



For five weeks now we have been studying the Beatitudes, one of the greatest and most beautiful passages, I believe, in all of the Scriptures. The Beatitudes are not only one of the greatest and most beautiful passages, they are also one of the most challenging of passages, especially when we dig in deeper and understand the complexities of what Jesus is saying.

As we have been doing each week, let's read the entirety of the passage that offers to us the Beatitudes –

Matthew 5:1-12 –

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,

2 and he began to teach them. He said:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This morning we come to the fifth beatitude – *blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.* With this beatitude, Jesus shifts gears to relationships. The first four beatitudes are what we might call *situational beatitudes*, as they speak to our situation – our context – in life. This beatitude is the first of three that have to do with relationships.

1. *Relationships are central to everything in life, so the desire of Jesus is to keep our relationships healthy.*

Some time ago I was in the greeting card aisle at a store looking for a card for Tanya and I was surprised to find a category of cards I didn't know existed. You know how the card racks have categories of subjects, like birthday, anniversary, etc.? Did you know there is now a category of cards called *Troubled Relationships*? (And by the way, I didn't buy Tanya's card from that section! And who wants to be seen picking a card from that section!) I was so fascinated by this discovery that I decided to take a picture and text it to Tanya. I took out my phone and was lining up the shot when I noticed a guy further down the rack of cards was watching me with a look that said *now that is really cheap. That guy is taking a picture of a card and is going to text the picture to someone instead of buying the card.* Doing so would most definitely necessitate a trip to the *Troubled Relationship* section! Is it a sign of the times that such a section exists or is it simply a sign that someone has figured out how to make money off of troubled relationships?

Here is a fairly obvious truth – almost everything in life is relationally oriented. Business is about relationships. A good businessperson knows the value of cultivating good relationships with their clients and customers. If you are in education you know that effective teaching comes with having good relationships with your students. If you are in sales, cultivating relationships is absolutely essential. Church is about certainly about relationships. People often come to a church because of a relationship with a friend or neighbor who invites them. Whether or not a person stays in a church depends in large part on whether or not they develop relationships with others in that congregation. Ministry is founded on relationships. My mom gave me some very good advice years ago about ministerial relationships years when she told me to never forget the importance of good pastoral care, because ministry is built on relationships. She said that good pastoral care can overcome a lot of bad sermons, but no amount of good sermons can overcome bad pastoral care. Pastoral care is simply another name for relationships.

Jesus spent a lot of time focusing on relationships. After reading the Beatitudes, we find that the rest of the Sermon On the Mount mostly concerns relationships. Take some time today or some other day and read through the Sermon On the Mount and take note of how much of it centers on relationships. Reading the gospels, we see that Jesus poured three years into the lives of the twelve disciples. He cultivated relationship with many other people as well. He told parables about relationships. The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32 – *11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' 20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him*

back safe and sound.’ 28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ 31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”), perhaps his most famous, is about one of the most foundational and precious of relationships – family. It’s also a story of how fraught with difficulty those relationships can sometimes be. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37 – 25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” 27 He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” 28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ 36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” 37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”) is about the relationships we have with those who are not in our normal circle of acquaintances. That parable speaks to us about the importance of caring not only for those whom we know, but for the strangers we encounter in life, particularly strangers in need). The entire mission of Jesus was about relationships, particularly the relationship between humanity and God and the relationships among humanity.

Here is a very simple truth – when our relationships are good, life is good; when our relationships suffer; life suffers. How many of us have at least one relationship that is troubled? How many of us have a fractured relationship that we just don’t quite know how to fix? Or, maybe we aren’t ready to fix it.

That’s where mercy comes in –

2. Healthy relationships are built upon mercy.

In 1970 the movie *Love Story* was a big hit. Did anyone see that movie? I’m fairly certain I didn’t, because I was in the eighth grade so I probably thought it was gross. But I do remember the famous line from the movie. Many movies have that one line for which it becomes known. If I said, *Luke, I’m your father*, you would know what movie that came from, wouldn’t you? The tag line from *Love Story* was a really unfortunate line. It was printed on posters, on little statues, and became the tagline for the year. Does anyone remember the line? Here it is – *love means never having* – can anyone finish it – *to say you’re sorry*. Let me ask you a question – how well would that line work at your house? Isn’t that one of the worst lines you’ve ever heard? It is just about the worst relationship advice offered in the entirety of human history. Whoever wrote that line probably came up with it right after doing something really foolish. *Yes, I forgot your birthday, Christmas, and our anniversary. And I forgot our kid’s birthdays. But you know what? Love means never having to say you’re sorry.* If you love someone you will say you’re sorry – every day, if necessary. And when someone does express sorrow – mercy must be given.

