been around people who can talk a really good spiritual game, someone who can say all the right things and can maintain an outward appearance of righteousness, but you go to rely upon them and you need their help, you need their help and there's a need in your life, there's a need in the body, and, "Ah, I'm sorry, I can't. No, I can't do anything for you there." But you've got time. "No, I can't do that." You see, that's not mercy and Scripture tells us to look at that and realize the distinction between true mercy and basically false faith, counterfeit faith.

Look at James 2. This is all very practical and remember that when in the next week or two that comes out and we tell you that there are some things that we need help with in the church, remember this message when you get that email because the needs in different places are real. Now, again, mercy, mercy, mercy is the context. James 2:13, "judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy." In other words, God is not going to have compassion on those in spiritual need at the judgment when their lives have been a contradiction of everything that he is in his mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Now, in this familiar text, as we continue reading in verse 14, you see the aspect of meeting a need being central to real, genuine faith. Verse 14, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith," air-quotes, "Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" The question answers itself. That's no good at all. That's useless. That's a waste of time. It's hypocrisy. Those words actually are self-condemning. If it's within your power to help, you see the need and you refuse to do anything about it. So, verse 17, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." We are saved, we are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies does not come alone. The theologians like to say, real faith operates in action. It's only by faith that we receive Christ, not by our works, but when the faith is real, the actions necessarily follow as a fruit of being a new creation in Christ. Faith without

works is dead. Beloved, if I can make this parallel: compassion without help is dead. Compassion without actual help is not mercy at all.

So we've answered the question, what is mercy, mercy is compassion in action for people in need. Compassion in action for people in need. Remember, Jesus saw the blind man, he acted. The good Samaritan saw need, he acted. You cannot have mercy without the action. Now question number 2. We're having a Q&A tonight, right, only I'm asking the questions and answering them. Why should you be merciful? Why should you be merciful and this is where remembering the opening context of Ephesians 2 is so very helpful to us. Beloved, fellow believer in Christ, you should be merciful because God has been merciful to you. You should be merciful because God has been merciful to you. You received mercy, therefore you should give mercy and Scripture does not allow any disputing over this point. Because God showed mercy to you, you should be motivated to show mercy to others. Because God showed mercy to you, mercy is now an operative principle in all of your life and will be throughout all of eternity. You have been taken from the judgment track, the judgment conveyor belt that drops people off in perdition, and you've been put on the escalator of mercy that carries you up to heaven. Now in light of that, beloved, because you're so, you should be, so grateful to God for the mercy that he showed on you when you were dead in sin, dominated by the devil and doomed to suffer the wrath of God, the fact that God showed mercy to you should make mercy automatic in your disposition, in your affections, and in your reflexes as you go through life. It ought to be automatic to one degree or another somehow.

Now let's go back to the book of Ephesians 4 with me. Ephesians 4 and once again, beloved, let me say this again, I've been saying this throughout the Beatitudes, and I don't think I can say it often enough: the Beatitudes separate the wheat from the chaff. They give us practical ways to discern who true Christians are and who the false professors of Christ are because you can't fake this stuff, and the absence of these virtues that the Beatitudes describe is a mark of someone that does not have grace operative in their soul. It's that critical and it just pops up all over the place in Scripture, and therefore it pops up all over the place in life, in personal life and church life.

Ephesians 4:31, after Paul has explained the glory of God in salvation, chapters 1 through 3, he says in 4, verse 1, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Now listen, that's what true Christians do. They maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace with humility and gentleness and patience and love. That's what Christians do. That's what Christians do, beloved, and it's right to ask, "Is what I'm seeing a fruit of mercy, peace, love, unity, so on, so on?"

