

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 26, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 5:7 (Phillips)

“Happy are the merciful, for they will have mercy shown to them.”

YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE

In this fifth Beatitude, Jesus is simply saying, “You get what you give.” “Happy are the merciful, for they will have mercy shown to them.” This is the law of direct return. If you criticize other people, they’re going to criticize you. If you are friendly to other people, they’re going to be friendly to you. The point is this — If you want to be happy in 1994, treat people right. And the right way to treat people is to be merciful.

Now, what is “mercy”? Mercy is love in action. It’s more than just an attitude. It’s more than just feeling sorry for people. It’s doing something. The Bible says that God is a merciful God. Notice Psalm 145:8 (LB), “God is kind and merciful, slow to get angry, and full of love.” So, if you want to be like God, you’ve got to learn to be merciful.

How do I know if I’m showing mercy? This morning I want to give you the four marks of mercy; and you can evaluate yourself to see how merciful a person you are.

1. If I’m merciful, I will be patient with those who are peculiar!

I believe that we all encounter “weirdos” somewhere along the way! Their elevator doesn’t go to the top floor! The lights are on but there’s nobody at home. They’re “good eggs” but a little cracked. Now, how do you handle these people? Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:14, “...encourage the timid, help the weak, and be patient with everyone.” Are you always patient with everyone? I’m not, and I know I should be.

Now, how can you become patient with those who are peculiar? The answer is, you learn their background. You see, when you understand where a person has come from, you stop saying, “Look how far he has to go!”; and you start saying, “My goodness, look how far he has come!” That change of perspective makes you a little bit more patient. You look beneath the external behavior and see the internal pain, because behind every peculiar behavior there is loneliness or hurt or depression. Romans 15:7 says, “Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you.” Merciful people are accepting people. They’re not quick to criticize or judge. They realize that hurting people are often hurtful people. They try to hurt you because they themselves have been hurt.

So, the secret of mercy with peculiar people is to learn their background.

2. If I’m a merciful person, I will forgive those who have fallen. When people make mistakes, do you rub it in, or do you rub it out? When people let you down, do you hold it

over their head indefinitely? Do you refuse to let them off the hook? That's not mercy. In marriage counseling I have often found that bitterness is perpetuated when someone won't stop dragging up some bad thing that his or her spouse did, maybe years before. That sin, perhaps long since repented of, is used to bludgeon the offender over the head. That's a perfect way to permanently impair a relationship.

Look at Colossians 3:13 (LB), "Be gentle, and ready to forgive; never hold grudges. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others." Now, an interesting thing about forgiveness is that when you are called upon to receive it, it feels so right; but when you're called upon to give it, it feels so wrong! "I don't want to forgive that person; I want justice!" Have you ever said that? It's like the man who had his photograph taken, and when the proofs came back, he said to the photographer, "This picture doesn't do me justice"; to which the undiplomatic photographer replied, "Sir, you don't need justice; you need mercy!"

And may I say in passing — Don't ever ask God for justice, because He might just give it to you. So, if I'm merciful, I will be forgiving to the fallen. It's a lot easier to criticize than it is to sympathize. It's a lot easier to point a condemning finger than to lend a helping hand.

3. If I'm a merciful person, I will help those who are hurting. Proverbs 3:27 (GN) says, "Whenever you possibly can, do good to those who need it. Never tell your neighbor to wait until tomorrow if you can help him now." Now folks, mercy is practical assistance.

One of the great philanthropic orders in the Roman Catholic Church is called "The Sisters of Mercy." These dedicated women spend their whole lives just helping people. There are people all around you who are hurting. Just open your eyes. When you feel sorry for those people, that's not being like Christ. When you do something about it, that's being like the Master.

Notice these verses: 1 John 3:17-18 (LB), "If someone who is supposed to be a Christian has money enough to live well, and sees a brother in need, and won't help him, how can God's love be in him... Let us stop just saying we love people; let us really love them and show it by our actions." That verse stabs me like a dagger. Let's do something real. Let's really help people.

You remember John Wesley's famous motto: "Do all the good you can; by all the means you can; in all the ways you can; in all the places you can; at all the times you can; to all the people you can; as long as ever you can." That's a great motto for 1994! No wonder Wesley made such an impact upon the world.

