

Sermon Title: Conduits of Mercy

Speaker: Jim Harris

Scripture Text: Matt. 5:7 (Sermon on the Mount #6)

Date: 7-12-20

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I would like you to turn with me back to Matthew Chapter 5. We have recently begun the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we come to the fifth of the so-called "Beatitudes"—or, "blessings." We've entitled this one: "Conduits of Mercy." This begins what all commentators that I've ever read understand to be the "second package" of the Beatitudes. The first four obviously have to do with you in your response to God. Then, He moves to us as we deal with other people.

Let's look back at those first four Beatitudes: Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 3 through 6—"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle"—or, "meek"—"for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (NASB, and throughout, unless otherwise noted). Remember: those are your responses to God; or, those are the responses to God of a person who has true faith in "the King of kings" (1 Tim. 6:15). This is Jesus explaining in great detail, through this whole three chapters, the depths of His message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). This is what someone who is turning to the King looks like, sounds like, acts like (2 Cor. 5:17; 13:5; cf. Deut. 30:6).

"Poor in spirit" means recognizing that, in the face of a perfectly holy and righteous God, you have *no merit* worthy of allowing you into His presence (Rom. 3:23; cf. Ps. 130:3). You come as poor as a beggar who *couldn't even have a meal*, unless something was given to him (Lk. 18:13)—beggarly "poor in spirit." Grace and mercy have to be extended, if you're going to know your Heavenly Father (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

Those who "mourn" are those who then see their sin—*not* by comparing themselves with other people (2 Cor. 10:12), because we *always* find other people with which to compare ourselves who are a little more flamboyant about sinning than we are, and we always come out on the favorable end of those measurements (Lk. 18:11-12). No, this "mourning" means seeing your sin compared to the perfection of God (Is. 6:5; 1 Jn. 1:5), and so you're grieved at your alienation from God (Is. 59:2); you "mourn" over your sin (Ezek. 20:43; 36:31).

"The gentle"—or, I think better translated: "the meek"—those are the ones who don't pretend to storm the gates of Heaven; they come humbly and grateful for the opportunity to be allowed to enter those gates (Lk. 18:14; Jas. 4:6). The one who is "meek" is the one who doesn't retaliate, doesn't resent, doesn't get bitter, doesn't strike back in anger or in revenge (1 Cor. 13:4-7; Eph. 4:2). That's the kind of person that will truly "inherit the earth"—*exactly the opposite* of what the *world* says is the kind of person who will inherit the earth (e.g., Jer. 48:29; Dan. 4:30).

And then last time, we saw "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." That means having a craving, having a nonstop desire—as if you hadn't eaten for three days, as if you hadn't had a drink of water in so long that you can't think about anything but a drink (Ps. 119:5, 20, 131)—that kind of desire to *demonstrate* the righteousness of God, because we have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Is. 61:10; cf. 2 Cor. 5:21), and now we want *that* to be on display (Phil. 2:15; cf. Rom. 6:4; Eph. 4:1; 1 Pet. 2:9).

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And then, what are the blessings that come with those? Oh, they're great! Remember, I've told you that in Greek, in all of these sentences, a pronoun isn't necessary—it's included with the verb; but when you have that situation and you add a pronoun, it becomes a *strong* point of emphasis. So, "they *and they alone*" is the emphasis in these. "They *and they alone*" are citizens of "the kingdom of heaven" (vs. 3). "They *and they alone*"—only those who "mourn"—will be "comforted" by God (vs. 4). "They *and they alone*"—only the "meek"—will "inherit the earth" (vs. 5). "They *and they alone*"—only the ones who "hunger and thirst for righteousness"—shall ultimately "be satisfied" (vs. 6).

Do you understand that the qualities, the attributes, that are "precious in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 3:4), and those attributes that He bestows upon the ones whom He adopts into His family when they come by faith in response to His grace (Phil. 2:13; Heb. 13:21)—those attributes are the *opposite* of what the world extols? (Prov. 8:13; 21:24) It's *humility*, it's *receiving* grace (Prov. 29:23; Rom. 3:27; 1 Cor. 4:7).

