

Sermon File # 753

Scripture Text: Matthew 5:7 (Reading: Matthew 5:1-7)

Sermon Title: *The Blessing of Mercy*

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At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 15 February 2009

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The New International Version.

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The Blessing of Mercy

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Matthew 5, as we continue our series of sermons from the Sermon on the Mount, and more specifically from the Beatitudes in verses 3 through 10, noting the life that God blesses with true and lasting joy. As D Martin Lloyd-Jones remarked, these Beatitudes describe the character of the Christian, the follower of Jesus, and we need to understand them individually, but also see them as a portrait of the mature character of a believer (p. 95). I challenge you to join with me in memorizing and meditating on these Beatitudes, and in making them a growing part of our understanding and experience. Let's seek to live all of these important characteristics that lead to God's congratulations and to his blessing us with abundant and everlasting happiness and joy.

Follow as I read, beginning with the first verse of Matthew 5, going through our text for today, which is **Matthew 5:7**.

The first Beatitudes focused primarily on the believer's personal character and his or her relationship with God. We noted the need to approach God, being poor in spirit, so we can find his grace and strength as the answer to our weakness and need. Then we saw that as we mourn over our sins, suffering and sorrow, we find God's comfort. Then we noted that the only way we can receive God's blessings and benefits is to be meek and humble, submitting to him, to others and to our circumstances as servants of God, after the pattern of Jesus. Then we must hunger and thirst, with a sense of desperation, for God's righteousness, in our lives, first of all, but also in our world, longing for injustice to be set to rights.

But now the focus is almost entirely outward, as we are challenged by Jesus to be people of mercy toward others in order to experience the mercy, compassion and kindness of our heavenly Father.

We've also seen that these Beatitudes are unlike the characteristics of the general population, being counter-cultural values. Christ calls us to be in the world, but not of the world; rather, to live as he lived and as he would live in this fallen world, which is now under the control of the Evil One.

Our text for today concerns a completely countercultural value in what is often called "a dog-eat-dog" world of every man for himself and "do unto others before they do it to you"! Jesus says we are blessed if we are merciful toward others and care about and care for them, even if they are unmerciful to us.

Pastor John Piper asks this question, as he interprets this text: "Can a prosecuting attorney live by this Beatitude?" Can one, whose job is to enforce justice in this crooked and often dangerous society filled with criminals, be merciful and still fulfill her responsibility to civil society?

More personally, how can you, who face injustice and aggression in the workplace, in government, or in the classroom, or even in the home, be merciful and keep from contributing to this injustice in a fallen society? I'm convinced that Jesus does not command us without enabling us. He intends for us to receive the blessing of God for being merciful, thus he will enable us to be merciful as we live in the midst of a society that, first of all, needs the discipline of justice.

Let's note together that for us to experience the blessing of mercy there must first be...

➤ **Mercy extended**

Jesus was speaking to a group of new disciples, who had just received the gift of entrance into the Kingdom of God through faith and repentance (4:17) and the gracious offer to be his followers (4:18-22). Mercy had been extended to them. And Jesus is the Incarnate Son who came into the world to offer God's mercy to all who would repent and believe (9:9-13). When Jesus offered the blessing of mercy he offered it...

- *To a world in need of mercy*

Christ did not enter a merciful world. To Roman society, mercy was one of those "dog" virtues held in disdain by those in authority. Secular and even religious society was cruel and merciless to the offending and the weak. In Roman culture, deformed and often female newborns were abandoned. The handicapped were left to fend for themselves in a life of beggary (Wiersbe, p. 95). And the religious world was not much more merciful, but rather was more intent on passing judgment on the violators of their list of scruples than on caring for the needy. Almsgiving was more for pretentious appearances of piety rather than from genuine compassion (Matthew 6:1ff; Mark 2:18-3:6). Although the religious gave their alms, it was primarily in order to justify themselves in their own eyes, according to their legalistic standards. The religious were unmerciful to those caught in the act of sin, and were blind to their own sins, which were equally egregious in the eyes of God (John 8: 1-11; 9:35-41).

