

# The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

## Chapter 6: Blessed are the Merciful

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Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy (Mt. 5:7).

In the fifth beatitude, we come to a transition point in the passage. In the first four beatitudes the Christian man shows his attitude in relation to God. The person who is awakened by the Holy Spirit as to who God is and his condition in relation to God is poor in spirit; mourns over his sins; is humble before Him and seeks the righteousness of Christ. All of these things obviously affect how a person will interact with others; but, the focus is on how people are in relation to God. The first four beatitudes are concerned with a state of mind or attitude; the focus on conduct is secondary. Thus we see that, in the biblical worldview, what a person does is rooted in what a person already is; that is, the state of his heart and his relationship with God.

The fifth beatitude and those which follow are primarily concerned with behavior toward men. Thus, once again we see a logical progression in the beatitudes. A right relationship must be established with God before men can act ethically toward other men with a proper spiritual motive. The man who has been filled or fully satisfied as a consequence of Christ's righteousness, which comes by God's grace and mercy, will be willing to exercise mercy toward others. "Those who have experienced the purifying influence of the Holy Spirit become pure in heart (sixth beatitude). And of course, these same people, having been saved by the Prince of Peace, now become peace-makers (seventh beatitude)."<sup>1</sup> Although all the beatitudes describe what a genuine Christian disciple is, the first four beatitudes deal more with the state of a man's heart who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, while the next four beatitudes focus more on the subsequent fruits. Our Lord wants His disciples, and the multitudes who are listening to His sermon, to understand what it means to be a disciple both inside and out, both toward God and toward man. The Savior's ethic and concept of the kingdom is all encompassing and comprehensive. It obliterates man's pride, while it exalts God and His grace. To understand this beatitude, we must examine a number of areas.

### What Mercy Is and What Mercy Is Not

In order to understand what this passage means we need to define mercy and clear up some common misconceptions about this term. Therefore, we will examine mercy from a number of different angles.

First, it will be helpful to compare mercy with another very important biblical term—grace. The word grace (Hebrew, *hen*; Greek, *charis*) refers to the unmerited favor of God toward guilty sinners who deserve the exact opposite. Grace is the word used when speaking of God giving salvation in the broad sense, based on His unmerited favor (e.g., election, Eph. 1:3-6; the gospel, 2 Cor. 4:15; Col. 1:5-6; justification, Rom. 3:23-26; Eph. 2:8-9; and sanctification, Rom. 5:2, 21; 6:1, 14, 15; 2 Cor. 12:9; Eph. 2:10; Tit. 2:11-14). Grace is the primary word used for God dealing with sin's guilt or pollution. Mercy (Hebrew *hesed*, Greek *eleos*) refers to

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<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 275.

compassion or loving kindness extended toward those who are in pain, anguish and distress. While grace is the term used for God eliminating sin and guilt itself, mercy is the word which is used for God relieving the consequences of sin. That is the great calamity and misery that is the result of sin. "If the grace of God contemplates man as guilty before God, and therefore in need of forgiveness, the mercy of God contemplates him as one who is bearing the consequences of sin, who is in a pitiable condition, and who therefore needs divine help."<sup>2</sup>

Mercy and grace are obviously closely connected in that a person who is merciful or compassionate with another person will show that person grace or favor, even if they do not deserve it. A person who is merciful, who has been greatly wronged, is quick and happy to extend forgiveness to those who confess their faults. The person who is merciful is opposed to cruelty or suffering unless such things are required by God's law (e.g., the death penalty for murder). A merciful man does what he can to relieve and prevent suffering in others.

