

# "Blessed are the Merciful"

*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: 04 August 2024

Preacher: Nick Lauer

[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Matthew chapter 5? That's page 759 in the Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there. This summer, we've been walking through what are called the Beatitudes. Beatitudes are statements of blessing. That's what the Latin word *beatus* means, blessing. But these statements of blessing don't describe how to earn God's favor.

It's not that sort of blessing that we're talking about. Rather, what these statements describe, they describe the kind of life that's worth living. According to Jesus, this is the genuinely flourishing life, a life centered on God and God's kingdom. And Jesus says, it looks like this.

And today, we come to the fifth of these statements in Matthew 5, 7. Blessed are the merciful, Jesus says, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. So I'm going to read again these opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount in page 759, and then we'll look more closely at the virtue of mercy.

So let me read Matthew 5, 1 through 10. Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. All right, let's pray together. Father, your word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. By your Spirit, would you illuminate our minds and our hearts to hear what you're saying to us.

[ 2 : 09 ] By your grace, help us to see more of Jesus this morning, and in beholding him, to become more and more like him for our own good, and most of all, for your glory. We pray these things, Father, in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. So, so briefly, I want us to consider three things before we go to the Lord's table this morning, as we think about this beatitude. First, what does it mean to be merciful? What does it mean to be merciful? And then second, what does being merciful lead to? What does being merciful lead to?

And then lastly, how do we become merciful? How do we become merciful? So first, what does it mean to be merciful? What does it mean? The story is told of a mother who once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son, and the emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense, not just once, but twice, but twice, and justice demanded death. But I don't ask for justice, the mother explained.

I plead for mercy. Napoleon replies, but your son doesn't deserve mercy. Sir, the woman responds, it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.

Well, then the emperor said, I will have mercy, and he spares the woman's son. Now, I don't know if that's a true story. It might be apocryphal, but isn't that how we often think of mercy, right?

Mercy, it is said, is not receiving something that we deserve, something's withheld. And sometimes, popularly, mercy is contrasted with grace, right? Grace, it is said, is getting something we don't deserve. Mercy is not getting something that we do deserve. And as we look through the New Testament, especially at the life of Jesus, we see that there is some truth to this popular idea of mercy. Jesus often does not give people what they deserve, at least what the surrounding religious culture thinks people deserve, right? The tax collectors and the sinners supposedly deserve to be excluded and shamed, but that's not what they receive from Jesus. Instead, he gives them his attention and his welcome and his forgiveness. But as we study the idea of mercy more closely, we see that the New Testament concept is broader than simply not giving people what they deserve.

## Mercy in the New

[ 4 : 42 ] Testament seems to include a more active, positive meaning as well. For example, remember when Jesus was walking down the road and the blind man cries out, Son of David, have mercy on me. Well, what is that man asking for? He's asking for compassion and for healing and for deliverance. And that's what Jesus gives him, compassion and deliverance. He heals his sight. Or remember when the Canaanite woman came to Jesus in the region of Tyre and Sidon, and she comes and she says, have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David, because my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. She's asking for compassion and for deliverance for her daughter, and that's what Jesus gave to her. So in the New Testament, mercy means both pardon for the one who's done wrong, but it also means kindness to one in need of help.

Mercy has a positive aspect. It's seeing a need, feeling moved by it, and acting to help. Of course, we don't live in a very merciful age, do we? We celebrate power, and we celebrate victory, and we celebrate vengeance, right? The movies we watch glamorize violence and getting even, you know? You watch some of these movies, and you find yourself cheering by the end, yes, kill them, right? We're just swept up along in the story. You know, and you think about sort of pop culture relationship advice that, what does it tell us? It tells us, oh, limit the time you spend with people that you don't like because they're going to drain your energy, and you really want to be your best self, so don't spend time with those people because apparently being our best self means not spending time with people who are hard, right? Or think about it, you know, what if you ever make a misstep? What if you ever mess up? Well, make one social misstep, and social media is ready to pounce, right? To humiliate, to shame, to exclude. It's a very merciless age that we live in.

