

Kingdom Character Part Three

Turn with me to Matt. 5 as we continue our study of Jesus' sermon on the mount. When we began this study my plan was to go through the entire sermon by the end of August but I'm starting to think that isn't going to happen and that's ok. I felt like the Lord spoke to my heart and said, "hearing is more important than hurrying." These are our Lord Jesus' words and one of his most important teachings, so if we linger on this mountain a little longer than expected, I can't think of a better place to linger. So let's pray and ask that the Lord give us ears to hear and hearts to receive the kingdom truth contained in this sermon.

Matt. 5:1-12

I stumbled across an interesting fact about Facebook and its facial recognition technology. When our family was visiting we took a day trip to Niagara Falls, and Janice, her brother York, and I took a ride on the Maid of the Mist. Later, when I looked at some of the pictures that I took of the falls, one in particular captured my interest. Along with the American Falls, there were about six strangers caught in the picture. Four of them were turned away so all you saw were the blue ponchos over the backs of their heads, but two of them were facing me. One was a woman facing right at me with only a small portion of her face obscured. The other was a woman laughing and looking down a little with the poncho hood over her head. You can see that she's smiling, but between the poncho hood and her sunglasses you see very little of her face.

What I accidentally stumbled over is that when I pass the mouse over the picture FB offers me the opportunity to "tag" the woman directly facing me. When I pass it over the other woman it doesn't offer me any chance to tag her. Though I can recognize her as a person, FB's facial recognition doesn't recognize it as a human face.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes the ethics and values of the kingdom of God. They are, in many ways, upside down from the ethics and values of the world because sin has so permeated the fabric of the world that we are upside down in relation to the kingdom of God. What's precious to the world is often worthless to the kingdom of God, and what's considered precious in the Kingdom of God carries no value to the world. As Christians, our ethics and values are to be guided and directed by the kingdom of God, not by the world.

Nowhere is that more important than when it comes to our character. The first 12 verses of Jesus' sermon - what we call the beatitudes - are all about character in the kingdom. The beatitudes are like the kingdom of God's version of facial recognition: is there enough kingdom character in us to recognize us - to tag us - as disciples of Christ? Verse 7 is especially important in tagging us as disciples because it describes a quality that, if missing in our lives, absolutely reveals that we are not disciples of Christ. That we are not kingdom-bound. It's the quality of mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (vs. 7) Jesus seems to imply that if we don't *have* mercy, we won't *get* mercy, so it's worth our lingering at this verse for a while to make sure we hear and internalize this truth.

I. What is mercy?

Miriam Webster offers this definition of mercy: *kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly; kindness or help given to people who are in a very bad or desperate situation.* John Stott describes mercy as "compassion for people in need." The common theme is that mercy is for those in desperate need. Mercy flows to pain, distress, and need.

Mercy is motivated by compassion and flows *from* compassion - feeling the pain, empathizing with the sufferer, being moved by the sorrows of another. Mercy has its own facial recognition software that helps us see people in their pain, to recognize their need, and have an inner compulsion to respond. We see their fears, pain, and sorrow and feel compassion. Without mercy, we can see the same people and the same needs, but it doesn't register on our hearts.

Pride's Substitution for Mercy: Condescension

Mercy flows from compassion. Condescension (as we use the word today) is a worldly substitute for mercy, but condescension flows from pride. Condescension sees the need...and sees it as an opportunity to exploit in order to build up our own sense of superiority. We are the heroes who swoop in and save the day. Jesus is going to talk about this in the next chapter, but when pride helps out, it's with strings attached: condescension thinks to itself *helping you can show what a great person I am. Giving to your need shows off how much more I have. Your need becomes a backdrop to display how superior I am.* It's pride and it stinks. That's not mercy.

Mercy is never interested in making us look good, what's important to mercy is helping the person in need. Rather than stripping a needy person of their dignity and sense of worth, mercy longs to restore their sense of dignity and worth. Mercy recognizes the person's need and has compassion.

This distinction is really important because it underlines the importance of discernment to mercy. Condescension helps out in order to feel good about itself. A lot of charity and even mission work can be done out of a subtle sense of condescension - and do more harm than good. We give to the poor in such a way that strips them of dignity or reinforces their inner sense that they can't help themselves, and we perpetuate a mindset of poverty in them. But what do we care? We feel good about ourselves caused we gave them something. Great harm is done out of misguided mercy which in the end really isn't merciful. Mission work can be done out of a spirit of the American coming to save the world. I went on a missions trip to the Ukraine and there were a lot of young people on our team, and at points they struggled with judging the culture and people of Kiev from a standpoint of American superiority. And then we see ourselves as better, and our mercy becomes condescension. It is so easy to slip into.

Mercy, whether it's helping the poor, or sharing the gospel, sees the need and wants to help it in the best possible way. Giving money to someone who really needs a job, or to learn how to put together a budget, isn't really helping them. In fact it may be hurting them. Mercy seeks to discern what is the real need and is there a way I can help their need? Mercy flows from compassion. And mercy flows from God.

