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Matthew 5:7 – *Blessed Are the Merciful*

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

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

“Blessed are the *merciful...*”

Imagine what it would be like if every Christian showed mercy.

Depending on your idea of mercy this will look different:

Maybe the word mercy causes you to focus on those experiencing homelessness...

Where we would all be working on getting people into sustainable housing.

Maybe the word mercy causes you to focus on those who are going hungry...

Where we would all be working on putting healthy food in the bellies of hungry children and those unable to make ends meet.

Maybe the word mercy causes you to focus on those who are in prison...

Where we would all be visiting and writing letters of encouragement and love to those behind bars convicted of crimes.

Maybe the word mercy causes you to focus on times you've been wronged...

And we would all be working on forgiveness in our relationships.

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

As we've been talking these last few weeks about the beatitudes...

We've said that these are the ways of God's kingdom...

Those who are disciples of Jesus will *embody* these counter-cultural ways of living...

We will *personify* what it means to be humble, compassionate, meek, righteous and merciful.

Because it's not so much about individual actions—

It's less about committing individual acts of mercy—

And it's more about becoming someone who is merciful...

Embodying mercy.

Describing those who are merciful, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says:

As if their own needs and their own distress were not enough, the merciful take upon themselves the distress and humiliation and sin of others. The merciful have an irresistible love for the down-trodden, the sick, the wretched, the wronged, the outcast and all who are tortured with anxiety. They go out and seek all who are enmeshed in the toils of sin and guilt. No distress is too great, no sin too appalling for their pity. If any person falls into disgrace, the merciful will sacrifice their own honor to shield them, and take their shame upon themselves. The merciful will be found consorting with tax collectors and sinners, careless of the shame they incur because of it. In order that they may be merciful they cast away the most priceless treasure of human life, their personal dignity and honor. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

This is what we're called to!

As Jesus' disciples—

As residents and citizens of God's Kingdom—

Mercy is to be so deeply rooted in us that we cannot help *but* to love:

“...the down-trodden, sick, wretched, wronged and outcast.”

Anything less would be untrue to our character as God's people.

This is our calling, but why isn't this the case?

Why is it so *hard* for us to practice works of mercy?

Why is it easier to walk by someone in need? ...

Pretending we don't see them;

Being sure not to make eye contact;

Coming up with excuses why we cannot be inconvenienced.

And when we do stop to show mercy—

Giving someone a tooney...

Putting together a back pack for the back-to-school drive...

Or choosing to let it go when someone cuts us off—
 It feels good, but why do we sense that it's not enough...
 That we're called to more?

There's a story of a relationship that illustrates an important piece of mercy...

A piece that we often miss. (from *Claiming the Beatitudes*, Anne Howard)

April was a smart and put-together young woman...

She was in her final year of seminary in Columbus, Ohio serving as a lay youth pastor.

One day while she was at the church...

A woman called in need of some milk and bread.

April was happy to provide food to the hungry...

Showing acts of mercy.

She would typically meet with the person to give them what they needed—

And if there was anything beyond this—

She would refer them to an agency that could help...

This is where the act of mercy ended.

As she was talking with this woman though...

April learned that Laura lived just a block away from her.

A woman barely getting by with her 3 kids...

Laura is someone that *we* love to judge:

She doesn't have all of her teeth;

She doesn't dress well;

And she doesn't have a lot of money.

April saw this woman standing in front of her—

A person, created in the image of God, that is quickly written off...

Easy to dismiss—

And April made the choice to enter Laura's story.

She decided not to pass Laura off to an agency...

But to be a neighbor...

To get to know Laura and her kids...

To learn her story and to see her heart...

To embody mercy.

And it isn't always easy.

Doing something *for* someone is easy—

Giving someone a gallon of milk and a loaf of bread is easy—

But *being with* them, learning their life and story, takes work.

For April it meant allowing Laura to frustrate her:

“Why is she living life by the seat of her pants?”

“Why doesn't she plan ahead...like me?”

“Why does she keep making these same foolish choices...”

“Choices that keep her locked in this cycle of poverty.”

Although it was hard to *be with* as opposed to doing something *for* Laura...

April was *receiving* as well as giving.

Being in relationship with Laura shined light on April's heart and April's own story.

April was able to acknowledge the mercy and grace she grew up in:

Loving parents;

Loving teachers;

Accepted by her peers;

Given the benefit of the doubt;

Allowed to make mistakes;

Opportunity after opportunity...

Over and over again experiences of mercy and grace...

All of the things that Laura's story lacked. [SLOW]

It was eye-opening for April—

Unsettling—

To see her own advantages from this perspective.

