

**“THE JOY OF A TWICE-BLEST LIFE”**

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Mt. 5:7

If a popularity poll were taken to determine which of the beatitudes has the greatest appeal, the vote would probably be in favor of our text.

The first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” has to be explained to be appreciated.

The second beatitude, “Blessed are they that mourn,” wears a veil which has to be lifted before the wonder behind it can be seen.

The third beatitude, “Blessed are the meek,” is so commonly misconstrued as extolling weakness, many people dismiss it completely.

But, when we read,

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy shown to them,” there is an instantaneous and spontaneous appeal. As the Interpreter’s Bible points out, “The mere mention of the word ‘mercy’ conjures up images of a good Samaritan helping a wounded man on the road to Jericho. Or a band of Red Cross nurses risking their lives to bring help to the casualties of war. Or a chartered plane flying through thunderstorms and fog to deliver a healing medication to a dying child.”

A thousand and one impressions come racing to our minds at the thought of “mercy.” Rescue parties. Kindly acts. Generous deeds. Unselfish service. Brotherly love. And, certainly no other human characteristic more instantly bridges the differences that divide us, than the trait of mercy.

G.M. Trevelyan in his book The Life of John Bright tells the story of Jacob Bright who is John’s father. One day Jacob was coming up the hill from town to his home, and found a poor neighbor in great trouble in the road. His horse had met with an accident and had been killed. People were crowding around the man saying how sorry they felt. To one of these who kept on repeating this most loudly and energetically, Jacob Bright said,

“I’m sorry twenty dollars worth. How sorry are you?”

And proceeded to pass the hat around to buy the man another horse.

*That’s* mercy! Mercy is not just an emotion, it is emotion which leads to action. How desperately our world needs a bit of this healing word to salve its wounds today.

As we climb into our warm, clean beds tonight and snuggle down upon a soft, comfortable pillow, there will be one million women and children who sleep in the streets of Calcutta, India, because they have no bed at all.

As we sit about our dinner table in just a little while and enjoy a delicious meal, there will be one billion people, or nearly half the world’s population, who will be enduring one more day of hunger. They have never had *one* good meal in their lifetime, nor have they ever known what it’s like *not* to be hungry.

All of these needs are not over *there*, somewhere. There are plenty of needs right here at home. A few days before last Christmas, I received a phone call from one of the people in our community informing me there was a family that might need some help. Well, of course, I went to see what could be done, although I couldn’t imagine what it could be. Surely no one in this fine, upper middle-class community of Morgan Park would need anything.

But I walked into a firetrap of a hovel for which a greedy landlord was charging exorbitant rent, and found a family that did not have enough to wear or to eat. We made arrangements to have their needs met. I prayed with them, and left. As I climbed into my car -- appalled, shaken, *angered* at the exploitation of people by *other* people -- I had to stop and ask God’s forgiveness for my own complacency and blindness to the needs which are going unmet right under my nose.

Which is to say that if there’s one place we Christians have failed -- and we fail in many ways -- it’s that we have *theorized* about our faith. We’ve debated over doctrinal issues while the world

is dying in misery without the necessities of life, and in many cases, without hope.

Little wonder there is so much boredom, frustration, and unhappiness among us. We have anesthetized our hearts against the needs of others, and have measured our meaning in terms of what we can get from life rather than what we can give to life.

You say, “Well, Dr. John, what can I do?” You might be surprised at how many friendless, lonely people there are right here in Morgan Park. Believe it or not, there are oodles of people in our community who never receive a letter. Never know the warmth of a handshake. Never (or rarely) go out because they are too shy, or too timid to take the lead in a social setting.

All about you there are people who are lonely, despondent, and miserable. And, it would mean so much, as they sit in their loneliness, to have someone *like you* care enough to write them a letter, or visit them, or go out of your way to make them feel at ease.

This was and is the spirit of Jesus. It is mercy that is more than mere emotion. It is Christian faith in action. Reaching out to bind up the broken hearted. To comfort the sorrowing. To encourage the despondent. To befriend the lonely.