And the first century was just as merciless as ours, perhaps more so when Jesus spoke these words. You know, for the typical Jew listening to Jesus' sermon on that day, they could probably resonate with the fourth beatitude, right? To hunger and thirst for justice. You know, justice, we talked about last week, part of justice means the end of oppression and oppressors, means the end of evil and evildoers. And to a people overrun by a violent and greedy Roman empire, justice sounded pretty good.

[ 7 : 26 ] But mercy. To lay down one's weapons and forgive? To look on those who suffer and to suffer with them?

To acknowledge the common humanity in everyone, Jew and Gentile, friend and neighbor and enemy? To be merciful? That sounds as countercultural then as it does now.

And yet, that is what Jesus says is the truly flourishing life. The life with God and God's kingdom at its center will be a life rich with mercy.

A life not consumed by giving people what we think they deserve, but seeing them as human beings made in God's image, just like ourselves. Seeing the misery that they might be in and having a desire to relieve their suffering.

Now, notice what mercy is not. Mercy is not overlooking what is right or just. You know, we can't separate the fourth and the fifth beatitude.

[ 8 : 49 ] We can't separate our hunger and thirst for righteousness with a need to be merciful, just as God can never separate righteousness and mercy in His own character.

Mercy then is not overlooking the law or ignoring righteousness or not caring when people do wrong. Nor, I think maybe more apropos, mercy is not simply letting people have their own way. Mercy is not permissiveness. You know, a merciful parent, for example. A merciful parent sort of doesn't just let their children sort of run amok and disobey.

You know, sure, play with knives. You know, touch boiling stoves. Do whatever you want. I'm a merciful parent, right? It's not actually merciful. It's harmful. Yeah? A merciful friend doesn't just let their acquaintance ridicule them or take advantage of them, right?

They speak up. They correct the wrong. So we mustn't confuse being merciful with being permissive. But just as we can err on the side of permissiveness, so we mustn't err on the side of always giving people what they deserve, of making them pay, of getting even.

[ 10 : 10 ] Martin Lloyd-Jones, the 20th century pastor in London, writing about this beatitude, he puts it this way. He says, a great test is when someone wrongs you, when you find yourself in the position of having in your power someone who's transgressed against you.

He says, now, the way to know whether you're merciful or not is to consider how you feel towards that person. Are you going to say, well, now I'm going to exert my rights at this point.

I'm going to be legal. This person has transgressed against me, and here comes my opportunity, right? In other words, he's saying, do you find yourself having a vindictive spirit? Or is there a spirit of pity, of sorrow, a spirit of kindness toward your enemy in distress?

Now, again, in such an instance, we won't pretend like nothing wrong has been done, nor will we keep putting ourselves in a position to continue to be sinned against. But we can forgive the wrong and release the dead and seek to be reconciled.

Or another instance, a different instance, when you see someone in need, when you see someone in need, is your first thought, well, they've made foolish choices. They're reaping what they've sown. [ 11 : 31 ] Why should I have to dig them out of the hole that they've dug, right? Or do you feel compassion? Perhaps they did end up in a bad place through their own poor choices, maybe through their own sinful choices.

But does your heart still have compassion for them in their sorrow? Do you see them not simply as reaping what they've sown, but as trapped, as afflicted?

And by the sinful world that we live in, by the flesh, by the world, by the devil, do you see them in some sense as in need and in despair?

And do we pray, God, what are you calling me to do to respond to this neighbor or this fellow church member, this co-worker, this family member, whoever it might be? What might you be calling me to do to help alleviate and relieve the distress that they're in?

So that's a bit of what it means to be merciful, some of the picture that the New Testament paints for us. Second, let's consider what does this kind of mercifulness lead to?

[ 12 : 41 ] What does it lead to? Well, one fear that we have, I think, is that if we're merciful, if that's the kind of people we are, if that's the kind of habit and virtue and character we develop, I think we fear that we'll end up just being overrun by the powerful, right?

We'll end up just being overrun by people who don't care about mercy and only want what they want. But as we've already said, you know, being merciful doesn't mean being a doormat, right? Mercy is not just mere permissiveness. Being merciful is having compassion towards those in need and having a heart to alleviate their burden. None of that means just sort of ignoring what's wrong. But still, we can still wonder, is showing mercy, is being merciful, is it wise? Is it safe? After all, it's a harsh world, right? Don't we have to fight fire with fire sometimes?

