

Sermon 7, Blessed Are the Merciful, Matthew 5:7

That is a blessed kind of giving which though it makes the purse lighter, it makes the crown heavier.--Watson

Bless God for a willing mind. To have not only an estate, but an heart, is matter of gratulation.--Watson

Some, again, recede from [works of mercy](#), lest they be busied with other people's misery. Hence [Our Lord](#) promised the merciful that they should obtain mercy, and be delivered from all misery."--Thomas, I-II.69.4

OT Reading: Ex. 20:1-6; Ezekiel 16:1-14

Proposition: The Christian must practice mercy if he would receive mercy.

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Outline

As you may know, Pope Francis has declared this year to be the international jubilee year of mercy. To that end, he has asked Catholic parishes to focus on the mercy that Christ offers, and he has unleashed "super-confessors," and so on. But of course Pope Francis didn't invent mercy, and he certainly would claim that he did so. No, mercy was an attribute of God before there was anyone who needed mercy. In our passage this morning, we see that mercy is not just a call this

year from an acknowledged ecclesiastical leader. Mercy is something that should characterize every Christian, all the time. Mercy is mandatory, according to the Son of God.

I don't usually arrange my sermon by questions, but today we're going to look at four questions. We will see that the Christian must practice mercy if he would receive mercy.

I. What Does It Mean to Be Merciful?

As we consider this Beatitude this morning, the question naturally arises: What does it mean to be merciful? Well, as Thomas Watson said, Love visits a man when he's well, purely from affection and friendship. Mercy visits him when he's sick, because mercy is responsive to misery.

A. Mercy Means Care and Compassion Toward Misery

In fact, mercy is misery-dependent. Grace means "having compassion;" it gives people what they don't deserve. Mercy has compassion too, but in a different way--it doesn't give people what they deserve. Mercy sees misery and is moved by it.

1. Feelings

The first way in which mercy shows itself is by feelings. When you see someone miserable, do you care? Imagine your spouse or child hurt. Does your heart reach out? Do you care? Are you moved? What about when you see a stranger being treated cruelly? Say you're watching a movie in which a bully taunts a helpless person. How do you feel? Are moved with sorrow about the situation on the screen? Do you wish that there was something you could do to ease the plight of the miserable person on the screen? Then you have felt the feeling of mercy.

Mercy is a tremendous virtue. Thomas Aquinas said,

But of all the virtues which relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest, even as its act surpasses all others, since it belongs to one who is higher and better to supply the defect of another, in so far as the latter is deficient. . . . Charity likens us to God by uniting us to Him in the bond of love: wherefore it surpasses mercy, which likens us to God as regards similarity of works. (*ST*, II-II, 30.4)

But mercy is more than a feeling, isn't it? Think of the good Samaritan. Did he show mercy? Of course. But it wasn't by walking by and feeling compassion on the misery of the beaten-up man. No. How did the good Samaritan show his mercy? Through his actions.

2. Actions

Well, our Roman Catholic friends enumerate 14 works of mercy. They are a helpful list in thinking about the kinds of things that mercy does. The corporal works of mercy:

- To feed the hungry;
- To give drink to the thirsty;
- To clothe the naked;
- To harbour the harbourless;
- To visit the sick;
- To ransom the captive;
- To **bury** the dead.

The spiritual works of mercy are:

- To instruct the **ignorant**;
- To counsel the **doubtful**;
- To **admonish sinners**;
- To bear wrongs patiently;
- To forgive offences willingly;
- To comfort the afflicted;
- To **pray** for the living.

Now, all of us have varying degrees of responsibility here. Most of us here have children in our homes. With your children, you literally have the chance to feed the hungry and clothe the naked every day. All of us should be giving food, drink, and clothing to our children, giving them a place to live, admonishing them for their sins and bearing their wrongs patiently. Children, you have the same responsibility toward your parents.

But the question is, do we exhaust our responsibility to be merciful when we perform these works within our own families? The answer is obvious. No! You must be merciful even beyond the four walls of your home.

Now, what does that look like? Are you responsible to seek out the needy? Do you have to find a homeless person and show mercy to him by inviting him to live with you for six months? Not necessarily.

B. Mercy Is Shown to those who Need Something

Before we puzzle our minds with these questions of responsibility and how much we're obligated to do to find these people, let's talk about the three broad ways in which everyone will in the room will certainly need to exercise mercy.

1. Knowledge

This is the first way--this includes the more traditional categories of "instructing the ignorant" and "rebuking the sinner." You almost certainly interact every day with people who either need to learn Christian truth, or who need to be reminded of it. In other words, you are not off the hook for this one. You may say, "I don't know a whole lot. My knowledge is weak." But that doesn't remove your duty to show mercy by helping people learn. A lot of our fellow Americans genuinely don't realize that egalitarianism and "You can be anything you want to be" are terrible ideas. That's all they've ever heard; they have no idea that these ideas are radically opposed to the teaching of the Word of God. Many people believe that God is satisfied with nothing more than sincere effort, or that He will admit anyone who "tried to be a good person" into His heaven. And so on. You see, people don't know unless you tell them. Now, the merciful person does not consider it his duty to be the thought police and correct everyone in sight. But the merciful person will, if the situation permits or if his opinion is clearly wanted, openly speak about the truth.

