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The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-12 - The Character of the Kingdom
Part Six: Blessed are the Merciful - Matthew 5: 7

By Tal Davis

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

"The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God Himself."

Perhaps you recognize that sonnet. No, it's not from the Bible, though it sounds like the King James Version, which is not surprising (see below). It is actually part of a famous speech from one of William Shakespeare's plays. It is a plea for mercy by Portia, one of the Bard's most famous heroines and a main character in his play, *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 4, Scene 1). In it she disguises herself as a lawyer and defends Antonio, a bankrupt money borrower, who must pay his lender "a pound of flesh" to cover his debt. The above speech is part of her defense.

The reason it sounds like the KJV Bible is because it was written in the last decade of the 16th century, about the same era as when that translation was published (1611). So naturally they both reflect the same exquisite Elizabethan linguistic

style used in literature by the English upper classes of the time.

But where did Shakespeare get this powerful statement as to the importance of the "quality of mercy?" Perhaps one significant source was from his study of the Bible itself, most notably in the teaching of Jesus from the Beatitudes. In this series we have been studying each of the Beatitudes individually to see what they really mean and how we are to apply them in our lives. In this Part Six, we will analyze Jesus' statement: *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.* (Matthew 5:7 NASB)

And while Jesus' Beatitude is considerably shorter than Shakespeare's elegy, it carries far greater weight of authority. We will begin our exploration of the meaning of this text, as we have in the previous installments, by investigating what it does not mean.

First, we need to understand that being "merciful" (Greek: *eleemon*) is not just having a maudlin feeling of pity or sympathy for the less fortunate. It is easy to feel bad for those who are suffering or poor. But just feeling something does nothing to remedy their situation. How often do we hear people, often celebrities and politicians, lament about the dire conditions of those less fortunate. Yet when it comes to actually doing anything productive to change things, they quickly get back on their private jet planes and demand the government take care of it. This kind of patronizing kindness is not what Jesus had in mind. This leads to the next mistaken idea of being merciful.

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Being merciful, second, is not making token gifts to charities or even to the church. Have you ever noticed how most famous and wealthy celebrities have a special cause or charity they support? Often they act as a spokesperson and do Public Service Announcements (PSAs) for a non-profit charity. They go on TV or do free public appearances to encourage giving to their favored organization. Some even start their own foundations or charity movements.

Certainly many rich people are sincere in their support for whatever cause they sponsor. We can be thankful for wealthy benefactors who generously support worthy institutions like Christian hospitals, relief organizations, colleges, or churches. What is not so well known is that one of the main reasons they do so is because they can claim non-profit charity donations as deductions on their income tax. Even just making a PSA allows celebrities to deduct the market value of what they would normally be paid to make a speech or do a paid personal appearance. (Note: Since 1993 members of the Church of Scientology can write-off the exorbitant prices they pay for their "auditing" sessions by the organization [see: *A Closer Look at Scientology - The Celebrity Cult* at <http://www.marketfaith.org/2015/09/a-closer-look-at-scientology-the-celebrity-cult>].)

I sometimes wonder what would happen in America if all charity gifts (including to churches and other religious organizations) could no longer be claimed as tax write-offs. You might think that is never going to happen. Probably not, but some US politicians favor reforming the tax system so that everyone pays the same percentage of income tax and eliminating all exemptions. Not a bad idea, but if that ever happens

I think we would see hundreds of non-profit corporations, Christian and otherwise (including Scientology), fold up and disappear.

So now that we have determined what Jesus did not mean by "the merciful," let's turn our attention to what truth He actually intends to convey by this Beatitude.

First, being a merciful person means one who is personally conscious that he or she is, himself or herself, an unworthy recipient of God's mercy. The fundamental basis of Christian salvation is that it is entirely by grace (*charis*) (Eph. 2:8-9). That is to say it is a free gift given to us by God despite our sinfulness. It was paid for by Christ's death on the cross as a propitiation for our sins (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). He paid the price we owed. We do not deserve it. We could not earn it. We could not pay for it ourselves. Only the perfect "Lamb of God" could provide such mercy to us (John 1:29,36; 1 Pet. 1:18-19).

So being merciful requires that we fully comprehend the mercy God has granted to us despite our sinfulness. Once we understand that fact, it changes our whole perspective about how we see ourselves and how we see others. So, second, being merciful is the natural resulting attitude that the same mercy we received be shown towards others. Once we truly grasp how much our salvation cost God, how can we feel anything other than wanting to show mercy to others. This is the source of genuine Christian compassion. Think about it; if God loved us so much that Christ died for us, how can we not love others for whom Christ died?

Third, this determines the way we deal with others in our day to day relationships. We are to see others as God sees them. They are made in His image and He loves them. This should make being merciful a natural part of the way we interact with our families,

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friends, co-workers, or even strangers. Let's not forget that even those we encounter who are lost and without Christ are still loved by Him. They are just like we once were, dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1-3). Perhaps our kindness will demonstrate God's love and grace in a way to draw them to Christ.

So what is the consequence of all this giving of mercy? Jesus states it plainly. He promises that the merciful will receive mercy from God. Now we might ask, does this mean we will receive God's mercy in proportion to how much we show others. No, that is not possible. We can never match the level of grace we have been given from God. Nonetheless, He does expect us to be merciful and gracious to those around us. He will reward us with more of his grace – not for salvation, that is already provided for, but in our daily lives as we experience a higher sense of His presence and love. The more we give, the more we are able to receive. Old Shakespeare was right, "The quality of mercy is not strained."

Jesus illustrated this important principle of receiving and giving mercy. In answer to a question from Peter about forgiveness, He told the following sobering parable:

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.

So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'

And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.'

So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'

But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'

And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:23-35)

Here are a few other passages of Scripture that echo the essence of this Beatitude.

*Do not let kindness and truth leave you;
Bind them around your neck,
Write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good repute
In the sight of God and man. (Proverbs 3:3-4)*

*The merciful man does himself good
But the cruel man does himself harm.
(Proverbs 11:17)*

*He has told you, O man, what is good
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:35-36)

For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:13)

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