Friends? But friends, Jesus will never let us as disciples. He will never let us go that route. In the kingdom of God, the ends never justify the means.

[ 13 : 53 ] And the reality is, part of what Jesus is pointing us to here is that we reap what we sow. If we sow vengeance, we're going to reap vengeance.

If we sow unforgiveness, we'll reap it. If we sow a rigid, give people what they deserve, we will reap it. But Jesus shows us here that if we sow mercy, if we spread mercy, if we live out of mercy, then we receive mercy.

Why are so many churches full of bitterness and gossip and infighting? Because of this very principle.

For years, church members, maybe even church leaders, they sow to bitterness and external religion and to grudges and unforgiveness. And before long, the church is not characterized by mercy and forgiveness and grace.

It's characterized by the opposite. It's not just true in Christian churches. It's true in families. Even Christian families.

[ 15 : 03 ] When a couple sows to just giving each other what they think they deserve. When spouses stop asking for forgiveness. When spouses stop granting it. When couples stop striving to be kind and to show compassion towards one another.

When there's no compassion for each other's failings and sins. Well then, friends, that marriage, that family will not be a garden of mercy.

It will be a desert of bitterness and loneliness. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. So on the human level, Jesus' words are certainly true.

When we sow to mercy, we're cultivating a culture of mercy. And then, in those times when we are in need of mercy and who is not in need of mercy, when we've sown to a culture of that, we find that we receive it.

But there's also a vertical dimension to Jesus' words here. There's also a divine reality that he's talking about. But at that point, we need to be really careful.

[16:14] When Jesus says, blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy, he is not saying, God will only be merciful to you if you are merciful to others.

Now, let's think about that for a second. If we think about it, that cannot be what Jesus means. Right? Why? Because if God's mercy only comes to us when we're merciful to others, then we're basically saying God is only merciful to us when we deserve it.

Do you see the contradiction there? If God's only merciful to us when we deserve it, then that means God isn't actually merciful at all. Because mercy is giving people what they don't deserve. It's having pity on them and giving them deliverance when they don't deserve it. So if God is merciful, and he most certainly is, then he must be a God who is merciful to the unmerciful.

So Jesus can't mean here God's only going to be merciful to you if you're merciful to others. Okay, so what does Jesus mean then? How is our mercy that we show connected to God's mercy?

[17:27] In what sense will we receive God's mercy when we show mercy to others? Well, I think in order to understand what Jesus means, we have to understand the difference between earning something and being assured of something.

We have to understand the difference between earning something and being assured of something. Earning something means I don't have it, but I can get it through my effort.

Right? If I get a job and save up enough, then I can earn the money to buy whatever, a classic car. Right? Which is sort of funny driving around now that I'm getting older. You see classic car license plates on cars.

You're like, I think I drove that as a kid. Like, my family had one of those. The 92 Taurus. I'm like, classic car. I don't know about that. So maybe you're saving up for a nicer car than that.

But you're earning it, right? That's the point. On the other hand, being assured of something, being assured of something means I already have it.

[18:29] But there's something that I do that reminds me of it or makes it even more real to me. Right? Taking this car example, you know, maybe your great-grandfather has put you in his will, and one day you'll inherit his classic car, that 92 Taurus.

Right? And every month you do a family dinner with your great-grandfather, and you enjoy your relationship with him, and it kind of reminds you of the relationship that you have and the blessings that he's going to bestow upon you.

Does that family dinner earn your place in his will? Does it earn you the classic car one day? No. It's the love of your great-grandfather that gave it to you.

The family dinner simply assure you and remind you of that relationship. So you see, there's a difference between earning something and between being assured of something.

Now, let's apply that to our relationship with God. Right? Think about the Lord's Supper that we're going to partake in a little bit. In a few minutes, we're going to celebrate communion.

[19:32] Now, does eating the bread and drinking the cup earn God's grace and forgiveness in your life? You know, if you eat three packets instead of one, do you get three times the forgiveness for the coming week?

