

July 31 “Blessed are the Merciful”

Matthew 5:7

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



Special Music: “Mercy is a Song”

Matthew West

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbpNUAZq09w>

MERCY'S TOUCH

Found guilty,

I stand straight,

Head bowed,

Awaiting punishment

For my discretion.

A sack of cloth

Draped o'er my head

As death's shadow looms.

I feel the coarseness of the rope

As the noose is placed around my neck.

A hinged wooden door

Is all that stands

Between me and oblivion.

A priest whispers in my ear

Forgotten words

Of a bygone year

Asking God to accept my soul,

Although I made the motions

Of a silent penitent,

I find no peace

Or release,
From the penalty of my sin.
My mind is focused
On the scaffold's creak
As my dispatcher
Ascends the steps.
Wood on wood
Speaking moans of coming doom
And future bleak.
He takes his place of justice
And grasps the rod
That will release my soul
To God.

No longer captain of my fate
My life now placed in other hands.
Condemned I stand
Of crimes against creation
Giving pause to revelation
Knowing that I understand.
Tis God I have offended
Not just man.

A voice calls out
“Hold, stay fast.
I speak for the king
For I am His son.
And I am the one
Who holds hangman’s hand,
Listen to my whispering.
I choose to forgiveness
And grant him mercy
For I have paid his price.
His fate lies with me.”

With that
The noose is loosed
And the bag is lifted
As I see before me
The man who gifted
Me mercy.
Nail scarred hands
And forgiving eyes
His only words,
“Go thou and do likewise.”

The judge looked down from his bench at the young man standing before him. It was obvious that the man had not shaved or brushed his teeth in several days, so he probably hadn't had a shower either. The crime he was accused of was vagrancy. A policeman had been called because the young man had been found sleeping in a shopkeeper's doorway to get out of the rain. It was obvious that he was down on his luck and struggling to get by.

In the small town in which the judge served, vagrancy was punishable by thirty days in jail. Looking at the young man he felt he might be doing him a favor by letting his serve out that sentence. At least the man would be out of the elements and get three meals a day. But it would also be on his record. It would be like kicking someone when they were already down. And yet, if he showed leniency, he might not get reelected. The townspeople expected him to be hard on crime, even small crimes like vagrancy. They did not want the appearance of having a local homeless population. It made the town seem unattractive to newcomers.

The young man shuffled his feet and stared at the floor. It was apparent that he knew he was in the wrong even though he had not had much of a choice. The judge vacillated between his options, and finally chose the path of mercy. He told the young man to lift his face up and look him in the eye. "Young man, I'm letting you off with a warning. But here is what is going to happen. You are going to go the address my bailiff will give you. It is a men's shelter and they will have a bed and food for you. They also have a counselor on staff and someone you can talk to concerning how to get you out of the mess you find yourself in.

With their help, you will be presentable to the public and will find gainful employment. If you are brought before my bench, you will be sentenced to the fullest extent of the law.”

The young man thanked the judge for his mercy. He turned, and the bailiff escorted him from the courtroom.

When thinking about the story of the judge and the young man, it seems like common sense, a positive solution to a sticky problem. But it is important to understand that as wonderful as mercy is, as beautiful as the concept is, there is always a price that comes with mercy; a cost to be paid. In this case, while the judge may have saved the taxpayers some money by keeping the young man out of jail, he would be paying for that mercy at the polls when election time came. He paid the price for the sake of offering mercy. It was the right thing to do, and he was willing to pay the cost.

Doris had a friend that owed her a large sum of money. The friend had been in a tight spot. She had three children and her husband had left her without warning or any income. She had worked her way through the local food banks and charities and managed to stay afloat for a few months. She had tried and failed to find a job and was close to be evicted from the small apartment they were in. In her despair, she had turned to her friend and asked for help. Doris had checked her savings and written her a check for several thousand dollars. While that money lasted a while with all the other help she was receiving, it became obvious to Doris that it was likely that she would never be repaid.

Doris considered her options. She could use the court system to force the woman to pay her back. But she also knew that the woman would not have the money. She could try to work out some kind of payment plan with her friend, but since there still wasn't any income, the woman probably couldn't make any payments. She could forgive the debt but use it as a tool of manipulation in the future, a way of getting the woman to run errands or do things for her. Or Doris could forgive the debt with the full understanding that she would probably never see the money again.

In the long run, she chose to forgive the debt and help her friend in other ways, which eventually led to a job and better circumstances for everyone concerned. She was quite surprised when after a few years of struggling, her friend's situation changed, bringing her a good job, a place to live, and a more stable environment. Doris' friend started sending money each month going towards the debt, even though the debt had been forgiven.

Doris had shown mercy to her friend and gave her the benefit of the doubt. While some may think that her friend was taking advantage of Doris, in truth Doris had used mercy to help rebuild someone's life without causing them pain and embarrassment.

