

## THE MIGHT OF THE MERCIFUL

"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." Matthew 5:7.

It is not without significant meaning that Christ's commendation of the merciful comes next after that of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. It is no accident that Christ passed at once from speaking of righteousness to talk about mercy. The person who is keen on righteousness and justice is quite apt to be merciless. It is so easy to yield to the temptation to become censorious, and to be hard on the weaknesses of others. We are prone to be intolerant in our judgments of people. Our condemnations of them are often very sweeping. Moreover, they are usually very artificial. Besides, the things we condemn in others are not always what Christ denounces.

If one hungers and thirsts after righteousness, he is prone to confuse harshness with a conscientious stand for the right. That is why it is difficult to live with some people who are determined that their particular list of do's and don'ts must be obligatory for everybody. There is something wrong with our following of Christ if it merely makes us denunciatory. Christ taught that the Christian must temper his eager search for righteousness with a spirit of gentleness and mercy. If one does not, the flame of what seems righteous anger may dry up the springs of human compassion.

In the Beatitudes Christ delineated the distinguishing characteristics of those who are His disciples, or the marks by which the true subjects of His kingdom may be identified. Our Lord was not describing the foundation on which rests the sinner's hope of receiving mercy from God, but He did trace the spiritual features of His own people, among which mercifulness is a prominent one.

Of all the Beatitudes there is not one of them that, taken to heart, does not bring conviction to the child of God. There is not one of them that does not tend to drive us to our knees in penitence and prayer. But this, perhaps, is the most searching of all. It brings to mind our hasty judgments, our sharp criticisms, and our callousness in the presence of heartache and pain. As we think about it, we feel that the most appropriate prayer for each of us is: "God be merciful to me a sinner."

In the biblical sense mercy is something much wider than letting an offender escape his deserved punishment. It means compassion--suffering with, sympathy--feeling with, pity and forgiveness. It means the ability to see life from the point of view of another. The Bible is full of the mercy of God. His servants, the prophets, preached it. Amos in the name of the Lord fiercely denounced the cruelties of aggressive war and the oppression of the helpless poor. Hosea's writings were radiant with tenderness for the unworthy woman who had wrecked his life and home. Most of all, we see the mercy of God incarnate in Christ Jesus. How revealing is that incident of the woman caught in adultery and thrust into His presence to be criticized severely, as her accusers hoped, by the wrath of this religious teacher before she was dragged off to punishment! But the indignation of Christ was for those pitiless and merciless faces rather than for their cowering victim. He said, "Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone." One by one they departed hastily. Then Christ said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more." Mercy like that is redemptive and helpful.

Christ Himself was mercy incarnate. In Christ we see mercy personified. It was mercy toward poor lost sinners which caused the Son of God to exchange the glory of heaven for the shame of earth. It was mercy, wondrous and matchless, which brought Him from heaven to this world, prompted His life of service and beneficence, and took Him to the cross where He was made a curse for His people. So it is "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:5). He still exercises mercy toward us as our "merciful and faithful High Priest" (Hebrews 2:17). He has taught all of His followers to be tender towards the helpless, gentle with the weak, kind to the poor, and sympathetic with the oppressed and distressed.

The Christian life has two sides. It has an inward side, and it has an outward side; it has a contemplative side, and it has a practical side. On its inward side, the Christian life is one of fellowship and communion with God; it is the cultivation of the soul. On the outward side, the Christian life is one of active beneficence. The full, well-rounded Christian life is a union of these two elements of communion and beneficence; it is a blend of piety and philanthropy. These two aspects of the Christian life, inward piety and outward activity, are absolutely necessary the one to the other. Let no one attempt to divorce them.

Mercy refers to disposition rather than to action. It signifies pain of heart, arising from a sight of misery. It is a disposition to feel for and to relieve the misery of those around us. Mercy implies sensibility to all suffering, whether deserved or undeserved.

Mercy may be viewed in reference to guilt or to misery. In reference to guilt, mercy is opposed to resentment or revenge, and it is a disposition to forgive, and to deal leniently with an offender. In reference to misery, mercy is opposed to insensibility or cruelty, and is a disposition to relieve suffering or to prevent it; a compassionate tenderness of heart. Such mercy is very wide in its range. It regards both the bodies and the souls of people, both their temporal and their eternal interests.

Mercifulness is a gracious disposition toward others, but it is more than a feeling. It is an operative principle. It not only stirs the heart, but it moves the hand to render help unto those in need, for the one cannot be severed from the other. Mercy does not exhaust itself in profitless words, but it is accompanied by helpful deeds. "But whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" I John 3:17. Mercy is always active. If one possesses a merciful heart, there are bound to be merciful deeds in his life. Mercy clothes itself in gracious deeds. This mercifulness, which is primarily a thing of the inner life, a disposition of the soul, must necessarily find expression in outward conduct.

