

October 22, 2013

9 - Blessed Are the Merciful

Matthew 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

ἐλεήμων (*ele'emon*): pertaining to being concerned about people in their need, merciful, sympathetic, compassionate (BDAG)

Compassion: sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it (Merriam-Webster)

James 2:13

For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11)

Acquiring honor and avoiding shame drove the culture of Jesus' day. Much more than amassing money or pursuing success, Mediterranean people sought after honor and status. For many, a wedding is the highest status event of their lives. It is a public affair, attended by all of the people that are important to the bride and groom's families.

The wedding festivities continued for a week (Gn. 29:27, Jacob and Leah) or sometimes 2 weeks (Tobit 8:20, Tobias and Sarah). These celebrations were marked by music (Ps. 45; 7:63) and by joking like Samson's riddles (Jdg. 14:12-18). (*New Bible Dictionary*, "marriage," p. 744)

A well supplied and festive celebration would bring honor not only to the new couple, but to both of their families as well. To run out of food or drink would bring disgrace onto the same. It is not clear what Mary and Jesus' relationship is to the bridal party, but Mary's insistence that Jesus do something indicates she felt a responsibility to solve the problem.

Jesus' response to his mother, "Woman, what does that have to do with us?" strikes the modern ear as rude, but this is because of a misunderstanding. F.F. Bruce helpfully explains:

Mary probably failed to realize adequately that since her Son had left home (some months before), something had happened which must make a difference to their former relationship. He had been anointed with the Holy Spirit and had received power to undertake the special work which his Father had given him to do. Now that,

after the long 'silent years' at Nazareth, he had entered on his public ministry, everything (including family ties) must be subordinated to this. This at least lies behind his surprising answer to her, translated in the older versions as 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?' The English word 'woman,' used thus in the vocative, carries with it a flavour of disrespect which is not present in the original. (Perhaps the Ulster expression 'Woman dear' would convey the sense fairly well.) Our Lord addressed his mother by this same term (Gk. *gynai*, vocative *gyne*) when he hung on the cross (19:26); and indeed the term was consonant with the utmost courtesy, being translatable as 'madam' or 'my lady.' (*The Gospel & Epistles of John*, p. 69).

Here Jesus pulls through. He makes more wine, and the head steward finds himself impressed by the provision of bridegroom so much that he compliments him. Thus, the groom's status receives a boost rather than a dip as a result of Jesus' involvement. The man did not deserve this, but because of Mary and Jesus' compassion, he received honor rather than shame on a very important day.

Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:1-27)

Once again, we must acquaint ourselves with the cultural tensions present in Jesus' day to understand adequately the incredible significance of his actions. Bruce points out the following:

Women usually came to draw water in company, and at a cooler time of day. This woman evidently came alone; possibly she did not seek the company of her neighbours (or they did not seek hers), so she deliberately chose a time when they were not likely to be around—but it is easy to speculate (*The Gospels & Epistles of John*, p. 102).

We also know of this woman that she has married five times, and at that time, she was living with a man to whom she was not married (John 4:17-18). What kind of reputation would a woman in this situation have in our day? She is on her sixth man! In the ultra-conservative culture of ancient Israel, how much more shocking would her actions have been? Even so, this is only the first barrier.

By the time of Jesus, deep-seated animosity had brewed between Jews and Samaritans for centuries, sometimes erupting in outright violence. They were sworn enemies who avoided one another, each regarding the other as heretical. The Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, as inspired. They believed the monarchy was a mistake, and they considered David's beloved city along with Solomon's ornate temple as illegitimate. They clung to mount Gerizim, the lofty peak where Moses commanded the blessings to be pronounced once

the Israelites entered the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12; Joshua 8:33). Later, they built a temple there and worshipped on Mt. Gerizim instead of Jerusalem (John 4:20).

A little more than a century before Christ (128 B.C.), the priest-king John Hyrcanus conquered Samaria for Judah and destroyed their temple in the process. By the first century, Herod the Great's impressive renovations to the Jerusalem temple stirred disdain among the Samaritans whose own temple lay in ruins atop what they regarded as the true holy place. Samaria lay between Judah and Galilee, so when Galilean Jews made pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem, they had to either go through Samaria or walk the long way around it.