There is always a price for mercy. The question that we all face is, are we willing to pay that price? Because mercy is not expected. It can be requested, but the person looking for mercy knows they are a guilty, are in the wrong, or undeserving of what they are receiving. A person looking for mercy leaves the

gift of mercy in the hands of the benefactor and both parties understand that it is a debt that may never get repaid.

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Mercy always requires sacrifice. Someone has to give up something (pride, money, reputation, influence, or even their own lives) in order for any act of mercy to be called a merciful act. If you compare it to a balance scale, you might think of the scale being out of balance due to the plight of the person or persons in trouble. And then someone steps in and gives something of themselves to balance the scale. That gift is mercy and comes in many forms.

I love the movie “It’s a wonderful Life” with Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. It is hard not to like the film. It first came out in 1946. I won’t recap it because everyone knows this story about George Bailey and Clarence the Angel. But I also see that this movie is a perfect example of what mercy is all about, even though mercy is not the focus. At every turn in the movie, George is sacrificing something to make the lives of the people around him better. Even when the pharmacist, Mr. Gower, makes a horrible mistake on a prescription and young George speaks up, knowing that it will probably anger Mr. Gower, George puts the customer’s wellbeing above his own. His reward is being slapped by Mr. Gower. George is always putting others before himself throughout the movie.

When his world comes crashing down because Uncle Billy loses the mortgage payment, George feels that it is himself that has let everyone else down. George loves the people of New Bedford and would do anything for them. But when the money is lost, he doesn't seek help. He just takes all the blame onto himself.

This exposes us to what our verse today is all about.

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When Uncle Billy loses the money, and it seems like the end of the world. But in a grand show of solidarity and gratitude, all those people that George showed mercy to all those years, gather together to give mercy right back to him. They, in turn, make the sacrifice to balance the scale so that George and his family will not suffer.

I truly love the way the townspeople come together to save George, to lift him at his darkest moment. But I also realize that it is only a movie. While the message is a good one, it is one that is written, directed, and produced towards a given outcome. That's what movies do. And let's face it, we like it when the good guy is vindicated in the end.

But life is not a movie, and the very basic truth is the day that God calls us home, the scale may not be balanced by any earthly standard. There are going to be people in our lives that are never going to apologize. They may never pay us

back. They may never do the right thing. They may never thank us for the mercy that we show. We may never receive of appreciation. We may never have that moment when all our friends come together around the Christmas tree in celebration as a bell rings and an angel gets its wings. And it makes us despondent. Maybe we had other plans for that money. Maybe that time could have been better spent. Maybe the sacrifice was hard on our families. We tend to focus on the possibility that our sacrifice may go unnoticed by the people we are trying to help.

Aye, there's the rub, isn't it? Self-consciously, we want them to show their appreciation. Maybe at least acknowledge that we made a sacrifice to help them. But that is the point, isn't it? God isn't wanting us to grant mercy with an expectation of repayment. Mercy is a gift and repayment is never required. To expect somebody to repay an act of mercy is treating it like a loan, which is it not. Mercy is akin to forgiveness. We grant mercy as God grants mercy to us. God forgives us our debts, our trespasses, our sins, without expectation of repayment. It's over, done, kaput. Everything is settled. There is no longer a cost associated with our past. It has been paid in full. The judge is satisfied. And we love that about God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We find joy in that, a real cause for celebration.

But when we need to step into acts of mercy, it becomes difficult for us. "If I show mercy to this person, how is that going to affect me? What is the cost on my part? What about my family? Will they have to sacrifice as well if I give mercy to this individual? What if my spouse can't understand it and threatens to

leave me? How will it affect my job? Will it jeopardize my future income?" These are all normal questions. We don't want our mercy to affect our other relationships. We worry that other people might not be as 'enlightened' or 'forward-thinking' as we are. We hesitate.

As Christians, though, we have an example we are following that was set by Jesus Christ himself. So, consider this, how does Jesus answer these questions? How did He answer them in the Garden of Gethsemane as He cried out to His Father, "Not my will, but thy will be done?" Or His words from the cross, His body wracked in agony as blood flowed from His body, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do?" Or His words to His disciples, "Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Or His words found in Matthew 7:12 that we are so tempted to twist to our advantage at times:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

We want to embrace the Old Testament law of an eye for an eye. But Jesus gives us a new measuring stick that is easy to understand. Treat others the way we would like to be treated and not the way we think they deserve to be treated. Show mercy.

Peter gets rather blunt about it, and in 1 Peter 3:9:

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

Did you hear that last part? **“because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”**

Can we hear what Peter is telling us? If we bless those, provide mercy for those, give grace to those who need us or seek to harm us, we will inherit blessings. Not from the people that we help, but from God himself.

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That is our task for the coming week. Showing mercy in all situations, blessing those we encounter, loving those who don't necessarily love us, give to those who cannot repay us. There are blessings abundant to be had and it is the very core of Christian belief and example. It is our purpose.

“Blessed are the merciful!”

God bless you all,

AMEN

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