This mercifulness upon which Christ's approbation rests is a holy compassion of soul, whereby one is moved to pity and to go to the relief of another in misery. In saying that it is a compassion of soul, we mean that it causes its possessor to make the case of another his own, so that he is grieved by it, for when the heart is really touched by the State of another, one is not only stirred within but prompted to action. Mercifulness is an aversion to that which is cruel, injurious and oppressive. It ennobles its possessor so that he tempers justice with mercy, and scorns the taking of revenge. It creates within him a willingness to forego personal ease, interest or gratification in order to help others and to make them happy.

Nobody can have friends or move among his fellow men with a sympathetic heart without continually finding suffering and tragedy, if indeed he does not experience them in his own life. What does God have to say about this? "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him." Psalm 103:13. You care when your child is in trouble. So does God care for you. You cannot always take your child out of his trouble. Sometimes it would not be good for him if you could and would. But you can help him in his trouble. You can sympathize with him, stand by him, encourage and strengthen him. So God does for you in your troubles.

People nurse their grievances. They brood over imaginary slights and real injustices. They watch for a chance to pay back the other person. Such brooding can fan a mere spark of dislike into a blaze of hatred. But mercy can be nurtured in the thoughts and feelings by kindly care. Feeling and action react upon each other. Frequently when feelings are indulged in word or deed they get stronger, whether for good or evil. Even the effort to render practical help to a person whom one dislikes will nourish liking.

Christian mercy is not a mere external quality or accomplishment. It is not just a cold theoretical principle of the mind, but it is identified with the feelings and sympathies of the soul. Christian mercy is a supernatural quality. It does not dwell in the unrenewed nature of man. It is produced only by the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit on the heart. Christian mercy is active. It will be seen in works of mercy. The mind will devise plans of mercy; the tongue will plead in the cause of mercy; and the hands will distribute to the objects of mercy.

One of the channels of mercifulness is the exercise of charitable judgment with reference to others. Mercy must begin with our thoughts concerning others. If we are merciful, we are not going to be Satan's advocate in our estimate of our fellows, but we are going to be kind in our judgments, searching for the best in our fellows instead of the worst, making allowance for their circumstances, temperament, temptations and provocations.

There is no finer description of mercy's sterling worth than is expressed in the well-known words of the great poet:

"It is twice bless'd;  
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes."

Man's own need of mercy is one incontrovertible reason for being merciful to others. Certainly mercy blesses him who gives as well as him who receives. No man ever showed mercy without a blessing to his own heart. We should be merciful, not only because it is enjoined by the Lord, but because it is an express condition of our obtaining mercy.

All along life's pathway we need mercy from our fellow men. All of us make mistakes, make foolish statements, do the wrong thing, or do the right thing in either the wrong way or at the wrong time. Therefore, we need kind judgment and generous treatment from others. The consciousness of our own weaknesses, the mourning of the heart over its own sin, the submission of the will to God, and the deep yearnings after righteousness are the experiences which will make one gracious in his judgments of another, and full of charity in all of his dealings with him.

He who is merciful does not stop by saying, "I am sorry." He proves his sorrow by doing something to relieve the situation. A good example of this is the nameless Samaritan whom the world has remembered through all the centuries. It will continue to remember him to the end of time. It will do so because he was merciful. Being merciful, he could not withhold his services from one who was in need. On the other hand, the priest and the Levite share with each other an immortality of shame. They passed by without doing anything, thereby showing themselves to be without mercy. The Good Samaritan's compassion was not of that shallow, unreal sort that evaporates in sentiment and tears and expressions of sympathy. When he saw the man who had been beaten and robbed, he "went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee." Luke 10:34-35. Mercy is seen here as compassion showing itself in action.

Mercy can never stop with feelings, although it includes them. In his Life Of John Bright, G. M. Trevelyan tells a story of Jacob Bright, John's father. One day he was coming up the hill from town to his home, and found a poor neighbor in great trouble on the road. His horse had met with an accident and it was necessary that the animal be killed. People were crowding around the man and saying how sorry they were. To one who kept on repeating this most loudly, Jacob Bright said: "I am sorry five pounds. How much are you sorry?" Then, Jacob Bright passed around the hat to take a collection to buy the man another horse. That was something of the spirit of Christ, His mercy led to action.

We should be merciful because God has dealt so mercifully with us. We should be merciful because we will have need of mercy from others. Mercy pays dividends in kind. Kindness breeds kindness as surely as cruelty breeds revenge. Only the forgiving can really be forgiven. If a heart contains hatred, there is no room in it for love. "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." If we give, we shall get; if we sow, we shall reap. Mercy is a good investment. "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." To refuse to show mercy is to shut the door of mercy in your own face.