Love is all about grace and mercy.

It's hard to read a page of the gospels without encountering mercy in some form. Every parable, to some extent, is based on mercy. Almost every word that Jesus uttered carries with it an emphasis on mercy. The entire mission of Jesus, without a doubt, is about mercy. The most famous verse of the Bible, John 3:16 – *for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life* – is about mercy. Mercy is a synonym for grace and forgiveness. Each of those words point to the same quality, and it is a quality that is increasingly in short supply in our world.

The word mercy itself carries with it this idea – that we would seek to understand the perspective and the experiences of another person. It asks us to try to get inside another person and see life through their eyes and to walk in their shoes. Mercy asks us to identify with the other person, it asks us to try and see and feel as they do, it asks us to try and understand why a person acts the way they do? Mercy asks that we ask ourselves *what is the other person experiencing that may cause them to say those words that have hurt me? What is the other person experiencing that may cause them to act in such a puzzling manner?* Mercy asks this of us because we don't know all that we think we know about the life of another person. I have learned a few lessons about people over the years and one of those lessons is this – the issue that seems to be causing difficulty in a relationship is often not the real issue. The real issue is often much deeper and we can discover the real issue only when we seek to understand what is going on in the life, the heart, and the mind of another person.

3. *If we want to be like Jesus, we will be people of mercy.*

One of the most pointed parables of Jesus teaches this lesson very bluntly. Matthew 18:21-35 teaches us about a man who was granted a very full measure of mercy, but in turn he refused to offer mercy to another. **21** *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"* **22** *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.* **23** *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.* **24** *As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.* **25** *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.* **26** *"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'* **27** *The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.* **28** *"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.* **29** *"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'* **30** *"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.* **31** *When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.* **32** *"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.* **33** *Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'* **34** *In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.* **35** *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Obviously, Jesus is very serious about mercy.

But as serious as Jesus was about mercy, here is something very interesting about this beatitude – it is not a command. Did you realize that? It was only recently that it occurred to me that this is not a command; instead, it is declaration of blessing. *If you are merciful*, Jesus says, *you are blessed because you, in turn, are going to be given mercy.* Giving and receiving mercy simply go together – an unmerciful and unforgiving spirit renders one incapable also of receiving. If you cannot give, you cannot receive. Giving and receiving mercy are two sides of the same coin.

Because we have received mercy from God, we ought to also extend mercy to others. Mercy thus

flows in two directions – vertically, from God to us, and horizontally, from ourselves to others. As our goal is to be like Jesus, we should then, be people of mercy. If we are people of mercy then we are certainly people who are blessed. In today’s world, there is a great paucity of mercy. People are so quick to judge and so quick to condemn. As followers of Jesus we should be quick to turn away from judgment and condemnation and to offer mercy.

As I said at the beginning of this message, the words of the beatitudes are beautiful, but they are also very difficult as well. They are difficult because mercy is difficult. They are especially difficult when we extend mercy beyond those who are close to us. As difficult as it can be to offer mercy to our friends, neighbors, and family members, it is especially difficult when we move beyond those close relationships and consider extending mercy to those we don’t know. It is important to remember that Jesus spoke these words to people who were living under a brutal and despised occupation. The might Roman army controlled life for all those listening to Jesus that day, and some, no doubt, did not receive his words of mercy very well. How could anyone be expected to be merciful to an occupying power that had brutalized not only some of the friends, neighbors, and family members of those in the audience of Jesus, but even some of those who were listening to him that day? Because it was a large crowd, I imagine there might have been some Roman soldiers on the edges of the crowd, keeping an eye on things, lest anyone get any ideas of rebellion. Jesus’ words of mercy certainly had, then, a much more powerful edge in that context.

We are in a different context, but we still live in a world that is dangerous, as it is filled with warfare and the violence of terrorism. Our world might be different from the world of Jesus, but it is not that different in its need for mercy. Practicing that mercy, however, is not the easiest thing to accomplish, but if we can, we are certainly, as Jesus says, blessed,

May we go, then, from here and be people of mercy!