

BUILDING CHARACTER: On Being Merciful

A Study of Matthew 5:7

Characteristic of Completeness: Compassion

Big Idea: God takes our mercy toward others personally.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 103:8; Proverbs 14:21; 17:5; 19:17; 22:9; Micah 6:8;

Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 18:21-35; Luke 10:25-37; John 9:1-8;

Philippians 2:27; 2 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 1:15-16

Introduction

1. His skin is leathery brown. His scruffy beard, mostly white, but faintly yellowed where the cigarette nub smolders close on his lip. His grimy clothes, oily hair, and blackened fingernails frame the cardboard sign he holds up for me to see, while I wait in the left-hand-turn lane: “Homeless and hungry but not crazy. God bless you,” it says.

In that moment, questions swirl in my head. Do I make eye contact or not? And the sign. Why does he say he’s not crazy? Is this a shrewd sales ploy, anticipating my objection, like I wouldn’t give money to a crazy person? And why say, “God bless you”? Is that a sneaky way of guiltting me into giving him money? And the cigarette. Not so shrewd I think. Is that where my money would go? For cigarettes? Or worse? Does he have a car parked somewhere out of view where he goes after his “shift” is over to drive home and count the take?

Or what if this guy is legit? What if he really *is* homeless and hungry? I have a wife. I have a family—my wife, my kids, my parents, my church. They’ve got my back. What if this guy has nobody? What if, while I’m out looking at plasma TVs, this guy is just trying to get down to the plasma donor station to get a few bucks for his next meal?

Do I show him mercy? How? The green arrow excuses me, and I drive away.

2. But Jesus holds up His own sign for us to see. And there’s no green arrow. Believers have got to deal with it one way or another. It’s in ► Matthew 5:7. I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5:7. That is the biblical text we’ll be studying this morning. Jesus ► says:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

Questions swirl in our heads. Three ► big ones frame the outline of my sermon. Question ► One: What does it mean to be merciful? What does mercy involve? Question ► Two: Where in everyday life is mercy needed? Where is it called for? Is mercy something I do for the homeless guy? Is mercy for my neighbor who is hurting? Is mercy for the person who wronged me? Is mercy sometimes unwise and enabling? And Question ► Three: Why are we better off being merciful? In what way are we blessed in being merciful? How does being merciful actually lead to receiving mercy?

- I. First ► things first. What does it mean to be merciful? What does mercy involve?
- A. The Greek word for mercy is *eleh-EH-o*.¹ Look it up in a Greek dictionary and you'll find that it means "to be greatly concerned about someone in need" to the point of helping.² It's pity to the point of providing. It's compassion in action. That's mercy.
- B. Mercy is very closely related to grace. In fact, in many places in the Bible, grace and mercy mean pretty much the same thing. This may come as a bit of a surprise.

You see, years ago, I heard somebody quote somebody about the distinction between mercy and grace—which, I'm afraid, is how some of my theology was formed early on: hearing somebody quote somebody. Anyway, I heard somebody say "Mercy is God's favour that holds back from us what we deserve. Grace is God's favour that gives us what we do not deserve."³ That's catchy. It has some face validity in English usage. And I've even used it myself. "Mercy is not getting the bad stuff you deserve," I'd say, "grace is getting the good stuff you don't deserve." Only one problem. I can find no linguistic support for this distinction in the Bible.

On the contrary, in the Bible, mercy and grace are most often interchangeable. Do a word search on the Greek word for "merciful"⁴ in our text, and you'll find that, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in the vast majority of cases, it's translated by the English word, "gracious." Consider, for example, ► Psalm 103:8. It says,

^{NAU} Psalm 103:8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.

The word ► "gracious" comes from the same Greek word translated "merciful" in our text. So grace and mercy are very closely related ideas. The idea is to be greatly concerned about someone in need to the point of helping. It's pity to the point of providing. It's compassion in action. And so, our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week is Compassion. That's what we're talking about: compassion.

- II. That brings us to ► the second question: Where in everyday life is mercy needed? Where is it called for?
- A. I want to show you that the need for mercy arises where people are in misery. Mercy is called for where people are in serious need. And the list of needs is long and varied.