You are all familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan. Here is this poor fellow lying in the ditch beaten up, bleeding profusely; half dead. And two passersby each said, "I can't get involved, I'm sorry." But the third man came along, and without a moment's hesitation, went into action. He took him down to the Holiday Inn, left his American Express Gold Card and said, "Take care of him, and I'll pay for it all." That's mercy! Jesus is saying in this Beatitude, "Happy are those who care enough to get involved."

Now look at this next verse, Jude 22, "Be merciful to those who doubt." Why does Jude

say that? Because, folks, when you're hurting, that's the time you're most likely to doubt God. You say, "Where is God? He's not hearing my prayer. Maybe He doesn't care. Maybe He doesn't even exist." If you've never had these doubts, then you've never been in very much pain, let me tell you; because if you've been in pain, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

What is the Christ-like response to people who doubt?

- You don't debate them. ("Oh, I'm going to prove to you that God exists...")
- You don't demean them or put them down.
- You don't disown them by saying, "Oh, you're not a Christian — you have doubts!" And,
- You don't desert them.

What do you do? You show mercy. You show understanding. You support them. You let them know you care about them.

4. If I'm really merciful, I will do good to my enemies. For many people this is the most difficult. Our Lord in Luke 6:33,35-36 confronts us with the challenge, "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that!... But love your enemies, do good to them... Then your reward will be great... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Jesus is saying, "Like Father, like son." Do you want to be like God? If so, be merciful. You do good to those who do evil to you.

Now, of course, that is the exact opposite of what society says. Society says that when people hurt you, hurt them back. Don't get mad; get even! And if you can do it without them even knowing about it, that's even better! Gossip about them. Destroy them. But God says, "No. That is an ungodly reaction." He says, "You not only forgive that person: You actually look for ways to be nice to him or her." That's what Jesus would do.

Now, this is so hard to do, isn't it? It's easy to talk about, but it's extremely hard to put into practice. Here's someone who has a boss who is a real jerk. Now, suppose that every time that boss criticizes you and cuts you up, you pay him a compliment! It would drive him crazy! Or at school, there are those obnoxious kids who get on your case and put you down because you're a Christian. Suppose that every time they give you a hard time, you build them up by saying something nice to encourage them. It would blow their minds! That's what Jesus says we should do. That's what being merciful is. You return good for evil.

Now, why should you do that? Simply because the best way to eliminate enemies is to turn them into friends. Smother them with kindness. They can't handle it because the world does not respond that way. They don't know how to deal with it; and all of a sudden you are in control of the situation because you are on the offense; you're not on the defense. You're acting, not reacting, as we talked about a few weeks ago. Remember, mercy is love in action. It's the way God treats people.

Now what are some powerful motivators to make you a merciful person? Let me give you three propositions to help motivate you to be a merciful person this week and throughout

1994.

a. I need to be merciful because God has shown me mercy.

Matthew 18:33 (LB) says, “Shouldn’t you have mercy on others just as I had mercy on you?” God expects me to do to others what He has already done to me. Now when you think of those people who really tick you off; if you’re having a hard time being merciful to those people; just remember how obnoxious you and I have been to God! I think of all the flak God has taken from me over the years, and all the things I’ve done my way instead of God’s way. Yet God still loves me and cares for me! What a gracious, merciful God He is. So, I am compelled to say, “God, if You can be merciful to me, surely, I can be merciful to anyone, however obnoxious he may be.”

One day some religious hypocrites brought a woman, caught in the act of adultery, and throwing her down in front of Jesus said, “The Law says she shall be stoned to death.” And Jesus said, “Yes, that’s what the Law of Moses says. I tell you what — the first one of you who has never broken the Law, you get to throw the first stone.” And they all silently started to walk away. (John 8:1-11)

Another time Jesus said, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye, and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3) God has been merciful to me, so I need to be merciful to other people. Have you ever noticed how we tend to judge other people by their worst faults, while we tend to judge ourselves by our best intentions?

b. I need to be merciful because I’m going to need more mercy in the future.