Second, as in the other characteristics described in the beatitudes, the mercy mentioned is not something natural. There are men who by birth tend to be kinder than others. There are people who are naturally more affectionate; who generally speaking are not cruel toward others; who do not demand their rights, so to speak. Our Lord is not addressing such men. The mercy described is a result of God's grace and mercy. It is mercy extended because of Jesus' redemptive work; in the name of Christ. It flows from a consciousness of the fact that God has saved us from our sins and the dreadful consequences of those sins when we did not deserve it; when we actually deserved the exact opposite. It is an attitude that leads to biblical action that is produced by the Holy Spirit. If we divorce mercy from God's salvation in Christ, then we are left with a prideful humanism. The acts of charity and mercy done by the wicked are rooted in self-exaltation and self-congratulation. The mercy extended by Christians is rooted in poverty of spirit, meekness, and mourning over sin. Therefore, it always points to Jesus and exalts Him, not ourselves.

Before our conversion to Christ, we really did not understand or practice biblical mercy. Paul says that one of the characteristics of those who reject God is that they are "unmerciful" (Rom. 1:31). "Before conversion the sinner is compared to a wolf for his savageness, to a lion for his fierceness (Isaiah 11:6), to a bee for his sting (Psalm 118:12), to an adder for his poison (Psalm 140:3). By nature we do not send forth oil, but poison; not the oil of mercifulness, but the poison of maliciousness."<sup>3</sup> The Romans and Greeks did not include mercy as a virtue. The Jews believed that those most likely to be blessed in the Messiah's kingdom were men of fierce, warlike dispositions, fired with resentment for the wrongs done their country, who would inflict a severe, unmitigated vengeance on their Gentile oppressors. Men with hearts of stone are incapable of true spiritual mercy that flows from love of Christ.

Third, mercy must never be confused with permissiveness or antinomianism. Many people believe that a father who refuses to spank a disobedient child; or, a judge who does not impose the death penalty for first degree murder; or a church court that looks the other way as a member commits adultery or abandons his wife is merciful. But, that is not at all what Jesus is speaking about. Others equate mercy with handing out taxpayer dollars to those who refuse to work, who deliberately are lazy and undisciplined. They want to hand out free needles to drug addicts, to give free condoms to prostitutes and free anti-AIDS medications to unrepentant sex perverts and whoremongers in Africa. But, none of these things has anything to do with biblical mercy. Such thinking flows from this world's concept of mercy which rejects transcendent law,

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1949] 1958), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 143.

discipline and justice or righteousness. This point is very important for when mercy, pity or compassion is divorced from the overall teaching of Scripture it actually becomes vicious. “The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Pr. 12:10).

A concept of mercy that is not held in conjunction with God’s moral law and biblical concepts of justice, punishment and discipline is nothing more than subjective feeling and sentimentality. We know that God hates antinomian worldly concepts of mercy from the example of Saul’s treatment of King Agag. Saul spared wicked Agag after God had condemned him to death and the result was that God judged Saul and removed him from being the king (cf. 1 Sam. 15:9, 23). Those who flout God’s justice in the name of mercy end up rewarding the wicked and causing distress and suffering for the righteous. American courts in the name of mercy set murderers and rapists free after short sentences to prey on the general public. In our day it is common for church courts to refuse to discipline damnable heretics and scandalous sinners because they believe their actions are loving and merciful. Consequently, they are allowing savage wolves to freely roam among the flock all in the name of compassion. “That is a false and unholy mercy which petitions the powers that be to cancel or modify a just and fully merited sentence which has been passed upon some flagrant offender.”<sup>4</sup> Many prominent evangelical leaders revealed their antinomian concept of mercy a few years ago when they petitioned the governor of Texas to remove the death penalty for a woman guilty of murdering another female with an axe. Christian mercy does not compromise with biblical justice.