II. Jesus is merciful

When you think of God, do you think of mercy? The Bible says we should. Lamentations 3:22-23 says *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

*For you, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy to all them that call on you.
Psalms 86:5*

Jesus' entire ministry was characterized by mercy. In fact, there's an interesting interplay between justice and mercy that happens in the gospels. John the Baptist arrives on the scene and he's pretty much an Old Testament prophet and he predicts the coming of Jesus and he puts the fear of God in their hearts: *who warned you to flee the coming wrath? The ax is already at the root of the trees, and any tree that doesn't bear good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire. The One coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat in the barn but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire...*

It's all absolutely true, and was and will be fulfilled. But I also think John was wired to expect judgment to fall immediately. To him Jesus was coming to knock heads together, and the sooner, the better! But after a while John saw that it wasn't happening, and so from prison John sends a couple disciples to ask Jesus, "are you the one to come or should we look for another?" If you're the guy, when are you going to get the fire started, Jesus?"

Jesus has them watch him operate for a while and then says, "go back and tell John what you've seen: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news preached to them." Jesus has them watch his ministry of mercy and says, this is the biblical proof that I am the One who was to come. The fire will come, John, but right now my mission is a mission of mercy, not judgment.

In the gospels over and over again it says that when Jesus saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion on them and healed their sick. The Greek word for "moved with compassion" literally means to have the inner organs move. Compassion is when the heart feels like it's shifting, moving, out of empathy for the other person's hurt and need. Jesus felt that. His heart was moved, like all his organs shifted within him, when he saw human pain and need. When Jesus saw the crowds and their need and pain and sorrow, he felt their pain as if it was his own. That's how he feels towards us. When you are going through a dark, painful time, or have needs squeezing your heart, know that Jesus feels compassion for you. He's not watching from some detached perch, he's with you in the pain and need and sorrow.

Mercy is compassion for people in need. God knew our greatest need was for the forgiveness of our sins. Mercy is at the heart of the gospel the same way that forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel. Jesus came to save us because God was moved with compassion to have mercy on us. No mercy, no gospel. The centrality of mercy to the gospel is essential to understanding the problem that Matt. 5:7 raises. Look at verse 7 again:

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (vs. 7)

III. To receive mercy, we must be merciful

But that presents a problem: If our salvation is entirely based on receiving the mercy of God (and it is), and the only way we can receive God's mercy is if we are merciful, is showing mercy the entrance fee to heaven? Are we earning mercy by being merciful?

The short answer is, no. We don't earn God's mercy by being merciful. That's not what Jesus is saying. God's mercy towards us cannot be earned and it's never a quid pro quo: if we show mercy to others than God will us mercy. God's mercy has been extended purely on the basis of His love and grace, not as a response to anything we have or ever will do. *But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Rom. 5:8*

So what does Jesus mean when he says, *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy?* What he is saying is that when we truly come to the place where we realize our desperate need for God's grace and mercy, we will have mercy for others. If we live by mercy, we will live with mercy. Every time. No exceptions. No one can truly receive God's mercy and have their heart void of mercy for other's need. Jesus' parable about the wicked servant demonstrates this clearly.

²³ *“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.^[a]²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. (what would take him 160,000 years to repay, spending nothing on himself - clearly impossible) ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant^[c] fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (a 100 days wages - a lot, but not outrageous or impossible to repay) and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. Matt. 18:21-35*

I want to pause there and ask you: is there anyone among us that would want the king's original mercy towards this wicked servant to stand? In the face of his utter lack of mercy towards a servant who owed him so much less? It would no longer be mercy, it would be wrong and unjust. It would be a mockery of mercy. If this wicked servant had truly recognized the mercy that had been shown to him there's no way his heart could be deaf to the pleas of the servant asking him for mercy, the very same cries that he had pleaded the king with. That is exactly why the king goes on to say to this wicked servant in verse 32

‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:32-35 ESV)

The hard truth Jesus is teaching is if your heart has no mercy for others, you never got saved. Doesn't matter how much you cried at the altar. Doesn't matter how much you read the Bible. Doesn't matter how much you pray or go to church or do good works. When a heart has received mercy it will give mercy. If there's no mercy to give, that heart hasn't received the mercy of God.

A fruit of true repentance leading to salvation is a heart touched by mercy. Kingdom facial recognition must see mercy or it does not recognize someone as a subject of the kingdom. The reason for this is that when our hearts have been touched by the kingdom of God, we recognize the needs of others, the hurts of others, the sorrows of others, and we see in their needs, their hurts, their sorrows, our own needs, hurts, and sorrows, how God met us with mercy, and we want to reach out with God's mercy to them.

Sermon on the Mount
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Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (vs. 7)

God has been merciful to us. Let's look for ways that we can show God's mercy to others, and let's pray God gives us hearts that see the needs and are moved with compassion. Let's pray.