

Beatitudes 5: SHOWING MERCY

Matthew 18:21-35, 5:7 [MW17-25]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 20 August 2017

The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven ...

- do you know where that line comes from?
Portia, the judge, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*
- I studied this play 41 years ago, in the sixth form – year 12
we had to learn quotes for the exams and that was one of them
I sat down to write this sermon and out it popped! Amazing!
- *the quality of mercy is not strained*
it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven ...

Do you know what mercy is?

- do you know what mercy really is???
- what mercy looks like, feels like, smells like, tastes like ...
- for me, I think that is why Jesus told the parable that was our first reading
the parable sometimes given the title: 'The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant'
- Jesus told this parable to embody, to put arms and legs on
movement and breath into, just what mercy really is all about

I think too that we are all able to identify ourselves in this parable

- you, me, each and everyone of us has been in the position of that servant
on his knees, desperately begging
- you, me, each and every one of us has been in the position of the king
who felt sorry for this servant and let him go free
- and, yes, what is next ... you, me each and every one of us I venture
has also been in the position of denying mercy to one who deserved it

The key to this parable is “mercy”

- if you wish to know what “mercy” is ... this parable tells us
John Stott in his Bible study on Matthew 5:7 says:

To forgive and be forgiven, to show mercy and to receive mercy: these belong indissolubly together, as Jesus illustrated in his parable of the unmerciful servant.

God blesses those people who are merciful. They will be treated with mercy.

This is the fifth of eight Beatitudes

- the first four focus mainly on our attitude to God
these next four turn to our attitude to our fellow human beings
and it all begins with mercy

“Mercy” - it's a great word

- I looked at all sorts of definitions of this fine English word
and I thought no, a dictionary style definition just does not do it justice
- a bit more research shows the word translated as “mercy” is the Greek “eleemon”
and behind this is the Aramaic, then the original Hebrew: “chesedh”
which for all intents and purposes is an untranslatable word
- it goes beyond sympathising with a person
it is so much more than simply feeling sorry for someone in trouble
- “chesedh/mercy” means the ability to get right inside another person's skin
seeing things with their eyes, thinking things with their mind
feeling things with their feelings

Bible Scholar for the 'ordinary person', William Barclay says:

... this demands a quite deliberate effort of the mind and of the will. It denotes a sympathy which is not given, as it were, from outside, but comes from a deliberate identification with the other person, until we see things as he sees them, and feel things as he feels them ... it means experiencing things together with the other person, literally going through what he is going through.

“Mercy” then is no simple thing

- and in fact is supposed to cause us to act in a particular way

I came across this from a father writing about mercy

“Grace” is where we get what we really *don't* deserve. “Mercy” is where we don't get what we really *do* deserve. For example, there is a Mercy Rule in my daughter's softball team. When the team is ahead by more than 10 runs, then yes, it is merciful to finish the game. The score could become quite embarrassing and end up looking like a cricket score.

□ From a secular standpoint, mercy is letting your children off the hook for some things that they are clearly guilty of. The broken cookie jar that they were supposed to stay out of until supper is evidence that they have disobeyed the parent's instruction to wait until after supper. But, when the child runs into your arms and openly admits that they did something wrong; and with tears, says they are sorry, mercy is knowing that they have learned their lesson. This compassion and forbearance is what I would describe as the parent having mercy on the child and not punishing them further for their disobedience. It is an act of open compassion or kindness for an offense that normally requires a consequence.

God's mercy is somewhat like this, but on an infinitely greater scale. We do not get what we really do deserve. It's our hand in the cookie jar and smashing the cookie jar on purpose, but His forbearance of our being caught in the act, and forgiving us anyway is the ultimate expression of mercy.

And this father sums it up by quoting John 3:17

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!

God knows and understands us, and because of this is merciful towards us

- God desires that we do the same
that we know and understand other people
and through this act mercifully toward them

William Barclay believes there is always a reason why a person thinks and acts as they do

- and that if we knew that reason it would be so much easier to understand
and to sympathise and to forgive
- if a person thinks or acts in a way that seems at odds with 'normal' behaviour
it could be because they have come through experiences
or they have a heritage which has made them do that
- if a person is prickly and short it may be because they are worried or in pain

He goes on to say:

Truly, as the French proverb has it, 'To know all is to forgive all', but we will never know all until we make the deliberate attempt to get inside the other person's mind and heart.

