

Blessed are the merciful: for they will be shown mercy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 October 2020

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] And now let's turn to our reading for tonight, which will be taken from Matthew chapter 19.

And our second reading will be from Acts 16. So our first reading from Matthew chapter 18, from verse 21 to the end of the chapter.

Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

[1 : 06] The servant fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me, he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, be patient with me and I will pay you back. But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything they had happened. Then the master called the servant in.

You wicked servant, he said. I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

[2 : 09] In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

We'll move on to our second reading, which will be Acts chapter 16, verse 22 to 32. So verse 22.

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.

Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Suddenly, there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once, all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose.

[3 : 29] The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul shouted, That's the word of the Lord.

As we've been thinking about the counter-cultural values of God's kingdom, here we come to Beatitude number 5, Matthew chapter 5, verse 7. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

I want to begin with an interview from the Australian singer-songwriter Nick Cave. He was in a wide-ranging Q&A; with some of his fans online, and he was asked the question, What do you think of cancel culture?

We heard of cancel culture, where there is backlash and boycott and social media attack because someone has said something or acted in a way that's deemed to be offensive, and so the call comes cancel that person.

[5 : 05] Here's what Nick Cave said. As far as I can see, cancel culture is mercy's antithesis. So the exact opposite of mercy.

Political correctness has grown to become the unhappiest religion in the world. It embodies all the worst aspects that religion has to offer and none of the beauty.

Moral certainty and self-righteousness shorn even of the capacity for redemption. So here is Nick Cave, not a Christian, but he's looking at our society, and he's recognising there's so much judgement and a lack of mercy, and people can be really brutal when somebody has opposing views.

It doesn't take us long to recognise that we live in a polarised world, and that call for people to be shut down, that tendency to talk over or to talk down, to condemn another because their views don't fit.

It should be so different for Christians and for the church. As we seek to allow the beauty of the light of Jesus to shape us and then to transform us, that should have a distinct character in the world.

[6 : 27] We should be a different kind of friend, and indeed, we should be a different kind of enemy. When people regard the Christian church as the enemy for our views, the way that we love and the way that we continue to extend mercy should point to the hope and the beauty and the life that there is in Jesus.

So we're going to see, I think, that this is another beatitude that challenges our culture. But it's one that Jesus would say, again, is essential to every Christian life.

It is of the essence of the Christian faith and the Christian life to be merciful. And there's a cause and effect of mercy. To receive Christ, to receive the mercy of God, to have our sins forgiven, to be adopted into the family of God, to have the hope of glory.

That's mercy. So that's the cause for us then to be merciful. It should lead us to extend mercy to others.

We enjoy a Niagara Falls, as it were, of mercy from God. Every day, his mercies are new to us each morning, and that should then flow from us to others.

[7 : 47] And so one of the things I hope we'll do this evening is to examine ourselves. You know, there are these streams of mercy never ceasing that flow from God to us as Christians.

Do those streams of mercy then flow out from us? Self-examination is important to help. I have here my handy-dandy peak flow meter.

Some of you will recognise this. So I have asthma every now and again, especially around this time of year. It can be a bit of a struggle.

And so the peak flow is really helpful. So when I get to the point where I realise that I have the same lung capacity as the average 60-year-old lady who is five feet in height, I realise that I need to do something about it.

I need to up my medication. And maybe I need to speak to my doctor. At some point, the flow has been blocked. And so I need change.

[8 : 52] And I want to think about that in our own Christian experience. Am I grateful for God's mercy to the extent that it's transforming my relation to other people?

Am I willing to take up the trouble of others because I see how God has met me and shown kindness to me in my distress? So that's where we're going to go this evening.

Now, what's the mercy that we are called to show here? Well, all around us, I am sure we can see there is misery, there is distress. So we live in a broken, in a sin-filled world.

In this particular time, there are so many different layers of distress that people are experiencing. And mercy, as it were, looks another person in the face and looks to express God's kindness to somebody in distress.

And Bonhoeffer said that mercy means that we are willing to lose things that we would consider to be treasures. So we're willing to lose comfort or we're willing to lose dignity and honour to pick up and shoulder the distress of another.