¹ That's the verb, "to have mercy." The adjective, "merciful," is *eleh-AY-moan*.

² W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. "ἐλεῆμων," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

³ I "Googled" this and found that it is attributed to the late evangelist, Rolfe Barnard.

⁴ In both its verbal and adjectival forms.

In some cases, there does seem to be a nuance between grace and mercy. Both carry the same idea of a loving response to another person, but they at times emphasize different aspects of it. At times, grace seems to focus a little more on the undeserved nature of the love; while mercy focuses a little more on the helpless or miserable state of the one loved. As one scholar puts it: “Grace answers to the undeserving; mercy answers to the miserable.”⁵

We can see this in the Bible, where various people call out for mercy. As I list them, notice that the needs include physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, and financial needs. And usually, those calling out for mercy are helpless or powerless to change their situation. For example, in Matthew 9:27, two men call out to Jesus, “Have mercy,” because they are blind; they are in a bad way physically. In Matthew 15:22, a mother calls out to Jesus, “Have mercy,” because her daughter is demon-possessed; she is spiritually oppressed. In Matthew 17:15, a father calls out to Jesus, “Have mercy,” because his son is very ill and mentally out of control.⁶ Elsewhere we find mercy connected with emotional distress.⁷ In the Bible, mercy shows up in financial hardship as well.⁸

Well, that’s the Bible. What about Moon Valley? Where is mercy needed in our neighborhood? Needs are all around us.

1. As part of our Project Turkey, we assembled and delivered a Thanksgiving meal—turkey, stuffing, yams, cranberry sauce, green bean casserole, potatoes, rolls, and pie—to 174 underprivileged families in our community.
2. As part of our Sharing Tree, we are providing Christmas gifts to 185 underprivileged children who might not otherwise receive gifts at all.
3. Twenty five of the children receiving gifts are a part of Young Lives, a program we support to help single, adolescent moms.
4. We’ve provided food and clothing and supplies to the school nurse at Moon Mountain Elementary school to help her serve the large percentage of children from families living below the poverty level.
5. We give out three to five grocery bags full of food each week to homeless or needy people who just drop by the church.

⁵ D.A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: And His Confrontation with the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1978, 1987, 1999, 2005), 24-25.

⁶ The Greek word indicates either being mentally out of control (Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. “σεληνιάζομαι,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000)) or epilepsy (BDAG, s.v. “σεληνιάζομαι”).

⁷ For example, God had mercy on Paul in sparing him great sorrow in Philippians 2:27.

⁸ For example, in John 9:1-8, Jesus has mercy on the blind man who was a beggar.

6. We're teaching people how to speak English in our ESL program on Tuesday nights, using new computers and language software as teaching tools. And as we learn of the needs of participants, we have responded by providing things like medical care and blankets and prayer.
7. For a church our size, it's unusual to have a full-time pastor of counseling and recovery. We have one. Because we want to help bring healing and wholeness to people who are hurting.
8. We have taken teams to Carbo and Hermosillo, Mexico and Shonto on the Papago Reservation to help churches with programs and building projects they can't do on their own.
9. As part of our Mending The Soul program, we're providing hope and healing to those who have been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused.
10. As part of our Bless and Be Blessed and Team Barnabas programs, we're providing some work around the house for those who are unable to get it done.
11. And our Life Groups are helping one another and taking on their own acts of mercy. One Life Group recently went to the Phoenix Gospel Rescue Mission to serve meals to the homeless. Another plans to serve a meal and give gifts to participants in our ESL program at Christmas.

And that's just a recent sampling. The needs are all around us.

- B. Let me raise a question at this point—a question that many of us think about but are reluctant to voice. What about those who don't deserve mercy? What about people who are directly responsible for their own misery? What about the people who have fallen into a hole that they dug for themselves? Should we have mercy on those people?

I want to show you that the need for mercy remains even in cases where one is responsible for his or her own misery. In fact, the need for mercy has nothing to do with whether or not it is deserved. Indeed, we see in the Bible mercy extended to those who clearly do not deserve it. Mercy is connected with forgiveness, and forgiveness is undeserved.

