

Matthew 5: 7-8
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THE KINGDOM OF THE HEART

Today we take two more steps on the path of the Beatitudes and enter the second half of our journey into the Kingdom of God. The first half of the Beatitudes focused on our relationship with God whereas the second half is focused on others. Our first step today is 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy'. It is the only beatitude that is reflexive. That means the only way to receive it is to offer it. It's a reciprocal action, a relationship of give and take, generosity and gratitude rooted in the other. And often, our inability to show mercy conflicts with our ability to receive mercy which conflicts with our ability to be merciful and so on until a cold, steely circle is forged. We are such a hard, tough, cool, smooth and crusty people. Mercy has evaporated from our culture and has been replaced with legalism, revenge and reprisal. Not showing mercy leads to self destruction. It causes us to nurse grudges or seek revenge. And often these get passed down from generation to generation and become destructive forces in the lives of individuals and families as well as societies.

Mercy or compassion as it is more commonly referred to today, starts with ourselves, for how can we be compassionate if we can't be compassionate to ourselves? Self compassion has 3 core elements. First, it requires that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves as if we were the nurturing parent rather than the harshly critical and judgmental one many of us grew up with. It calls us to accept that we are perfectly imperfect as we are and asks us to offer ourselves the same grace God offers us, something many of us have

been told is selfish or narcissistic. It is in self acceptance that the seeds of mercy are sown. We have to be patient and accepting as we practice growing mercy and self-compassion in ourselves. Second, it requires the recognition of our common humanity, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our own suffering. Being merciful and compassionate with ourselves allows us to see that there are innumerable factors that influence who we are and what we do. We begin to see how impossible it is to completely blame ourselves or any one individual for anything. Self compassion requires that same meekness or humility we explored last time and joins us with the rest of the human race, gives us a true estimate of ourselves and therefore no need to compare ourselves with others.

Self compassion allows us to feel another's pain without being overwhelmed by it. Compassion and self compassion are ways of relating to suffering. When we recognize how difficult it is to be there for people who are struggling and comfort ourselves in the process, we are stronger, more stable and resilient when supporting others in their suffering. Once our inner reserves are full, then we can in turn offer mercy and compassion to others. Third, it requires a mindfulness that allows us to hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it. We acknowledge it as it is, with no stories or excuses attached to stimulate an overwhelming or harmful emotional response. We can choose to respond rather than react by choosing to be mindful and intentionally focus on the thoughts, emotions and sensations that are arising in the present moment in a friendly, non judgmental way. Kristen Neff, in her book Self-Compassion recommends saying something like the following to ourselves when we need this kind of compassion for ourselves. "This is a moment of suffering. Suffering is a part of

life. May I be kind to myself in this moment. May I give myself the compassion I need." At the moment of being care-full, you'll find yourselves cared for." Stephen Colbert, who lost his father and two brothers in a car accident, in a recent interview with Anderson Cooper says it this way, "It's a gift to exist and with existence comes suffering."

Once we embrace who we are and whose we are and know that God's unbounded love is not conditional we can offer to ourselves the same mercy and compassion we offer others. The airline industry reminds us of this every time we fly. We must put on our own oxygen mask before we put on our child's! We must know mercy in order to show mercy! Mercy has already been demonstrated in divine mercy and there is nothing we need to do except accept it. Mercy is both an inner attitude and something you do. Mercy comes from the abundance of God's heart where forgiveness, pardon, grace, healing, life and joy become permanent residents in our hearts. The more willing we are to embrace our flaws, shortcomings and imperfections, the more liberated our lives can be. Mercy frees us from self-centeredness and we can reach out in confidence to others assured that those very same promises are for everyone. Mercy allows us to simply love, to be compassionate and show respect for another. Mercy is wisdom in tenderness. Mercy frees us from the need to 'fix' whatever is wrong. Mercy listens and does not spew forth the answers. Mercy has no need to justify or explain. Mercy is tenaciously strong, flexible and realistic. Mercy never trivializes suffering or the position a person has found oneself in or is offended by anything or anyone. Mercy is the ability to get inside another persons skin until we see things with their eyes, think things with their mind and feel things with their feelings. This is what God did in Christ – God entered human life and things have never been the same!

One of the most interesting aspects of those who are merciful is that they get so absorbed in God's mercy that they see sin and suffering differently. Mercy has a component of contrition in it. The strength I need to accept responsibility for my own faults provides me with the wisdom to accept the same inclinations in others. It reminds me that though we are distinct in the most mundane ways, we are alike in the most profound. We are all perfectly, imperfect, beloved children of God. Mercy is grace, forgiveness and compassion all rolled into one. It is doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you. There is no 'deserving' in mercy. Mercy without action is pity, action without mercy is condescension. We must always go further. Those willing to enter into the painful places of life with others will find the true happiness of mercy. Our faith calls us to find a way to engage in the struggle for mercy anywhere in the world that is without it. Mercy gives us sympathy for the plight of every human life. Mercy allows us to simply love, be compassionate and show respect to one another. Such offerings of love, tenderness and compassion serve as direct expressions of the kingdom life.

The Beatitudes are truly a ladder - for it is only the poor in spirit who can be merciful. Those who mourn know more keenly than anyone else how to be merciful. The meek have no reason not to be merciful. And those who hunger and thirst for righteousness understand that mercy is their food and drink and swallow it down eagerly. Mercy is the natural outgrowth of righteousness. And righteousness is the natural outgrowth of mercy. Mercy and justice go together like the warp and woof of one fabric. And it is a paradox as well. In the economy of God's kingdom, what we give away is not depleted but multiplied.