Our society today has institutions for charity (due largely, in fact, to the rise and influence of Christianity) and even the unconverted are capable of acts of charity, kindness and heroism. But it is not within the character of the individual or of society to be merciful, but rather to be selfish and to “take care of number one” first of all. Ours is an unmerciful world in desperate need of God’s mercy and not his justice and judgment, under which the world already stands condemned. For that reason we can give thanks to God that Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). As we read in John’s gospel, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (3:17). Those who believe in Jesus are not condemned, but “whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (3:18).

Jesus suffered at the hands of an unmerciful world in the grips of the Evil One, to offer deliverance...

- *By a God who is rich in mercy*

Jesus came into a world already under God’s condemnation and his purpose was to rescue the lost by God’s mercy and grace (Luke 19:10). The Apostle Paul, in describing God’s gracious salvation of spiritually dead sinners, noted that “because of his great love for us, *God, who is rich in mercy*, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4f). One scholar notes that mercy “may be God’s most fundamental attribute” (Blomberg, p. 100), although God’s holiness seems to be more fundamental to the nature of God. His mercy arises out of his holy love for lost sinners.

God’s mercy toward sinners is made possible through the atoning death of Jesus, who took upon himself God’s just wrath for sinners in order that we who repent and accept his free gift might be forgiven. As Peter writes, “He (Jesus) himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). Paul says that because Jesus suffered and died as God’s sacrifice for our sins, justice was done that mercy might be offered:

“God presented him (Christ Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25f).

In moral universe, men and women, created in God’s image and therefore accountable to him, must face God’s perfect justice. Without a Savior, our Advocate, we have no defense before him. We have all sinned and fall short of his glory (Romans 3:23). Therefore we must seek his mercy which he freely offers through our turning from sin and trusting Jesus as Savior and obeying him as Lord. God is rich in mercy toward the not-yet-converted and also toward those of us who have sought to follow him as Lord through the years.

Mercy was and is extended to us and then for us to receive God’s blessing there must be...

➤ **Mercy experienced**

If we take these Beatitudes as a progression in the stages of God's working in our lives, we note that God's merciful blessings are for the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meekly humble, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. All of the merciful blessings that Jesus promises are not of our deserving or by our earning but rather are experienced...

- *By the repentant*

Jesus came preaching the presence and availability of the kingdom to those who repent of sin (4:17). What the Incarnate Christ was to provide through his suffering and death on the cross was the free gift of eternal life for all who believe in him. The mercy of God is offered to all of us who were and who are dead in our transgressions and sins and have nothing to offer to God but our repentance (Ephesians 2:1ff).

We must be like the publican, the sinful tax collector, which Jesus said "went home justified," forgiven by God, instead of the pretentious, self-righteous Pharisee. This sinful publican was made right with God because he had a repentant heart and felt totally unworthy of God's mercy and grace. He "beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (Luke 18:9-14).

With this awareness of our spiritual poverty, our grief over our sinfulness, our submission to God, and our hunger and thirst for righteousness, we turn from self with repentant hearts to follow Jesus as Lord and trust him as Savior. Repentance isn't just a one-time experience when we first begin to trust and follow Jesus, but rather becomes the ongoing disposition of our hearts. We always continue to pray, "Kyrie eleison (Greek for "Lord have mercy") and we do so...

- *With remade hearts*

Only those who experience God's mercy in Christ Jesus fully understand what it is to be merciful and who are motivated, by the power of the Spirit, to be merciful to others. In fact, mercy is an essential aspect of the character of God's being-transformed children.

Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant to illustrate that a merciful, forgiving spirit is the evidence of one who has been forgiven by God. Jesus told about a man who had been forgiven a \$20,000,000.00 debt who was unwilling to forgive someone who owed him a \$2,000.00 debt (Hughes, p.49). In Jesus' parable, this unmerciful servant was condemned (jailed and tortured!) for his lack of mercy, and Jesus said that "this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:21-35). Jesus taught us that if we close our hearts with refusal to forgive others, we necessarily have shut ourselves off from God's forgiveness of us (6:14f).