This point becomes very clear when we look at God’s nature and character. The Bible repeatedly teaches that God is merciful, tender hearted, compassionate and slow to anger (Neh. 9:17b; Ps. 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2b; Nah. 1:3). However, Scripture also emphasizes that Jehovah is righteous, holy and just. God is exceedingly merciful, yet God never overlooks, condones or countenances sin. The idea that God’s mercy somehow means that He doesn’t really care about sin is unthinkable. It is practically blasphemous. In fact, if God’s mercy was in any way antinomian then there would have been no real reason for Jesus Christ to suffer and die on the cross. Jehovah extended mercy to His people, but completely honored His own righteous character and moral law in the process. Therefore, when we interpret the term mercy in its biblical context we must never do so at the expense of the moral law or God’s righteousness. To do so is both wrong and very dangerous.

Fourth, the mercy described is not meritorious before God. Many who believe that God’s Word teaches salvation by faith plus our own works appeal to this verse as a proof text for their position. The idea is that God looks to see how we treat people; if we are first merciful toward them then God will show us mercy. That is, He will reward us with salvation. That our Lord is not describing our behavior as a foundation for our hope to receive mercy is proven by the following considerations.

(1) The narrow context of Scripture proves that the exhibition of biblical mercy toward others is a *fruit* of salvation and not a cause of it. We have noted that there is a logical progression to the beatitudes. The person who is merciful is first poor in spirit, mournful over his sins and meek before God. He has already been seeking the righteousness of Christ. Thus, it is quite clear that mercy is an indispensable characteristic of a person who *has already been* regenerated by the Holy Spirit and *saved* by Jesus Christ. Obviously, then, the person who is unmerciful, who is not forgiven by God was never a Christian to begin with. His lack of good fruit demonstrates an unbelieving root (Mt. 7:16-20). His failure to do good works proves that his faith was dead, non-existent, counterfeit and worthless (Jas. 2:17-18, 26).

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 30.

(2) Such an interpretation also contradicts the broad context of Scripture. If Jesus is teaching that God only forgives us to the extent that we first forgive others, then we must reject the explicit teaching found throughout the whole Bible that men are saved by grace through faith and that our good works have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with our justification before God. “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9; cf. Ac. 13:39; Rom. 3:20-24, 28; 4:3-8; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:8-9, etc.). Further, the Bible tells us that Jesus had mercy on Paul and saved him while he was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples” (Ac. 9:1); while he was on his way to arrest and persecute Christians in Damascus (Ac. 9:2-3). Moreover, Paul says that “Christ died for the ungodly...that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6, 8); that “when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10). If we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture and allow the multitude of clear passages to shed light on passages that are less clear or that if taken out of context seem to contradict the Bible as a whole, then we will not fall into the deadly, pernicious error of works salvation.

Fifth, biblical mercy is not merely a feeling or attitude, but is a way of thinking that results in compassionate action. Christian mercy is an inward compassion that reaches out to others in need and assists them. People that talk about how much they care, but offer no real help at all, do not have real biblical mercy. “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:17-18). “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily good, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” (Jas. 2:15-16).

We once again can learn about mercy by looking at the mercy of God. God looked at fallen mankind in sin and misery, had mercy on them and took action. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16). He “spared not His own Son, but delivered him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). In the ministry of Jesus Christ, mercy in action was a prominent feature. “He not only pitied, but saved.... With what indefatigable [not easily exhausted] activity, what disinterested self-denial, what patient endurance of suffering, did he seek to”<sup>5</sup> helps others. Christian mercy, like the mercy of God and Christ, must be extended toward others.

## Examples of Mercy

One way of sharpening our understanding of biblical mercy is to examine some examples of mercy in Scripture. Joseph extended mercy toward his brothers who had sold him into slavery by forgiving them and providing for them in a time of famine (Gen. 45:1-11). After Miriam had spoken against Moses, challenged his authority and been struck with leprosy by God, “Moses cried out to the LORD saying, ‘Please heal her, O God, I pray’” (Num. 12:13). The good Samaritan showed mercy to the man robbed, beaten and left for dead when he bandaged his wounds, poured on oil and wine, set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him (Lk. 10:34). A Christian must have compassion not merely toward those that they already love but even to a stranger they encounter in dire need. God has had mercy upon us so that we would be compassionate and merciful toward others. “What are we doing to help those who are troubled in mind, body or estate? There are many such in the world. There are always some near