[10 : 17] So our beatitude today is calling those who have enjoyed God's grace, who have enjoyed mercy, to pass it forward to others. And there's a counter-cultural aspect to this.

So John Calvin, a long time ago, he said, the world says we're blessed if we're trouble-free. We recognise that. We love a sense of comfort and security. But Jesus says you are blessed both if you put up with your own troubles and suffer well and if you are willing to take on the suffering, the distress, the misery of others.

So it's quite a different value system. Now, an important clarification when we think about this beatitude. When Jesus says, blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy, does Jesus mean we will receive mercy only if we are merciful?

And to that, well, the answer is yes. But we need to ask a second question. Is my mercy then the basis for receiving God's mercy?

Is this salvation by mercy ministry? Is this a form of salvation by good works? And the answer to that is absolutely not. So what's the logic then?

[11 : 38] What's going on here? Remember, Jesus is speaking to disciples, to those who have already received mercy and grace from God. And he is saying to know that mercy, to have received the life-transforming good news that is in the gospel, that out of sheer loving kindness and in response to his covenant promise, God has sent Jesus to be our saviour, to be the once for all sacrifice for sin, to take us from death to life, from darkness to light.

And to have our hearts and lives transformed leads to the showing of mercy, that that is the natural result and consequence of having a new heart.

It's an evidence of receiving the mercy of Christ in our lives. And so it's important to recognise that. Now, to help us to think about mercy, I want us to think about two parables on mercy. One which is sort of taught in the negative, one which is taught in the positive.

Daniel read for us from Matthew chapter 18, verses 21 to 35, often known as the parable of the unmerciful servant. The parable, as you'll remember, is told because Peter is asking a question about forgiveness.

[13 : 06] How often should I extend forgiveness to someone? That's a form of mercy in itself. And Jesus tells a story about a king, about a king who wants to check on his account and who wants debts to be settled.

And so he calls in a man who owes a huge debt, equivalent of millions of pounds today. And he demands that the man pay all the debt or be thrown in prison.

And the man, before the king, falls on his knees and he pleads. He pleads for mercy. And the king's response is to show mercy and to cancel that debt. So while the parable is about the unmerciful servant, we also see a very merciful king.

But the response of the man is significant because he then goes out having received this gift. He sees a fellow servant who owes him a few hundred pounds and he grabs him and he demands from him.

And because the man is unable to pay, he throws his family into prison. And of course, the other servants are outraged. They report it back to the king. The man is brought again before the king and he is sent to prison and he faces judgment.

[14 : 20] Why? Well, here in the words of the king, shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

So there was a gift of mercy, but that left the servant's heart cold and unchanged. He did not share the king's merciful heart, which is a way of showing that he has no part in the kingdom.

And the point that Jesus is making, and he says it in verse 35, this is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

If we find ourselves harsh and judgmental and critical of others, quick to talk over them, quick to talk them down, quick to point the finger, then it is a sign that we also are taking the mercy of God, our king, for granted.

We have a false view of ourselves where we have lost sight of the fact that in God's eyes, we have a massive debt of sin to a holy God, a debt that we could never repay.

[15 : 42] And the only way that we are in God's kingdom and we've been forgiven is entirely because of the mercy of forgiveness. And if we lose sight of that, then like the servant, we can very easily become unmerciful.

So Jesus tells that parable as a warning against having a small and a closed and an unmerciful heart. But then to tell the positive parable on mercy, perhaps one of the most famous parables that Jesus taught in Luke chapter 10 and verses 25 to 37, we find the parable of the Good Samaritan. And that parable is told to challenge a man who is full of self-righteous pride. He thinks he has kept all the commandments.

He thinks he has it in and of himself to attain eternal life. And Jesus says to him, if you want to truly live, you need to love your Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your

neighbour as yourself.

And what becomes clear is the man has a very narrow view of who is my neighbour. He wants a self-contained, nice and clear, not a messy view of who is my neighbour and what neighbour love will look like.

[17:09] And Jesus tells a story that shatters his illusions and shows us how wide mercy is to go. Because in the Good Samaritan story, what we have is an enemy who is better at showing love than so-called friends are.