We aren't saved by works of mercy, but rather we are saved by mercy and grace alone. But the grace that saves us causes us to be merciful toward others. This was the truth that Jesus told the "expert in the law" with his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). It was the merciful Samaritan, and not the religious leaders, who had experienced saving grace which prompted and motivated him to have mercy on his beaten and left-for-dead enemy. We aren't saved by our acts of mercy, but when we are truly converted, we will be merciful because we have

remade hearts. Remade hearts are hearts that are responsive to the needs of others and cause us to act in behalf of those in need. Merciful love, according to John, is one of the tests of the genuineness of our faith:

“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 3:15). James is even more explicit when he writes that “judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful” (2:13). As we, with being-remade hearts, continue to pray, “Kyrie eleison,” we act with kindness, mercy and with forgiveness toward others.

Mercy experienced becomes...

➤ **Mercy expressed**

Mercy is a God-like attribute that will be expressed by the children of God, who are taking on more and more of his nature. “Blessed are the merciful...”

- *In a ruthless world*

In this “dog-eat-dog,” merciless world, we are called to express the mercy of God. There is so little mercy that it’s conspicuous when it “shows up.” Jacob was fearful of meeting up with his brother Esau, whom he had cheated out of his birthright and blessing. But instead of exacting vengeance against his wily brother, Esau embraced him with merciful love and forgiveness. Jacob remarked that seeing Esau’s merciful face was “like seeing the face of God” (Genesis 33:10).

So when we practice mercy, when it is in our power to hold a grudge, extract compensation or exact revenge against someone who has hurt or wronged us, we show “the face of God.” But mercy can be understood and appreciated only...

- *In the context of God’s justice*

As we noted above, God is a moral God, who has created a moral universe that must abide by his laws. He created us in his image also as morally accountable, and injustice and sin must be punished. But also, as we noted above from Paul’s letter to the Romans, through Christ, the sinless one, taking our punishment for sin in our place, God paid the penalty for our sin, so that he could be both the just one and the justifier of all who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25f).

When we realize that we are all sinners, deserving God’s punishment, we then appreciate and call upon his mercy and grace. That dependence on his mercy and grace is not a one-time experience, but rather is the way we continue to trust God and seek his help in our times of need (Hebrews 4:16). We realize we could not live and certainly could not receive eternal life apart from God’s sustaining mercy and grace.

The Prophet Micah asked this poignant question:

“He has shown you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
And to walk humbly with your God” (6:8).

Mercy is in the context of God's justice. It's meaningless to offer mercy to someone who is oblivious to justice. How can we forgive someone who doesn't seek forgiveness and who cannot appreciate mercy because he or she doesn't understand justice? Only those who are under the sentence of justice are ready to receive mercy.

We are to act justly, respecting laws and limits and teaching others to do the same. Children need to be disciplined and even punished, at appropriate times and in appropriate ways. Spanking is often appropriate and necessary for proper discipline for a child, as we read in Proverbs 13:24. But abuse and injury are never appropriate. Civil laws must be enforced, else the result is social chaos and anarchy. So, a Christian prosecuting attorney is justified in her or his job. We are to act justly and expect others to do as well.

Yet there is a time and place for mercy. Children, who are disciplined fairly and consistently can be treated with occasional mercy, when they exhibit true repentance and sorrow for their misbehaving. And for the truly repentant lawbreaker and even the egregious criminal, mercy can be a powerful witness for the love of Christ. But when the criminal, perhaps even a murderer, shows no repentance, then forgiveness and mercy are meaningless.

Abortion is an important issue of social concern and responsibility for believers that involves both justice and mercy. We should seek to stand for justice in the support of the establishment of laws that protect the rights of unborn children. Yet we should also provide love, forgiveness and mercy toward those who have chosen to abort a child and are probably suffering from guilt and depression.

As a church, we should always stand for biblical principles of justice and moral standards, and seek ways to influence governments to enact and enforce just laws. And we of course must be uncompromising in our teaching and preaching and statement of beliefs, making certain they are in accord with the essentials of the faith we have delineated for ourselves. We must also practice church discipline when one of our member's belief and/or life are causing dishonor to the name of Christ or disruption to our fellowship. But I want IBC Brussels to be known as a merciful people, who welcome everyone into the circle of unconditional love. We may disagree with and even teach and preach against someone's lifestyle and beliefs, but we must reach out to them with unconditional love. I don't want us to be known for what we are against. Rather, I pray we will be known for our love and for our mercy (John 13:35).