Having said that, I must hasten to say that mercy has a much deeper connotation than that which relates to the Red Cross, or Florence Nightingale, or just plain neighborliness. In the Bible, the meaning of the word “mercy” takes on a much broader scope. It speaks of God’s gracious disposition toward *people*. His readiness to help *people*, forgive *people*, redeem and bless *people*. It describes his loving kindness, his goodness, and compassion toward us, his *people*. And this attitude of God toward *us*, is the pattern we must follow in our relationship toward other *people*.

*His* mercy toward *us* becomes the basis of *our* mercy toward others. As true followers of Christ we must walk in the footsteps of him who came, “Not to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved.”

Do you remember the story Jesus told about a king who forgave his servant a huge debt which he could not pay? Soon thereafter, this servant met a fellow servant who owed him a mere pittance. Because the poor chap could not pay, the first servant had the second servant thrown into prison. As a result, when the king heard about the unforgiving nature of the man whom he had forgiven, he ceased to be merciful. He called justice into play, and had this ungrateful wretch of a man tossed into jail.

I am sure you remember the story, but I wonder if you remember what Jesus said immediately following it?

“So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if you, from your hearts, forgive not others their trespasses.”

Here is forgiveness conditioned *by* forgiveness. And, if you think about it for just a moment, you will see that it is not at all unreasonable. We have a saying that “what goes up must come down.” But if nothing goes up, nothing can come down! As one commentator suggests,

“In physics we are taught that for every action there is a reaction. But, if there is no action, there can be no reaction.”

And that’s what Jesus was trying to get over when he said,

“If you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses.”

Without *forgiving*, *forgiveness* cannot be received. In other words, if we don’t, he can’t!

This is a theme which winds continually through the teachings of Jesus --

“We must be forgiving if we want to be forgiven.

We must be merciful if we want to find mercy.”

That doesn’t mean our showing mercy gives us any claim to the mercy of God. If *I* let someone renege on a debt he owes *me*, that doesn’t mean I have the right to expect *you* to let me renege on a debt *I* owe you.

Now, be clear on this! What Jesus is describing here is not a kind of tit-for-tat arrangement, a kind of arbitrary bargain where God says, “You forgive him and I’ll forgive you.” But, what it *does* mean is that unless forgiveness flows *out* of your heart, there’s no room for the forgiveness of God to flow *into* your heart. And, when you fail to recognize this fact, when you refuse to be forgiving, you pay a dreadful price.

We all know the name John Wesley. And, though we are not Methodist, we owe him a great debt for the spiritual insights he gave to all Christians. In one of his sermons, Wesley tells of a rich landowner whose servant broke open and drank several bottles of his employer’s expensive wine. The rich man was very angry over this insubordination, and not only fired the man but threatened to put him in prison. John Wesley interceded on behalf of this poor fellow, urging the rich man to be merciful. The irate landowner said, “I never forgive!” To which Wesley calmly replied, “Then I hope you never have to be forgiven.”

The law of life is that things beget their kind. This holds true negatively as well as positively. Just as mercy begets mercy, so, too, mercilessness begets mercilessness. The Romans were merciless toward their barbarian neighbors, and when the latter finally conquered Rome, they showed no mercy to the Romans. The Germans, in WWI were merciless toward their enemies, and they received little mercy at Versailles. The Czar’s government was merciless toward the Russian peasants, and when the revolution of 1917 put the peasants in power, they showed no mercy toward their former oppressors. What is true internationally, is also true individually. Holding negative, critical, fault-finding thoughts toward others disrupts your own soul.

As a matter of fact, the most expensive thing you can do is to hold a wrong spirit in your heart towards another. The price you pay in the loss of your fellowship with God, is enormous. To hold a grudge, to be unforgiving, to be merciless, is to destroy the bridge over which you must pass to reach the thrown of God’s mercy.

“If you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive

you yours.”

In other words, you must follow in the footsteps and spirit of our Master, who, when he was reviled, reviled not again.

Ephesians 4:32 puts it this way --

“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.”

If you take a long, hard stare at the life of Jesus, you will see that there was nothing of condemnation or vilification in any of his actions.

He forgave his false friends who betrayed him.

He forgave his followers who deserted and denounced him after he was arrested.

He forgave the bribed witnesses who falsely testified against him during his mock trial.

He forgave the judges who presided over the court where the principles of law and justice were totally disregarded and willfully perverted.

He forgave the Sanhedrin who condemned him to death.