Now, that's the first four Beatitudes. Beginning with the one that we have before us today, we see those previously-described *inner* qualities as they get expressed *outwardly* in the presence of other people. So you could say: The first four Beatitudes—how you respond to God. The rest of the Beatitudes—how you respond to other people.

To introduce this Beatitude, I'd like to show you a universal principle that God built into the world of men from the very beginning, because it *does* come into play in how we view and apply these attributes. The most famous statement of it is Galatians Chapter 6, Verses 7 through 9. It's the principle of sowing and reaping—you reap what you sow. Paul writes: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary." Notice: you reap "from the Spirit"—*God* is the One who gives you "the harvest" (2 Cor. 9:10). You sow *this* on Earth, God causes you to reap *this*. Will you reap it on Earth? Maybe—certainly more than if you *don't* sow the right thing (Prov. 11:31). But you *will* reap in Heaven for all of eternity (Mk. 10:29-30).

Then there's the one in Second Corinthians Chapter 9. This is actually in the context of financial contribution for the ministry to the saints, that same contribution that Paul was taking to Jerusalem that we read about in the Book of Acts, but the same principle is stated. Second Corinthians 9:6—"Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." You might look out into your garden, and you might have a handful of very healthy cornstalks, and you're looking forward to that wonderful sweetcorn when the time of harvest comes, and you look over the fence and you can see the next field over there—that guy has *80 acres* of corn! *How'd he get so much more than you?* Well, he *planted* 79.998 acres more than you did! Your reaping is in proportion to your sowing.

Now, he's *not* talking about *earning* salvation (Gal. 2:16; 3:21; Eph. 2:8-9), but he's talking about what God rewards in the Kingdom of Heaven and for eternity.

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And by the way: it's not just a New Testament concept. Proverbs 22:8—"He who sows iniquity will reap vanity." You sow sin, you reap things that are fleeting; they're just like a puff of seeing your breath on a cold morning, that's all there is to it (cf. Jas. 4:14).

Or, Hosea Chapter 10, Verse 12—"Sow with a view to righteousness"—that's kind of like hungering and thirsting for righteousness, right?—"Reap in accordance with kindness; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord until He comes to rain righteousness on you." The idea is: you sow the things on earth that God chooses to bless, God rains His righteousness on you—it is spiritual, divine, and eternal blessings that we reap (Rev. 21:12).

And again, I want to emphasize: we're not talking about how to *enter* the Kingdom of Heaven (Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3). These things are *not* the Gospel; these are not the things that you do in order to solve your sin problem that alienates you from God (Jn. 3:16-18). These blessings—these Beatitudes—are about cultivating the kinds of things that God blesses and that He rewards (Ps. 58:11).

Now, in *all* the Beatitudes, it's safe to say: faith is presupposed. Jesus is speaking to people who were *professing* to be looking for the King (Lk. 2:25, 38). He said: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17) because He was the King (Lk. 10:9)—He was offering the Kingdom to them. So, He's *not* talking about what to do *in order to* get saved, He's saying: "This is what the citizens of My Kingdom look like."

He's talking about the kind of mercy—when we deal with our parable this morning (see below, pg. 7-8)—that springs from a personal experience with the *unequaled* mercy of God (see 2 Cor. 1:3). It's described in Ephesians Chapter 2, Verse 1, and then down to Verses 4 and 5. Look at this—here's a description of your testimony; here's where it started: "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins"—you were born "in iniquity" and "conceived...in sin," as David writes in Psalm 51, Verse 5 (cf. Jb. 25:4; Ps. 58:3; Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22a); you were *born* "dead in your trespasses and sins." Verse 1 says: "You were dead." Then, skip down to Verse 4—"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." This is explaining our merciful God, and how He changes people into people of mercy (Matt. 18:33).

We're going to stick with the same outline; it's not broken, so we're not going to fix it yet—we're going to use the same outline, I presume all the way through the Beatitudes: Number 1—Who is Blessed? Number 2—What Does the Blessing Include?