As God's blessed and Spirit-empowered children, we are called to express mercy...

- *In the Spirit of Jesus*

As Micah says, we are to act justly but are to love mercy (6:8b). To be merciful at every opportunity is to act like Jesus (Mark 5:19), who desires mercy rather than the performance of religious ritual (Matthew 9:13). Jesus was angry with the religious legalists who cared more about their Sabbath rules than they cared for a man who needed to be healed (Mark 3:5). And he calls us to care and gives us the opportunity to be merciful in every sphere of life.

Marriage is a relationship that welcomes and is strengthened by mercy. My wife is gracious and merciful toward me by overlooking and forgiving all my faults. And I am

called to be merciful by being patient and kind regarding her very few faults, and by not keeping record of her few missteps (1 Corinthians 13:4f).

Certainly we have opportunities in daily life, in the workplace and classroom, to be kind and merciful instead of being harsh and demanding toward others.

The church has a network of relationships that demand that call for kindness and mercy toward others. Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to forgive, comfort and restore the repentant member and to reaffirm their love for him (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). Some churches are good at standing for the truth and practicing discipline, but often these churches are lacking in the spirit of love, kindness, forgiveness and mercy toward the fallen. Yet restoration and mercy are the heart of Jesus (Galatians 6:1). Paul lists “showing mercy” as one of the spiritual gifts and says that whoever is thus gifted should show mercy cheerfully (Romans 12:8d). God has given this church people who obviously have this spiritual gift, which is a powerful witness, not only within the church but to the outside world. Those who have the gift of mercy are like salt, light and leaven within the church, influencing all of us to be kinder, gentler and more compassionate.

Expressing mercy in the Spirit of Jesus is likely a costly act. Dallas Willard speaks of his parents, who owned a clothing business during the Great Depression of the 1930’s in the US. They provided many people with clothing “on credit,” even when they realized they would never receive payment from them. As a result of their merciful generosity, their business went bankrupt (117). Yet they acted in the Spirit of Jesus.

Mercy flowed from the heart of Jesus on the cross. In fact, it was his love and mercy that sent him to the cross for our sake. And on the cross he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). It was this same Spirit of Jesus that enabled Stephen to intercede for those who were stoning him to death, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

Mercy is the Spirit of Jesus and as such is an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit (patience, kindness, goodness, in Galatians 5:22f) which is produced in our lives when we live by the Spirit. And he enables us to do the supernatural, that which amazes the world.

The late Corrie ten Boom, in her book *The Hiding Place*, relates her postwar encounter with a guard from the Ravensbrück concentration camp, “where her sister had died and she herself had been subjected to horrible indignities” (as told by Kent Hughes, p. 50):

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing. Betsie’s pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,” he said. “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!”

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people of Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

Corrie ten Boom expressed mercy in the Spirit of Jesus, who alone could give such grace. This attribute of mercy is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls the renunciation of dignity in sharing the indignity of the cross. The only honor and dignity the merciful have "is their Lord's own mercy, to which alone they owe their very lives" (p. 112).

Only the Spirit of Jesus could enable a father of a young woman, who was brutally murdered, to visit the troubled teenaged murderer in prison. This father continued to visit his daughter's murderer, sharing the message of Jesus with him until the young man came to repentance of sin and faith in Christ (Hughes, p. 50).

When I read about such amazing grace to enable such acts of mercy and forgiveness, I realize how weak I am in practicing mercy and how unworthy I am to receive Christ's mercy and the mercy and forgiveness of others. Yet mercy is the Spirit of Christ and is at the very heart of the good news of Jesus. He came into the world to bring God's mercy and calls us to join him in sharing his love and mercy within our world. And some of you may be facing the difficult, humanly impossible challenge of practicing the mercy of Jesus, perhaps toward an unfaithful spouse, or someone else who has hurt you or your family members deeply.

Only mercy experienced can lead to...

➤ **Mercy expected**

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." When we experience and express God's mercy extended to us, we can expect God's mercy toward us. It can be expected...

