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The Beatitudes #3  
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### Sermon Summary #3

#### When Beatitudes Seem to Collide: Or, Can One be both Righteous and Merciful? Matthew 5:1-12

We all now live in a world that is increasingly uncomfortable with tight moral categories. Right and wrong have given way to personal preference. People no longer think in terms of what is good and evil. Rather, they make choices based on what feels good, what affirms one's sense of personal identity. It doesn't matter, for example, if you were born biologically male or female. It only matters how you perceive yourself and what you desire for yourself and what affirms your sense of personal authenticity. It doesn't matter if the child in your womb is human and can feel pain. It only matters that you do whatever best promotes personal flourishing and freedom and convenience.

I could go on and on talking about what I know most of you already recognize to be true. The bottom line is that with the rejection of the transcendent God of Scripture we see the rejection of any concept of ultimate good and evil, truth and falsehood, righteousness and sin. As one author put it, we have lost our "moral courage" (J. K. Dodson, 75). This has resulted in what C. S. Lewis described as "men without chests," a phrase he used to describe people who lack moral conviction and moral fiber.

It raises the pressing question for us all: Are there any good reasons to be righteous? Some will say, yes, but only if being righteous secures for us personal wealth, comfort, and security. In Psalm 11, David, king of Israel, gave expression to a different point of view:

"The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face" (Psalm 11:4-7).

That last phrase in the psalm, "the upright shall behold his face," sounds remarkably similar to the beatitude we'll look at next week: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." But it also compares well with the first of two beatitudes we'll look at today: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Righteousness is not a popular topic today. Many reject it as antiquated and overly religious. But Jesus thought otherwise.

#### *Blessed are those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness (5:6)*

If we are to grasp our Lord's meaning we must envision the worst imaginable condition of physical hunger and thirst, the sort we often see in third world countries. Here Jesus says, "Blessed are those whose appetite and thirst for *righteousness* is as intense as that of starving children for food and water!" Are we as hungry for righteousness as they are for food? Are we willing to go to any lengths necessary to obtain it? Is there anything you are *not* willing to give up to get it? Do you feel in your heart the same depth of spiritual anguish, for lack of righteousness, that a starving child feels in his stomach, for lack of food and in his mouth for lack of water?

The pursuit of righteousness is not altogether a popular thing, even among Christians. Many today feverishly seek after happiness at any cost. Others run from preacher to preacher, from church to church, from conference to conference longing for the next spiritual high. But how many run after righteousness?

Jesus has in mind zeal for purity in conduct, in thought, in language, in action, in our feelings. He is talking about the person who yearns for the unholy to become holy, for the whole of life to be a reflection of the righteousness of God himself. Be it noted, however, that not everyone thinks Jesus is referring to personal holiness. Donald Hagner contends that the Greek word *dikaio sunē*, translated "righteousness," here means *justice*. "The poor, the grieving, and the downtrodden (i.e., those who have experienced injustice) are by definition those who long for God to

act” (93). Perhaps both ideas are involved, as Spurgeon’s words would seem to indicate:

“With hunger and thirst he cries, ‘Lord, end the reign of sin! Lord, cast down idols! Lord, chase error from the earth! Lord, turn men from lust, and avarice, and cruelty, and drunkenness.’ He would live for righteousness, and die for righteousness: the zeal of it consumes him” (I:57).

As Stott put it, “it is not enough to mourn over past sin; we must also hunger for future righteousness” (46). Watson has suggested that to hunger and thirst for righteousness is to hunger for Christ alone:

“Hunger is satisfied with nothing but food. Bring a hungry man flowers, music; tell him pleasant stories; nothing will content him but food. . . . So a man that hungers and thirsts after righteousness says, ‘Give me Christ, or I die. Lord, what wilt thou give me seeing I go Christless? What though I have wealth, honor and esteem in the world? All is nothing without Christ. Show me the Lord and it will suffice me. Let me have Christ to clothe me, Christ to feed me, Christ to intercede for me. While the soul is Christless it is restless. Nothing but the water-springs of Christ’s blood can quench its thirst” (128).

How might we know if we are hungering and thirsting for righteousness?