2. Forgiveness

The merciful person, like the meek person whom we heard about a few weeks ago, will not exact strict justice out of everyone around him. He won't operate with a tit-for-tat mentality. He will

forgive injuries, even really painful injuries. The merciful person does not bear a grudge. The merciful person sincerely wills good to all, even to the person who really hurt him. Now, being merciful doesn't mean that you enjoy everyone or are equally close to everyone. But it does imply that you recognize the misery of the sinner and forgive him. This is a challenge. But this is one primary part of showing mercy. When your mother says something truly cruel to you, when your sister takes your toy, when your boss victimizes you or your co-worker unjustly, or when a business associate steals a lot of money from you, you are called to forgive. That doesn't mean that you become a doormat. It doesn't mean that remain in an abusive relationship. But it does mean that you do not carry a grudge or hold onto the pain perpetrated by that person. See Ephesians 4:31—5:2. This applies even to people who are actively trying to hurt you. It doesn't mean that you can't testify or seek civil remedies, or assist in convicting the wicked person in a church discipline case. But it does mean that you do not let yourself hate or long for their destruction.

3. Help

This covers all the physical works of mercy. When a Christian sees someone in misery, he does what he can to help. Now, I know that I rarely give charity to people on the street because I wonder whether they are truly miserable. Further, you should not help in such a way that you become part of the same problem. E.g., you shouldn't pay someone else's rent, but neglect to pay your own! Becoming homeless doesn't help the homeless. Society works best when each family supports itself and has its own place to live, and mercy helps make that happen. The bottom line is that when you see a need, you should help meet the need--but you should do your best to be informed about how to meet the need. Those who have given their lives to studying poverty alleviation provide a grid for helping us understand how physical works of mercy should actually work. You must understand these three different needs, and act accordingly, if your temporal works of mercy are ever going to make a difference.

Let me introduce you to these stages using the analogy of a newborn baby, since that's something I've been thinking a lot about recently. When that baby is born, what will happen to it if no one does something for it? It will die. That baby needs relief. It needs a handout--food, clothing, possibly medicine. And it will continue needing that handout for another six months to a year before it can even get food from the plate to its face. Nonetheless, even at this stage there is something you expect the baby to do for itself. What is that? Suck. It needs to liberate the milk from the breast, get it in, and swallow it. What happens when you put the baby on a feeding tube and don't make it suckle? It doesn't grow. It doesn't thrive.

So baby needs relief. Now, imagine that baby has become a toddler. Given a house with food in the cupboards and blankets on the shelves, this resourceful toddler will be able to keep himself fed and warm. But let's say that the cupboard gets empty and isn't replenished. Is it enough just to refill that cupboard, making sure that the food keeps coming in the door? No. As the child grows, you want him to eventually be able to go out and either grow his own food or earn wages from someone that will allow him to buy food. Refilling the cupboard is relief. If the

child gets crippled, moving the food into a lower cupboard so he can get it from his wheelchair is rehabilitation. But teaching him how to work and feed himself is development.

a) Relief

This is what you provide when someone is in free fall, and their life is only going to get worse without outside intervention. This is someone who's just experienced a massive crisis. For instance, my grandparents' house burned down in 2014. They have decent retirement savings, good homeowners' insurance, etc. But when their house burned down, they were both left in their bathrobes. Their neighbors gave them a half-dozen shirts. An old black man stopped on the sidewalk, took off his coat, and gave it to Grandpa. That was appropriate. That was relief. To figure out whether a situation needs relief, you must ask yourself this: If I fail to provide immediate help, will there really be serious negative consequences?⁷ If not, then relief is not the correct response.

b) Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is different than relief. Rehabilitation seeks to return to the positive pre-crisis elements at work in someone's life. Thus, in Grandma and Grandpa's case, rehabilitation would have gotten them back to the place where they could sit in the dining room and read the *Wall Street Journal*. Rehab isn't enough, though; what you need to pursue, as often as possible, is going beyond the positive pre-crisis elements into new territory. That's development.

c) Development

Development is best expressed by the old saw about teaching someone to fish so that he can eat for a lifetime. It's true. Giving someone a turkey at Thanksgiving is probably not a great solution to long-term poverty. In fact, generally it's applying relief when what the person needs is development.

Is there anyone in the room who could live on a one-time gift? Of course not. We all need regular incomes. The same goes for poor people. What they need is not a handout but a hand-up. Paternalism--doing for people what they can do for themselves--is not mercy. It's not even close. Rather, mercy is *effective* compassion on misery. It is not merciful to feed someone who won't work. It is not merciful to put a baby on a feeding tube so he won't have to suckle.

Ultimately, effective mercy is not about salving your conscience by handing something to the guy begging on the roadside. Effective mercy is about actually getting in there for the long haul and working with someone to effect long-term change. Our goal with showing mercy to the needy among us and in the broader world is not to reinforce how wonderful we are, how generous we are, how merciful we are. Our goal is to help other people learn to work and support themselves and their families to the glory of God.

