

## Blessed are the merciful - Notes

*"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" NIV*

*"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full', you find yourself cared for" The Message*

The opening starter question is to remind people about what they have learned so far. The beatitudes are a description of one person – the Christian, and what they really look like as they live their life; so although we're looking at them individually, or in pairs, it's important to remember it is difficult to understand one in isolation. Remembering this, let's have a look at what it means to be merciful. So...what is mercy?

**Mercy** is compassion for people suffering and in need. It is *'an eye for distress, a heart of pity, an effort to help, in spite of hostility.'* (John Piper) So to firstly apply this to the Christian, we have to recognise God's mercy towards us. This is a biblical promise – God promises to show mercy to those who come to him and ask for it (John 6:37, Ps103:11-12). Secondly, the merciful feel pity and compassion towards those in need and express these emotions by taking practical steps to relieve the misery that triggered their concern. 1 John3:18 *'Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth'*. Practically, mercy operates in giving help to the needy; spiritually, it operates in granting forgiveness to the guilty. It is compassion in action that cures, heals, and helps the pain, distress and misery that are the results of sin in our lives and world. Jesus described it as one of the weightier matters (Matthew 23:23-24) Also Micah 6:8.

Our **Motivation** is *not* in order to receive mercy in return. So often we think it is. This is the purpose of the third question – to get people to start thinking seriously about our motivation when we show mercy. Encourage people to be honest. God's people are motivated to show mercy by the mercy they themselves have been shown by God. Being merciful to others is the *natural* result of receiving the mercy of God – and provides evidence that we have received it. The key to becoming a merciful person is to become a broken person. You get the power to show mercy from the real feeling in your heart that you owe everything you are and everything you have to sheer divine mercy. We are to be merciful to others because Christ has been merciful to us, and we recognise our constant need for more mercy from God, who freely gives it (Lam 3:22-23 - they are *'new every morning'*). And so as a result of this perspective we become more merciful. As John Stott says, *"The Father will forgive us if we forgive others but will not forgive if we do not forgive others. This certainly does not mean that our forgiveness of others earns us the right to be forgiven. It is rather that God forgives only the penitent and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit. Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it proves that we have minimised our own."*

### The unmerciful servant

It can be hard to fully understand the beatitudes; they are only one line each! So that's why we use other passages to help us understand them. The parable of the unmerciful servant is an illustration of what it means to be truly merciful, and of what our motivation for being merciful should be. Jesus tells the parable in response to Peter's question in v21 as to how many times he should forgive his brother. By suggesting 7 times, Peter feels he is being more than generous, and is really justifying himself and seeking to feed his ego. Religious leaders taught a limit on forgiveness and mercy, but Jesus has other ideas - v22 suggests a radical view of mercy that was as upside-down as what has gone before it...

The servant owed the master a huge debt – he could never have paid it back himself. V24 tells us the debt was *'ten thousand talents'* which in today's terms is millions of pounds. So, at a tremendous cost to himself the master forgave the servant's debt. This displays the character of God the Father who was willing to give up His Son to die on the cross because of His love for us (John3:16) and because we owed a debt we could never pay. As John Stott says, *"The main point of the parable of the unmerciful servant is the disparity in the size of the debts."* Each of us owes God a huge debt that we cannot pay, but out of His love, he forgives us from that debt, and sets us free from its grip.

As an aside, notice that the servant hadn't truly realised his poverty of spirit, he thinks he can pay the debt back himself, if only the master will give him more time (v26). This shows the importance of grasping the meaning of **all** of the beatitudes. If we don't realise we are nothing by ourselves (poor in spirit), and see our sin as God sees it (leading to a Godly mourning over it), then we will think we can fix our own problems, and not turn to Him for the solution. This was what the servant was doing; he thought he could pay back his debt himself. As Carson observes, *"The one who is not merciful is inevitably so unaware of his own state that he thinks he needs no mercy. He cannot picture himself as miserable and wretched, so how shall God be merciful to him?"*

