

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

Matthew 5:7

We will continue today our study of the Beatitudes. In Matthew 5:7, we find the fifth Beatitude and we read this.

Matthew 5:7. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

A matter of salvation

Let's talk about the second part of this verse. *They shall obtain mercy.* What does that mean? The Lord Jesus is making reference here to the mercy of God. 'They shall receive mercy from God.' And to obtain mercy is quite simply to obtain salvation. God's mercy is the foundation of the salvation of mankind. It is directly linked to salvation. For example, Paul says in Titus 3:5 that God saved us *not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy.* In 1 Peter 1:3, Peter says that *His (God's) great mercy has caused us to be born again.* These verses are specific references to the salvation that God provides. And who are the people who shall obtain mercy from God? The Lord's answer is this: it is the merciful. They are the ones who shall be saved.

Let me say right away that the Lord's teaching on salvation is not based on a salvation by a profession of faith. It is not a salvation that can be earned by works of righteousness. It is a salvation that is promised to a certain kind of person. In this case, in Matthew 5:7, this person is described as being merciful. It is a person who shows mercy to others. Those who belong to the kingdom of God are people who are merciful.

When we think for a minute about the kind of person that the Lord Jesus is talking about here, we realize that we simply cannot be this kind of person except by the grace of God. By nature, we are not merciful. Nobody who puts his own interests first is likely to be merciful when his interests are being threatened. This is a common daily experience. In this world, if you want to survive, you have to show that you are strong. Mercy is often considered as a sign of weakness. And therefore, it is better not to express it. That is the thinking of the carnal mind.

God's grace

By nature, we cannot be merciful. That is why we need God's saving grace. It is by God's transforming grace that we can become the kind of people who will inherit the kingdom of God. We are not saved by a superficial profession of faith, neither are we saved by works. We are saved by God's transforming grace in our lives who makes us the kind of person that we, by our own nature,

cannot be. The whole point of salvation is that He changes us to become people like this, people who are merciful.

God's grace becomes effective in our lives when we have faith in Him. And by faith, we mean commitment and trust. It is the kind of faith in which a patient puts himself in the hands of a doctor. He trusts the doctor and allows him to do whatever is necessary to do in order to be healed. That is faith. Faith is not just believing that this doctor is good and that he can help you. You have to put yourself fully into that doctor's hands and accept the treatment that he proposes.

So faith implies that you put yourself totally into God's hands, that you commit yourself totally to Him. You let Him transform you and heal you spiritually. Faith means this kind of commitment in which you put yourself without reserve into God's hands, allowing Him to do with you whatever is necessary to do so that you get well. That's how God's grace can be effective in us. Grace is simply God's power enabling us to do and to be what we cannot do and be in our own strength. I cannot be merciful, but God can make me merciful. God's grace is able to make an unforgiving person to forgive, an unkind person to be kind.

So understand that salvation in the Scripture is God's grace effectively transforming the sinner into a saint. And it is God who provides the power to change. We can see this connection between power and grace in 2 Corinthians 12:9 where we read that Jesus said to Paul, *My **grace** is sufficient for you, for my **power** is made perfect in weakness*. His grace is sufficient for us and His power is made perfect in our weakness. That is the glory of the gospel.

Healing the sick

Let's go back to Matthew 5:7. We need now to look at the first part of the Beatitude. What does it mean to be merciful in the light of the Scriptures?

One way to study this question is to open a dictionary and to look under the word 'merciful'. That is a good start but it will not necessarily take you very far. If you want to go deep in your study, you have to see how that word is used in the Scripture. In order to do this, you need a Bible tool called a concordance. A concordance will give you all the passages where a particular word appears, and how that word is used. When you take the time to look at these passages, the biblical meaning of that word will begin to emerge. In fact, that is exactly what a theological dictionary does. The writer of a theological dictionary checks every reference of a particular word in a concordance and sums it up for you. If you go through the process of doing that for yourself, I can tell you that it will have a greater impact on your Christian beliefs than just reading the definition in a Bible dictionary.