Well, Paul gives that general statement, walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called, and then as he goes through and works out the details of it, we come to the end of Ephesians 4, verse 29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." Now in verse 31, remembering we're talking about mercy and why you should

be merciful, why should you be merciful? It's because God has had mercy on you. That's the biblical ethic, that's the biblical argument, that's the biblical motive, the biblical compulsion. And the better your theology of salvation is, theological word, soteriology, the better your soteriology is, the better your mercy will be because when you understand that you were totally depraved, that you were dead in sin and God had mercy on you in that condition and you did nothing to deserve it, when that's clear in your mind and you're overwhelmed by mercy and grace poured out on your sinful, wretched soul, then it's an easy thing to say, "Okay, time for you to be merciful too." You get it? "Yeah, I get it. I get it. I've received so much. I ought to give a little out."

So in verse 31, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." Flip side, other side of the same coin, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." He says, "You forgive each other. Why? Because God in Christ forgave you. And since you have been forgiven, then go forgive. Since you have received mercy, be merciful." This isn't complicated. You don't need a seminary degree to understand this. You don't need Greek or Hebrew to understand this. It's all so plain that really even a child could understand it.

Chapter 5, verse 1, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love." Why? "As," what's the pattern, "as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Be kind, be tenderhearted, walk in love. Why? Because you're a Christian and as a Christian, that's what Christ first did for you. He loved you. He showed mercy to you. He forgave you. He sacrificed himself and his own precious blood on your behalf when you were a rebel against him. When you were a rebel against him. You were guilty, but in mercy, Christ died for you.

Now beloved, for those of you that like to write message titles out, the title of tonight's message is "The Mercy Spiral." The mercy spiral and I mention the title because I want to talk about a spiral now. There is a revolving spiral in the mercy of God, a divine spiral in salvific mercy and here's how it goes. God was first merciful to us in our salvation. When we were not deserving, God showed compassion to us and exercised his power to help us in our need. He was merciful to us in our salvation. We received it from him. Now, as you grow in Christ, as you grow in Scripture, you start to understand something more, and you grow more and more in your understanding of how great that mercy is. And so God is first merciful to you, and then as you grow in Christ, you recognize that mercy and give thanks to him for it. "God, thank you for the mercy that you've shown to me. You showed compassion on me. That melts my heart before you. I recognize it. I glorify you. I thank you." And then, having established that vertical link to mercy, you turn and you extend mercy to those around you with differing needs, maybe not necessarily spiritual needs, but the principle of mercy, having received help in your time of need from a compassionate God, instills in you a principle to act likewise.

This isn't complicated. It may be hard to practice because we're still fighting against our selfish flesh, but the principle is not hard to understand at all. And so we receive mercy, we give thanks for mercy, and then we extend mercy to others, and as we do that, God, as

we go along in life and as we live that way, God pours out more mercy on us. We sin, we confess, he shows us mercy. We're lonely, he brings us friends, and loved ones to alleviate the isolation, and he just shows mercy to us. We have physical needs and he meets them. We have spiritual needs and he meets them. We need a church, he provides a church. We long for something, he provides it. Just so much mercy, mercy, mercy going on. He helps us in our afflictions. He cleanses us from our sins. And as we realize what we're receiving from God in these things, it refreshes our hearts. It increases our gratitude. We grow spiritually as we give thanks to him. And from that position of expanded spiritual growth and spiritual gratitude, do you know what happens? It makes us more merciful and we show more mercy to others along the way.

And so there's just this spiral, this upward spiral. God shows mercy to us. We're grateful. We show it to others. We go through life. God shows us mercy in other ways. It expands us, refreshes us, and we want to do it more for others. And God continues all of that until he mercifully brings us home to glory, and the mercy is culminated in a perfect manifestation that eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and mind cannot conceive the greatness of the mercy that awaits us when we are in heaven with Christ. And maybe, just maybe, with the countless numbers of the redeemed, we'll have all of eternity for this, maybe we'll have the opportunity, I'm speculating here. I hope that something like this can happen. Maybe in the presence of our still incarnate Lord in his resurrected glory and us sharing in resurrected glory, maybe we'll have an opportunity personally, individually, to fall at his feet and wrap our arms around his feet and kiss them and say, "Lord, thank you for the mercy that you showed to me when I was dead in sin. Here I am in heaven. I deserve to be next door to Satan in the pit, and here I am at your feet. I will kiss your feet in gratitude for your mercy." I hope we get to do something like that, something to express the inward spiritual gratitude, something that there's some kind of outward manifestation as we sing glory to the Lamb, something like that to just utterly humble ourselves before him, lost in wonder, love, and praise at the greatness of the mercy that he's given to us. Don't you want to do that? I do. I want to run to his feet and fall and fall at his feet and kiss his feet and thank him for his boundless mercy and the compassion that he had on my soul and has on my soul even now in all of the ways I still stumble, as you do also.