For example, in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, the Apostle Paul describes his own conversion experience—his own salvation from sin, his own forgiveness from God—with the simple words: “I found mercy.” He ► says:

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 1:15 . . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost *of all*. ► 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in

me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

Is Paul saying he deserved this mercy? No. Quite the contrary. He describes himself as the foremost of sinners. He in no way deserved such mercy. No one does.

Moreover, the Lord says that those of us who have received undeserved mercy from Him, in turn, have an obligation to extend undeserved mercy to others. That's the point of His ► parable about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35. A parable is a story that makes a point. In this parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. One of his slaves owed him an astronomical amount of money—billions in today's dollars.⁹ No way the slave could repay the king, so he begged for mercy. The king felt compassion and forgave him the debt.

Then the slave who received undeserved mercy, in turn, found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a few thousand dollars and demanded repayment. The fellow slave could not repay right away and begged for mercy. But the slave who had received mercy did not extend mercy to his fellow slave and had him thrown in prison.

News of this got back to the king who then summoned the slave he had forgiven. He ► said:

^{NAU} Matthew 18:32 “. . . You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?”

Here, mercy is about forgiveness. And the point is: We are to forgive because we have been forgiven. We are to have mercy because we have received mercy.

- C. But ► are there situations in which mercy may be unwise or even enabling? Are there situations where we should *not* show mercy because it would only encourage more poor choices? Like what about the “homeless and hungry” guy with the cardboard sign. Would a ten-dollar bill *truly* help him? Hard to say.

But I think there are some principles that can help us determine when and where to be merciful. They by no means clear things up entirely, but they can help.

1. For example, the biblical pattern seems to suggest that mercy is to be extended to those who are unable to help themselves. Those able to help themselves ought to do so. That's the idea conveyed by the Apostle Paul in ► 2 Thessalonians 3:10 where he writes:

⁹ The text says “ten thousand talents.” A talent was worth more than fifteen years of the average laborer's wages.

^{NAU} 2 Thessalonians 3:10 . . . if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.

2. And there ► may be some situations where the most loving and helpful thing to do is to allow a person to experience the negative consequences of his own sin.

Parents know this, or should. Keep sheltering children from the negative consequences of their own sin and it can encourage more poor choices.

Similarly, it is not helpful for anybody to silently put up with physical, sexual, or emotional abuse from another. Sometimes the most merciful thing to do is get help.

3. But sometimes you just don't know the extent to which people are able to help themselves, and you don't know what would be the most loving and helpful thing to do. This points up the need for spiritual discernment. It's always a good idea to ask the Lord for guidance, even when you've only got a moment to decide.

When a need comes to my attention, whether it's someone asking for help in the parking lot of a grocery store or an invitation to give to some ministry by mail, I send up a quick prayer, asking the Lord for His guidance. Sometimes I get a green light; sometimes, a red. And I don't always know why. I just go with it.

4. And I think it's important to be willing to be taken advantage of on occasion. In order to be merciful, I don't see how I could do it consistently without reconciling myself to the fact that my mercy will sometimes be abused. In fact, as I think about it, mercy wouldn't be mercy, grace wouldn't be grace unless it could be abused.

I'm not advocating mindless, reckless, unwise attempts at mercy. I'm just saying that sometimes you can apply every principle you know and you can seem to get a green light from God and you'll still get taken advantage of. You have to be willing to take the risk.

During our staff Teaching Team meeting, we were discussing our text for today and sharing examples of mercy exploitation. Seems everybody's got a story. The winning story came from Deric Miller. He decided to be merciful and give a stranger a ride. He got car-jacked!

Our model for being willing to be taken advantage of is God Himself. Let me ask you: Do you ever take advantage of God's grace? Do you ever exploit His

mercy toward you? Me, too. I guess that means a part a being godly is being willing to take the risk of being taken advantage of in being merciful to others.