Well, it's not really hard to figure this out. Who is Blessed? Matthew 5, Verse 7—"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Merciful ones are blessed. What does it mean to be "merciful"? Well, the word that's translated that way means: "to show mercy to; to care for the afflicted; to give help to the helpless one, or even the wretched one; or, to rescue the miserable." "Compassion" is a very close relative of "mercy" (Rom. 9:15; Jas. 5:11). You *have* compassion, and then you *show* it by your actions toward people who are "needy" (Ps. 72:13; cf. Ps. 79:8; Is. 49:13; 55:7; Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32).

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Mercy is a *desperately* needed gift of all sinners, because: you're *dead!* Your only hope is: God is *merciful!* In His mercy, He sent His Son (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 8:32). He extends His "grace" (Rom. 3:24), and *that* changes people into the ones who extend mercy to others (Col. 3:12-13).

I've always summarized it this way, looking at the companion doctrine of forgiveness; I said long ago, and I've stuck with it—it's a good way to summarize a doctrinal point: "Forgiven people *become* forgiving people." Well, people who have received mercy become merciful people. People who *truly* understand God's mercy become—and here's our sermon title—Conduits of Mercy to others. Every person *needs* mercy.

Now, let me make another little distinction for you. When we talk about "mercy," showing mercy means: you *don't* punish what *could be* punished. To receive "mercy" is to *not receive* the punishment or the suffering that you deserve (1 Tim. 1:15-16; Jas. 2:13b). On the other hand, "grace" is: receiving the *good* things that you *don't* deserve. They go hand in hand. "Forgiveness" just wraps its arms around both of those, and it's very closely related (Dan. 9:9; Eph. 1:7).

And by the way: when Jesus said this in this Beatitude, it wasn't an unknown concept. You've heard of the Rabbi Gamaliel, mentioned in the Book of Acts—a First Century Jewish rabbi, a fairly well-known guy. One of his statements is quoted in the Talmud, that massive collection of Jewish rabbinical teachings from before, during, and after the life of Christ. He said this: "Whenever you have mercy, God will have mercy on you." Now, there *is* a bit of a problem with that, in that he is saying it the way the Pharisees meant it, in a works-righteousness sort of way (contra Rom. 11:35). If you want to *achieve* God's mercy, if you want to *receive* God's mercy, you have to give it first. And he says: "If you have not mercy, neither will God have mercy on you." But understand: the *concept* was there—*receiving* mercy and *passing on* mercy. When God is involved, there will be mercy heaped upon mercy. The mercy that is *received* by the ones who are blessed with receiving mercy—that comes from God.

Now, we're going to circle into very similar territory again in the next chapter; I was thinking this may pop into some people's minds, so I thought I would bring it up today, just to whet your appetite for it. Of course, we'll say a whole lot more about it when we get to the next chapter. Chapter 6, Verses 14 and 15—same sermon, same Jesus, same day, same general context—He said: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

Mercy and forgiveness are very closely related (Ps. 25:7; 51:1; 86:5). They aren't *exactly* the same thing, but understand here: He's *not* talking about how to *achieve* mercy—how to *achieve* forgiveness—but how to *demonstrate* that you *have* received mercy, how to *demonstrate* that you *are* forgiven (see Matt. 3:8; Acts 26:20; cf. Jas. 2:22; 1 Jn. 2:5; 3:10, 14). We'll come back to that and talk a lot more about it when we get to Chapter 6. The kind of person who *shows* mercy is the kind of person who *receives* all the more mercy from God.

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Now, this is a spiritual principle of the Kingdom of Heaven. Understand: this *does not work* in the human-to-human realm, in general. If you turn this into a platitude applied among people, you realize: this Beatitude *just doesn't work*. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, if you reject what we call "Biblical Anthropology"—the Bible's definition of man—if you reject that, and you don't believe that we are "dead" in our "trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) and "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:10-11)—if you don't believe that, if you buy into the idea that every person is "basically good," then you would be tempted to go the way of what the world says.

Someone found this quote, and I am shamelessly borrowing it without knowing the source: "This is the great truth of life: If people see us care, they will care." Now, is there an *element* of truth in that? Yes. People say, "They don't care how much we know until they know how much we care." There's an element of truth in that, but if you believe that everybody is basically good, all they need is just to see a good example of showing mercy, and they will all show mercy. And so—how practical is that today?