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<sup>5</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of our Lord*, 1:130.

our own doors. What are we doing for them? Anything, or nothing at all? May God help us to answer these questions! The world would be a happier world if there was more practical Christianity!”<sup>6</sup>

In the parable of the lost son when the son repented and came to his father we are told, “when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him” (Lk. 15:20). After the son confessed his sin, he was fully restored to the household with no resentment on the father’s part but only love, joy and celebration. The father’s compassion was expressed by his willingness to forgive his son’s guilt and relieve his son’s suffering. Mercy forgives and welcomes penitent sinners.

The supreme example of mercy and compassion was Jesus Christ our Savior. When our Lord saw those who were sick, diseased and lame, He had compassion on them and healed them (Mt. 14:14; Mk. 1:41-42; Lk. 7:22). He had mercy on those who were demon-possessed and set them free from their bondage and suffering (Mk. 5:13; 9:20ff.). He freely forgave men their sins (Mk. 2:6) and had mercy on a mother by raising her dead son (Lk. 7:13). When He saw that the multitude had nothing to eat and were about to faint He had compassion on them and miraculously provided food (Mt. 15:32-39). When Jesus saw suffering, He was moved to action repeatedly to relieve that pain and anguish. In fact the Redeemer’s whole life and existence was one of mercy. He came to die to relieve men of the guilt of the sins and the consequences of those sins. He took the curse, pain and suffering of hell upon Himself so that His people would not have to suffer such horrors. Christ had pity and compassion on His sheep to the point that He submitted to death, the death of the cross (Phil. 2:9). “Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in all things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17).

## The Duties of Mercy

Now that we have an idea what mercy means, we need to consider specific things that we can do as Christians that are merciful towards others. Our Lord gave no indication as to whom believers are to show mercy; therefore, we need to consider this passage as having a wide range and must rely on other passages to avoid turning mercy into license or some other error. Further, it is important that as Christians who have been saved by grace, who have experienced God’s mercy that we learn to pity those who are in distress; who have wounded themselves by their own sin and foolishness. “If I weep, says Augustine, for that body from which the soul is departed, how should I weep for that soul from which God is departed? Had we seen that man in the gospel cutting himself with stones and fetching blood of himself it would have moved our pity (Mark 5:5). To see a sinner stabbing himself and having his hands imbued in his own blood should cause relenting in our bowels. Our eye should affect our heart. God was angry with Edom because he ‘cast off all pity’ (Amos 1:11).”<sup>7</sup> There are a number of things that Christians can do to show mercy to others.

First, a believer can show mercy by helping another Christian who has suffered calamity or financial ruin. This can be done, for example, by giving a brother in dire straits an interest free loan or even a gift of money to help him get back on his feet. “The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous shows mercy and gives” (Ps. 37:21). “Mercy has given to him, and therefore he gives in mercy. He is generous and prosperous. He is not a borrower, but a giver. So

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<sup>6</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Trust [1858] 1986), 1:380-381.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 144.

far as the good man can do it, he lends an ear to the requests of need, and instead of being impoverished by what he imparts he grows richer, and is able to do more.”<sup>8</sup> A godly society does not depend on the immoral confiscation and redistribution of funds by the state, but upon the mercy and compassion of the righteous who “shows mercy with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:8).

Second, Christian mercy extends a helping hand to everyone, even our enemies, whom we encounter in a dire life-threatening emergency. This point is illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan. In this story Jesus is teaching what it means to love our neighbor. The Jews at that time taught that one should love and help other Jews, family members and friends, but that non-Jews should be hated and not shown any mercy or love whatsoever. In this parable a man (presumably a Jew) is robbed, stripped and beaten to within an inch of his life. He is left in the hot sun to die of exposure. As he lies there suffering, first a certain priest and then a Levite sees him but walks around him and gives him no aid at all. They essentially abandon him to die a painful death. The Samaritan, however, “had compassion” (Lk. 10:32) on him and took the action necessary to save his life. The Jews hated the Samaritans with a passion and most Jews would not even enter Samaritan territory. Thus, the Samaritan extended love and mercy toward his enemy.

