

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

by Rev. Jimmy Only

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

(Matthew 5:7, NRSV)

It's ironic that in less than half an hour Iraq's deadline will have passed with Saddam Hussein still in power, thus triggering a war. Tonight our Beatitude is, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). No one has ever accused Saddam of being merciful nor will our military be merciful with those who put up resistance. However, those who lay down their weapons are to be treated with mercy, according to the Geneva Convention. On August 12, 1949 the Diplomatic Conference for the Establishment of International Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War was adopted in Geneva. What was the point of this document? In short it was an agreement amongst various countries to show mercy to one another's prisoners of war. In other words, we will show your people mercy if you will show ours mercy in return. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Of course there are those nations who follow the law of the jungle instead of international human rights laws. When this happens, a vicious cycle begins: "Violence begets violence; the cycle of injury and vengeance, injury and vengeance, seems to go on forever. 'Getting even' is almost as old as time" (John Purdy, *Blessed Are You: Resource Book*, Pittsburgh: The Kerygma Program, 1994, p. 25). The first murder in the Bible, when Cain killed his brother Abel, arose out of a desire to get even. God accepted Abel's sacrifice while rejecting Cain's. In a fit of anger, Cain thought he was getting even by killing Abel. God thought otherwise. Nevertheless, while much of the Old Testament's ethics arise out of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" tradition, we might find it surprising that God treated Cain mercifully. Cain's punishment included barren soil and a life of wandering. However, "God placed a mark on Cain to warn would-be attackers that he remained under God's protection" (*The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, San Francisco: Harper, 1996, p. 163). God showed mercy to Cain when it would have been so easy to do otherwise. The Bible contains no record of Cain committing another act of violence. Perhaps in experiencing God's mercy he learned to be more merciful.

It's interesting to note that, "When Jesus said, 'Blessed are the merciful,' he was not giving out a new commandment. Among the Hebrews, mercy was a cardinal virtue. Mercy was also the single most important attribute of their Lord. Their songs and prayers abound with praise to God for steadfast love and mercy" (Purdy, p. 26). Consider Psalm 23:6, which says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Recall as well Psalm 103:8, which says, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

However, in tonight's Beatitude, we find the words are conditional. "Blessed are the merciful, *for they shall receive mercy.*" Does this mean that if we fail to show mercy that God's mercy will be withheld from us? It's similar to the line in the Lord's

Prayer, which says, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Does this mean that God will not forgive our debts if we fail to forgive others?

This issue comes up later in the Gospel of Matthew in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. In this story a king forgives a servant who owes a huge debt. Upon leaving the forgiven servant finds a fellow slave who owes him a small debt. When this second slave cannot pay, the first slave has him thrown into prison. The king hears about it and, outraged, has the first servant thrown into prison until he can pay every cent.

Is God’s forgiveness contingent upon us forgiving others? Is God’s mercy contingent upon us being merciful? Is God’s grace dependant upon our ability to let others off the hook? If this is the case then grace, God’s unmerited favor, is suddenly conditional favor, which means it is no longer grace. What then did Jesus mean when he said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy?” Perhaps it means that if we have truly tasted God’s grace and mercy, and have been forgiven ourselves, that grace will spill over into our everyday lives so that we will naturally show mercy and forgiveness to others. If we have unforgiving hearts we can be sure that our hearts have never been warmed and softened by God’s grace and mercy.

Forgiveness, confession, and repentance go hand in hand. Confession means admitting to God the various ways we have missed the mark or missed out on following God’s way. Confession to God may lead to confession to others when we say we are sorry for hurting them. An important step in the Twelve Step programs like AA is restitution. Here people seek to make amends with those who have been hurt in the past. Restitution is a tangible manifestation of the Christian doctrine of repentance. Repentance means turning around and heading in a different, and in this case, a better direction. In so doing the emphasis should not be so much on looking back as in looking forward. Frederick Buechner says, “To repent means to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ than to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’” (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 96).

As we continue our Lenten journey together, let us look for opportunities to show mercy, knowing that God has always been and will always be merciful with us. AMEN.

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