

Matthew 5.7
St Stephens

March 7, 2009
Sat PM, Sun 11

Blessed are the Merciful

We are in a message series in Lent on virtues and vices, on the 7 deadly sins and beatitudes. It is a series on how God forms Christian character in a modern world, in modern lives. Christian character, **Christlikeness**, is what we are praying for and looking for in this series.

- On Ash Wednesday, we talked about **hunger and thirst for righteousness** and contrasted it to **sloth**.
- Last week we talked about **meekness** and contrasted it to **anger**.
- This week we are talking about **mercy**, and Wednesday night we will be contrasting it to **greed**.

There is probably no more well known summary of Christlikeness in the teaching of Jesus than the **beatitudes**. These short sentences are the best known words of Jesus next to the Lord's prayer. They are a shorthand summary of the **character** of Jesus and of his **strategy for life and living**.

Have you ever thought about **what you might put on the wall** of a business where you work or a home where you live? A motto, or a quote that sums up the purpose of your life, or what you want to be all about... What would you put up? I have a friend who **posted the beatitudes** on the wall of the business he led. It was a statement that infected everything that happened in that place – how staff treated each other, how policy was developed and carried out, how customers were engaged... and it was the way he built that business. This is the wording of some of the Beatitudes in the paraphrase of the **Message; just imagine this on the wall of your office:**

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope...

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less...

You're blessed when you care...

You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right...

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight...

You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution...

Not the normal strategy for success. But a breath of fresh air! A lot of people would say that would be **suicide for a business**. But what my friend told me was that God did actually bless his business when he led it like this.

The Beatitudes are **something even far more** than a summary of how we should be, or how we should live.

Among all of the words Jesus spoke, I think they are something **unique**. They come at the **beginning** of the Sermon on the Mount, this three-chapter sermon about the Kingdom of God. The beatitudes are at the **front** for a reason, and I think they are the **gatekeepers** to the Kingdom. I think they **let people in and keep people out**.

I want to show you a **film clip** to show you what I mean. This is from one of the early Harry Potter films, where Harry and Ron and Hermionie find themselves underground seeking the Chamber of Secrets. As they come along through a maze, they come to **a life size chess board**, and then watch what happens...

Video...

I love the way those pawns come alive, draw their swords and raise

their shields... and when the kids back off, these sentries once again shield their swords and bow.

Like many of the words of Jesus, these special words seem to be able to **adapt to people** as they come up to the gates, up to the doors. The beatitudes **treat people differently**, I think, depending on who they are.

They are **sentries** to the Kingdom of God, and as you approach, they **greet** you, they **announce** the Kingdom to you – but then they do more - they **interview** you, **ask** you questions and very quickly have the ability to get to the very center of your heart. And depending on who you are, they **welcome you in or turn you away**.

Listen again to the phrasing of the Message on the first two beatitudes...

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

Matthew 5.3

You can feel these words, this gatekeeper, **search you, probe your heart**. He looks for who you are and why you have come.

- If you are one of those people who is at the **end of their rope**, a sufferer, a sinner - they welcome you in, 'blessed!' they say!
- But if you are **full of yourself**, if you think you have it all **under control**, if life is **all about you**, they draw their swords and shields. You find yourself turned away.

It might make you **mad**. You think, '*who do they think they are?*' And you go away and **think about it**, and they work on you some more... '*Maybe I don't have it so much under control. Maybe I'm not doing such a hot job of managing the universe...*'

What you are finding out is that this word is not just a gatekeeper, but he is also a **physician**, a doctor, who has the power to heal.

And **back you come**, and lo and behold, this time it is not swords and shields, but a warm welcome... and a word, '**blessed**' – the kingdom of God is yours!!!

We come to our passage for the weekend, this physician, this guardian, speaks another word... Listen:

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy...

Matthew 5.7

Again, listen to the gatekeeper...

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy...

Mercy is simply **compassion for people who suffer**, especially compassion that reaches to people, whether they deserve it or not. Mercy is planting good seed in your enemy's parched field.

Jesus was **always teaching about mercy** ...think of these beatitudes, think of his stories about prodigal sons being welcomed home, stories about people with impossible debts who were suddenly forgiven all – and, of course, he seemed to have time, **mercy time**, for people that no one else had time for – little children and sufferers and lost people that everyone had given up on. He had mercy time for them.

Jesus also taught about the **challenge of mercy**. The challenge of mercy is that **it will turn things upside down**. God takes people out of the end of the line and puts them ahead of you – and you have been on that line for a long time. How do you feel when people jump in line in front of you?

There is something important here: the **mercy of Jesus is not fair**. It can't be counted, can't be measured out with exactness. It has no boundaries. It can't be contained. It is alive, it has a mind of its own, and it pushes and surges and overflows, where it will. **Are you OK if mercy is not fair?**

Here is **how you know** if you are OK with mercy. Take one of those people who has really hurt you – you have a list of them. Take one near the top. Would it be OK with you if God was more merciful to them than he has been to you?

Not easy, is it? His mercy is **not fair**. But let's think about this for a moment... There are **two ways to deal with people**.

The **first is by giving people exactly what they deserve**. An hour's pay for an hour's work. A full day's pay for a full day's work. You get only what you earn. We call that being **fair**, being just. And if people don't measure up, they get left behind. But it will be '**fair**'.

The **second way is to give people more than they deserve**. A full day's pay for a half day's work. You receive far more than you could ever earn. We call this 'grace', we call it **mercy**.

Which do you want to be the **central dynamic** of your life? Justice or Mercy? You have a lot to say about this. **You have a choice** to make. You **stand** at the gate to the kingdom, in front of **this beatitude** and you **must answer**. To enter, you must answer.

The doctor is probing your heart. He wants to know.

Most of us quickly say we want mercy. Well, there are a few of us who want to go the justice route. But that route is a tough and

hard road, and exacts a terrible price along the way. It will, in the end, leave a lot of people behind, and it will crush you and break you. And soon enough, you will be back here where we are learning from Jesus that **life goes better by mercy.**

Remember the words of the brother of Jesus, James, "Mercy triumphs over judgment". Mercy can get things done that judgment and criticism and writing people off will never get done. It is stronger. It is more powerful. In the end, it will be the writing on the walls of the universe that lasts into eternity.

Let me leave you with **two quick thoughts** about mercy...

First: To say 'yes' to mercy means I will **get something very clear: God has been better to me than I deserve.** Isn't that true? His mercy goes way back in our lives, way, way back. We have nothing to mutter about. Nothing at all. Much to be thankful for. His mercy is fresh every morning. It takes us where we otherwise would never be able to go.

Second: To say yes to mercy **also means** that I **will be better to people than they deserve.** Far better. No matter what they deserve. When people deserve little, I will give much. I will do that at home. At church. At work. Around town...

And you know what he says back to us? *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive even more mercy!!! Much more mercy... pressed down and overflowing mercy...*

Prayer: today we extend mercy... we forgive... we will not allow our hurts to turn into hates. In your name, we forgive this day... Give us your mercy for people... make us a people of mercy...