Our Lord ends this parable with a question that reveals the great truth of this story. “‘So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among thieves?’ And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Lk. 10:36-37). This means that one aspect of Christian mercy is a willingness to step in and take action in providential situations where we encounter someone in serious physical trouble. Whether someone has been in a car accident, or there is a house fire, or we see someone being beaten and robbed, or observe a child abduction or people trapped in rubble after a tornado, the Christian is to view such situations as opportunities to extend mercy in the name of Christ.

Note however that the example of the Good Samaritan which deals with an emergency providential situation (that one happens to encounter), does not justify the civil government’s confiscation of tax funds to send to hurricane victims in a Muslim or other heathen nation. Mercy toward our enemies in this parable is a personal one-on-one experience. Believers are not to use their tithe money to set up aid services in far-off lands unless they are subservient to the job of preaching the gospel and setting up new churches. As we mentioned earlier, the extending of mercy must not contradict God’s principles of justice or be used as an excuse to subsidize evildoers.

Third, biblical mercy involves warning unsaved sinners of their record and condition before God. All sinners who do not know Christ as Savior and Lord are living dead men (Eph. 2:1-3; Mt. 8:22). They are under God’s wrath and curse against sin (Rom. 1:18; Gal. 3:10). Even though they may be completely unaware of it, they are in bondage to Satan and sin (Ac. 26:18). With God’s wrath upon them, they are like blind men groping in the dark; walking on thin ice over the abyss of hell. The jaws of death and destruction are never far away. Their condition is desperate, tragic, very sad and exceptionally dangerous. To enter eternity without Jesus Christ is to enter suffering, pain, anguish, despair and hopelessness forever and ever. There are no second chances. There is no turning back. There can be no escape from the eternal curse of living a life serving sin, refusing to repent and not trusting in Christ. Therefore, the greatest acts of mercy do not involve medical aid, food or shelter; but, rather words of truth. Men need the gospel more than anything. Therefore, we must explain to people their severe soul danger—that their record before God is one of sin and guilt. That they have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23);

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<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1882-87] 1983), 2:194.

that they have missed the mark of God's holy law and are guilty of sin in His sight (Rom. 3:9-19); that all of their supposed good deeds and personal righteousness are nothing but filthy stinking rags in God's sight (Phil. 2:8). "They tread upon the banks of the bottomless pit. If death gives them a jog they tumble in."<sup>9</sup>

Do you plead with sinners to repent and turn to Jesus knowing that Christ has saved you from your wicked self, sin and hell? Are you moved with compassion when you see relatives, old friends and acquaintances walking blindly in their sin and guilt toward the abyss of fire? Are you willing to be mocked, laughed at, rejected and even hated to tell them about your precious Savior and what He has done for you?

When missionaries became modernists and stopped preaching the gospel on the mission field; and, when charitable Christian organizations decided to become ecumenical and essentially secular in order to reach out to more people with education, food and clothing, they cast the most important feature of mercy aside. What is a coat and a bowl of rice compared to beholding the face of God forever in heaven? What are warm clothes and a piece of bread compared with escaping God's wrath and the lake of fire on that final day? Charitable works are nothing but brief comforts and vapors that pass away if they are not done in Christ's name and accompanied by the gospel of salvation. Most Christians do not have the resources to do much beyond the church tithe that God requires. But they have something far more precious than gold or silver. They have the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners and that His mission was a complete success. A mercy that looks after men's bodies but does not minister to their souls is shallow, unwise and ultimately unprofitable. When you look upon an unsaved sinner meditate on the torment and affliction that awaits him if he does not believe in Christ. This should motivate you to the most important task of mercy which is winning souls for Jesus.