Being in relationship with Laura also exposed *April's* need for mercy.

It was all too evident how ready to judge and condemn April was.

How ready and willing she was to turn from people not like her...

To separate herself from people who don't share her values and perspectives.

Not only did being with Laura teach April to see *Laura's* humanity—

Her inherent value as God's creation—

It taught April to see her *own* humanity—

Her own value but also her own need for mercy.

See, when our mercy stops at a hand out...

We miss an important piece of mercy...

It's reciprocal nature.

We miss out on relationship.

We miss out on the gift of the other.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” Jesus says.

It is Jesus himself who demonstrates the depths of mercy to which he calls us.

This is the gospel message:

There was nothing attractive about us—

Not because we were of no value to God...

We were and are of immense value to God—

But we turned our ugly side toward him.

Filled with pride we told God we didn't need him...

That we could do better on our own;

We no longer valued him as we should.

We were nasty toward God...

His enemies.

Even though we turned our ugly side to God...

He had compassion...

He had mercy.

Jesus Christ—

God himself—

Came and lived as one of us.

And when we were called to account for the way we lived before God—

When we were called to accept the consequences of our attitude toward God—

It is Jesus, God the Son, who stepped in...

Taking the punishment meant for us.

The greatest act of mercy ever put on display...

Is Jesus Christ dying on the cross for us.

But it doesn't end there...

Because the purpose of this act of mercy isn't just atonement—

It's not just to pay for sins—

No, it's relationship.

Jesus went to the cross for us so he could *be* with us...

So we could *be* with God forever and for always.

The cross isn't an isolated act of mercy...

It is the continued embodiment of mercy lived by God himself.

God didn't just save us and say, "Here you go. See you later. Don't bother me again."

No, God said, "Let's hang out."

"I want to get to know you."

"I want you to get to know me."

"I want to keep pouring myself out for you."

"Even though you will continue to make mistakes..."

"I want to love you."

This is the distance we are called to go in extending mercy...

Opening ourselves to the gift of the other...

Not merely doing something *for* them...

But *being with* them...

Seeing ourselves in kinship with them; (*Tattoos on the Heart*, 71)

Fellow human beings in need of mercy and relationship.

But you say:

“It’s too hard.”

“I already have too much going on.”

“I cannot carry anyone else’s *stuff*.”

“I’m content with giving a handout.”

I hear you, because I say the same thing...

I put up the same resistance...

I put up the same walls.

But we are built for relationship...

And we will not experience the full shalom and joy of God’s kingdom without relationship...

Not just with those we like and who look and think like us...

But with those people God places in our lives who are different and challenge us.

So, how do we develop capacity for embodying *this* kind of mercy?

We move toward.

First, we move toward Christ.

We may not have the capacity to hold the world’s suffering...

So, we move toward the One who does.

We spend time with the one extending mercy to us.

We allow ourselves to bask in the grace of God...

We draw away to spend time with Christ:

Where he speaks his delight over us;

Where he spreads balm over our wounds;

Where he pours *his* oil of mercy over us...

Flowing down our head and over our garments.

Maybe this means making a list of God's promises...

And sitting with them...

Allowing your heart and mind to marinate his promises.

Our first move is toward Christ.

In this move of turning toward Christ...

We're also moving toward ourselves...

We're taking care of ourselves...

And honoring our humanity.

We're saying:

"I'm not God, but you are."

"I have limits, but you don't."

If we feel a strong resistance to being with people...

It's probably a good indicator that *we* need to be ministered to.

And so, we allow the carpenter's son to work in us.

If we feel tapped out and exhausted—

Unable to give any more—

Moving toward Christ, we're moving toward ourselves.

We're listening to our needs...

Knowing that we cannot give what we do not have.

And finally, we move toward our neighbor.

Understanding the depths of God's mercy—

Knowing how much God did and continues to do for us—

We cannot help but to turn toward our neighbor.

And so, we move toward them:

Instead of just dropping a tooney in someone's cup...

We take the bold step of asking them how they're doing today...

And when they give a short response, "Good..."

You ask how their week has been.

Not prying if they don't want to talk...

But showing that you're willing to go a step further.

Instead of giving a cordial wave to your neighbours...

We take the next step of introducing ourselves...

Showing them that we're interested in their humanity and story.

It might mean leaning into the 10-second rule...

Where in your interactions with people—

If you sense a nudge from the Spirit to take a next step—

You take that step within 10 seconds...

Because after 10 seconds you're less likely to do it.

It doesn't have to start with something big...

It's little steps toward living a life of mercy.

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

May we know deep in our bones the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ...

And may that move us to extend to others mercy of the same kind.

All for the glory of God.

Amen.