So you have the Samaritan who shows mercy compared to the Levite and the Pharisee, the priest, who don't show mercy. We really see three lessons about mercy from that very famous story. The first thing is that mercy is costly. There is risk involved. The priest and the Levite don't want to take a risk. They don't want to cross the street.

They don't want to get involved in case there's a risk to their life or a risk to their cleanness. But the Samaritan, he takes a risk. He makes himself vulnerable in order to meet this man at the point of his desperate need.

Mercy is costly. Mercy is also generous. As Jesus tells the story, we see various resources are used to meet this injured man's need.

[18:26] He is bound up. There is oil used for his wounds. He is placed on the man's own donkey. He is taken to an inn where payment is made so that the man can continue to be cared for.

And to follow on from that, mercy is also sacrificial. We see in the Samaritan an ongoing willingness to bear the cost. He is going to inconvenience himself.

He's going to return another time to check on the patient. He's going to pay any further medical costs that are required. Here's a holistic response to distress that goes the extra mile because he has seen someone in distress.

That's what mercy looks like. Jesus, having told the parable, then turns to the self-righteous man and he says, which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

The expert in the law replied, the one who had mercy on him. And Jesus said, go and do likewise. As we think about showing mercy, maybe we can consider together three important factors.

[19:46] One, we need to think about the lens that we wear because there is the danger, as we see in both these parables, of being short-sighted, of failing to see clearly that salvation depends on God's mercy to us.

And that should change how we view others, that we would learn to see others as fellow image bearers of God, that we would aim to see the best in others and not be so quick to condemn a person for the madness of a single moment.

And it should also make us ask a wisdom question as we have those lenses on where we're looking to see how we can show mercy. How can I best help answer distress?

So it's about the lens that we wear. It's also about the honour that we give. In Hebrews, there is a wonderful statement where it says that Jesus, our great high priest, he is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters.

Jesus is not ashamed of us. And his shameful death becomes the vehicle for us receiving honour from God.

[21:23] The gospel secures our honour in view of the one whose opinion of us matters the most. And knowing that, we can then be willing to face loss, the loss of dignity and honour to care for others, to honour somebody else who stands in need of mercy.

And the other important factor for us as Christians in showing mercy is to think about the Saviour that we follow. Because think about the pattern of Jesus' ministry.

Think about the list of people that he loved and helped and reached out to and cared for. There was the touch to the lepers.

There was the welcome to the Samaritans. There was eating and drinking with the despised as a way of extending grace and mercy from God to them.

It's the pattern of his life. He is the good Samaritan coming to meet us in the point of our distress and needs to pay the ultimate price to restore us, to restore us to fellowship with God.

[22:44] It's the nature of his work on the cross that seeing the misery that sin had brought us into, the breakdown of relationships, including our breakdown in our relationship with God and knowing that we are unable to fix or rescue ourselves.

Jesus came to do what we couldn't do, to be the answer to our distress by becoming the sin bearer of the world, by being our representative, by being the one perfect sacrifice to deal with sin, to show us mercy.

And as we think about the work of Jesus on the cross and his mercy, that's where mercy flows. Three barriers to mercy. Even reading the parables, we can probably recognise it as we look into our own hearts.

If you're anything like me, I'm sure you can recognise it. As we begin to examine ourselves, that can be painful, can be humbling, revealing, can be revealing, but it's the way towards healing.

Just like my peak flow meter reveals where I'm struggling, where there's been a blockage, and I need help.

[24 : 15] So we need to reflect on our own lives so that we might see how we can reconnect and appreciate the mercy of God in our own lives to pass it forward.

Because the most common cause when mercy is blocked, when it's not flowing from us, it's me and you, it's ourselves. When we are self-centred, when we feel that we are just unable to enter into the distress of someone else, where we're always standing at a distance, or where we, for the sake of our own comfort, we insulate ourselves to the hurt and misery of others, we can be very self-centred.

Or when we're full of self-pity, it doesn't matter what someone else is facing, we always feel like my trouble always eclipses that of others. Or we simply think, I have my own stuff to deal with, I don't have the capacity to care for anybody else.