Fourth, Christian mercy involves reproving other professing Christians when they fall into scandalous sin or embrace heretical doctrine. Many believers and churches have a worldly concept of mercy and thus believe mercy entails overlooking, ignoring and sidestepping sin. Tragically, men who have insisted that church courts deal with sin and heresy have even been rebuked and censured for speaking up. But, leaving a person in sin or heresy is not mercy at all. It is irresponsible, antinomian and cruel. Scripture even equates a refusal to discuss an offense with a brother as hatred. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him" (Lev. 19:17). It is wrong and wicked to hold a grudge in our hearts against a brother who has sinned against us. Instead of holding resentment and anger inside, which usually leads to sinful behavior and conflict, the believer must confront him regarding his sin. For his own spiritual good, the evil must not be left on him. "Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (Pr. 27:5-6). The wise man welcomes and receives such a rebuke, but the fool rejects it (Pr. 9:8; 15:12; 19:25).

Antinomian pity is no better than cruelty. Correct doctrine is so important that Paul told Titus regarding false teachers in the church, "rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" (1:3). "The surgeon cuts and lances the flesh, but it is in order to a cure. They are healing wounds. So by cutting reproof when we lance men's consciences and let out the blood of sin, we exercise spiritual surgery. This is showing mercy. 'Others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire' (Jude 23). If a man were in the fire, though you did hurt him a little in pulling him out, he would be thankful and take it as a kindness."<sup>10</sup> If God's law tells us to come to the aid of a

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 144.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

donkey, belonging to a man who hates us, yet is lying under a burden (Ex. 23:5), then certainly we must offer help to the Christian who has fallen under the burden of sin.

An admonition or rebuke must, of course, be delivered with delicacy and tact. The Christian must reprove his brother with poverty of spirit, meekness and humility. Paul instructed Timothy regarding this topic saying, “And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil” (2 Tim. 2:25). If our mercy is extended with kindness, patience and gentleness, then, if the person rejects the teaching of God’s Word, we can rest assured that they were offended by the truth and not our arrogant tactless presentation of it. If we extend mercy toward a fallen believer and do everything we can to lead him to repentance and he still rejects our counsel, then we have done our job. Their blood is not on our head if he apostatizes (cf. Ezek. 33).

Fifth, we can extend mercy toward others through prayer. When fellow believers fall into sin we must pray for their spiritual recovery. When a Christian becomes sick, we should pray that God would heal him. Jesus instructs us even to pray for our enemies, “for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Mt. 5:44). There are times when people have so rejected the truth that all we can do is to extend mercy through prayer. Prayer is an essential ingredient in mercy, for only God can change the heart; only the Holy Spirit can retrieve fallen sinners. If we have compassion on fallen and lost souls, then one of the best things we can do for them is to pray fervently on their behalf. “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (Jas. 5:16).

Sixth, a crucial aspect of extending mercy toward others is a willingness to forgive a brother who has repented of his sin. “Our God is a merciful God and shows mercy continuously; the citizens of his kingdom must show mercy too.”<sup>11</sup> When Peter asked Jesus, “‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said unto him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’” (Mt. 18:21-22). A believer must have a merciful attitude that seeks a complete reconciliation; that is willing to repeatedly, without end extend genuine forgiveness to a repentant brother. This aspect of mercy is simple and central to the Christian faith, yet it is not followed by many professing Christians in our day. There are a number of ways that this aspect of mercy is commonly violated.

(1) Instead of following God’s example and Christ’s teaching many professing believers do not seek reconciliation, but instead seek retaliation through gossip, backbiting, slander and evil-speaking. The sin of malicious gossip is common in Reformed denominations and is often practiced by ministers, elders and presbyteries. Such a practice is very unmerciful and wicked. Mercy seeks to protect a brother’s reputation and, thus, follows proper biblical procedure. Mercy seeks to protect a Christian’s good name and not destroy it for personal satisfaction.

