# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“God Blesses Those Who Are Merciful”**

**Matthew 5:7**

**February 12, 2023**

Today we come to the fifth of Jesus’ eight beatitudes: “God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” Once again we want to remember that these beatitudes are all connected. They do not describe eight different kinds of people; they describe a person who is in Christ, a person who is seeking to become like Christ, a person who is learning how to live in God’s Kingdom. Similarly, the beatitudes do not give us eight different benefits, or blessings, to try to earn; they describe various dimensions of the abundant life of a follower of Jesus Christ. I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 5:1-10

One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them. “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

“God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” The word “mercy” has three interconnected uses in the Bible, all of which are included in Jesus’ statement. First, mercy is an attribute of God; it is a part of who he is. Just as God is holy, just as God is love, just as God is gracious, so God is merciful. Second, mercy means forgiveness. We have all sinned and we all deserve to experience the consequence of sin, which is eternal separation from a holy God. But, in his mercy, God forgives us, treating us not as we deserve but instead, through forgiveness, he clears the way for salvation, which is eternal union with God. And, third, mercy is something we are to practice. To be merciful is to respond to the struggles or sufferings of another person. It is being compassionate in our response, generous with our help, and forgiving when they do wrong. In fact, it sounds very much like a description of Jesus. The merciful practice what Jesus practiced.

Why, then, do so many of us struggle with being merciful? Why is it so hard to live as Jesus lived with compassion, generosity, and forgiveness? Why do so many Christians feel justified in being aloof to the needs of others, withholding help, and nursing grudges when wronged? Could it be that while we have gratefully accepted the mercy of God toward ourselves we refuse to give it to others?

This fifth beatitude relates directly to the first, which states: “God blesses those who realize their need for him.” The more you realize your need for God, recognizing how much you require God’s grace and forgiveness, the more merciful you will be with others who, like you, need God’s mercy just as much as you do. However, if you have somehow convinced yourself that you no longer need God to be merciful toward you, that it was nice when he saved you but now, as you live your life, you no longer need his mercy, then it is quite easy to convince yourself that you don’t need to show mercy to others.

Jesus illustrated this reality in his parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter ten. His parable was occasioned by an expert in religious law who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded by asking him what the law told him to do. The man answered: “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “That’s right,” Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.”

Well, the man wanted a more precise answer from Jesus. To love God was all well and good, but to love one’s neighbor could become a real nuisance. To be compassionate toward difficult people, to help those who really should be doing more to help themselves, and to forgive those who had wronged you is not easy. Perhaps, Jesus, you could allow me to narrow the category of people that I must love, that I am called to be merciful toward. So, he asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped and beat him, and left him half dead on the road. A priest happened to be on the road, but when he saw the man he passed by on the other side. A Levite, that is, one who works in the Temple, did the same. But, when a Samaritan saw the man, he had compassion on him. He went to him, bound up his wounds pouring oil and wine on them, put him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn where he cared for him.

Having told the story, Jesus asked the lawyer which of the three was a neighbor to the man who had been attacked. The lawyer answered that it was the one who showed mercy. Jesus told him to go and do likewise. Here we have a wonderful illustration of mercy and its opposite, which is neglect. First, a need presents itself. All three, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan are aware the man is in need. What, then, causes the difference in their response? The priest and the Levite were indifferent to the man’s needs, while the Samaritan felt compassion for him. The merciful are those who when confronted by a person in need, be it physical, psychological, or spiritual, respond with compassion. Then, in their compassion, as they are able given the circumstances, they respond in a way that addresses the need. And, they do so, regardless of their feelings about the person. Why did Jesus make the merciful man a Samaritan in his story? Because Samaritans had a reason to dislike, even hate, Jews because of the way they had been treated by them. But, this man, this Samaritan, did not allow any dislike he may have felt toward the injured man for his Jewishness keep him from being merciful, from showing compassion, generosity, and forgiveness.

God sees our need, he has compassion on us, and he acts on that compassion through his Son, Jesus Christ, who he sent into the world that we may be saved from our sin and receive his eternal life. In order to become people who practice mercy, we must acknowledge how much we depend on the mercy of God. Now go, and do likewise.