

Blessed are the Merciful

Matthew 5:7; 18:21-35

About a month ago, our cynical and jaded nation was stunned by mercy. The occasion was the sentencing for Amber Guyger, a Dallas police officer who shot and killed an innocent man, Botham Jean, in his own home. Botham Jean was a devout Christian black man and his death at the age of 27, by a police officer, was a devastating grief to his family. Amber Guyger was found guilty, and the family was invited to speak at the sentencing. But no one could have imagined what happened next. ABC News reported it this way, under the headline, "An Extraordinary Act of Mercy":

"Former Dallas police officer Amber Guyger was sentenced on Wednesday to serve 10 years in prison for the fatal 2018 killing of an innocent man she shot when she mistakenly entered his apartment believing it was her own. But in a remarkable act of kindness, Jean's 18-year-old brother, Brandt Jean, took the witness stand and spoke to Guyger, saying, "If you are truly sorry in your heart, I forgive you. And I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you."

I watched video of the event and was moved to tears as Brandt asked the judge if he could give a hug to the woman who killed his brother. She clung to him, weeping, overwhelmed by the mercy he had shown to her. The judge was crying. The court reporters were stunned, struggling on camera to explain what they had witnessed. They had never seen anything like it in their life.

What if a whole church could be like that? We live in a shame-based, outrage culture. The sins and failures of others are click-bait for a ravenous audience and leverage for social agendas. Blessed are the aggrieved who shame and expose those who sin against them. I'm not suggesting or recommending that there is no need or place for justice. There certainly is. But in our hyped-up, victimized, and justice-clamoring social climate, the church has a magnificent opportunity to stun this world with something from another world – mercy. Blessed are the merciful.

This evening we come to the 5th beatitude, the first of the second table of the Beatitudes. One of my commentators pointed something out to me that I don't remember seeing before, as he divided the 8 beatitudes into two tables:

- 1-4 are the Beatitudes of Faith – focused on our relationship to God.
- 5-8 are the Beatitudes of Love – focused on our relationships with fellow men.

This isn't surprising. The 10 commandments are divided in the same way. Biblical faith and obedience always begin with God and always move to our relationships to others.

I. The Meaning of Mercy

We need to begin by defining our terms because "mercy" is a vague concept in our culture. It has the generic sense of being nice to someone in need. But biblical mercy is much more. Mercy is a heart of compassion that leads to practical, and often sacrificial, acts of kindness in response to the needs, flaws, and failures of other sinful people.

A. Biblical Mercy Has to do With God

Remember, Jesus is teaching us the values and characteristics of the kingdom of God. These are the things that God himself values, and the things that will mark those who belong to him. In the pages of the Bible God strains to express that he is full of mercy and delights in mercy.

Like the Dallas courtroom, God's mercy is usually expressed in the context of judgement. The first place we find the word in Scripture is in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. God is going to destroy them, pour out his just sentence upon them. But he has mercy on Lot. When the angels warned Lot to take his family and flee Sodom, we read:

Gen. 19:16 *When he [Lot] hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them.*

God didn't owe Lot deliverance. But he showed mercy because He delights in mercy. This desire to show mercy is central to the character of God. In Exodus 33, when Moses asked to see God's glory, God responded:

Ex. 33:19 *And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and compassion on whom I will have compassion."*

The prophet Micah marvels at this astounding characteristic of the living God of Israel.

Micah 7:18 *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but **delight** to show mercy.*

As Micah surveyed the pagan gods of his day, there was no god who delighted to show mercy. The gods of men are cruel; they demand obedience and sacrifice. They often delight in justice – but none of the pagan gods of Canaan delighted in mercy. God's delight to show mercy is a key part of his unique glory as the one true God – and a constant encouragement to his people. The psalmists often reference it.

Psalms 23:6 *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,*

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Psalm 25:6 *Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.*

Psalm 51:1 *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*

Mercy is about God – it is his unique glory to show compassion and kindness to sinners!

B. Biblical Mercy Has to do With Godliness

It's interesting that as Jesus begins his teaching on the beatitudes of love, he begins with mercy. In other words, **kingdom morality begins with mercy.**

Frederick Dale Bruner points out, "there is a piety that hardens." There is a piety that makes men proud and stern, eager to point out wrongs and punish the wrongdoer. There is a piety that delights in justice, that prizes exposing sin and ostracizing the sinners.

Jewish piety was like that, particularly that of the scribes and Pharisees. They were the moral watchdogs, quick to point out offences and ready to pronounce sentences. That may be why the gospel of Matthew, written specifically for a Jewish audience, is the only gospel writer to twice quote Jesus quoting Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."

Matt. 9:10–13 *And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Kingdom morality begins with mercy. Mercy is the 5th beatitude because mercy is the obvious and necessary response for those who have experienced the first four. Those who confess their sin, who mourn the transgression, who submit to God's rule and hunger for righteousness – these are people who already have received mercy! Theirs is the kingdom of heaven! They shall be comforted, they shall inherit the earth, they shall be satisfied. Those who are full of God's mercy will be merciful. Those who have been forgiven much will love much!