People say, "Well, you know, we'd be better off to get rid of the police, and send out social workers instead." Well, that was tried *way back*—oh, I don't know...*last month*—in Seattle. How did it go? Well, you know, the first day or two, it wasn't terrible; but then, they kind of wanted the trash picked up! And how did that work when somebody got *killed*—when there's a *murderer* loose in the group, people kind of wanted the police!

You *can't function that way*, purely on the human level—it doesn't work (see Prov. 21:10; Ecc. 8:11). But in the Kingdom of God—oh, yes! And we need to be, in this world, ambassadors of that Kingdom (Phil. 2:15; 1 Pet. 2:12). But neither Scripture, nor our experience, validates that that works on a purely human level. *God* works that way, but the world doesn't (1 Jn. 5:19; cf. 2 Tim. 2:26).

Whoever showed more mercy than Jesus? Nobody. Nobody even *came close*. He healed countless thousands, He delivered people from demons, He spoke truth, He offered the Gospel, He offered the Kingdom, He ultimately laid down His life...and what happened to Him? Well, the more mercy He showed, the more He exposed the unmerciful hearts of men and women (Jn. 7:7).

And the more He showed mercy, the more they got together and determined that they would kill Him. His ultimate act of mercy—going to the Cross, taking upon Himself the penalty that everybody else deserved (Is. 53:5-8)—do you realize that, in Jesus' crucifixion, He was showing mercy, and all the while, the merciless government and the merciless religion united to kill Him? Totalitarian Rome joined with intolerant Judaism to try to destroy the Prince of Mercy (Acts 2:22-23).

It doesn't work on a human level! Now, is it good to show mercy! Absolutely, it is! And the more you show mercy, the more you're going to understand the mercy of God, but understand: this is a principle of the Kingdom of Heaven.

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Who is Blessed? "Blessed are the merciful." Now: What Does the Blessing Include? Look at the rest of the verse: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Again, I boil it down to a simple sentence: People who have received God's mercy become the most merciful to others. God multiplies mercy to them.

And again, this fifth Beatitude does *not* teach that mercy brings mercy *from men*, but that mercy *to* men brings you mercy from God *multiplied*. If we're merciful to others, God will be merciful to us—whether men and women are, or not.

*God* is the one who fulfills this promise, just as in the other Beatitudes. Do you realize: Beatitude #1—it's *God* who gives "the kingdom of heaven" to "the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). Second Beatitude—it's *God* who gives comfort to "those who mourn" (vs. 4). Third Beatitude—it's *God* who bequeaths "the earth" to the "meek" (vs. 5). Fourth Beatitude—it is *God* who gives satisfaction to "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (vs. 6). Those who are "merciful...shall receive mercy" from God. God gives the divine blessings to those who obey His divine standards.

Luke recorded the principle a little bit differently in Luke Chapter 6, Verse 36. Understand that probably not everything that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matthew 5, 6, and 7; I think He preached a lot longer than it would have taken Him to read the three chapters that we have—this is a boiled-down version of it. But He said many of these things on other occasions, and Luke records the principle this way: Luke 6:36—"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Same idea—He didn't use the word "blessed," but that's what He said.

And if you state it again in the terminology of the first-cousin doctrine to mercy—the Doctrine of Forgiveness—you have it over in Ephesians Chapter 4, Verse 32—"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." You could stick mercy in there, and it would work just as well: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, *being merciful to* each other, just as God in Christ also has *been merciful to* you." (see Heb. 8:12)

The same two observations that we've made about the other Beatitudes also fit here. Number 1—understand that this promise is in the "passive" voice. You don't *achieve* mercy for yourself; that means that the *source* of the mercy is God. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall"—not "stir up mercy"—"they shall *receive* mercy." It's not something you can achieve for yourself.