(2) When people repent, mercy is often not truly extended through a genuine biblical forgiveness. It is very common in our day for people to give lip service to forgiveness because believers know that the Savior requires it, but then turn right around and contradict those words by unmerciful deeds. It is common for people who have supposedly forgiven an offense to repeatedly bring it up and throw it back in a person’s face. Tragically, it is also common to permanently label someone who has sinned and repented as if their sin still clings to them. We can thank God that when He forgives He truly forgives and forgets (Isa. 43:25). He no longer holds a grudge. Biblical forgiveness does not: bring up the matter again; hold a grudge; or,

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<sup>11</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 47.

spread the matter abroad. Mercy comforts the repentant sinner and does all it can to help him, while arrogance and a lack of mercy beats him up and drags him down. Speaking of a man who had recently repented of a scandalous sexual sin, Paul writes, “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love to him” (2 Cor. 2:6-7). “Discipline which is so inflexible as to leave no place for repentance and reconciliation has ceased to be truly Christian; for it is no less a scandal to cut off the penitent sinner from all hope of re-entry into the comfort and security of the fellowship of the redeemed community than it is to permit flagrant wickedness to continue in the Body of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> According to Christ Himself, an unwillingness to forgive a repentant brother of sin is as much a sign of being unregenerate as living a lifestyle of habitual wickedness. A man cannot claim to have repented of his own sins if he is unmerciful toward the sins of others.

## The Merciful Receive Mercy

Jesus says that the merciful are blessed because “they shall obtain mercy” (Mt. 5:7). This mercy obtained raises a number of questions.

First, from whom do the merciful receive this mercy? The answer to this question is, obviously, God. The receiving of mercy presupposes that the person, who receives mercy, is in need of it. Those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit and evidence their faith by living in obedience to the Redeemer’s requirements have been saved by God. On account of what Jesus has done, the guilt of their sins and the misery that sin merits has been completely eliminated. “When God shows mercy, he pardons the guilty and he blesses the miserable. To obtain mercy is for a sinner who deserves everlasting destruction to obtain pardon and salvation, as tokens of the benignant pity of God.”<sup>13</sup> The future tense is used because believers in Christ will receive mercy on the day of judgment and all the miseries of this life will at that time forever cease.

Second, what is the connection between being merciful and receiving mercy? This question is very important because, as we have already noted, Romanists and merit-mongers have misunderstood this passage to their own destruction. Therefore, once again we emphasize that a believer’s acts of mercy are in no way a ground or instrument of receiving mercy. The Bible explicitly teaches that Christ’s atoning death and perfect righteousness are received by faith alone, apart from the works of the law. Therefore, when our Lord says that the merciful will receive mercy, He is describing a characteristic of a genuine believer. Those who exhibit mercy in their behavior are demonstrating the reality of their faith and those who have true faith will receive mercy on the final day. We see much the same thing in Jesus’ description of the final judgment in Matthew 25. “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me’” (vs. 34-36). These works described, which are works of mercy, are decisive in the final judgment, not because of an inherent meritorious quality, but because of their evidential quality.

Third, by way of application, we all need to examine the genuineness of our faith by our works of mercy. Are we merciful toward others who need our compassion? Are we charitable

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<sup>12</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 66-67.

<sup>13</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:134.

toward those who ask us for help? Are we forgiving when people who have sinned against us repent and seek forgiveness; or, do we hold a grudge and tear down our brethren with malicious gossip? Being merciful is such a crucial aspect of being a Christian that if we are not merciful, then we must call into question whether we truly are Christ's disciples. God had been merciful toward us and has forgiven us a multitude of sins. Therefore, let us take pity on those around us; let us show people that Christ has loved us by being merciful toward them.

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