And some of you are like, those packets are so disgusting, I'm not eating three of them. Right? But that's not how it works, right? You're not earning God's forgiveness by partaking in the Lord's Supper.

What are you doing? We're being assured of something that we already have. The bread and the cup assure us that Christ's body was broken for us, that his blood was shed for us, that he did something bitter so that we could have something sweet.

And this meal that we share, it assures us that we will feast with Christ one day in the new heavens and new earth. You know, we can genuinely say, if you eat this now in faith, you will eat with him in glory in the age to come.

And when we say that, we're not saying eating now earns your place in the future banquet. No, we're saying it assures you of it. It comes and it reminds you and it gives you assurance in your heart. Now let's go back to the fifth beatitude.

[20:52] Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Friends, that's an assurance statement. When the Holy Spirit works in your heart and over time you become more and more merciful, it assures us that we are God's children.

And that there's coming a day when he will shower us with his mercy. Mercy that's already ours through faith in Christ. So brothers and sisters, keep fanning the flame of mercy in your hearts.

For in living a life of mercy, you're anticipating the great day of mercy to come. God's future, friends, is a future of mercy. What does the future hold?

What is the angle of the universe that God has made? God's future is a future of mercy. It's a future of sinners forgiven.

Of a church cleansed of every spot and stain. It's a future of reconciliation between sworn enemies. It's a future of families being healed.

[ 22 : 00 ] It's a future of friendships being restored. It's a future where none of us will get what we deserve. Instead, we'll get mercy. So live that mercy now.

Live now like that day is coming. Live now like that day is more real than this passing world of petty vengeance and harsh bitterness. Because that day is more real, you see.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Be assured of it, Jesus says. But on the other hand, if our hearts are perpetually hard and cold, if we care nothing for the suffering in the world, if we'd rather see people get what they deserve, then, friends, we have no grounds for assurance.

There's an invitation to self-examination here. Is there evidence of mercy in your heart? Now, such an examination can be sobering, can't it?

Some of us might fear that we aren't actually the sort of person that Jesus describes here. Perhaps we fear that we know nothing of this true mercy that Jesus describes.

[ 23 : 28 ] Where do we go? What do we do? Or perhaps, you know, perhaps you see sort of little flickers of mercy, but you know they're just that.

They're so small. They're so little. And you hunger for more. How can mercy become a greater reality in your life? Not just a fleeting thought from time to time, but how can it become more and more your way of being in the world?

Well, if you find yourself in either of those camps, either worrying that you don't really know mercy at all or wanting to grow in your life, friends, the answer for both of us is the same.

And that takes us to our third and our last point. How do we become merciful? You know, the truth is we can't just will ourselves to become merciful.

We can't simply just try harder and become it. Now, of course, that's not to say that we shouldn't try to be merciful, right? It's not as if we should just throw up our hands and give up. You know, it's better to try to be merciful than the opposite.

[ 24 : 38 ] We should seek to be merciful, but simply trying in our own efforts to get there won't be enough. The truth is it's only an experience of mercy, internalized, known, that will make us merciful.

Do you remember Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant? The story goes like this. Jesus said, He says, The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

And when the king began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. Okay, now that's a lot of money. That's like a lot, a lot of money. It's like six billion dollars or something like that.

You know, sort of like this guy was in charge of a major corporation or a major investment firm, and then he lost everybody's money. That's how much money we're talking about. He's in a lot of trouble. Okay, the story goes on.

And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold with his wife and his children and all that he had in payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees imploring him, Have patience with me, and I'll pay you everything.

[ 25 : 55 ] And then Jesus says, Out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. Wow. Wow. This guy is free. You know, have you ever had that sinking feeling in your stomach because you knew something bad was going to happen?

Like, it was coming. And then you realize, Oh, wait. It's okay. The debt's been paid. Right? That's how this guy should have been feeling. He should have been feeling just elated, released, changed. However, let's pick up in verse 28. But when the same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.

Okay, now a hundred denarii is still like a lot of money. It's like fifteen, twenty thousand dollars. You know, it's not chump change. So he finds someone who owes him a hundred denarii, and then he seized him and began to choke him, saying, Pay what you owe.

His fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, Have patience on me, and I'll pay you. But the man refused, and he went and put him in prison until he should pay his 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.

[ 27 : 07 ] Then his master summoned him and said, You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

It's a pretty powerful parable, isn't it? And the point is this. The debt that God has forgiven us is massive.

The mercy that we've been shown almost cannot be calculated. And if you come to grips with that, you'll never be like this unforgiving servant.

The mercy that we've been shown, it almost can't be calculated. You know, how do we know that? Well, friends, look at what it cost God to forgive you.

You know, forgiveness is always costly. Mercy is always costly. Why? Because the one who forgives, the one who shows mercy, right, they're absorbing the cost of whatever happened.

[ 28 : 12 ] When the good Samaritan took care of the man who was left for dead at the side of the road, you know, he pays for the care and the rehabilitation of that person. The good Samaritan absorbs the cost to show mercy to that man.

And in forgiveness, the same thing is true. If someone breaks something of value to you, you can either make them pay for it or you can absorb that cost yourself and not make them pay. That's forgiveness.

And of course, small offenses, they don't really require much, right? But what about big offenses? They cost a lot. Especially when we're talking, you know, not about just like damaging property, but something greater.

What does it take to absorb the cost of relational betrayal or someone hurting a loved one or someone destroying something that's irreplaceable? That cost is great.

But what about the cost of our sin, our rebellion against God? How great was that debt? How deep was the tear that our sin had made in our world and in our relationship with God?

[ 29 : 30 ] The only way we know how great the cost really was is by looking at the place where God absorbed the cost and paid the debt. And it's there that we see how infinite and how precious and how unfathomable the depths that God went to pay this debt.

for the cost was nothing less than the death of the Son of God. Friends, what unspeakable mercy. When God viewed us in our sin, deserving of wrath, He viewed us with mercy. When billions upon billions couldn't even get close, God lovingly offered everything to forgive our sins and reconcile us to Himself.

And we will spend eternity worshiping the risen Jesus. And even into eternity, we're never going to plumb the depths of the mercy of the cross. So how do you become merciful?

You look at the cross with eyes of faith and you see what the Lord Jesus did there and you see that He did it for you, for your sin. Not because you deserved it, but because He is rich in mercy and He chose to love you.

[ 31 : 03 ] Three days later, Jesus rose from the grave to demonstrate that the debt had been paid for all who trust in Him. The burden of your guilt is left in the grave.

For those who trust in Jesus, your life can be lived in the freedom of mercy. That's what it takes to become merciful, to behold Christ eradicating your debt and showering you with just unimaginable mercy.

And what we do at the Lord's table is we re-encounter once again this great mercy because we're a forgetful people, right? I think it was Charles Spurgeon who once said, you know, Lord, fill me with the Holy Spirit.

We need the Holy Spirit to fill us. Why? He said, because we leak, right? And it's like that. You know, everyone who's a Christian has come into an encounter with the majesty of the cross for us, of who Jesus is and what He's done.

But we're forgetful. We're forgetful, and like the unforgiving servant, we can go out and we can demand that the people around us pay for what they did and pay for what they owe us. Why?

[ 32 : 23 ] Because we so quickly forget what Jesus has done for us. And that's where the Lord's Supper comes in. The Lord's Supper reminds us that Jesus' body was broken to pay our debt and

His blood was shed to cover our sin.

And we eat the bread and we drink the cup to re-encounter the truth of it again, to leave its taste literally in our mouth and to leave its mark on our hearts, to experience mercy again, that we might go out and show mercy to the world.

So I'm going to invite the music team to come up. I hope they're here. Come on up, guys, and we're going to sing as we prepare to take the Lord's Supper. So if you're able, please stand. If you didn't get a communion packet, the ushers have more at the doors.

They can come around or feel free to get up and get one. We're going to prepare our hearts to take the Lord's Supper. and to be reminded of this great mercy. Why don't I pray before we sing?

Father, as we turn to your table, prepare our hearts to receive again these signs of your great work on the cross, your great display of unspeakable mercy, and make us through your word, through your spirit, and through these signs a people of mercy.

[ 33 : 46 ] In Jesus' name, amen.