Most Jews chose to travel the extra distance to avoid the despised Samaritans. In one incident, Jesus went through Samaria on his way to attend a festival at the temple. He sent ahead messengers to make arrangements for him in a Samaritan village. They refused to receive him "because his face was set toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:53). Jesus' disciples asked, "Lord, do you wish that we call fire to come down out of heaven and consume them?" (v54). Jesus rebuked them, and they resumed their journey.

The Jews likewise despised the Samaritans and called them Cutheans, whose blood was not really Israelite in origin but Gentile (from Cuthah in Persian).¹ They libeled them as turncoats who vacillated between identifying as Jews or Gentiles depending on who was asking.² So much did the Jews despise the Samaritans that they considered eating with them the same as eating the flesh of a pig and any contact with a Samaritan female as contaminating as touching a menstruating woman.³

Now we can understand why, when Jesus asked the woman at Jacob's well for a drink of water, she replied, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" John helpfully explains, "For Jews do not use anything in common with Samaritans" (John 4:9). Even just asking for a sip of water from her drinking vessel was crossing the line. This then is the second layer of social complexity in this incident.

Jesus should not talk to this woman because she is a woman, she is sexually immoral, and she is a Samaritan. Furthermore, he should not ask to share her drinking vessel since that goes against the cultural grain. Jesus essentially breaks all of the social rules and then breaks his own rule of not telling people he is the Messiah. Generally, Jesus did not go around telling people who he was. Instead, he wanted only those who had eyes to see and ears to hear to

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9.14.3 (288)

² *ibid*, 9.14.3 (291).

³ *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Zera'im, Shebi'ith 8.10; *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Tohoroth, Niddah 4 (31b)

figure it out. Often when people discovered who Jesus was, he warned them not to tell others (Mark 8:29-30) because he knew this would bring about the end too quickly. However, with this low status woman, he honors her in the best way he can and tells her truths that will save her life in the age to come. Once again, Jesus felt her plight and demonstrated mercy rather than judgment. In fact, we can even say this was his standard operating procedure (John 3:17), though many times Jesus did rebuke people as well (especially the Pharisees).

The Lame Man (John 5:1-17)

Imagine not being able to walk for 38 years! Now take it one step further and imagine what it would have been like before handicapped ramps and parking spaces, before wheelchairs and modified vans, before government assistance and free health insurance. We encounter the man at the pool of Bethesda in a truly pitiable situation. He waits day after day in vain for an opportunity to go into the pool when the waters are troubled. He has no one to pick him up and put him in, so every time someone else gets into the water before him. It is not at all clear that actually going in would really bring about healing anyhow. Nevertheless, the man holds out hope that perhaps, one day, he might just get cured. Jesus enters the picture and once again feels the other's pain and desires to alleviate it. He asks the man if he wants to be healed and upon affirmation, Jesus commands him to arise. Jesus doesn't just bring the man to the front of the line in hopes of getting him in the pool. No, Jesus heals him right there on the spot.

Sometimes, showing mercy backfires. Jesus doesn't stick around for the accolades of the onlookers, but slips anonymously into the crowd. The Pharisees, as always, show judgment, not mercy. They condemn the man for carrying his little rolled up mat. They do not rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15) but instead criticize his behavior on the basis of their traditions. Jesus goes out of the way to find the man and warns him not to sin anymore. Rather than heeding Jesus' instruction, the man tells the Pharisees who Jesus is, and this brings persecution down on our Lord. Sometimes, showing mercy results in people taking advantage of the situation or even trying to hurt you. I know of no way to guarantee this won't happen, and Jesus' example confirms that even the wisest man was not immune to this.