A sermon like this is a funny thing. Probably people needing mercy will pop up for many of us in the next few weeks. One just popped up for me as I was getting ready to preach this past week. But even such people don't, I'm sure of this: for most of us here, realistically, we will have

⁷ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 101.

the chance to show mercy to people who need something from us at our job. We will have the chance to show mercy to family members who have screwed up again. We will have the chance to show mercy to our students, or to our employees, or to our pets. And honestly, it's in the day-to-day that habits of mercifulness are formed. Jesus isn't saying, "Blessed are those who go out and buy a house for a homeless person, for they shall receive mercy." Honestly, most of the time it's going to look more like helping a co-worker do something that isn't strictly your job just so she doesn't get in trouble with the boss. It's going to look more like changing your child's diaper. It's going to look more like forgiving your awful mother-in-law when she does something really out there. And so on. Yes, the Gospel demands heroism. But heroism is by and large exercised in the everyday, in the boring environment of the break room or the bedroom. .

C. Mercy Cannot Be Deserved or Earned

You see, mercy can't be earned. By definition, mercy is a gift. You can't obligate God to be merciful to you. The merciful haven't earned from God the right to receive His mercy. You can't have a right to mercy, by definition. That's why Christ's promise is a blessing. It is fitting that the merciful obtain mercy, but it is not mandatory. God is obligated only by His promise, not by His nature.

II. Why Does Christ Deny Mercy to the Merciless?

Well, this Beatitude is phrased positively, but I want us to think about its negative side for a minute. Christ is saying that if you do not show mercy, you will not receive mercy. If you want to be saved, it is necessary for you to show mercy.

A. Mercy Is Necessary for the Christian (Antecedent vs. Consequent Necessity)

In other words, the things we talked about above are not optional. They are not add-ons for the super-Christian. They are the bread and butter of the ordinary Christian. Works of mercy are things you should be doing and must be doing, as you hope to receive God's mercy. You cannot be saved without showing mercy.

How do I mean? Well, I don't mean that God won't save you until you have been merciful. Just the opposite. You will never be merciful until God saves you--but if you aren't merciful, then you probably haven't been saved.

For those who like a little bit of philosophy, I think the distinction between antecedent and consequent necessity is helpful here. Merciful deeds are absolutely necessary to salvation—but they are necessary by a consequent necessity. In other words, you don't have to do the works first so that you can be saved afterwards. Rather, you have to do the works afterwards to show that you were saved in the first place.

Let's say you've got a pear tree. Now, it is necessary for a pear tree to grow pears. It cannot grow apples or lemons. But does the tree have to grow a pear before it earns the right to be a pear tree? Of course not. Far from it. It is necessary for the tree to grow pears by a consequent necessity: given that it is a pear tree, it produces pears. Or think of fire: it is a consequent necessity, not an antecedent necessity, for fire to be hot. "I won't call it fire until it's hot." No. Rather, you say, "It's fire, so it must be hot." It doesn't get hot and then become fire;

the nature of heat is not to produce fire. The nature of fire is to produce heat. The nature of merciful works is not to save you; no, the nature of a saved person is to do merciful works! It is a consequent necessity. By the way, faith is necessary for salvation with a consequent necessity.

B. The Merciless Have Never Been Affected by God's Mercy

And thus, to answer the question, the merciless don't obtain mercy because they show that they were never Christians at all. Remember the unforgiving servant? Matthew 18:21-35 is a long passage, but we're going to read it, because it shows clearly what mercy is all about. Mercy is generally going to involve forgiving someone who *totally* doesn't deserve it, just because you were forgiven when you totally didn't deserve it. If you are unwilling to show compassion on the misery of those around you, then you make it clear that you have never been affected by God's mercy. He had pity on Israel in her misery; He had pity on every believer in this room in their misery. Can you not have pity on your kindred, your fellow saints, and many others?

III. Why Do the Merciful Need to be Blessed with Mercy?

Well, we have another question to answer. If being merciful is so good--and it is--then why do the merciful need mercy? Don't they need justice instead?

A. Salvation Is Not a Reward for Being Merciful

The answer to that question is "Absolutely not." Salvation is not a reward for being merciful, just as it is not a reward for any other good deed.

B. Salvation Is a Gift: God's Mercy Shown to Our Misery

No--salvation is a gift! God has mercy on people who deserve His wrath. God has mercy on miserable people who are far from Him and suffering. God has mercy. So if you are miserable, if you are suffering, then come to God and cast your burden on him. Ask Him to save you. Ask Him to comfort you. Ask Him to show you mercy. He doesn't promise that He will comfort you right away. But He has declared Himself to be abundant in mercy.

IV. How Can We Become Merciful?

If you want to be merciful, you must first have an encounter with God's mercy in Christ. You must apply to Him for mercy. You can't be merciful until you've received mercy. Oh, you can be nice. You can be "decent". You can be humane. But your heart will not truly be broken over others' misery until you've seen your own and accepted God's mercy. Come to Jesus. Embrace what He offers. Accept mercy now, then show mercy, and then receive mercy on the last day.

Brothers and sisters, let's not be known as a cruel church. Let's be known as a *merciful* group of believers. Amen.