Second thing—just what I said before: this one also has that emphatic pronoun in it. "Blessed are the merciful, for" *only* those who are merciful "receive" the kind of "mercy" that comes from the hand of the King of Mercy. You show me a person without mercy, a person who does not rejoice to forgive, a person who is not willing to let go of bitterness—and I'll show you an unsaved person. Regardless of what they *profess* to believe, how they live shows what they *truly* believe (see Titus 1:16; cf. Matt. 7:21-23; Jn. 14:15, 21; 2 Cor. 13:5; 1 Jn. 2:3-5; Jas. 2:26).

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This is illustrated profoundly in a parable told by Jesus. It was one of those times when Peter...acted like Peter. Peter was always the spokesperson, whether he had anything good to say or not. He was always the first to speak up. He was the most exuberant. He was obviously a leader—there's no doubt about that—good, bad, or indifferent. It was one of those days when Peter *almost* got something right; he was on the right track. It's in Matthew 18, and Jesus has just taught about the woe to "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble" (vs. 6), and He's talked about restoring a brother or sister who is in sin, and trying to get them to come around to forgiveness. And Peter started to catch on.

I want to show you the whole parable—this is really cool. Matthew 18: Verses 21 and 22—"Then Peter came and said to Him"—now, that's really interesting: Jesus was not giving an oral exam. He had asked them the question: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13)—Peter had come through *in spades* on that one! But now, *Peter* comes up, and it's like: he's going to *show Jesus* what he understands. Now, I've been told that the background of this is that, among the rabbis, they taught that if your brother or sister sinned against you, you had to forgive them up to three times. Well, Peter—he's catching on to the *magnitude* of forgiveness. So, "Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?'—and I can just see Peter kind of motioning to the rest of the disciples: *Watch this! I've got this one!*—"How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to *seven times?*' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.' "

*Ouch!* "Nice try, Peter. You understand forgiveness better than most people, but you are *infinitely short* of understanding *God's* forgiveness." Can you imagine how fat your notebook would have to be, that you would carry around with you, to keep track of all the checkmarks it would take to find out when somebody had sinned against you *491 times*—so you don't have to forgive them anymore? Obviously, He doesn't *literally* mean "seventy times seven"—490 times. He was using hyperbole. "You just keep forgiving!" So, remember, Jesus is expounding upon: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). "Understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, Peter."

So, let's dive into the parable: Matthew 18, Verse 23—Jesus says: "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him." A "talent" is a *huge* amount of money; it's actually an amount of weight. A "talent" of silver is worth a fortune. A "talent" of *gold* is worth a *multiplied* fortune. This guy owed him "ten thousand talents"—you couldn't *possibly* owe that much unless you had been embezzling, or you were the government...and we won't go there. This guy had been unrighteous. He owes him something he could *never* repay.

"But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made" (vs. 25). In other words: he was given a life sentence. You are going to become a slave now, and *every bit* of income that can be derived from *everything* you do will go toward this debt, and *you can't work off* that debt. It was a life sentence.

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So, Verse 26—"So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' " Now that was a tall tale—there's no way, by any legitimate means, he could have earned enough money in his lifetime to repay that. "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii..." What's the difference between a "denarius" and a "talent"? A "talent" is a large weight of gold or silver; a "denarius" is the standard, basic daily wage of a day-laborer or a soldier (see Matt. 20:2). The guy owed him a hundred days' wages. That's *plenty*, but it's not anywhere *near* "ten thousand talents." "...and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' " Now, the difference between him and the first guy is: this guy *could have*. You set up a payment plan, and if you owed a hundred days' salary—three or four months of your income—you could do that. If you own a house, you probably owe a lot more than *that*, by percentage.

"But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.' " And there's another Greek thing that's cool there. This is why we preachers have job security—something they can't get into the translation, we can explain it to you. You can change the order of words in a Greek sentence to give greater emphasis, and the logical way that we would say it in English is: "I forgave you all that debt." The way *this* guy said it was: "*All that debt*—ALL that debt—that HUGE debt—all that debt, I forgave you because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, *in the same way* that I had mercy on *you*?" You see, receiving mercy in the Kingdom of God—the Kingdom of Heaven—*that* should *produce* merciful people.

Verses 34 and 35—"And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him." In other words: it's a picture of "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46; cf. Rev.14:10-11; 20:10, 15), because there's no way he could ever repay that. This is Jesus's punchline now: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." To which Peter must have said something like: "Oh..." I think he got the point.