Jesus clearly taught that mercy is given to us in order to be passed along, not stored up. Kingdom citizens are to be channels of mercy, not cul-de-sacs.

One of the parables of Jesus that powerfully makes this point is the parable of the unmerciful servant, found in Matthew 18. The context for this parable of mercy is the context of sin.

Matt. 18:21 *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked him "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

Jesus answered him with this parable about a king who was settling accounts and "a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him." Jesus' story would have raised eyebrows. The number 10,000 was the highest number in the Greek language of the day, and so it came to symbolize an inconceivable, innumerable amount (a "gazillion"). The point is that there was no way this man would ever be able to repay this debt. If he plundered the royal treasury of Caesar, there would not be enough money to pay his debt. And in those days, debt had terrible consequences. He and his wife and all his family would be sold into slavery to repay this debt. What can this man do? There is nothing to do but beg for mercy!

Matt. 18:26 *The servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." (Of course, that isn't true. He CAN'T pay it back.)*

And Jesus proclaims the shocking good news:

Matt. 18:27 *The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

Oh, the kindness and marvelous glory of a God who delights to show mercy! This is the story of the gospel, isn't it? This is what has happened for all true Christians! This is your story! You owed God an inestimable debt because you have committed innumerable sins against infinite love. You and I fully deserve divine wrath and eternal death. But the King had mercy on us!

"Now my debt is paid, it is paid in full, by the precious blood that my Jesus spilt.

Now the curse of sin has no hold on me, whom the Son sets free, oh is free indeed!"

But the parable doesn't end with the king's declaration! It moves on to the servant's obligation. The gospel of God's merciful grace calls us to a new path of merciful living! The experience of mercy must lead to the expression of mercy.

No one should be more marked by mercy than the Lord's children. We all have a story of mercy to tell.

Eph. 2:1-5 (ESV) *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, **being rich in mercy**, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved... "*

That's our story of mercy. And out of that indescribable mercy, we HAVE the power to show mercy to others. No matter how great the sins of others against us, as we stand under the thundering waterfall of the infinite mercy of God continually poured out upon us, we are free and able to show mercy to others.

One of the things that was so beautiful about Brandt Jean's forgiveness of the woman who killed his beloved brother was that it was a mercy so evidently rooted in Brandt's faith and the faith of his dead brother.

Brandt Jean told Guyger, "I personally want the best for you...I want the best for you because I know that's exactly what Botham would want for you. Give your life to Christ. I think giving your life to Christ is the best thing Botham would want for you."

Blessed are the merciful. They shall receive mercy.

II. The Promise of Mercy

"They shall receive mercy."

What mercy is Jesus speaking of? Primarily, it is the mercy of Ephesians 2! The mercy of God's forgiving love and grace in Jesus Christ! The mercy of God seeing us in our lost condition bound to the Devil and hell, and making us alive together with Christ! All freely. All by grace.

We live in the ocean of God's mercy every day. He does not deal with us as our sins deserve. Why not? Because though "our sins, they are many, his mercy is more." His mercies are new every morning. His mercy is never exhausted, it will never wear out. These are the great and precious promises of the gospel.

But this beatitude comes with an implied warning as well. Those who do not show mercy shall not receive mercy. What's implied in the beatitude is made explicitly clear in the parable of the unmerciful servant. The man who was forgiven a great debt refused to cancel the miniscule debt another man owed to him. When the merciful king heard it:

Matt. 18:34-35 *And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

James 2:13 *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.*

The Lord's Prayer suggests the same thing: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

The Bible offers no assurance of divine forgiveness or mercy to those who refuse to forgive or show mercy. In fact, we can say that one of the surest ways to prevent mercy, grace, and love from flowing into your life is to refuse to show mercy to those who've offended or sinned against you.

Now, if you are a Christian, you are going to have experiences in your life where you are deeply offended, deeply hurt, and deeply sinned against. This is going to happen to every single child of God – and not just once. I promise you, you will have opportunities to show mercy. You are maybe in that place right now. Someone has hurt you deeply, and you know you need to forgive but you don't know how. The pain is too raw. Let the invitation of Christ allow you to at least desire what he desires.

Jesus showed mercy to those who nailed him to the cross – you and me. He is able to give us the supernatural power to forgive those who've done much less to us.

The only power that can set us free to love with extraordinary mercy is the power that Jesus gives by the Holy Spirit. This is a supernatural work, a supernatural ability. It absolutely requires abiding in Jesus and in his love.

Jesus is inviting us to experience the love and mercy of God in Christ in a way that it will empower us to show mercy to others. A cynical world got to witness that mercy in a stunning way through an 18-year-old young man embracing the woman who killed his beloved brother. Imagine what a witness the church could have in the world, for the glory of God, through simple acts of kindness and supernatural mercy for a dying world in need. May it begin with me.