- Are you satisfied with yourself? The person who is pleased and content with his own righteousness will see little need for God’s. No matter how mature we may become, we should always be prepared to declare: I’m hungry for more.
- Do you have an insatiable appetite for God’s Word?
  - “My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times” (Ps. 119:20).
  - “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97)
  - “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:103).
  - “I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments” (Ps. 119:131).
  - “I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil” (Ps. 119:162).
- Is your hunger and thirst unconditional? The rich young ruler wanted Christ *and* his possessions. Do we say, “I want Christ *and* my pride . . . *and* my immorality . . . *and* my cheating . . . *and, and, and?*”
- The person who is truly hungry and thirsty for righteousness won’t eat between meals! He will do nothing to dull his appetite (such as eating the delicacies of the world).

Solomon once said that God “has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccles. 3:10). This means many things, but chief among them is that there is an inconsolable longing in the human heart to understand the ways of God in the world. The problem is that we are so distorted and bent inwardly that we seek to satisfy this longing in countless sinful and ultimately destructive ways. We think the key to life is found in a higher salary, a newer and more luxurious car, a bigger home, a faster computer, a slimmer, sleeker body, an artificially induced high that comes from alcohol or some drug, and who knows what else. Jeremiah, in a famous passage put it this way:

“Be appalled, O heavens, at this: be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:12-13).

I am convinced that many of you, no, that most of you here today are hungry and thirsty. There is an ache of emptiness in your spiritual belly. Your heart longs for something that it can’t quite lay hold of. Your soul yearns to be filled, but you don’t know quite with what. You are restless and easily deceived into thinking that someone out there in the world will provide you with the answer.

What you don't realize is that it is probably the Holy Spirit awakening you to the emptiness of your heart and calling you to come and eat at a feast that Jesus Christ has provided and drink from a well that will never run dry. Why not come to him and eat and drink your fill? Everything else will ultimately turn sour in your soul and leave you more empty and desperate than when you started. C. S. Lewis said many famous things, but none that rings truer than this:

“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy,” said Lewis, “the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

In this beatitude Jesus is talking about this universal and inconsolable longing of the human heart. Everyone hungers and thirsts. But after what? Where do you turn to fill the need and the emptiness? Jesus is saying to us all, find it in a life lived in the power of the Spirit, under the authority of God's Word, in community with God's people, zealous for God's principles, and in pursuit by grace of the righteousness that is pleasing to him and satisfying to you and me.

#### *What is “Righteousness”?*

So what is this “righteousness” for which we should hunger and thirst? Down in v. 10 Jesus says that those who are persecuted for the sake of “righteousness” are blessed. Clearly he is referring to living a bold, courageous, unwavering existence for the sake of Jesus that calls attention to the gospel and refuses to crater or compromise under pressure.

But we also get help by remembering that the first three beatitudes are, in a sense, characteristics of the Christian life in which we lack: we are spiritually impoverished, we mourn, and we are meek. So, when Jesus then turns in v. 6, he directs us from emptiness to fullness, from lack to abundance. And in the beatitudes that follow, we once again see expressions of godly fullness, if I can put it that way: being merciful to those in need, having hearts that are pure and holy, and seeking to make peace whenever we can. Those are just a handful of the expressions of “righteousness” that Jesus encourages us to thirst and hunger for.

The word “righteousness” appears again in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:20 (see also Matt. 6:33). There Jesus says,

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

Ouch! That's pretty heavy, is it not? If you thought hungering and thirsting after righteousness was a secondary issue of comparatively little importance, Jesus just shattered your view all to pieces.

But some will protest and say that the Pharisees were famous for their so-called righteousness. Obedience to God's law was their calling card. They counted up from the OT and found 248 positive commandments and 365 prohibitions and then labored hard to abide by them all. How in the world can Jesus say that our righteousness must exceed theirs? Is this not salvation by works? It certainly can't be, because Jesus said in the first beatitude that we

are spiritually bankrupt!

Clearly, then, our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees not in quantity but in quality. Jesus isn't saying that we must obey 249 positive commands, one more than the Pharisees, and that we must abide by 366 prohibitions instead of only 365. No. Our righteousness must exceed theirs in quality. Theirs was external only. Ours must also be internal, a matter of the heart. Ours must be pursued and practiced not in order to win God's favor but in response to the fact that we already have it. Our righteousness is deeper, one that flows from a heart that has been fully forgiven by the grace of God in Christ.

If you try to measure up to the righteousness of the Pharisees, you will fail. Theirs was a rigid conformity to the letter of the law, a righteousness, so-called, that was devoid of mercy and couldn't have cared less about making peace and experiencing purity of heart. Ours is to be inward and from the depths of our souls.