He forgave the mob that reviled and abused him.

Even in the agony of suffering on the cross, Jesus showed his tender mercy and gentle forgiveness to those who nailed him to the cross and said,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

We must not forget that *we* were there when they crucified our Lord. *Our* sins were part of those that nailed him to that tree. And *we* are included among those who received his divine mercy,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

And because God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven us, we must forgive others. Not to obtain mercy, but because of the mercy we have already obtained.

*The reason we are to be forgiving is not to be forgiven in the future, but because of the forgiveness we have already received in the past.*

One very beautiful story of human forgiveness which almost borders on the divine is that which Allen Chalmers gives us in his book High Wind at Noon. It is the story of Pierre Holm who was a world-famous engineer. He built great bridges, railroads and tunnels in many parts of the world. He gained wealth and fame, but later came to poverty, failure and sickness.

He returned to the little village where he was born, and, together with his wife and his little girl, eked out a meager living. Pierre Holm had a neighbor who owned a vicious dog. Pierre warned him that the dog was dangerous, but the old man contemptuously replied, “Hold your tongue, you cursed pauper.”

One day Pierre heard a terrible scream coming from the yard outside his home. He rushed outdoors to find his neighbor’s vicious dog at the throat of his little girl. He tore the dog away, but the dog’s teeth had gone too deep, and the little girl was dead.

The sheriff shot the dog, and the neighbors were bitter against its owner. But the owner was unrepentant. He remained as caustic and contemptuous as he had been before. To show their displeasure, the people in the town refused to sell the man any grain, so that when sowing time came, his fields were plowed, but bare. He could neither beg, borrow or buy seed. In fact, the hostility of the community was so great against him, that when he walked down the road the people of the village sneered at him and turned aside.

But not Pierre Holm. He couldn’t sleep at night for thinking of his neighbor. Very early one morning he arose, went to his shed, got his last half bushel of barley. Then he climbed the fence and sowed his neighbor’s field and quietly returned to his home. No one knew what he had done until the fields themselves began to tell the story. When the seeds came up, it was revealed that part of Pierre’s field remained bare, while the field of his neighbor was green.

It strikes me that this is an illustration of true forgiveness. Mercy requires that we sow good seeds in our enemy's field, even though it means part of our field will be left bare. It is not easy. It is the hardest possible action. But it is the key to the kingdom of happiness.

Arch Bishop Tillotson expressed it this way,

“A more glorious victory cannot be gained over another man than this: that when the injury began on his part, the kindness and forgiveness should begin on ours.”

Or, to put it the way a blind girl did one day,

“Mercy is the odor which flowers give when they are trampled on.”

Surely these two phrases bear repeating --

“Mercy is the odor which flowers give when they are trampled on.”

“A more glorious victory cannot be gained over another man than this: that when the injury began on his part, the kindness and forgiveness should begin on ours.”

When a man learns to give mercy in that way, he receives mercy, even as God has promised. He enters into the joy of a twice-blest life. For, as Shakespeare says with such symmetry of speech, “The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice-blest. It blesses him that gives, and him that takes.”

### **The Joy of the Twice-Blest Life**

When we begin to stretch our soul in loving service for others,

When we so live throughout the day, when we can pillow our heads at night and say

“I was merciful, or at least I tried to be merciful today. I tried to make someone feel better. I tried to make someone happier, someone wiser. I tried to help someone with his or her help. I prayed for someone. I was eyes to the blind and

feet to the lame and friend to the lonely.”

When we have thus been merciful, we will be given mercy.

Even as the gentle rain of heaven falls upon a plot of hard, dried, trampled earth, refreshing the soil and causing the sleeping seeds to break into life, so, too, when we water the garden of our soul with the divine mercy-drops, our hearts are softened, our clenched fists are relaxed, and, instead of being bitter, we are better. Indeed, “Happy are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.”

This doesn’t come easy. We do not suddenly wake up one morning with a merciful heart. But, as one author suggests,

“When we passionately desire it, diligently seek it, energetically work for it, earnestly strive toward it, then God graciously rewards us with a merciful heart.”

We enter into a correct relationship with him and with others. We look forward to the day when God’s promise is fulfilled,

“I will meet with thee, and commune with thee, about the *mercy* seat.”