Or there's self-preservation, maybe especially with our resources, but I feel so time poor, how can I give my time to a hurting friend? Or there's the emotional drain, I feel so low emotionally, how can I then try and extend sympathy and care to someone else?

Or maybe we feel tight financially, how can I give generously in that circumstance? When we recognise and examine ourselves and we see that there are blockages, how do we remove those barriers?

[25 : 46] How can we allow those streams of mercy to flow from us? again, the answer is to preach the gospel to ourselves so that we would live in the overflow of the Niagara of God's mercy to us.

Knowing that we are blood-bought children of God because of his mercy, it should cause mercy to well up in us. to see how God has answered our distress, should give us new eyes and new hearts, soft hearts to meet the distress of others.

And also, we should focus on future glory and of the mercy still to come to cling on to that so we'd be willing to lose temporary treasure for what is eternal.

all. Now, as we finish, I want to turn back to Acts 16, which again Daniel read for us, where we found Paul and Silas in Philippi in prison.

They have been arrested for rescuing a slave girl from demon possession. They have been attacked, they have been flogged, they have been imprisoned, they have been chained, they are regarded as enemies of the state for their radical teaching, turning the city upside down.

[27 : 23] But what do we find Paul and Silas doing? We find them engaged in a midnight hymn sing. That's wonderful. We find them praying to God, praying to God and singing in such a way that everybody could hear, prisoners and the jailer alike.

And then that great act of God, the earthquake comes, doors fling open, chains fall off, there is release, and as the jailer comes to his senses and realises what's going on, there is terror, isn't there?

If he loses these prisoners, he might as well give up until he's about to kill himself. But what do Paul and Silas do?

Paul and Silas show him mercy in his distress. Remember, they were regarded as the enemy, but they're a different kind of enemy because they're an enemy that loves Jesus and so they're determined to love and show kindness, to show love and not hate.

And what happens is that their connection to the God of mercy has kept their hearts soft, has enabled them to present the mercy of Christ so that they spare this man.

[28 : 34] and when he asks them, sirs, what must I do to be saved? They say, believe in the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved, you and your household.

Their mercy received from God is a constant supply that they're so conscious of that allows them to share that mercy with others. It's mercy in action.

What does the mercy that is, in the words of Jesus, what's the mercy that is blessed look like? How do we see mercy in action? So I was thinking about sort of the last few weeks, things that I've heard in church or just conversations with people because mercy takes on many forms.

When we heard from our friends in Columbia and they were talking about the importance of giving at a place, at a safe place for people to share how their feeling, to ask someone, how are you really to struggling pastors and to struggling Christians, that's a mercy because they're realising so many people are in distress.

We talked to our friends in India, mercy looks like feeding the poor in pandemic, that when the church could have their own worries to care about, and they certainly did, they were still going to the towns and to the villages to try and care for others.

[30 : 00] mercy looks like gathering online to pray for a sick friend. Mercy is being prompted by the spirit to give a homeless person money to stay in a hostel and to get a hot shower and a hot meal.

Mercy looks like walking with a family that's going through hard times. mercy looks like leaving everything behind to go and serve refugees in another country.

Mercy looks like taking the time to call a lonely friend. Mercy takes many forms, but it's whenever we look someone else in the face and we help them in distress.

let me ask you today, do you feel tired? Do you feel weighted down by your own troubles?

Do you feel powerless when you see so much need around and you find it hard to show mercy?

[31 : 11] how can we in that situation unblock the flow? It's where we need to look and keep looking to Jesus and his work on the cross.

Look back, look back to God's response to the misery of sin, that he sent Jesus to love you and rescue you and now Jesus lives in you and he's with you always.

Look back until your heart bursts with a sense of gratitude and from that gratitude look to help and extend kindness to others in the strength that he supplies.

But don't just look back, look forward also. Remember that this beatitude promises blessing.

Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.

In this life, that ongoing stream of forgiveness and compassion and the presence and help of God of the Lord Jesus but also mercy and glory, treasure and heaven that can't be taken from us, honour and joy and love and life and having that treasure and delighting in that, we can then lose treasure to show mercy to those in need.

[32 : 41] Didn't honor and you said it so it's so it's great.

You devotion