The Public Face of Christianity

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: 01 July 2020

Preacher: David Parker

[0:00] and verse 7. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5 and verse 7, and where we find the words, blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Now, I'll be talking about three things with regard to this beatitude. I'll be talking about the importance of the concept of mercy in the Bible. I'll be talking about the imperative need of mercy and I'll be talking about the identification of mercy with a merciful Christianity.
The title that I've given to this beatitude is The Public Face of Christianity. You perhaps remember a few weeks ago, I was sharing with you that Andrew Marr was hosting a programme about great artists and great paintings. And the painting that he was talking about on that particular evening was the Mona Lisa. And he was talking about how, as he stood before the face of the Mona Lisa, he was so greatly inspired. And he thought that the face, the glance and the eyes and the smile and the total effect and impact of the face of the Mona Lisa on him was incredible. He said it made the hairs on his back stand up or something like that.
Now, my question is this, how is the public face of Christianity perceived by the people of Scotland Scotland in our day? Well, it's probably seen as an irrelevance and out of touch.
Perhaps far from drawing them, it repels them. It may also be seen by some as austere and middle-class and antiquated, obsessed with sexual morality, while silent regarding other great moral issues.
[3:03] As insular and wrapped up in its own peccadilloes. A bit like the community of faith in Jesus' day, where I read from Matthew 23, 23.

I wonder if you noticed, as I read there, that Jesus is saying to them, you are so punctilious about certain things, even the tiniest of herbs, that you will give a tenth of those herbs in thinking that this is what your Christianity, I use that term, is important, that that's important in your Christianity.
And they said, you remember, but you've omitted, and I want you to notice the word, the weightier matters of the law. Justice, mercy.
And it's that mercy that I'm obviously fastening on to tonight. And what should the public face of Christianity look like?
Doesn't Jesus give us an answer to that question in this beatitude? Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
[4:23] And that literally, that beatitude reads literally, blessed are the merciful ones. Now, the first four beatitudes, one might say, have been talking about the inner being and disposition of Christians.

But real Christians are people who have a poverty of spirit. They are people who mourn. They are people who are meek.
This is part of their being and their disposition, their way of being. But this beatitude is talking about our outward manifestation.
And of course, the two are connected. And it's telling us that authentic Christianity will be seen and noted by the degree of mercy that characterizes it.
You see, those who have truly received mercy ought to show mercy to others. We are no better than anyone else. We are strong, are we not, on our diet of church services and treats.
[5:40] But what about the public face of mercy? Ironically, there is just about zero evidence of Jesus holding church services in the four Gospels.

Of Jesus holding a single church service. But there's masses of evidence about Jesus going about publicly doing good. And you know, it was this quality of mercy that endeared Jesus to the ordinary people in the streets of Jerusalem.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-11 01:58:04

Anywhere he appeared, the cry went up from the masses. Son of David, have mercy on me.
Commenting on this fact, Bonhoeffer said, No distress is too great.
No sin too appalling for their pity. How much mercy is in our Christianity today? Does Scotland see a Christ-like, merciful face of Christianity?
Let's think about these questions as we look at these three areas of this Beatitude. First of all, the importance of mercy in the Bible.
[7:01] Now, there are three Hebrew words which are translated in our Bibles variously as either kindness, mercy, compassion, or steadfast love.

The most powerful of those three Hebrew words is found in the Old Testament in Isaiah 49, 15.
You'll know this verse. It's the verse that says, Can a woman forget the child of her womb and not have compassion on that child?
And it goes on to say, They may forget. Theoretically, they may forget. And then there's that wonderful line, Yet will I not forget you.
But the thing I want to bring out of that verse is the powerful emotional aspect of that word that we translate as mercy.
[8:10] Well, you'll notice that the metaphor is maternal. And the nuance is of this great bond between a mother and a child.

And the affection that the mother has, the bond that the mother has, the emotional bond. In other words, mercy from God.
His mercy isn't something that is cold and abstract and philosophical and theoretical. Can a woman forget the child of her womb?
They may forget. Yet will I not. So mercy is effective and filial and emotional and relational. It's more than a duty.
Somebody said, commenting on this verse in Isaiah, This steady, persistent refusal of God to wash his hands of wayward Israel is the essential meaning of Israel.
[9:16] Sorry, is the essential meaning of mercy. And, you know, we could change that, couldn't we? To say this steady, persistent refusal of God to wash his hands of us is the essential meaning of mercy.

And also, mercy, and of course, this word, by the way, is used hundreds of times in the Bible. But secondly, mercy is part of God's self-disclosure.
So, for example, in verse 19 of Exodus 33, I read, The Lord said, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and will proclaim my name.
And that phrase, proclaim my name, is proclaim my, what I'm like, my being. How I would characterize myself. And here's what he says.
I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. And I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. And then, in Exodus 34, we read, Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and again proclaims his name.
[10:47] Notice that word, name, proclaims his name. And he passed in front of Moses. And he says, the Lord, the Lord.

And what is the meaning that he gives to his name? Here it is. The compassionate and gracious God. Slow to anger.
Abounding in love and kindness. Yes, he does go on to say that he doesn't leave the guilty unpunished. And I'm not ignoring that.
But I'm stressing what he says first about his mercy. And then, of course, Jesus, I'm sure you would agree, is the supreme manifestation of all the Beatitudes and certainly of God's mercy.
Notice what Jesus says in Matthew 9, verse 13. And he says this on a number of occasions in the Gospels.
[11:54] Here's what he says. But go and learn what this means. I desire, notice that word, desire, mercy, not sacrifice.

