

This winter, I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled Revival. This series came out of a conviction that God has so much more available for us individually and as a church, but if we choose complacency, if we give ourselves to worldly pursuits while relegating him to an afterthought, then we will miss out on all the power, the joy, the love, and the wonder that He had for us. Oh, that we would not live our lives and never experience the power and reality of our great God! May we give ourselves to Him and earnestly plead for a revival of our souls and of our church, that His kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Earlier in this series, I mentioned what Richard Lovelace calls in his book *Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal* the **two preconditions of revival: an increased awareness of the holiness of God, and an increased awareness of the depth of our sin**. By holiness, I mean that God is transcendentally separate from us in His perfection. By sin I mean our rebellion against God, our inability to measure up to His holy standard, and our brokenness. The more we are aware of the greatness of God, the high expectations of God, the incredible promises of God, along with our own inability to live up to His expectations and the terrible effect of our sin on ourselves and others, the closer we are to revival. You want to see revival in your life and in the church? Pray for those two things – Lord, increase my awareness of your holiness and the depth of my sin.

Over the past few weeks, I've been trying to dive deeper into the second part, the awareness of the depth of our sin, and to do so by looking at the Beatitudes, the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes describe the blessed life, the characteristics of the man or woman who is favored by God, what a life touched by revival will look like. This morning, we will be looking at Matthew 5:7 – **"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."**

What is mercy? What does it look like to live mercifully? Mercy is compassion towards someone experiencing the consequences of sin, plus action to relieve suffering. It can be focused on spiritual offenses – relieving someone from the consequences of sin through forgiveness; and also on physical suffering – relieving someone from their misery. **True revival should be accompanied by a church that is not just hungering and thirsting for God, but is also compassionate towards the suffering of the world and is willing to give of itself to meet the needs of its community.**

Two parables that Jesus told will help us understand what it looks like to show mercy: the parable of the unforgiving servant, and the parable of the good

Samaritan. A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson. In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells a story about showing mercy to those who have offended us:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

In Jesus' day, there was a popular belief that three was the limit that you had to forgive someone, and so Peter probably thinks he's being generous here by offering to forgive seven times. But Jesus tells him to forgive seventy-seven times. It's Jesus' way of saying "keep on forgiving and don't keep counting." And then, to illustrate his point, Jesus tells this parable:

²³ *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ 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.*

Jesus tells them a parable about a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The money belongs to the king, and one of his servants, who is probably one of his tax collectors, owes him ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents is the rough equivalent of about 9.6 billion dollars today. Jesus' point is obviously that this servant owes an enormous debt that can never be repaid.

Continuing:

²⁶ *"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

The servant says, "I'll pay it back!" Really? That's ridiculous. This servant is not only foolish, he's stupid. Nevertheless, the king takes pity on him – he feels compassion for him. He is merciful towards him. **Mercy is compassion towards someone experiencing the consequences of sin, plus action to relieve suffering** He cancels the debt. And he lets him go.

Now, it's important to note that just because the king cancels his debt doesn't mean that the debt goes away. After all, this is the king's money that has been lost or embezzled. **Someone needs to bear the cost.** But in this parable, the king chooses to

bear the cost. Jesus is telling a story in which a king pays the price, bears the cost himself, by cancelling the man's debt and letting him go free.

I think that Jesus' parable is genius in how he uses the metaphor of money and debts. When someone hurts you, there is a debt that is created. When you are wronged, there is a debt, and somebody has to pay. The natural response is to make the one who offended you pay. When we decide to get revenge, we are saying "I'm not paying for this one. You will pay for this one." We make them pay through gossip, slander, the cold shoulder, abuse, withdrawing friendship, or ruining their reputation, among other things. And maybe that works – over time, the debt goes down and you no longer feel the need for revenge. But in the process, making them pay for what they have done has a way of twisting you into a bitter, spiteful person. Or, as often happens, revenge becomes a back-and-forth cycle. They hurt you, so you hurt them back, and then they hurt you back again.

Where there is conflict and hurt, there is a debt that is created, and someone has to pay it down. Either you will make them pay, or, you will pay it down yourself. Essentially, that is what forgiveness is: Choosing to pay down the debt yourself. Forgiveness is choosing to bear the cost yourself and to not punish your offender, but rather to treat them with love and to leave the judgment to God

Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, shares what he calls "The four promises of forgiveness":

"I will not dwell on this incident" – don't rehash the past and keep focusing on what someone did to you.

"I will not bring up this incident and use it against you" - *1 Corinthians 13:5* - *Love keeps no record of wrongs.*

"I will not talk to others about this incident" – You don't malign their reputation to others

"I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship" – you treat the other person with kindness. You pray for them

When you forgive someone by choosing to pay the debt down yourself, it feels like death. But in the end, it leads to resurrection and rebirth. Forgiveness is choosing to pay the debt down yourself.