And is this not what our God has done in Jesus Christ?

- in the most real way God has 'got inside our skin'
he came as a human being, seeing things with our eyes
feeling things with our feelings, thinking things with our minds

Barclay concludes:

[God came] not as the remote, detached, isolated majestic God; but as a man. The supreme instance of *mercy, chesedh*, is the coming of God in Jesus Christ.

And that I venture is why the king is so angry

- and gives such an extreme punishment to the unmerciful servant in the parable Jesus told
- the king is incensed, because having been shown such great mercy the forgiven servant could not do the same, could not show even a drop of mercy

All of us, each and every one of us, has been shown great mercy

- we have not got what we really do deserve whether we recognise it or not, God has shown us amazing boundless, overflowing mercy - and Jesus Christ is the embodiment of that mercy
- none of us, no one on this earth, gets what we really do deserve suffers the consequences of our behaviour, our actions, our selfish disobedience
- what do we get instead?
the offer of forgiveness, a new beginning, a fresh start, new life
- and having received this, having become aware of the gift we have received we can be part of extending God's kingdom
we can play our part in saving the world, saving people
by extending to others the mercy we ourselves have received from God

John Stott sums this up very succinctly:

Nothing moves us to forgive like the wondering knowledge that we ourselves have been forgiven. Nothing proves more clearly that we have been forgiven than our own readiness to forgive.

What does mercy look like, feel like, smell like, taste like???

- I keep coming back to Jesus' parable in Matthew 18 however alongside that let me put something else a real story of life and mercy

In April of 1986, two gray-haired men greeted each other warmly in Tokyo's International Airport. Both men had tears in their eyes. One man was an American named Ponich; the other was a Japanese named Ishibashi. The last time the two men met was forty years before, as enemies, in a cave in Okinawa. At that time the American, then Sergeant Ponich, was holding a five-year-old Japanese boy in his arms. The child had been shot through both legs. Ishibashi was one of two Japanese snipers hiding in a dark corner of the same cave.

Suddenly, Ishibashi and his comrade leaped from their hiding place, aimed their rifles at Ponich and prepared to fire point blank. There wasn't a thing Ponich could do. He simply put the five-year-old on the ground, took out his canteen, and began to wash the child's wounds. If he had to die, he thought, what better way to die than performing an act of mercy. The two snipers watched in amazement. Then, slowly, they lowered their rifles. Minutes later, Ponich did something Ishibashi never forgot. He took the child in his arms, stood up, bowed in gratitude to the two Japanese, and took the child to an American field hospital.

How did the two men happen to meet after all those years? In 1985, Ponich wrote a letter to a Tokyo newspaper thanking the Japanese people for the two Japanese soldiers who had spared his life forty years before in that cave in Okinawa. Ishibashi saw the letter and contacted the newspaper who set up the meeting. The meeting was long and affectionate.

The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven ...

- that is what is ingrained in my brain
that is what I remember, all the way from 41 years ago!!!
- however it inspired me to go and look up the whole speech that it comes from
and this is it ... it makes thoughtful reading

*The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show like God's
When mercy seasons justice.*

The 'take home' thought, your 'homework', your challenge/invitation this week is:

- who can you show mercy to?
who can you show mercy to this week?
- I had thought of having a PowerPoint or song or some music while we reflect
but I got the message to do something much simpler ...

What I believe we are to do is hear Jesus' words again:

Imagine being on that mountainside – you might like to close your eyes – be aware of other people, the blue sky, the dusty ground, the heat, and of the presence of Jesus and his words which are comforting, encouraging; and also cut right to your heart, pierce your spirit as no other words ever have. Here today on our mountainside hear Jesus' words and hear him saying your name – “Wayne, this is the person, this is the situation, this is the group I ask you to show mercy this week.” Maybe he will even tell you exactly what he would like you to do ... let us spend some time in silence, together, and allow whatever happens to happen ...

Time of silence ...

then, Jesus says: *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy*

Continuing with prayers ...