The Lord's response to someone *refusing* to grant mercy, in spite of the mercy and grace he has received—He was "moved to anger." God is "merciful" by nature (Ps. 86:15), and He *loves* to show mercy (Mic. 7:18)—but even if some of His mercy splatters on you, unless it *changes* you, you're going to miss out on His mercy in the most *important* sense of His forgiveness of your sins.

Now, I want to take a few minutes and make sure that we don't just leave this as an adorable, pithy parable on the page. I want to make sure that real learning takes place in our hearts. Me telling you about one of the Beatitudes—it's a good thing, I trust—but it's irrelevant unless we let it penetrate our lives (Jn. 13:17).

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The number one reason for humdrum, unexciting Christian lives—the number one reason for, generally speaking, a lack of spiritual growth in so many people who *say* that they love Jesus, is the unwillingness to make the effort to change (Ps. 119:112; 1 Tim. 4:7). Now, *God* does the work, right? Salvation is *100 percent* of God (1 Cor. 1:30). "You were *dead* in your trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), but *God* "made" you "alive" (vs. 5). But then, it's easy to fall into acting as if we expect God to somehow strike us with some kind of consuming passion to know Him better, but we aren't willing to do anything to start the process. He is *also asking us* to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Amos 5:15; Rom. 6:19), to "mourn" over our sins (Ps. 97:10), to *work* on being "meek" and "gentle" (Phil. 4:5; Jas. 4:10), to *remind* ourselves that we are beggarly poor (Rom. 7:18a).

Can you think of *one good thing* that has ever happened to you in your life—one accomplishment that has done something really good—that came with *no work* on your part? Have you ever heard anybody say: "I was just going along and minding my own business, and all of a sudden, somebody gave me this Ph.D. and made me the CEO of this multinational corporation"? *It doesn't work like that!* That's not how you grow and get better. Do you really think that spiritual growth and spiritual vitality come *automatically*, without there being some kind of serious, disciplined, intentional, sustained effort on your part? It doesn't *just happen* any other way. (see Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 5:14; cf. Lk. 9:23)

Last week, I closed with my little challenge to ask you, in the category of hungering and thirsting after righteousness—are you willing to work on cultivating the right kind of attitude to increase the right kind of hunger and thirst? (see Ps. 119:38) I suggested a 30-day fast and feast—*fast* from the things that drag you down, *feast* yourself on the things that build up your soul (Col. 3:2).

It's not okay to let things slide because you just don't *feel* like pursuing them. Spiritual growth is *not* a matter of waiting until you *feel* the right feeling to move you forward. It's a matter of obeying your King—not waiting for a feeling (Hos. 6:3). You *always* have feelings. *Good* feelings tend to come from cultivating the right things and doing the right things (see Ps. 1:2-3; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Anybody who has sought to minister to other people will tell you how heartbreaking it is when you deal with somebody who is feeling spiritually lethargic. And we *all* get there, right? I mean, if you're *physically* not up to par, it can drag you down emotionally, and even spiritually. If you're going through a really hard test of your faith, it can drag you down. People start feeling spiritually lethargic, and so, what do they do? Pull away, back off, stay away from church, stay away from fellowship. And you know what? That never, *ever*—in *any* situation, for *any* person—is good for them! That's exactly the *wrong* way to go! It always makes things worse (Prov. 18:1).

I shared with you a prayer request last night, that our son has Covid-19. It does not look like *any fun at all*. It's rough. It's been *brutal* on him. He sent me a little video overnight with some good news. He said, "I slept. I did this last night." And you know what it was? It was a doctor showing *breathing exercises* for people with Covid-19. You know why? Because it's *really hard* on your breathing!

Sermon Title: Conduits of Mercy  
Scripture Text: Matt. 5:7 (Sermon on the Mount #6)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 7-12-20

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When you're being tested with something, you need to *strengthen* that thing that is being tested! And it doesn't always come easy. I was once athletic, and sadly, I still have a good memory of what that feels like, so I still do things; and you know I've broken a couple of things and smashed up a couple of things and twisted a couple of things—and I've learned some lessons, and they actually have spiritual applications!