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After the servant's debt has been cancelled he shows his true attitude to the master's mercy by not forgiving his fellow servant a tiny debt. In today's terms, a hundred denari is a few pounds. So, the servant who has just been forgiven millions of pounds will now not forgive a few pounds! He showed that he did not value the enormous gift he had been given. It meant nothing to him. For us, if we do not show mercy and forgiveness to those who ask for it we are in effect rejecting the forgiveness and mercy God has shown us. Matthew 6:14-15 tells us that if we do not show others forgiveness, we will not be shown God's forgiveness. From a mercy viewpoint, this beatitude should challenge our attitude to the needy around us, who also need mercy. *'If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?'* (1 John 3:17) See also James 2:14-17 - faith without works is dead – although it is not our works that save us (Eph2:8-9) they are the *evidence* of our true salvation.

In the parable the master hears what has happened and withdraws his mercy from the servant. Verse 35 says that *'this is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'* This may seem harsh; but God is not saying that we *merit* mercy by showing mercy or forgiveness by showing forgiveness - rather that if we do not show mercy then God withdraws His mercy and forgiveness from us. We cannot receive the mercy and forgiveness of God unless we repent and we cannot claim to have repented of our sins if we are not merciful to the sins of others. It is not that God stops being merciful to us but that we reject his forgiveness and mercy by refusing to admit our need for it. If we are not merciful to others we are merely showing that we never truly had God's mercy. One way to 'lose heaven' is to hold fast to an unforgiving spirit and so prove that we have never been indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. The point of Matthew 6:15 and 18:35 is that if we hold fast to an unforgiving spirit we will be handed over to the tormentors – our choice will be confirmed by God. We will lose heaven, and gain hell. The reason is not because we can earn heaven or merit heaven by forgiving others, but because holding fast to an unforgiving spirit proves that we do not trust Christ. If we trust him we will not spurn his way of life. If we trust him we will not be able to take forgiveness from his hand for our million dollar debt and withhold it from our ten dollar debtor. Paul said in Ephesians 4:32 *"Forgive each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."* In other words God's forgiveness is underneath ours, creates it and supports it. So that if we don't give it to others - if we go on in an unforgiving spirit - what we show is that God is not there in our lives. We are not trusting him. And not trusting him will keep us out of heaven.

The absence of mercy is a bad sign. It shows that, however loud his/her profession of faith is, the person who shows no mercy (spiritually and practically) to others is not a true Christian. Remember the servant in v26 – he fell on his *knees* and *begged* the master. It was loud – it looked real, but it's the servant's conduct *after* v26 which shows the attitude of his heart. A Christian is a person whose heart has been radically changed, someone who has been transformed by the grace of God. As a result his whole attitude to God and to man has been revolutionised and brought under the authority of the word of God. Showing mercy is simply a manifestation of this. Nowhere do we imitate God more than by showing mercy to others.

**"for they will be shown mercy"** is the promise to those who are merciful. As we've seen this does not mean that mercy is a reward, that we can merit God's mercy by showing mercy to others. That would make our salvation 'by works' not 'by faith' – the opposite of Eph 2:8-9. God's grace and mercy is free. So *how* then do the merciful receive mercy? Here and now, showing mercy has a therapeutic value – Proverbs 11:17, Acts 20:35. Blessing can come in the form of material things – Proverbs 11:24, 28:27, Luke 6:38. 'I shovel it out, God shovels it back in – and God uses a bigger shovel.' Mercy also comes in the form of granting forgiveness. Forgiveness saves us the expense of anger and hatred. The promise of mercy also has an eternal dimension - Jude 21, 2 Timothy 1:18, James 2:12, 13.

The beatitudes are not a map showing us the way to be saved (member of God's kingdom), but a mirror reflecting the character of those who are already saved. They are an exhibition of what a genuine Christian is like. They are birthmarks by which true subjects of God's kingdom can be identified.