

## **Now You're Getting It: Merciful**

Matthew 5: 7

There are sciences that study just about every aspect of our lives.

From the smallest atomical makeup of matter to the farthest reaches of space, there are people that study all the corners, all the nooks and crannies, of God's creation.

And to be honest with you, I think it's a shame that humans reduce science and spirituality to two diametrically opposed approaches to understanding the world around us.

I happen to think that studying and understanding our surroundings can lead us to a deeper understanding of God, how He works, and of our role within His creation.

Here's a great example. Did you know that there is an entire science behind the idea of compassion? That's right! There are people who study the role of compassion in our lives, in the lives of the people around us, and on our mental and physical well-being.

And I think what they have found is not only beautiful, but it will act as a springboard to launch our larger discussion for today.

Here are some of their findings:

Compassion can actually reduce the risk of heart disease. We all have something called a vagus nerve, which controls things such as our digestion, our heart rate, and our immune system.

Compassion has a positive effect on this nerve, and so not only do we benefit from a reduced heart rate, we also experience an improved immune system for our general health.

Compassion also help us respond better to stress. The National Institute of Health found that compassion that is focused on ourselves or compassion that is directed to the benefit of others led to reduced stress, lower levels of mental illness, and increased well-being.

The science of compassion has also led to the discovery that compassionate people are more socially adept, meaning they are less susceptible to loneliness (which, by the way, can actually lead to negative effects on our health).

And finally, if it wasn't obvious already, we have found that more compassionate societies are generally happier than less compassionate societies.

So what does this have to do with the Beatitudes, which we have been discussing these last four weeks? Well, I think quite a lot, actually.

Let's go ahead and read our Beatitude for today. From the 7<sup>th</sup> verse of Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus says:

*7 Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.*

Yes. That doesn't say anything about compassion.

But let's take a look at these words, because they are closer in idea than we might realize.

Compassion is defined as pity or concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.

On the other hand, mercy is forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish.

Both compassion and mercy involve a recognition of the distance between two parties. Compassion is recognizing that we are better off than someone else. Mercy is recognizing we have a certain power over someone else.

And in both compassion and mercy, we make the decision to close that distance.

So really, compassion and mercy are not all that different.

Those findings we started with this morning each represented that our lives and our world get a little better when we show compassion and mercy. I believe that is the case because we are getting closer to the Kingdom of God.

A man named Alter Wiener survived the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. He entered a labor camp when he was 15.

Three years in those camps took their toll. When he was liberated, his weight had dropped to 80 pounds. He was weak and always hungry.

In one labor camp, he worked in a textile factory. There were German women who also worked in the same factory. They were forbidden from speaking to prisoners like Alter. They were not even allowed to look them in the eye.

One day a German woman pointed, motioning for Alter to go to another part of the room. Alter waited until no one was looking and he went to the spot she had pointed out. She motioned to a crate and walked away.

Al lifted the crate and found a sandwich. I'm sure nothing ever looked so welcoming to him than that sandwich did at that moment. We take something so simple for granted, but how much worth was that sandwich! Alter ate the sandwich quickly while no one was looking.

Every day for two months the woman did the same, leaving a sandwich under that same crate. She risked her life for him. She didn't need to do that, and surely there were people around her that would have encouraged her not to do what she did.

Her actions are the definition of mercy. For her own good, it would have been better for her to not help him. Yet, she did it anyway. She did it because she recognized his pain and desired to ease his suffering.

Alter later said her sandwiches probably saved his life, and he believed that God used this woman's heroic and charitable acts to save him so that he would be able to tell others his story and the story of millions of unfortunate people who were executed by the Nazis.

What would the world be without compassionate, merciful people, people who are willing to feel the pain of those less fortunate than themselves?

Mercy is not only a gift from God, it is how God wants us to live. It is engrained in the blueprints for a holy life, a life that is lived in the Kingdom of God.

So it shouldn't be any surprise that Jesus speaks on mercy in the Beatitudes. It shouldn't be any surprise that one of the characteristics of a follower of Christ who is finally getting it.

Today, we begin the second half of our walk through the Beatitudes. It's a good time to refresh on where we've been so far. You may noticed that there's a simple formula at play in each of these Beatitudes.

That simple formula is: when you become this type of person, you're getting it. But also, when you become this type of person, you receive something in return.

In the first week, we were starting to get it when we were poor in spirit, when we realized how much we desperately need God. And for that, ours is the kingdom of heaven.

After that, we were starting to get it when we have the capacity to mourn, not only sad things, but mourning sin in general. And for that, we will be comforted.

The third week was about being meek, and how we were starting to get it when gentleness was a part of our lives, when our strength was under control. And for that, we would inherit the earth.

And last week, we were hungering and thirsting for righteousness. We were starting to get it when we yearned for a right relationship with God, and when we desired that for all the world. And for that, we would be filled.

Today, we are talking about being merciful. And what we read is that when we are merciful people, when we show compassion to people, we also receive mercy in return.

Let's reflect on this before we end today, because I think it's important to understand this. We generally know what it means to be merciful. Even if we all could use a little more practice at it, we know what it means.

But when it comes to receiving mercy, I think we might need some clarification.

Are we expecting to receive mercy from others? Well, that would be nice, wouldn't it? And certainly, if we were living in a sinless world that is truly and fully the kingdom of God, we should expect that.

But we don't live in that world. We know that we are all sinners, and so sometimes it's going to feel like we are the ones showing all the mercy and getting none in return. No, our hope in our promise of mercy must lie somewhere else.

Do we then expect to receive mercy when we make some mistakes here on earth? I mean, if we're generally good people, and if we really, really try to show mercy to everyone around us, does this promise of mercy mean we can cash in for a freebie or two when we mess up?

Maybe if, God forbid, we find ourselves in some legal trouble, can we go before the judge and say, "Your honor, I showed mercy to someone just last week! Matthew 5:7 says I should now be shown mercy." Case dismissed, right?

Well, again, that should be a firm "no." The Beatitudes are not like those tickets you earn at the arcade when you play skee-ball and can turn them in for a lollipop or something.

No, instead of that, our hope of mercy should always and only be in God. We need to come away knowing that we are to be a merciful people because we ourselves are in desperate need of mercy.

We need to know that without the mercy that comes in the image of Christ on the cross, we are ourselves hopelessly lost in sin. Our only hope for salvation doesn't come in the form of the things we do. Our salvation can't be bought with good behavior coupons.

Our salvation comes in the form of a merciful and loving God, a Heavenly Father who sent his One and only Son to die for our sins, for his blood to be shed to wash us clean.

When we get to that point in our existence when we come face to face with our Creator, we will have to answer whether or not we lived as a people who were convinced that we have already been freed by a compassionate and merciful God.

And if the answer to that question is “yes,” then I think the rest of our lives will ultimately reflect that hope and that promise. I think our lives will reflect a burning desire to live into that same mercy that we have been shown, to spread it as far as we can.

The more we live into the promise of the mercy given to us, the more we will become people who are merciful at heart.

You know, the world may study things like compassion and mercy, and they may be surprised when they find that these ideas make the world a better place.

We, as Christians, shouldn't be surprised one bit.

That should be very plain to us, because as we become the people Christ is telling us about in the Beatitudes, we are getting ever closer to the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom that Christ came to bring to earth.

We will be living as a kingdom of people who are finally getting it.

And all of God's people said...