You see, I don’t expect to be perfect from now until the time that I die! So, I’m going to need more mercy myself. Look at James 2:13 (Phillips), “The man who makes no allowances for others will find none made for himself.” What is James saying here? He’s saying, “Only those who give it, get it. Those who give mercy, receive mercy. Those who don’t show mercy, don’t get mercy back.”

Someone says, “But you don’t know how much that person continues to hurt me, and I just can’t forgive.” I say to that person, “Well, I hope you never sin; because forgiveness and mercy is a two-way street, and when I refuse to forgive and show mercy to others, I’m burning the very bridge I’ve got to walk across to get to Heaven.” So, don’t burn your bridges. As I said already, be very careful about demanding justice, because God might just give it to you. If we all got what we deserved, none of us would be here. God does not give us what we deserve; He gives us what we need, and that’s mercy. Mercy is giving to others not what they deserve when they’ve fallen; not what they deserve when they have hurt us; but giving them the mercy they need; the same kind of mercy God has given us.

c. I need to be merciful because it makes me happy. Jesus says, “Happy are the merciful.” Now, the opposite of that is also true — “Unhappy are the unmerciful.” The most miserable people you will ever meet are people who are resentful, who refuse to give up a grudge. Usually they don’t even realize that they are hurting themselves. Lack of mercy makes

you miserable.

It was Ben Franklin who said, "When you're good to other people, you are best to yourself." That's what Jesus is saying here. Look at Proverbs 11:17 (LB), "Your own soul is nourished when you are kind; it is destroyed when you are cruel." That simply means that doing acts of mercy gets us out of ourselves, gets the focus off "me," gets it onto other people and that produces happiness.

This, incidentally, is a wonderful way to get rid of depression. You see, when you're depressed, and all of a sudden you start being patient with those who are peculiar, and forgiving of those who have fallen, and you start helping those who are hurting and begin to do good to your enemies; you will watch the clouds of depression lift and blow away; because it gets you out of yourself; and as you give yourself away, the happiness comes. Mercy is a boomerang blessing. Jesus is saying, "What you give is what you get."

How, then, do I become a merciful person? The starting point is that you must first experience the mercy of God. You cannot offer mercy to anyone else until you have received mercy. You can't offer forgiveness until you yourself feel forgiven. When a person feels unforgiven, then he is definitely unforgiving because if he doesn't feel good about himself, he certainly doesn't want anyone else to feel good! So, I need to receive the mercy, the grace, the forgiveness of God, so that then I can offer it to others.

Jesus offers us His grace, His mercy, His forgiveness. He is the only One Who can do that because He paid the penalty for our sins when He died on Calvary. We don't deserve His mercy, but He offers it to us because He loves us and wants to forgive us if we will just ask Him in faith. If you've not asked Him into your life, would you do it today, and look forward to a New Year of true and lasting blessing?

Now, once you have received God's forgiveness, then it's easier for you to be gracious and merciful and forgiving. So, you start looking at people through the eyes of Christ. See them as Christ sees them, because the most Christ-like thing you can do is to care for other people. The Bible says in Matthew 25:34ff that Christians will be rewarded or punished on the Day of Judgment according to how they treated other people. Jesus will say to genuine believers, "I was hungry and you fed me; naked, and you clothed Me; thirsty and you gave Me drink; sick and in prison and you visited Me... Inasmuch as you have done this to anyone else, you have done it to Me."

God is going to ask you how you treated other people. Were you merciful? Were you like Jesus? Jesus had a ministry of mercy. He lifted up the lonely. He accepted the rejected. He grieved with those who were sorrowing. He loved the unlovely. He helped those who were helpless. He cared for those who were hurting. God wants you to be like Jesus at your work, at your school, in your home.

Now tell me — Who is it in your life who needs mercy? Are you ready to show mercy this week and throughout 1994?

Are you holding the past over someone's head, refusing to let him or her off the hook because of something that was done in the past? Who is it to whom you need to say a word of forgiveness this week? "Be happy; show mercy!" That's what Jesus says.

Surely this is what we want Faith Church to be in 1994. We want this place to be a place of mercy. We want our church family to be patient with the peculiar and forgiving toward the fallen and helpful toward those who are hurting; a place where we do good to people no matter what they do to us.

Will you help make Faith that kind of a church?

AMEN.