For example, in Matthew 5:21-26 Jesus describes those who prided themselves on the fact that they never committed murder. But that's not enough. True righteousness extends more deeply into the heart and says you must not hold anger against your brother. In Matthew 5:27-30 we read how the religious leaders thought it was enough just to avoid committing adultery, but Jesus says that we must deal with the lust in our hearts as well. In Matthew 5:43-48 Jesus rebukes those who, while loving their neighbor, hate their enemies. But the people of God must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

These are the people, says Jesus, who will be satisfied. Envision how you feel after you've slaked your thirst with ice water and filled your belly with the best and most delicious food imaginable. Now take that and apply it spiritually. Jesus is saying that to hunger and thirst after righteousness and to be filled up to the full brings the satisfaction of incomparable joy and peace and blessedness and hope and delight in God. That's what it means to be "satisfied"!

Let me say one more thing to those of you who may still think that I'm making more of this than is justified. Consider how the Sermon on the Mount concludes:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Matt. 7:21-23).

Did you see that? They use the right name: they call him "Lord". They do miracles and supernatural deeds. They drive out demons. And Jesus declares that he "never" even knew them. Why? Because their so-called "mighty works" were performed for their own glory, probably in the power of Satan. They did not do "the will" of the Father. The "righteousness" after which they hungered and thirsted was self-righteousness done for their own praise. They were religious, that's for sure. But they were not righteous in the sense that Jesus has in mind.

It's never too late, folks, to change your spiritual diet. You make changes to your physical diet all the time, either to get healthy or lose weight or get in shape to run the Memorial Marathon. Start eating and drinking righteousness!

The promise is that ***“they shall be satisfied.”*** The psalmist makes this promise to us: “For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things” (Ps. 107:9). But with what does he satisfy and fill us? David writes this in Psalm 17:15 – “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with ***your likeness.***” Or consider what Paul says in Romans 15:13. There he prays, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom. 15:13). And of course, the best thing to be filled with is God himself. Paul prays in Ephesians 3 that we might come “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

*Blessed are the Merciful (5:7)*

Jesus has been describing the *moral* man or woman, the *righteous* man or woman. Some have the idea that this will only serve to make us hard, severe, cool, cranky, and relationally distant. But the test of true biblical morality is not whether it makes you tougher, but whether it makes you *tenderer* (!). The moral person, says Jesus, is the merciful person.

This combination of righteousness and mercy is rare in people around us. There are many who insist on righteousness, but what they mean is legalistic conformity to religious rules and traditions that have no basis in Scripture. Most often, such people are stiff, judgmental, angry, arrogant, insensitive to the struggles of others, and just down right mean.

But the righteousness that Jesus is talking about is living like he lived. It is loving people like he loved them. It is longing for truth in the place of error and seeing the power of the Spirit transform ourselves and others. It is the sort of righteousness that sees the hurting and brings healing to them, that hears of those in need and happily meets it, who learns that a brother or sister is in financial needs and pulls out the checkbook to help them through a time of crisis.

If your so-called righteousness makes you hard and defiant and stingy and selfish and self-righteous, you have not hungered after what Christ here commends. Being merciful, then, is one of the primary features of a righteous life.

Why is mercy important? I’ll let David tell you why in Psalm 109.

“Appoint a wicked man against him; let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him come forth guilty; let his prayer be counted as sin! May his days be few; may another take his office! . . . May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD, and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out! Let them be before the LORD continually, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth!” (Psalm 109:6-8, 14-15).

What in the world could someone do that would call for that kind of indictment and treatment? We are told in the very next verse:

“For he did not remember to show kindness, but pursued the poor and needy and the brokenhearted, to put them to death” (Psalm 109:16).

Showing kindness to the poor, the needy, the brokenhearted, is mercy, and it is clearly of preeminent importance to God.

What else does it mean to be merciful? It means to be like God!

“But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36).

There are two words for “mercy”, one of which refers primarily to the emotion one feels, hence pity. But Jesus uses the word that focuses on the action to which the feeling of pity compels us. God did not simply feel sorry us. Because of his great “mercy” for us he acted and “caused us to be born again” (1 Peter 1:3). Thus “mercy” is kindness and generosity and loving sacrifice on behalf of the wretched and unworthy.

