

“BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL...”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 5:7, James 2:8-13

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Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Mercy. What exactly is mercy? How is mercy different from another word, grace? **Grace might be best understood as the act of endowing unmerited favour while mercy is the withholding of deserved punishment.** Mercy is closely related to forgiveness. There's a parable the Jesus tells of a man who owed his king ten thousand talents. One talent was worth more than 15 years of wages for a labourer, so ten thousand talents would have been impossible for any man to repay. But the king, out of pity for his servant, released him and forgave him the debt. The same man, then met a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii, which is about a hundred days' worth of wages, well within the scope of a repayable debt, but the servant, who had just been forgiven a debt of 150,000 years of wages, wouldn't show the same mercy he just received and had his fellow servant thrown in jail. When the king heard what his servant had done, in his anger the king had the unmerciful man thrown in jail until he could pay his entire debt, which of course meant for life. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you, said the king. And Jesus ends the parable on a difficult note: **“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”** In matters of forgiveness we also remember the Lord's Prayer which we recite each week in worship. **“Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us.”**

Given these commands, it's tempting, **but misguided**, to understand God's mercy or forgiveness toward us as being **contingent** upon our mercy and forgiveness toward others. We know from the whole witness of scripture and especially from the witness of Jesus Christ, that God's mercy to us **isn't** something that is withheld until we have shown mercy to others. God's mercy is given to us **even** when we are undeserving, even when we have not shown mercy to others. In the Book of Exodus God proclaims to Moses about himself, **“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”** What follows then is that God's mercy to us **isn't contingent upon our prior mercy to others**, rather, **because** God is merciful to us, **so then** must we be merciful to others.

Easier said than done, isn't it? It seems to me that we don't live in particularly merciful times. I've often wondered why politicians don't apologize more than they do. I think that they used to. You used to be able to say sorry and people would be merciful, they would accept your apology and not exercise the judgment that was deserved. But these days politicians struggle to apologize, or if they do, it's often a qualified apology, if anyone has been offended by something I might have said, then I am sorry. I think I know why these unconditional apologies are so hard to come by these days. Politicians know that an unconditional apology won't be met with mercy but with further judgement and condemnation.

If you apologize, the other side won't just accept it and move on, they pile on, judging your judgement to be lacking.

I think about this past week and the controversy that erupted about the comments of Jane Thornthwaite, a BC Liberal candidate about Bowinn Ma, a female NDP candidate in North Vancouver. What was said about Ma was wrong and sexist and eventually Thornthwaite apologized, as did Andrew Wilkinson, the leader of the BC Liberals, who was on the same zoom call with Thornthwaite. But Wilkinson's public apology didn't come until 4 days after the sexist remarks first surfaced. Perhaps he should have apologized sooner, but when he did, he was met with the predictable comments questioning his leadership and judgement.

Or maybe you watched some of the US Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett as a justice of the US Supreme Court? Barrett was nominated by President Trump to fill the seat vacated by the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Well the hearings were entirely predictable. The Democratic senators on the committee tried in many different ways to get Judge Barrett to give any kind of answer to a host of questions that they posed. And judge Barrett, nominated by a Republican President, knew that she couldn't leave a sliver of daylight in her answers which might leave room for further attacks from the Democrats, so she said basically absolutely nothing. Judge Barrett is a brilliant woman, but she knows the game. Don't offer anything that might be exploited as a weakness by the other side. **There's no room for mercy in our modern political arena.**

And I suppose it's not only in our politics that mercy seems to be absent. I am more and more convinced of the growing dangers of our social media platforms. We live in an age where our mistakes now live with us forever. In an era where just about everything we do is documented by an email, a picture, a text, a tweet or an Instagram post, **nothing is forgotten and little is forgiven, it seems.** Youthful indiscretions that used to be forgiven or forgotten are now dredged up years after the fact, even when people might have matured and learned from their mistakes. There's little doubt that the current rage of social media outrage has led to a lack of mercy in our interactions and our evaluations of each other. Context is desperately missing from what's shared on a tweet or a post or a picture. Instead we rush to judgement, we convict without careful deliberation. As a parent I worry about things for my kids that my parents couldn't have imagined worrying about for me.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. **The words of Jesus confront us and don't leave a lot of room for ambiguity. Mercy isn't optional,** it wasn't when Jesus first spoke these words from a hillside in Galilee and it isn't now. Remember, Jesus didn't say what he said in the Sermon on the Mount, he didn't say the Beatitudes because things were okay the way they were, but because they weren't, because he knew that things needed to change. The core problem hasn't changed in the 2000 years since Jesus first spoke these words.