I have said that, if I were to become so wealthy that I felt like it was my responsibility to personally put people to work, and I wanted people on *my* payroll—I don't care about the maid, I don't care about the butler, I don't care about the chauffeur...the first one I'm hiring is the physical therapist, because of what they *do*, after a surgery, after a break. I remember, after I fell on the ice in Russia and broke my arm, I went to the physical therapist and he said, "Okay, let's see how far you can raise your arm!" I said, "Well, about this far." "No, no—*without* the other hand!" "Oh...Well, I can wiggle my fingers!" You have to *work* at it. And when you start out, you're saying: "You want me to do *what*? How am I going to do *that*?" "Well, try this little baby step." Friends: Spirituality is *a lot like* muscles and bones! They have to be *moved* and *flexed* and *developed* and *put to work*. And the more you work, the better it gets.

Psalm 119, that fantastic 176 verses that is *one seamless prayer*—look at this: Psalm 119, Verse 58—in the midst of that prayer, the psalmist says: "I sought Your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to Your word." That sounds like a formula that could be a Beatitude! "Seek Me! Hunger and thirst after Me, and I'll satisfy you!" God is "gracious and merciful" (Ps. 145:8)—nevertheless, we pour out our hearts in prayer, because we ache to know the fullness of His goodness (Ex. 33:18; Phil. 3:10-14).

Look at Verse 59, the next verse: "I considered my ways and turned my feet to Your testimonies." I looked at my situation, I assessed things, I examined where I was at, and I said: "I need to *turn* to Your Word, Your testimonies." He "turned his feet," if you will, to follow and obey what God says. And then the next verse: Verse 60—"I hastened and did not delay to keep Your commandments." You've got to make it a *priority*, if it's going to happen! The psalmist didn't want to put off doing what he knew was right. It's as if he had been granted the ability to read ahead a few centuries, and understand hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and what that looks like—to make the choice to *pursue* what is right (see Ps. 34:14; 21:21; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22).

Now, what about our Beatitude? Well, remember verse 59 there? "I considered my ways..." Consider your ways, and ask if you are cultivating a reputation for mercy. Let's get practical: Is there someone you won't talk to? I mean, be really honest here. Is there somebody about whom you're saying, "I am so thankful for this lockdown, because I haven't had to deal with—(fill in the person's name)"? Is there somebody about whom you would secretly rejoice if you heard they were having a hard time? Has God allowed a need to cross your path, and you were able to look away and go your way, and ignore the fact that you could have done something to help? A lot of this happens in families. A lot of this happens at jobs. Is there a *feud* going on, and you're letting yourself be content with not doing anything about it?

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Are you consumed enough with God's mercy that you're *looking* for an opportunity to pass it along to others? (see Ps. 116:12) And what did that definition of "mercy" talk about? Caring for the downtrodden, caring for the poor, caring for the needy ones (Jb. 29:12-13, 15-16; 30:25; Prov. 31:20). I have some really good news for you: The same One who promises: "I will give you mercy," is *happy* to hear that you need His help (Ps. 18:6; 28:7; 50:15; 119:73; Is. 41:10; Matt. 8:2-3; Heb. 4:16).

Hebrews 2:17—"Therefore, He"—the "He" is Christ—"had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest..." We love to talk about Jesus being our high priest—the "high priest of our confession" (Heb. 3:1), and He loves to hear from us (Ps. 62:8)—but notice, the word "merciful" is before that: He is a "*merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God*"—He went so far as "to make propitiation for the sins of the people." God not only wants you to be merciful—He wants to *help you* be merciful, as you walk in obedience to His Word (Heb. 13:20-21).

Let's pray:

*Our Father, please make us "conduits of mercy," that as we receive, we are also so happy to share that mercy that You have poured out upon us. Thank You that we have Your mercy—there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," because we are not going to receive that punishment that we deserve because Your Son voluntarily took it upon Himself. Father, teach us to be agents of mercy in a merciless world. And we'll thank You for what You do in our hearts—that You might, though us, demonstrate Your mercy. In Jesus' name. Amen.*