When you look at this word 'mercy' and how it is used in the NT, you begin to make the following observation. We observe that the word 'mercy' is often used in the Bible in a context which deals with the consequences of sin. The way God deals with sin in the NT is by His mercy. God's antidote to the poison of sin is mercy. Divine mercy is expressed in the context of the reality of human misery. A sick person asks for help and God heals him and delivers him from the infirmity that he suffers.

For example, it is used in this passage in which a blind, hearing that Jesus was passing by, wanted to be healed by Him. He cries out to the Lord Jesus and says, '*Jesus, Son of David, have **mercy** on me!*' (Luke 18:38). What was this man asking for? He was asking for healing. Then Jesus said, *Receive your sight; your faith has saved you*. In saying that, Jesus was fulfilling His messianic mission of restoration and healing that He spoke about in Luke 4:18. *He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted ... and recovery of sight to the blind*. This incident has a strong spiritual overtone. The begging blind man represents the poor who recognizes his need for God's mercy. And because of his faith, Jesus heals him. The restoration of sight to the blind represents the removal of spiritual blindness and the

salvation that Jesus is able to provide. It is an act of mercy to a person in need and who recognizes his need for healing.

Sickness, or any physical ailment should be viewed as a consequence of sin. If there were no sin in the world, there would be no disease. But because there is sin, there is disease. However, we must not make the mistake of thinking that there is a direct relationship of personal sin to disease in the sense that a person is sick because he has sinned. Sometimes it is true, but it is not a general rule. Most of the times, there is no direct connection. That is why in John 9, when the disciples asked Jesus concerning a certain blind man, 'Who sinned? He or his parents?', Jesus said, '*Neither this man nor his parents sinned.*' This man is blind not because he sinned, nor because his parents sinned. He is blind because there is sin in the world generally. And we, living in a sinful world, must cope with the consequences of sin.

Having said this, we can now understand that mercy is God's antidote to sin. When the Lord Jesus shows mercy to the blind person, He is removing a consequence of sin from that person. The effects of sin are being undone through the saving power of Christ. That is why He explained His ministry to John the Baptist in these salvific terms: *Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them* (Luke 7:22). The time for God's deliverance has come. And Jesus is the Messiah that God has sent to provide healing and restoration to a sick and sinful world. These miracles could happen because of God's mercy.

Mercy: forgiveness of sin

To be more specific, we can say that mercy, in the NT, refers to the forgiveness of sin. That is why mercy is such an important element for spiritual restoration. Take 1 Timothy 1:13. There Paul says, *although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but **I obtained mercy** because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.* Paul confessed that he persecuted the Christians in ignorance. But when he realized what he was doing, he repented. And therefore, he obtained mercy from God. Notice the similarity with our Beatitude. *They shall obtain mercy.* He was forgiven for the wrongdoing that he had committed. Mercy here clearly means forgiveness.

Let me give you other references in the NT that highlight this connection between mercy and the forgiveness of sin.

*Luke 1:77. To give knowledge of salvation to his people in **the forgiveness of their sins**, 78 through the tender **mercy of our God**, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high...*

The forgiveness of sins in v. 77 is in parallel with the mercy of God in v. 78.

*Rom. 11:31. Even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you **they also may obtain mercy**. 32 For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.*

When Paul says that the Gentiles received mercy, he means that they have been saved. They have been forgiven.

*Titus 3:5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but **according to His mercy**, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.*

Out of God's own mercy, He saved us by washing away our sins, by cleansing us from our filthiness, by forgiving our sins.

The obligation to be merciful

So mercy simply means forgiveness. And to be merciful is to be forgiving. *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.* Blessed are those who forgive, for they shall be forgiven. The negative side of this statement is also true, that if we don't forgive, neither shall we be forgiven. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus says very plainly these words.

Matthew 6:14. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Your being or not being forgiven, the Lord Jesus says specifically, depends on whether you forgive or not forgive. And whether you forgive or not depends on whether or not you have been transformed by God. Because if you have not been transformed, you will not be able to forgive. The natural man puts himself first. If you owe me anything, I will see to it that you pay me my dues to the last penny. But because God has transformed my life, I don't insist that you pay me back what you owe me. As God forgave me, so I freely forgive you. That is the transforming power of the grace of God.