Now, beloved, here's the thing, the whole principle of this, the whole spiral, the circle of mercy, if you will, it's all based on this simple principle that mercy begets mercy. Mercy causes other mercy to take place. And so mercy on our souls causes our souls to become merciful, and that's the spirit of Matthew 5:7. And here's the million-dollar statement on all of this, beloved, when it comes down to it is that, remember, think about the Good Samaritan, think about the priest and the Levite passing by on the other side, content to let that guy bleed to death, and then the Samaritan comes and stops and changes the course of his week to help the guy. Mercy begets mercy and so here's the million-dollar thing for us to realize, beloved: your impulses reveal your character. Your impulses reveal your character. Are you prone to help a Christian in need? Do you see something and find yourself saying, "What could I do to help there?" That's mercy. Praise the Lord for his work in your life. I know a pastor's wife who's like that. Every single time she hears of a need, her immediate thought, the first words out of her mouth is wondering

what she can do to help. Every single time. Convicts me like crazy because I'm not so naturally like that. But she is. Got a lot to learn from her after 35 years still.

Now, beloved, I want you to understand that Jesus addresses the other side of this coin. We've seen so much about how mercy begets mercy, but Scripture is filled with warnings against the unmerciful and this is not to be trifled with. Oh, my. No, no, no. We don't trifle with these things. We do not trifle with these things and even if we think in terms of people who've wronged us, there's room for mercy even there. We wronged God far more than anyone has wronged us, and God showed us mercy, and so the fact that somebody wronged us isn't a sign that we're now excused from mercy and we can go on the attack. That's not Christianity because Scripture teaches us that people who show no mercy will face the wrath of God.

Look at Matthew 5:7 again. Matthew 5:7. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Now just like all the other eight Beatitudes, the word "they," it uses the intensive pronoun in the original language, and in the original language, you can move words around to give emphasis that you don't have the freedom to do so much in English, not in the same way, and so this construction here that Jesus uses puts the word "they," uses an intense word for "they," and puts it at the very forward so that it's emphasized and it's like it's in bold italics, if you were to read it rightly. And I say this so often, but it's so essential to understanding what the Beatitudes are teaching, the sense of the construction in all of those second clauses, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; for they shall be comforted; for they shall inherit the earth," in every instance, beloved, in all eight instances, verses 3 through 10, the "they" is emphatic, and the idea of it is they and they alone will receive mercy. They and they alone will receive mercy. The others won't receive mercy. They're back in the realm of James 2, judgment will be merciless for those who have shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. This isn't simply a matter of personal preference. This isn't a matter of, "Oh, I'm too busy," because the Levite and the priest weren't excused because they were so busy, busy, busy. They weren't excused. Mercy might be inconvenient, might require some cash or some time or some consistent service.

The "they" is emphatic. Only the merciful will receive mercy from God. People, maybe they, you know... look, we all suffer wrongs, right? We have to decide if we're going to play the victim or respond in mercy, trust the Lord for his providence or become bitter and hateful about it all. Some people have been wronged and refused to forgive. We should weigh Jesus' thoughts on that very, very, very carefully, because the ramifications of this are eternal.

