



247 Broad Street | Red Bank NJ 0770  
(732) 747-0446 | [www.umcredbank.org](http://www.umcredbank.org)

**October 14 , 2018**

**The Beatitudes – “Blessed Are the Merciful””**

**Introduction to Worship** - *♪Blest are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs.*

This morning we pick up our worship series on the Beatitudes, the first part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he is painting for us a portrait of what people of the Kingdom look like. When we become citizens of God's Kingdom and start to follow Jesus, what does that look like in our lives? In each of the verses of our Beatitudes text from Matthew chapter 5, verses 3-13, we have both a portrait and a promise. The portrait is of the blessed people of the Kingdom, which is then followed by a promised reward. Last week we explored how we are blessed when we are poor in Spirit, knowing that we need God in our lives, recognizing that we don't have all the answers, nor can we do it all in our own power and strength. Today we've swapped the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Beatitudes, reserving Blessed are those who mourn for our celebration of All Saints day on Nov 4<sup>th</sup> – and so we turn our focus today to mercy, wrestling together with what it looks like to be merciful, and why it brings blessings, not only to our lives, but to others as well. With our thoughts turning toward mercy, let us sing this refrain together about the blessings we find as we live into the Kingdom of Heaven.

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### **Luke 6:31-38 (NRSV)**

Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your

reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

**Matthew 5:7 (NRSV)** - Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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I remembered this week a game I used to play as kid called "Mercy"... I wonder if you've ever played it? In some ways, I hope not... because it was about the finding out who was stronger by interlocking hands together and then twisting and contorting your opponents arms around until the weakest cried out MERCY! Some people would use a different word than Mercy... they'd cry out "monkey" or "uncle"... but regardless... the word you used didn't really matter.... when you couldn't take it anymore, you just shouted out anything to mean, "I give up! Have compassion on me!"

Sometimes in the church, we toss around the word "mercy", but like the game, we interchange it with other words, like grace or compassion, kindness or forgiveness. When I step back, I wonder if we know the difference between these words?

This morning I'd like us to focus on what is mercy? What distinguishes it from grace? What's its relationship with forgiveness? How does it relate to compassion? When Jesus sat on a mountainside in the country of Galilee and proclaimed "Blessed are the merciful!", what exactly did he have in mind?

Mercy is a desire to relieve someone from suffering. It goes beyond the feelings of compassion and sympathy as it puts them into action toward anyone in need. Mercy is seeing a people without food and feeding them. Seeing someone desperate for love and taking time to build a relationship of care. It is seeing someone lonely and spending time with them. Mercy is taking action to meet a need, not simply feeling compassion, but doing something about it.

It's important for us to make a distinction here between mercy and grace. Grace is all about getting what we DON'T deserve - God's undeserved favor and love. So no matter how good or bad we are, no matter how many mistakes we make throughout our lives, God's love for us is unfailing. God is

always reaching out to us in love, ready to forgive and welcome us home. If grace is about getting what we DON'T deserve, mercy is about NOT getting what we DO deserve. It's about being saved from the consequences of our actions, being shown compassion and raised out of a challenging situation.

There's a story about Napoleon that demonstrates this concept of mercy in a beautifully clear way. A young man had been caught and arrested for stealing from Napoleon's royal palace, not once, but twice, for which the punishment of the land was death. Sentenced to hang, the boy's mother sought mercy from Napoleon on behalf of her son. Napoleon answered the mother's plea, "This boy has stolen from my palace twice now; he deserves justice and that justice is death." The mother replied, "But I don't ask for justice, your highness. I seek mercy." "He does not deserve mercy," replied Napoleon. The mother passionately begged, "It would not be mercy if he deserved it." Touched by the mother's grief and passion, Napoleon consented and released the boy. Mercy is NOT getting what we DO deserve through compassion and forgiveness put into action.

Out of compassion, Napoleon forgave the boy for his crime... so then are forgiveness and mercy the same? They're similar, but not exactly the same. Forgiveness is more based on emotions and what we are feeling. Forgiveness is to stop feeling resentful toward someone for an offense, flaw, or mistake... It's a letting go of the emotions of anger and resentment. Mercy goes beyond emotion and feeling, and is more about ACTION – letting go of your power to punish or harm a person for what they did – letting them off the hook.

And this... this is where it gets really hard! Because what happens when everything within us wants to hold a grudge or point a finger at someone because of what they've done to us? What happens when the motivation for mercy – which is compassion and forgiveness – is in short supply? As we read this Beatitude, we're reminded that we're called to be merciful, with the promise that we will receive mercy. It is this recollection that WE ALL receive mercy for any number of offences, that can be our motivator, when the last thing we want to do is show mercy.

In the autumn of 2007, an 18-year old named Abdollah Hosseinzadeh was killed in a street fight in Iran by a man named Balal, who was then sentenced to death. According to the local laws, Balal's execution was to be carried out with the help of Abdollah's family. But things didn't go as planned. Marched before the angry crowd, Balal was made to stand on a chair, and a noose was wrapped around his neck. But then, Abdollah's mother walked forward. She

slapped Balal, with tears streaming down her face, and then asked her husband to remove the noose. Effectively, in a legal sense, she pardoned him of his crime. She showed radical mercy. Had she fully forgiven her son's killer, probably not, but her commitment to compassion and mercy, motivated her into action, even though her heart wasn't fully there yet.

Unfortunately, this motivation for mercy is all too often missing in our world today. It is missing in politics, the workplace, our homes, social media, and even sometimes churches. We get so focused on justice – on making sure people get what they deserve that we forget Jesus' call to mercy. They hurt us, so we want to pay it back. They made a poor choice, so they have to suffer the consequences of their actions. They made their bed, they're going to lie in it! In the midst of our toxic and divisive culture, we need to lift up the Beatitude, challenging ourselves and others to live it out.

Remember the second part of today's verse – “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” As we experience others, and God, having mercy on us, we are moved to compassion and motivated to pass it on, extending a hand and heart in mercy to others. Like so many positive things, mercy creates a ripple effect that cannot be contained, and makes the world a more loving, grace-filled place.

Mercy is not only lived out in radical ways – like Abdollah's mother pardoning her son's killer. But mercy has a mundane, everyday quality, too. Let's imagine what mercy looks like in our lives, in big and small ways. I challenge you this week to find at least one place or relationship where Jesus is calling you to be merciful. Whether your heart is fully in it yet or not. How might it change the climate of our homes and workplaces if, more often than not, we let go of our offenses, rather than hung onto them and stewed about them? How might it change our relationships if we're known to be a constant source of mercy instead of anger, and kindness instead of retribution?

May God bless us day by day as we grow ever more merciful, living out the kingdom of God in loving, forgiving, grace-filled ways! Amen!