5. I think it is wise, however, to minimize the risk of exploitation whenever we can. For example, giving money to the homeless guy with the sign is risky. He could use it for booze. But I could carry in my car a two-gallon Ziploc[®] bag full of non-perishable food items, some warm socks, and maybe a gracious gospel tract. As the Lord prompts, giving the bag would be just as helpful and not as risky.

- III. Now, to ► the third question: Why are we better off being merciful? In what way are we blessed in being merciful? How does being merciful actually lead to receiving mercy?

The answer to the question is the big idea of my sermon. Here ► it is: God takes our mercy toward others personally. That is, when we show mercy to other people, God takes it personally and He shows greater mercy to us. On the other hand, when we fail to show mercy, God also takes that personally, and He withholds mercies from us that we would otherwise enjoy. Our eternal salvation is not at stake, but our ongoing fellowship with God is. We're better off being merciful because our mercy helps us enjoy His mercy. Conversely, our lack of mercy puts a strain on our relationship with Him because He takes it personally. When we are merciless, we lose the blessing of close fellowship with God. Let me show you.

- A. Our text in Matthew 5:7 says that the merciful are blessed because,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:7 “. . . they shall receive mercy.”

Who's going to give mercy to the merciful? God Himself. God will be merciful to me as I am merciful to others. Now, this doesn't mean that I must earn my eternal salvation through works of mercy. I am eternally saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But it does suggest that, to the extent that I am merciful to others, God will open me up to more and more of His tender mercies in my relationship with Him. On the other hand, if I give the cold shoulder to others, I can expect a cold shoulder from God because He takes it personally.

- B. This idea is reflected elsewhere in the Bible. For example, ► Proverbs 17:5 tells us that to mock or taunt or dismiss the poor is to do the same to God. It says,

^{NAU} Proverbs 17:5 He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker . . .

God takes our mercy toward others personally.

- C. In Proverbs ► 14:21, it says,

^{NAU} Proverbs 14:21 He who despises his neighbor sins, But happy is he who is gracious to the poor.

This is an example of antithetical parallelism, where ► the second line is in contrast with the first. As such, the opposite of being gracious to the poor is despising your neighbor. The original word for “despise” simply means to “accord little worth to something.”¹⁰ So, the one who blows off his needy neighbor as not worth helping ► sins against God. On the other hand, the one who is gracious to the poor ► God blesses.

God takes our mercy toward others personally.

D. Proverbs ► 19:17 is even more direct. It says:

^{NAU} Proverbs 19:17 One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, And He will repay him for his good deed.

How ► will the Lord repay? What could that look like?

I believe there will be rewards in heaven for the merciful. I don't know exactly all the forms the rewards may take, but they will be perfect and joyous and eternal.

But, there are rewards on earth, too. Studies of retired residents living in Sun City indicate that people engaged in acts of mercy stay healthier longer.¹¹

And acts of mercy make this world tolerable. Can you imagine a world with absolutely no mercy? I suppose that's what hell will be like.

And the benefits are not just physical. Withholding mercy and withholding forgiveness stores up a bitterness that will eat us up emotionally. Mercy brings healing to the recipient and the giver.

And being merciful opens us up to enjoy, to delight, to revel in the mercies of God to a greater and greater degree. We see more and more clearly that His mercies are new every morning.

My good friend, Don, was an atheist. He has come to church and our Life Group for over a year now to support his believing wife, to learn, and to enjoy the friendships.

Last Sunday, Don found mercy. He found himself believing in Jesus for eternal life. During the Sunday service, Don's wife thought he was sleeping. He was praying. Then he got up and took communion. He gave us the news at our Life Group on Thursday. We stopped to pray, each one giving thanks and praying for Don. Then the earth

¹⁰ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “בֹּזֵז,” (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), hereinafter referred to as TWOT.

¹¹ John Vawter, *Uncommon Graces*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 102.

stopped turning. Don prayed aloud. He gave thanks for God's patience and mercy. And he gave thanks for his Life Group friends who had also shown him patience and mercy. That night, in that moment, we wept for joy. God was pouring out more mercy on all of us. We still need it.

^{NAU} Matthew 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."