This leads us to our sixth beatitude – ‘Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.’ Each beatitude so far has demanded something of us except this one. This beatitude demands all of us. Purity of heart is to will one thing, and that one thing can’t be just any old thing! It is to will God’s will. It is a singleness of purpose. It is a God focused unity. It builds upon the characteristic of meekness or humility we explored last time. Purity of heart has two dimensions. It can be seen as simplicity, focus or single - mindedness. And it can also be seen as goodness, cleanliness or holiness. It is to stand with total honesty before God with unmixed motives. It is to be loyal and sincere. It is about integrity and the inner qualities of truthfulness, honesty, goodness and honor. And it is to be emptied of what is unclean and impure, from what no longer belongs, purged by God. It is a catharsis of everything that hinders our vision of the Kingdom of God. The heart mentioned here refers to the sum of a person’s interior life, your truest self, the part of you that feels, grieves, delights and desires. The heart is the imagination, where we dream, conceive and make connections. The heart is where we exercise freedom, make choices and decisions. The heart is where we meet or avoid God. The heart defines our spiritual identity - whether we are for or against God.

If this is purity of heart then impurity of heart is that which blinds us to God. It is the divided, scattered, busy, stressed, anxious self that can’t see God. It is the people pleasing, multiplicity and divided attentions that the world blesses. It is following the world’s voices and visions that call us in every direction and offer us so many choices that we make quick people pleasing decisions, and lose what is essential to not only our lives but often to others and our planet as well. Those who see God are the ones who love God and love as God loves.

To see God is both a physical sight and an understanding. It is a perception, an insight, a vision or a spiritual sense of seeing the Kingdom of God already emerging in and among us. It's not a sweet sentimentality of looking at the world through 'rose-colored' glasses. It's not a taking lightly of all the destructive and disruptive forces operating in our world today. It's not worrying about all the seemingly negative activities happening in our world either but acknowledging that these are the very places where God shows up to work through us to enter into the Kingdom of God. It's not something that is out there in the future but is something that is real and active now in our lives and in our world. Again Stephen Colbert offers this: 'It's loving the thing that you most wished had not happened.' "When you get your inside world – your mind and heart put right, then you can see God in the outside world". One's life is in focus, concentrated on God alone. We can see the divine in everything. Ordinary moments become divine. We can see the face of God in the poor, hungry, homeless and imprisoned. We see people as creative, resourceful and whole rather than faulty and in need of 'fixing'. We move from what imprisons – the anxiety, the fear, the shame, the resentment, the self deception, the cover ups, the revenge. We make a complete break from everything that deters us from God's purpose and God's kingdom. We move from this by recognizing our need for forgiveness, both from God and from those we have hurt and harmed. Forgiveness is the vital spiritual practice for this set of beatitudes for ushering in the Kingdom of God. One we must practice many times a day both to ourselves and to those we have hurt and harmed. Forgiveness cleanses our souls from guilt and shame and anticipates that in God's kingdom all will be forgiven.

Forgiveness is not our power, for we cannot easily summons forgiveness when we are hurting and have been harmed. It is God's power flowing toward us, in us, through us like a mighty

river flowing to cleanse, heal, nurture, and bring us to new life. Our hearts, minds and spirits become changed by the love of God shown to us as we continue to practice each of the vital spiritual practices.

Forgiveness happens when we stop holding a grudge and let go of our right to resentment for being mistreated. Again, it's getting rid of those judgmental thoughts of 'deserving' either for ourselves or another. Being merciful allows us to recognize our common humanity and see that there are innumerable factors that continually influence who we are and what we do. We begin to see how impossible it is for us to completely blame any one individual for anything, ourselves included. This insight allows us to forgive ourselves and others and let go of anger and resentment and replace it with compassion and mercy.

Jesus assumes we will sin for the definition of human is fallible, faulty, imperfect. If we were perfect we would be God. And Jesus offers us forgiveness freely, with no strings attached. It's a free gift of grace. Forgiveness is the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell. It is experiencing peacefulness in the moment, which is where our beatitudes lead us next week. A powerful way to envision forgiveness is to imagine the one who hurt you alone in a room with Jesus and leaving them there together. Within that safe place of God's presence, we can begin to see them as Jesus sees them and we can ask for understanding and help for ourselves and then reach out in compassion and mercy to the one who hurt us. We can begin to see our enemy as God might – healed, made whole, reflecting God's love and light as perfectly, imperfect children of God. We can see with the eyes of God. We can see God in the potential of another. We see

each person as loved, creative, resourceful and whole in their own divinely given unique way. Forgiveness is a commitment to accept that person in spite of what was done. It is a decision NOT to demand retributive justice but to show mercy. Forgiveness means our sins no longer stand as a barrier in the relationship. Forgiveness removes the barrier and allows us open fellowship, reconciliation and peace. Forgiveness offers us the freedom to be at peace inside our own skins and to be glad of heart in each other's presence. Forgiveness is the eraser that wipes any impurity from a person's heart and makes it pure.

Forgiveness is the blessing of these two beatitudes. Listen now to the fifth and sixth Beatitudes from the Message: "You're blessed when you care.

At that moment of being 'care-full', you find yourselves cared for.

You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart put right.

Then you can see God in the outside world.
Welcome to the Kingdom of the Heart.