The Blind Man (John 9:1-41)

This incident illustrates the sharp contrast between the legalists and Jesus. We have very little information about this man or even Jesus' interaction with him. We do know, however, that people commonly thought his blindness resulted from sin: either his own or his parents (John 9:2, 34). To have the stigma of divine punishment piled on top of the incredible hardship of blindness must have overwhelmed this poor beggar (John 9:8). Jesus heals him and then, characteristically, disappears.

The blind man has to tell his story three times to the authorities. Each time he narrates the event, he gets a little more frustrated:

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| To his neighbors (John 9:11) | The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight. |
| First reply to the Pharisees (John 9:15) | He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see. |
| Second reply to the Pharisees (John 9:27) | I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you? |

Eventually, the leaders cast the blind man out, but Jesus, in a second move of compassion, seeks him out. He had heard what happened, and he found the man in order to tell him who he really was. The blind man believes on the spot.

So, what we see throughout Jesus' ministry is that he regularly felt sympathy for people and situations. He was willing to break social norms and defy manmade traditions in order to help someone in genuine need. Oftentimes, people appreciated his help; sometimes, these acts of compassion backfired by bringing unwanted attention and persecution to him. Showing mercy often costs us something, but Jesus teaches us that if we show mercy, God will show us mercy (Matthew 5:7). Even so, in some cases, being merciful may not be loving as it may enable someone to continue in a sinful habit.

10 - MERCIFUL

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

Understanding our need for mercy is paramount for right living and merciful living. According to Merriam Webster dictionary, “mercy” is compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one's power. Imprisonment rather than death imposed as penalty for first-degree murder is a manifestation of mercy. Mercy for the Christian includes God's blessing and eternal life rather than separation from God and eternal death.

Synonyms for “merciful” are compassionate, kind, kindhearted, generous, sympathetic, and forgiving. Antonyms are hardhearted, callous, cold, insensitive, uncaring, and unsympathetic.

Luke 6:27-36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Matthew 5:42 Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

Matthew 5:20 “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Twice Jesus confronted their lack of mercy – Matthew 9:13 and 12:7

Deuteronomy 15:7-14 The instruction to help those in the family who are needy is not new.

Matthew 18:21-35 Compassion (empathy) and forgiveness are at the heart of mercy.

Matthew 25:31-46 In each of these records, the instruction pertains to those in the family and not all those in the world.

We will be held responsible for how we responded to those in need. We cannot sidestep the importance of living a merciful life.

Luke 10:25-37 The standard for love, compassion, and mercy

Luke 17:12-19 To have mercy on means in the context to help one afflicted or seeking aid. When we understand our need for God's mercy, we develop a mindset which is the opposite of entitlement.

Did Jesus did not show mercy because they deserved mercy due to past actions, nor did he show mercy because of what they would do in the future.

The proper response to mercy received is gratitude; however, such a response is not always given.

Matthew 9:27-31 They asked for mercy and received it. They did not say, “We deserve it!” Mercy and deserving something good are not connected.

Matthew 15:22-28 She asked and persisted with humility.

Matthew 17:14-19 With each situation, the afflicted did not have the ability to resolve their problem by themselves. Helping people who can and should help themselves is not necessarily mercy; rather, it could be foolish and harmful.

Matthew 20:29-34 With every one of these situations, the person or persons came to Jesus and asked for help.

Sometimes the merciful act is to say no just like parents do with their children.

How long do I help someone who has the ability to change but refuses to change? How long do I help someone who does not have the ability to change?

Matthew 6:1-3 Our merciful acts are to be done with the right motive – the glory of God – and not the recognition of others.

Jesus did not demonstrate mercy to everyone; rather, he asked God what he should do in each situation. We need the help of God for direction as to when we are to give mercy. We never want to be hardhearted, and we never want to harm people because of our generosity. Therefore, we need God’s help.

SUMMARY:

- Understanding our need for mercy is paramount to mercifulness.
- Religious people can become hardhearted.
- Compassion and forgiveness are at the heart of mercy.
- The merciful help one afflicted and seeking aid.
- Mercy and entitlements are incongruous.
- Helping people who can and should help themselves is not mercy.
- Sometimes the merciful act is to say no.
- We need God’s direction in order to be merciful.