Mercy is in short supply. Jesus tells those who will listen to him to be merciful, that to be merciful is blessed and that those who are merciful will receive mercy.

Now let's be clear. Those who are merciful will receive mercy, **but that doesn't mean that they haven't already received mercy first.** This is what we often forget. We have already received mercy. I think many people struggle with showing mercy because they haven't been offered mercy in their lives. If you live a life where mercy hasn't been offered to you, I can see where it might be really hard to bring yourself to offer mercy to others. If your life has been one in which your every action, your every fault and weakness has been pointed out and judged, where people have exacted a penalty for your failures, where fear has ruled and forgiveness has been regarded as for the weak, I can see where mercy would be awfully hard to extend to others. It's hard to give to others what you haven't experienced for yourself. For those who profess no religious faith, for those especially who aren't Christians, I can understand why the concept of mercy would seem to be unnatural. After all, if we are just products of biological evolution and nothing more, mercy would seem to be counter-intuitive. Only the strongest survive, mercy is for the weak.

But for those of us who locate ourselves within a creation that has a greater purpose, for those of us who believe in God, who know that our God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, who confess that God in that mercy, grace and love, has come to us in Jesus Christ and in Jesus, took upon himself our fears, our failures, our sin and brokenness and redeemed all of it by his sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave, **we who believe know that we have received mercy, over and over and over again.** And we are called by God, we are commanded by Jesus to show mercy, to be part of the new unfolding witness of the kingdom of heaven.

I know it's hard. How do we show mercy to those who have been merciless to us? How do we forgive those who don't seem to deserve our forgiveness or mercy, who have done nothing to warrant it? But of course our mercy doesn't look to others as the example, **we must always look to Jesus.** And to make our mercy conditional on the worthiness of others leaves the world just as it is, in desperate need of the counter-cultural and counter-intuitive proclamations of Jesus. We look to Jesus as the one who has shown us more mercy than we could ever take in. **His mercy covers all that we are, all that we have been and all that we still might be.** It's not others, it's Jesus who must be the one who inspires our willingness to be merciful.

The Letter of James states that judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. Again the point is clear. God's mercy triumphs over God's judgement. We are shown God's mercy and as recipients of that mercy we must also show mercy to others, to one another. **When have you shown mercy?** If mercy is a regular part of how you live out your faith, keep up the practice.

No doubt it is difficult at times and there are times when we will be sorely tempted to leave mercy in the bag and pull out retribution or vengeance, but remember the mercy we have already received. **While we were still sinners, Jesus gave his life for us, he died for us.** We have not received the punishment we deserved for our sin. In God's mercy, God through Jesus Christ has taken on the wages of our sin and has overcome the penalty of death and the powers of darkness. We **have** received mercy. Someone needs to receive **our** mercy. Someone we know someone close to us or someone we may only encounter once, someone needs our mercy. The promised kingdom of heaven is breaking into our world. God will transform this world into the creation God has always intended. Jesus's words in the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount tell us clearly that something's afoot. In Jesus, our God, merciful and gracious, invites us to participate in that unfolding, in that revealing. It is a privilege to be called to model what it is to be a blessed people and through those who profess to follow the ways of Jesus, glimpses of the new world to come are being made available to all.

As those who have received mercy, we cannot refrain from being merciful. If we really belong to God, if we believe that we have received God's mercy, if we truly believe that, then we need to practice our faith in ways that reflect who God truly is, **whether it's easy to do or whether its difficult.** Our God is a God of endless and sacrificial love, whose mercy and grace, whose slowness to anger and whose abundance of steadfast love and faithfulness remind us of whose image we bear and in whose likeness we are made, all of us.

May the generosity, tenderness of heart, and kindness of soul undergird the mercy of all God's people and may we hear clearly the words of our Lord,
"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Thanks be to God, Amen.