It is very clear that showing mercy is a biblical commandment that is required of every disciple of Christ. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, the king forgave the enormous debt of the servant. However, this same servant was without mercy towards a fellow servant who owed him a very small amount of money. Therefore the unmerciful servant was punished. Matthew 18:33 gives us the basis of his punishment. The king said, *Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?* Mercy requires mercy.

James has his own commentary on this Beatitude of the Lord Jesus. We notice in James 2:13 that mercy and judgment are contrasted. In that verse, he first says, *For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.* There is no mercy for the person who has shown no mercy. There is no forgiveness for the one who does not forgive. This is the negative side of the Lord's Beatitude. Now, here is the same teaching, but put in the positive. Again, in James 2:13, in the second part of the passage. *Mercy triumphs over judgment.* God's mercy triumphs over judgment. God's mercy, His saving grace, delivers us from judgment.

Do you understand the beauty of the Lord's teaching? We are required to be merciful. It is not optional. To be merciful simply means to be forgiving. If you do not forgive, neither will you be forgiven. But if you are merciful to others, you will receive mercy. How can we be merciful? By our own strength, it is impossible. God has to change us. By God's saving grace, God transforms us into merciful persons. And God's grace becomes effective in our lives through faith.

We cannot earn our salvation by an act of the will in being merciful towards others. The natural man is incapable of being merciful to others. And if he cannot be merciful, he is also incapable of receiving God's mercy. Only faith can move a person to a point of repentance for his own sins. And as he experiences God's grace, he is then able to show mercy towards others. Being merciful is not a condition for God's grace, but it is a necessary consequence.

The sustaining grace of God

So the word 'mercy' refers to God's forgiveness for our sins. But that doesn't mean that the only time we need mercy was when we first became Christians. That the only time we needed God's mercy was when we repented of our sins, we were baptized and we came to Christ. And after that, we don't need mercy anymore. When we study the Scripture, we see that the word 'mercy' is used in a way that expresses a continual need for mercy. We see this for example when Paul speaks of the

‘grace, mercy, and peace of God our Father’, an expression that many NT writers use to greet their readers.

In 1 Timothy 1:2, Paul begins his letter with the sentence, *To Timothy, my true son in faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.* In his greeting, Paul wishes grace, mercy and peace for Timothy. We still need grace. We still mercy. And we still need peace.

In 2 John 1:3, we find the same kind of greeting. *Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.*

In Galatians 6:16, Paul states that peace and mercy will be the continual experience of those who follow the truth of the gospel. *And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.*

All these passages show us that mercy is not something that you needed only once in the past. We continue to need mercy in the present. Why do we still need mercy now? Because we are still struggling against sin and we need God’s sustaining mercy to help us to win the battle.

We find this idea of struggling with sin in Hebrews 4:15. *For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.* We are tempted by sin and we are weak.

Now look at the following verse, v. 16. *Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Because we are weak and tempted by sin, we need the sustaining mercy of God to hold us up, day by day. Remember what I said earlier in this lesson: mercy is God’s antidote to sin. This mercy of God is God’s wonderful answer to sin and to our spiritual weakness, upholding us and sustaining us moment by moment.

Giving priority to mercy

In Hosea 6:6, we can see how being merciful is so important to God. Mercy is more important than any sacrifice that you make in God’s name. In that verse, God says, *For I desire mercy and not sacrifice.* The Lord Jesus, in His teaching, will quote twice these words of Hosea 6:6. First in Matthew 9:13 and then again in Matthew 12:7.

Sacrifices are the outward performances of religion. You slaughter a lamb, or a bull. Then you offer it in sacrifice to God. These are the outward acts of religion. And Jesus says, ‘I desire not these outward performances of religion called sacrifices. I desire mercy in the heart. What I want is that you become a different kind of people, people who are able to show mercy. These are the people who will be saved.’ *For they shall obtain mercy.* These are the people who will find mercy from the Lord in the day of judgment (2 Timothy 1:18).