Look at Matthew 18. Matthew 18 and I'm just going to read this parable. It will be self-explanatory. Verse 21, Matthew 18:21, "Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?'" Peter thought he was being generous. "I'm willing to go seven times, Lord." "Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" He just made it infinite so that you don't keep count. "Therefore the kingdom of heaven," which remember the Beatitudes start with that, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of

heaven," we're talking about the same operative entrance principles here, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents." It's beyond a lifetime of debt. Impossible debt to repay which is where all of us were before God, couldn't repay our spiritual debt before him. 10,000 talents! Maybe 20 years of wages, some suggest. "Since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made." Off to debtor's prison for you. Off into slavery. You can work it off in slavery. "So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him," the compassion, the mercy of the master, "the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt." Forgave him a massive debt that he could never pay, which is exactly what God did for us in Christ. We had a debt that we could not pay to him and he forgave us at the cost of his own Son.

Verse 28, "But when that same servant," who had been forgiven a lifetime debt, "went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii," maybe, you know, three months of wages. You could repay that over time. Another servant owed the forgiven servant three months worth of wages and he had just been forgiven a lifetime of debt and what did he do? He seized him. He began to choke him, saying, "'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him," and said the exact same thing that he appealed to the master with. He used the same words. He said, "'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'" I had mercy on you. Surely you see that you should have mercy on others, but you didn't. You choked him. You put him in prison.

Verse 34, "And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt." Verse 35, here's the principle, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you," no exceptions, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." You say that you've received the mercy of God, but you won't extend mercy to others? The Bible says, Jesus says, Scripture says, not me, you are wicked and deceived. You are profoundly mistaken to think you are a Christian if you have an unforgiving heart as a course and character of your life.

Wow. This makes you want to step back and take stock, doesn't it? Everybody likes to talk about a gracious God who forgives all my sins, and we thank God for that, that he does that, but to flippantly talk about that while simultaneously walking in a pattern of anger, bitterness, unmerciful attitudes. Scripture says, no, no. You're not a Christian, Scripture says. Those two things cannot be reconciled. If you received mercy, you give mercy. Blessed are the merciful, for they and they alone shall receive mercy. They and they alone. Don't talk to us about your faith in Christ if you are a chronically angry, unforgiving, bitter person, because your words contradict your profession, and Christ tells us to listen to the reality of your life, because anybody can talk. So it behooves us to get

on our knees and say, "Father, search me. What am I really like? O God, don't let me be like that wicked servant; to the extent that I trend that way, forgive me and bring me back, O God."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says this. If you could read Martyn Lloyd-Jones and James Montgomery Boice and John MacArthur, you'd be doing really good. If you only read those three guys all your life, you'd be alright. I don't recommend just limiting it to those three, but if that's all you ever did, you'd be all right as a Christian. They will not lead you wrong. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says this, that dear, humble man of God, writing in his studies in the Sermon on the Mount, said this, "The grace of God is such that when it comes into our hearts with forgiveness, it makes us merciful. We proclaim, therefore, whether we have received forgiveness or not by whether we forgive or not. If I am forgiven, I shall forgive. If I am not merciful, there is only one explanation, I have never understood the grace and the mercy of God. I am outside of Christ. I am in my sins and unforgiven."

My dear friends, don't go there. Don't follow the path of that wicked servant who was forgiven a great debt but refused to forgive the one who owed him. Don't go there because, beloved, even in your own self-interest, nothing is worth missing the mercy of God as we've seen it here tonight from Scripture. So if this word from the Bible tonight has convicted you, I plead with you, I urge you, I beg you, I counsel you, I advise you to repent and let the Lord work his mercy into your heart.

Father, make us merciful people, having received mercy to give mercy, and where mercy and ingratitude and bitterness have held root in any heart under the sound of my voice, Father, would your Spirit go deep inside that person, loosen the chains as he loosened Paul and Silas from their chains in Acts 16, that they might go free? Having convicted us through your word here tonight, Father, we pray that you would work out the sanctification that you intend. Sometimes you bruise us with conviction so that you could heal us and make us better on the other side of it. To the extent that we're believers and feel that bruising hand of the convicting work of your Spirit, have your way with us, Father. Not our will, but thine, be done. And for those, Father, who have been exposed as hypocrites by reason of their unmerciful spirits, give them no rest, give them no relief. Strengthen and deepen the pangs of their conscience until they can stand it no more and must cry out and flee to Christ for mercy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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