Now, let me clarify what forgiveness is by saying six things forgiveness is not:

- 1) **Forgiveness is not condoning what someone has done.** It's not saying it's okay.
- 2) **Forgiveness is not forgetting.** Sometimes you need to remember so that you do not allow it to happen again.
- 3) **Forgiveness does not mean you don't confront sin** – Confrontation has as its end the restoration of the person who hurt you. It comes from a desire to see them grow in righteousness so that others will not suffer the way you have. It does not come from a desire for vengeance
- 4) **Forgiveness does not mean there are no consequences** – there may be consequences, even with forgiveness.
- 5) **Forgiveness is not reconciliation** – forgiving someone doesn't mean you need to get back together or that you will start another business together. I doubt the king hired the servant back. Trust takes time to rebuild.
- 6) **Forgiveness is a process** – it doesn't happen all at once, typically. Maybe today all you can do is decide that you won't kill the person who hurt you. That's a step in the right direction.

The story continues in v. 28:

²⁸ *"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' ³⁰ 'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*

The servant has just been forgiven a few billion dollars of debt. And now he goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii, which would have been about 3 months wages. The other servant says the same thing – be patient with me and I will pay you back. But the first servant refuses and has the second servant thrown into debtor's prison.

³¹ *When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² 'Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of*

yours because you begged me to. ³³ *Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back **all he owed.** ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

When the king hears about what his servant has done, he has the servant thrown into prison. And look how Jesus ends – this is how God will treat you if you do not forgive others. I would encourage you not to read this as a comment on your eternal status before God, for that would make our salvation contingent upon our works; but rather on your present experience of freedom. **If you insist on holding people accountable for what they have done and making them pay for what they have done to you, then you will continue to live in a prison of bitterness and anger, as God refuses to show you mercy.**

Remember, Jesus taught us that blessed are the merciful, those who see the terrible consequences of sin in others and have pity and are moved to compassionate action to relieve their suffering. What does this parable teach us about why we should be merciful?

Certainly the main point of this passage is that we forgive because we recognize how much we've been forgiven. If we are struggling to forgive someone, the power to do it comes from being reminded of the depth of our sin and how much God has forgiven us. We go back to our poverty of spirit, to mourning, to recognize God's mercy. As you are humbled, you find it easier to forgive.

Romans 5:6-10 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath **through him!** ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

This is the gospel – God, in Christ, paid the debt that we owed through His death on the cross for our sins, and we have been freed. The more you understand this, the more you will be able to show the same kind of mercy to others. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, **“Meekness is essentially a true view of oneself, expressing itself in attitude and conduct with respect to others... The man who is truly meek is the one who is truly amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and**

treat him as well as they do.” How much easier it is to forgive and be merciful to others when we see our own sin and God’s mercy towards us.

But mercy is not just about forgiving sin and having compassion on those who have mistreated us. The second parable that shows us what mercy looks like is the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

The passage begins in Luke 10:25:

***Luke 10:25-37** - On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

The scene begins with an expert in the law – not a lawyer, but a theologian, an expert in Jewish Old Testament law – who has come to test Jesus. What do I have to do to inherit eternal life: to be right in God’s sight, to enter heaven, to be saved? But instead of answering the question, Jesus asks the man a question in response:

²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷ He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" ²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." ²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus turns the question back on him. You’re an expert in the law – how do you read it? And the man correctly identifies the core of the law – love God and love others, both of which are central to the Old Testament. This is the sum of God’s law: **Love God** – desire Him above all other people and things, and serve Him with your whole heart, devoting your life to Him. **And love your neighbor as yourself** – care for others and meet their needs with the same intentionality and fervency you do for yourself. Jesus tells the man, “**do this and you will live**” – **you will have eternal life**. Then Luke writes that the expert in the law wanted to justify himself, so he asks Jesus a follow-up question – and who is my neighbor? **What does it mean to want to justify yourself?** To be justified is to be innocent, to be not guilty, to have met the standard of righteousness. The expert in the law wants to be sure that he has cleared the spiritual hurdle, and so he asks Jesus for clarification on who his neighbor is.

Now, in those days, the understanding of the religious elite was that your neighbor was your fellow Israelite. You were to love and act in love towards your fellow

Jewish man or woman, but you were under no obligation towards others outside your nation, especially your enemies. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:43: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" And so undoubtedly this expert in the law felt that he had measured up to God's standard for love, for he loved his Jewish neighbors, and he wanted to see if Jesus agreed. He wanted to justify himself.

But Jesus responds to this man by telling him a parable:

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. This would have been a very familiar road to his listeners, one that many Israelites traveled. It was a very dangerous road, known as **the Way of Blood**. The Way of Blood was 17 miles long, running downhill from Jerusalem to Jericho, making its way through barren mountains over rough terrain with caves and large boulders where bands of robbers often hid in order to rob travelers. And this is precisely what happens to the man in the parable. He is robbed, beaten, and left half dead.

