

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7)

A friend brought up in a village in Wales told me this story and it had a lasting impact on me

- one of her contemporaries became what was known back then as ‘an unmarried mother’
- despite the disapproval of the community, the young woman went to the local chapel with her baby
- and was turned away at the door by one of the deacons – the chapel is closed now
- and that to me is no loss to anyone – for if it had no gospel, then it might as well be closed
- how many similar stories could people who have been in church for a long time tell?

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:21-35).

The parable of the Lord Jesus is taken from a later part of Matthew's Gospel than our scripture text from

- The Sermon on the Mount which is about both the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of lives
- It opens with 'the Beatitudes', a name that comes from the Latin *beatus* (blessed, still the best translation)
- 'happy' has been devalued and cheapened in modern usage and, in any event, the focus tends to be inside
- Whereas the focus of the Beatitudes is how we stand before God whose blessing rests on unlikely people
- So much so that the usual order of things is turned upside down, or more accurately, the right way up
- The fifth saying is 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy'

You might know that in the Church of Scotland there is a slight variation in the Lord's Prayer

- Scots normally say, 'And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'
- A translation that brings to mind the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant – but is not limited to money
- It is about mercy and forgiveness in their widest sense, a principle open to great misunderstanding
- When we are looking at any passage of scripture, including the Beatitudes, we have to interpret it
- We begin with the immediate context, in this particular case, looking at the other Beatitudes
- And then the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and then the rest of the Bible, its own best interpreter
- Some people make the 'blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy' mean
- If I am merciful to others God will be merciful to me; if I forgive others then God will forgive me
- Therefore, all I have to do is to be merciful (assuming I can do it) and forgiving (another assumption)
- And then I can deserve God's mercy and God's forgiveness by being merciful and forgiving myself
- But this interpretation is nonsense – for throughout the Bible mercy is unmerited and free
- Indeed mercy and forgiveness in the Bible seem to be particularly for those who do not deserve it
- To get what you deserve is justice – the Bible is clear that what we have earned through sin is death
- We can only know mercy because we have a new father, a new heart and a new life

I A NEW FATHER

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk. 18:9-14).

The first thing that we have to do to receive mercy is to realise that we are sinners

- All we deserve is God’s judgment, we have nothing about which we can boast
- But Christian faith is not about relying on our good works, or becoming a self-made man
- It is being born by faith into the family of God and knowing God as Father

Some years ago, a school-friend of my late father gave me a class photograph including both him and my Dad

- The photograph was dated 1938 so my Dad would have been about nine years old
- I was just looking at this when a neighbour called by – I said, ‘this photograph includes my Dad
- He’s easy to spot, he’s the one that looks like my daughter, Fiona,’ who was only about two at the time
- Of course, in reality it was not that my Dad looked like Fiona but that Fiona looked like him
- A strange quirk of genetics as generally people did not think that Fiona looked particularly like me
- Our neighbour looked across 25 children for a moment or two and then correctly identified my Dad
- As Michael grows up – I look at Michael and see me, I look in the mirror and see my Dad
- So it is in the family of God, we are becoming like him because by his mercy, we have been born anew

II A NEW HEART

Being made right with God requires first that we realise that we are sinners under his judgment

- And that God in his mercy has made us alive in Christ – and has given us a new heart
- This has to be a heart after his own divine nature, a heart of mercy and compassion
- Through this we do not earn the privilege of being his sons, his children, but we exhibit it
- As a believer we must ask, ‘Am I merciful so that I can earn God’s mercy?’
- ‘No, I must be merciful because I have received mercy’.

Mercy embraces both forgiveness to the guilty and compassion for the suffering and needy

- This is the disposition of the new heart in Christ
- When the ‘unmarried mother’ took her baby to the Welsh Chapel – she was turned away
- But I wonder, even in the eyes of the self-righteous deacon, ‘what was the correct response?’
- Surely, the correct response was to come to the chapel and to bring the baby with her
- And yet, it seems to me, even in our generation, that some of the people in church
- (and we have to examine ourselves carefully at this point) don’t seem to be able to welcome others
- Without some sense of superiority, perhaps not to the extent of feeling we have to rub their noses in it
- But when someone who does not conform to our pattern of life arrives at church
- Do we do a mental, ‘I thank you Lord that I am not like this person’?
- The Beatitude is in a succession of Beatitudes where the third reminded us ‘Blessed are the meek’
- Can we show by our compassion, a lowliness and meekness of heart, that is the compassion of Christ?
- ‘For to be meek is to acknowledge to others that *we* are sinners
- To be merciful is to have compassion on others, for they are sinners too’ (John Stott)

III A NEW LIFE

It because the believer has a new heart that the believer is able to live a new life

- A life that demonstrates forgiveness toward the guilty and kindness for the hurting and the needy
- In New Testament times, the Pharisees were intent that the people of Israel should be pure
- But they set out to achieve this through rigorous demands, by rules and regulations
- Harshly condemning those they judged were not living up to those demands
- But does that sound so different from churches and congregations that we know?

Jesus taught his disciples to behave in a different way

- Without sacrificing God's standard of holiness, Jesus commended those who showed mercy to the needy
- Because the mercy shown to others will be shown to them, because it has been and is being shown to them
- A heart attitude that is open to receive mercy is also open to give mercy
- Something that the self-satisfied cannot do because they are so pleased with their religious attainments
- That they do not believe they need mercy
- It is because the true disciple is all too aware of the greatness of God's mercy
- That the true disciple must show greatness of mercy to others

It was down to the prophet Micah, and others, to warn Judah of the impending Babylonian captivity

- In this, he reminded people how they should be living
- 'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?
- To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8)
- Prophetic teaching that is in complete harmony with these Beatitudes

I think the question that we need to ask today is:

- How are we, as individual Christians and as Christian communities
- Showing the mercy of God in the present age?
- While I do not always sit comfortably with modern Methodism, I value our heritage
- That to me, of course, is particularly distilled through the verse of Charles Wesley
- Who, with his brother, John, was the accidental co-founder of the modern Methodist movement
- While the style of expression might be different there is not really a word here beyond our understanding

Father on me the grace bestow,
Unblamable before thy sight,
Whence all the streams of mercy flow;
Mercy, thy own supreme delight,
To me, for Jesu's sake impart,
And plant thy nature in my heart.

Thy mind throughout my life be shown,
While listening to the sufferer's cry,
The widow's and the orphan's grown,
On mercy's wings I swiftly fly,
The poor and helpless to relieve,
My life, my all for them to give.

We have to ask ourselves how are we engaging with the world to show mercy, forgiveness and compassion?

- Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.