And then in Luke's Gospel, chapter 6 and verse 36.
Jesus says this. Be merciful just as your father is merciful. I hope that I've said enough to convince you that the concept of mercy is not some marginal quality or unimportant sign or unimportant sign or word in the Bible.
Based on what I've said, we've seen that mercy is God-like. It is Christ-like. It is a central and key concept in the Bible and in the history of redemption.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-11 01:58:04

Now, this brings me to my second point. That's enough, I think, on the importance of mercy in the Scripture. But secondly, the imperative need of mercy.
[13:21] Who needs mercy? Everybody. There isn't a single human being on the planet that does not need God's mercy. Why do we need it?

We need mercy because of our fragility as human beings and our finitude. We need mercy because we're flawed and fallen creatures.
We do wrong and fail to do right. Our silence passing by of our neighbor, our self-centered lives.
Above all, we need mercy because we have failed to give God the place he deserves in our lives.
After all, in him, we live and move and have our being.
We've failed to give him back the life we owe. We've transgressed the law of love. We have lived as if he did not exist. It could be said that even sometimes we're practical atheists.
[14:31] But who needs mercy? It's not just individuals. It's also nations. Is it not true that the history of the world graphically portrays the human capacity for evil?

Now, I'm well aware of the part of the human narrative where there's so much good and so much altruism and so much kindness.
But I'm equally aware, if not more aware, of the human capacity for evil. Think of Hiroshima, the Holocaust, apartheid, the slave trade, mass genocide, ethnic cleansing.
Does not world history show our fallenness, our pride, our cruelty? Is there not a need among nations today for mercy?
For acts of kindness, forgiveness, for healing of relationships between nations? For acts of kindness, for healing of the people, for healing of the people, for healing of the people, for healing of the people, for healing of the people?
[15:43] But so also, not only is it individuals and nations, but so also does the church need mercy? Where was mercy during the early church against those deemed heretics?

Where was mercy during the Reformation against the Anabaptists? In the covenanting period? During the Inquisition?
During the Crusades? The slave trade? And what about our relative silence as missionaries of mercy to those of our own day and age?
Surely, the church needs mercy, just as nations and individuals do. How much mercy is seen in the public face of our Christianity?
Are our actions shaped and formed by the mercy we have received? The point of the beatitude is, if we have been recipients of God's great mercy, we should be merciful people.
[17:03] If we have truly received mercy, we should be giving and sharing that mercy to others.
This brings me to my third and final point.

The identification of mercy and a merciful Christianity. Because that's what that beatitude conveys to us.
There is a very close, indeed, an inseparable connection between those who have received mercy and the merciful ones.
The community of the merciful ones. Now, if we don't have a drop of mercy in our bones, there's something far wrong.
Jesus, in this beatitude, declares that it is only the merciful ones, the community of the merciful ones, that will be shown, that we'll find, that we'll obtain mercy.
[18:12] These words of Jesus remind us of his comments on forgiveness. You'll remember that he said that unless you forgive from the heart those that sin against you, your father will not forgive you.

Something similar. Same sort of idea. Same sort of principle here. Jesus is saying, it's impossible for a person to truly experience God's mercy and not be merciful.
Now, our reformed antenna suddenly gets all excited and cries, but it's not by works of mercy which we have done. That's true.
But Jesus isn't looking at the ground of our salvation here, but at the character and lifestyle of a true disciple.
What we need to think about here is our union with Christ. Because there's a lot more takes place when someone becomes a Christian than justification by faith.
[19:29] Someone who's become a Christian.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-11 01:58:04

His union is in Christ. His union is in Christ. His part of his body is in union with him. And it's inevitable that they will be merciful.
We do, of course, need to receive God's mercy in order to become part of the merciful community of disciples. So let me ask, have you received God's mercy?
Were you able to identify with our opening psalm, God's mercies I will ever sing? Have you become a disciple of Jesus Christ?
Have you said to him, be merciful to me, the sinner? And if you have, do people see that mercy in the public face of your Christianity, in all your networks, in your family, in your work, among your neighbours, and wherever else?
[21:03] There is then this inseparable connection between having received mercy and displaying it in the outworking of our faith.

And indeed, between being merciful and obtaining it at the great assize and tribunal of God in the final day.
Think here of Matthew's gospel, chapter 25 and verse 34.
Then the king will say to those on his right, come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
And what else does he say? Please notice what he does.
[22:37] He doesn't give us reasons that you recited the creed correctly, that you were a Calvinist, a reformed Christian. Note with reflection the kind of things that Jesus himself mentions.

Let's not be complacent then, or rest on the laurels of creed, confession, or some theoretical faith that has no evidence of mercy at its inner core and outer actions.
Blessed, says Jesus, are the merciful ones. For they, and they alone, will be shown mercy.
Are we disciples of mercy? Are we missionaries of mercy?
If you take nothing else away from this sermon, I ask you to go away with the words that I already quoted of Jesus Christ.
[23:57] And here they are again. Be merciful, just as your father is merciful.

Amen.ming aside, and may God himself add his own blessing to each one of us for our eternal good and for his eternal glory.
Amen. Thank you.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-11 01:58:04