Mercy is best seen in the spirit you display when you unexpectedly find yourself in a position of power over

someone who has mistreated you without cause. Are you vindictive? Do you feel an overwhelming urge to exert your rights? Or do you humble yourself and help them in whatever way you can?

The reward: “for they shall receive mercy.” But *from whom* and *when*? Probably not from people. Although they *may* reciprocate, there is no guarantee that you will ever see any earthly reward, any earthly recognition, any earthly gratitude from those on whom you have showered mercy. Our reward comes from God: “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do” (Heb. 6:10).

#### *Where Does Mercy Come From?*

But some may say: “Sam, I’m just not a merciful sort of person. It’s not in my personality. So where do I find it? How does it become something that spontaneously erupts from my heart?” Mercy comes from the work of God in the human heart when he delivers us from a well-deserved eternal death. There are several texts that trace our salvation and forgiveness and new birth to the “mercy” of God, but two will suffice:

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3a).

Thus, ***mercy comes from mercy!*** In order to *be* merciful we must first acknowledge that mercy is what we have *received* from God instead of eternal damnation. Mercy is what happens to the person who acknowledges his/her spiritual bankruptcy (Matt. 5:3) and who mourns over his/her personal sin (Matt. 5:4) and who is meek (Matt. 5:5).

***Only broken people who know that they deserve nothing but eternal death but have instead been shown mercy can truly show mercy to others. You must come to the point where you know in your heart that everything you have now and will experience in the age to come is owing to the free, undeserved, unearned mercy of God.***

On several occasions in the Scriptures we come across the phrase: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (see Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7). The point isn’t that sacrifices are worthless. The point is that God does not want people who discharge their so-called religious duties in a purely formal or perfunctory way. He doesn’t want us to be enslaved to religiosity but to serve and sacrifice for one another from a heart that has been captivated by the wonder of God’s saving kindness. We see this in our Lord’s denunciation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23-24 –

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and ***mercy*** and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matt. 23:23-24).

Jesus is saying, among other things, that ***the enemy of mercy is preoccupation with religious trifles***, matters of comparative unimportance that captivate us all the while we ignore the hurts of people all around us. Isn’t that the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan? The priest and the Levite pass by the man who is desperately injured and in need of assistance all because they were preoccupied with ceremonial cleanliness and the rules of their religion and the protection of their status in the community.

Now, before we close, let me make sure that you do not understand what being merciful is or is not.

Mercy in this beatitude is not the spiritual gift of mercy (Rom. 12:8). All of us are to be merciful, while some have an extraordinary anointing of the Spirit to consistently show mercy in truly remarkable ways.

Mercy is not the same as tolerance. Some say that we must be merciful to those who have yielded to same-sex desires and have embraced an identity as gay or lesbian. To be merciful means we tolerate their choices and say nothing. No.

Mercy does not mean you can’t serve as a police officer or a prosecuting attorney in a court of law.

Mercy does not mean you must refrain from spanking a child for repeated disobedience.

Mercy does not mean you can’t serve in Congress and pass laws that impose penalties on those who violate the basic rights of others.

Mercy does not mean that the Board of Elders at Bridgeway should never put an unrepentant person under

discipline and restrict their access to the Lord's Supper.

You can hold people accountable for their actions and still be merciful. Sometimes we must uphold standards of justice that will appear to be at odds with mercy. But they need not be. And yet at other times we should respond to people better than what they deserve: that's mercy. If you wonder how you'll know when judgment is called for and when mercy is appropriate, stay close to Jesus! There are no strict guidelines in Scripture to tell us. But to the person who is poor in spirit, who mourns over his/her sin, who is meek, and who hungers for righteousness, the person in whom the Holy Spirit is working and leading, it will in most cases become evident to you.

Having said all that, you can be merciful to the gay man or woman by praying for them and being present during their time of need. A police officer or prosecuting attorney can be merciful by visiting the criminal offender in jail or tending to the needs of his/her family. The parent who disciplines their child can do so with tears, as my father did with me. A legislator can look for other ways to bless those in need who through no fault of their own are in dire conditions. And the Elders of a church can pray for and counsel those who have wandered off into sin and be quick to receive them back when they repent.

In conclusion, I asked a question in the title to this message: What happens when beatitudes appear to collide? Can we be both righteous and merciful? I hope you can see now that the answer is decidedly Yes!