But then two men walk by: first a priest, and secondly, a Levite. Priests were servants of God who offered sacrifices for the Jewish people in the temple. And the Levites were men who also served in the temple, but in subordinate roles as assistants, or as police or maintenance. Both men would have been very familiar with the Old Testament passages about loving your neighbor and loving mercy and doing justice to those who are suffering. Priests and Levites were even responsible for distributing handouts to the poor in Israel. Nevertheless, both men, instead of stopping to help, intentionally cross to the other side of the path to walk by the injured man. **Why do you think they pass by?** It doesn't say, but I can think of three reasons:

- 1) **Contamination** – They might have believed the man was dead, and they knew that if they came into contact with a dead body, they would be contaminated according to the law of Moses. They would be ceremonially unclean. And as a result, they would have to return to Jerusalem for cleansing in order to become fit for service again.

- 2) **Safety** – Perhaps they did not stop because they were afraid for their own safety. Perhaps they feared that it might be a trap or the robbers might still be nearby
- 3) **Entanglement** – Or, maybe they just knew that it would be too complicated to get involved. How would they get the man to safety? Would it keep them from whatever the purpose of their journey was? Best to leave the man and hope that someone else showed up on the scene to help.

Whatever the reason was, both the priest and the Levite pass on by the wounded Israelite. But that is not the end of the story:

³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' ³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" ³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

The priest and the Levite pass by the injured Israelite, but a Samaritan stops to help. He bandages his wounds, probably tearing up his own garments to use. He uses his own wine as an antiseptic and oil as a balm and anodyne to sanitize and seal the wounds. He puts the injured man on his own donkey, even though it means walking beside him the rest of the way. He brings the man to an inn, spends the night with him to take care of him. And then he gives the inn keeper two silver coins, which would have been enough for two months' room and board, to make sure the man is taken care of until he returns.

Certainly the lengths this Samaritan goes to for a complete stranger are impressive enough. But it becomes even more impressive when you understand who the Samaritans were. The Samaritans were hated by Israelites, and they hated the Jews in return. The Samaritans were the descendants of Israelites who had intermarried with non-Jewish people during Israel's time in exile. The Jews considered them half-breeds, religious apostates who had taken their religion and blended it with pagan practices. In fact, when the Pharisees want to insult Jesus, in **John 8:48**, they say, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" The Jews hated the Samaritans and looked down on them. The feeling Jesus' listeners would have had as they heard a Samaritan raised up as the example

of neighborly love and virtue would have perhaps what a patriotic American might feel were Jesus to raise up a member of Al Qaeda as the hero of the story.

Jesus ends the story by asking the expert in the law a question: ³⁶ *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

And the expert in the law can't even bring himself to say "The Samaritan."

³⁷ *The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

Jesus tells the man that loving his neighbor means loving like the Samaritan in the story: (slide) **to be willing to inconvenience yourself, risk your own safety, and bear the cost for anyone who is in need, even your enemy.**

1 John 3:16-18 - *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

The expert in the law asked "who is my neighbor?" And the answer is clear: there are no limits to neighbor love. **Your neighbor is any person in need, whose need you can see, and whose need you can meet.** Even your enemy. And love is sacrificial action. It is interrupting your schedule, expending your money, risking your safety and reputation, ruining your property, even for a stranger, even for an enemy, so that you can do what is best for him. Again: **Mercy is compassion towards someone experiencing the consequences of sin, plus action to relieve suffering**

If we truly understood the gospel and were transformed into people who loved as the good Samaritan loved, what a witness that would be. As Julian, the last pagan Roman emperor (361-363 AD), who was irritated by the spread of Christianity, which he was trying to stamp out, said - *"Do we not observe how the benevolence of Christians to strangers has done the most to advance their cause. It is disgraceful that the Christians support not only their poor but ours as well, while everyone is able to see that our own lack aid from us."*

What if we struggle with showing mercy? What if we harbor grudges and are unforgiving? What if we are apathetic towards the misery of others?

Go back to the beginning.

Remember that each Beatitude builds on the one before it. We begin with a recognition of our poverty of spirit. Remember that the Beatitudes build off each other. We begin by coming poor in spirit, recognizing that we are spiritually bankrupt, dependent upon God for everything. We have no spiritual resume which we can present before God, nothing that is not stained with sin and self-centeredness. But this is not just an unemotional fact. As we consider our spiritual poverty, we see how our sin has negatively impacted our own lives, the lives of others, and especially our God, whose innocent Son died to pay the penalty for our sins. As we see and mourn for our sin, we become meek in our relationship with God and others as a result. With respect to God, we realize that the smartest thing we can do is to submit ourselves to God's good leadership, like a wild horse submitting to its rider. And with respect to others, we are so aware of our sin that we are willing to take the lowest place in relationship to others, because we know that anything good in us is a complete gift of God's grace. And as we see the gap between who we are and how our sin has impacted our lives and others, and what God has for us, we begin to hunger and thirst to be in right relationship with God. We desire more of His life and godliness in our own lives.

We can not look at anyone with disdain, for we know how desperately we needed God's mercy, how spiritually poor we are, how apart from God's power and grace we would have nothing. Where is God calling you to be merciful as He has been merciful to you?

As we fast, pray for a merciful spirit that would be transformed by God's mercy towards us, so that we would live mercifully towards others.