- *But not deserved*

Early Church Father, John Chrysostom (347-407), noted that this blessing of God's mercy is not an "equal reimbursement." God's mercy is so much greater than ours that we could never possibly repay our debt to him on an equal footing (p. 85). This was the point of Jesus' parable of The Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35). To quote another Church Father, we are God's beggars, and as we treat our beggars, God will treat us (Augustine, p.85).

Again, we live our lives as God's beggars for his ongoing mercy and grace toward us and realize we have his love, forgiveness and his daily help...

- *Because of grace alone*

Our daughter is a painter and is often commissioned to paint portraits, such as of the president of the college where she teaches art and now for a US seminary president. I told her the story of a university president whose portrait was to be hung in the foyer of his university, alongside those of his predecessors. Suspecting that the artist would not "get it right" and paint him in a flattering way, he secretly peeked

at the painting before its unveiling. He took his portrait to the artist and complained angrily, "This portrait doesn't do me justice." The undaunted artist replied, "Sir, you don't need justice. You need mercy." Our daughter is much too sweet to use this line with her portrait subjects!

And we need mercy, for God's forgiveness and his help throughout our earthly pilgrimage. If we were judged by God's law, we would be forever condemned and if had to live by our efforts, we would fail miserably to honor and please God. We were created and are saved and also redeemed to live lives that depend on God. We always and forever depend on God's mercy. For that reason we "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

God loves to show us his mercy, by the assurance of his forgiveness from his Word and through the peace he gives. And God extends his love and mercy to us through those who forgive us and show genuine love, care and concern for us, far beyond our deserving. Peterson in *The Message* offers this paraphrase of our text:

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you'll find yourselves cared for."

Merciful people enjoy the merciful care of those who have received their previous mercy and care. This is a wonderful part of the fellowship of God's people. I remember a conversation with the pastor of a church he had served faithfully for a number of years and now was stricken with cancer that impaired his ability to minister actively. He noted that he never felt more loved and cared for in his life and had a wonderful assurance of God's care extended to him through his church family. And, with advancing years, I am beginning to relate to that sense of assurance as I seek to minister to people who someday will possibly minister to me.

Conclusion:

Today you and I can rejoice in the mercy of God that was extended to us in Jesus Christ and from his cross. We can be eternally grateful that God does not treat us as our sins deserve (Psalm 103:10). Because of the cross, holy God gives his love, mercy and forgiveness to us. By grace alone through faith alone we have been saved (Ephesians 2:8f).

Because the Holy Spirit touched our hearts, God's mercy was experienced when we repented and trusted him and committed our lives to follow Jesus as Lord. Because we are forgiven sinners we now must express that forgiveness to others, regardless of their sins and offences, and that without limit (Matthew 18:21f). We are given the grace of God and the power of the Spirit to express that God-like quality, mercy. The greater the offense and the hurt to us, the more powerful will be the expression of our mercy. It will be for the forgiven like seeing the face of God. And then, as we live mercifully, we can expect that God will be gracious and merciful toward us at the last. And even in the meantime, throughout this earthly pilgrimage, his grace and mercy will be sufficiently extended to us through his people.

Again, mercy is counter-cultural and even, in many cases, supernatural. But so is all of the Christian life. It's the only way to experience a happy, eternally joyful life. So, as Michael Green reminds us, the merciful person is "happy in a way the legalist can never understand" (p. 90). The merciful are partners with Jesus in his work of

spreading mercy to the needy and the guilty. In this “dog-eat-dog” world, we can be merciful when others are being ruthless; kind and generous when others are being legalistic, condemning and selfish. Mercy speaks loudly to the world, it shows the face of God, and brings us the pleasure and joy of knowing that the life of mercy pleases God.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What has been your experience of God’s mercy? Think of the ways you have been blessed by God’s mercy and through the mercy shown by others.
2. What are some examples of mercy, from Scripture, history or current events that made an impact on others?
3. What should be the attitude of our hearts when we realize our need for God’s mercy?
4. What place has mercy in the context of the exercise of justice in society? In other words, can a prosecuting attorney experience this Beatitude for mercy?
5. What are some ways to discipline children with also expressions of mercy toward them?
6. What are some situations in your life where God may be calling you to exercise mercy?
7. Spend some time in prayer, asking God to give you grace and the Spirit of Jesus to act with mercy in these situations.

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