

“The Path to Joy, Part 4”

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Scriptural Foundation: Matthew 5:1-12, NIV

The Beatitudes

¹**Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying:**

³*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴*Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

⁵*Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

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

⁸*Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*

⁹*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.*

¹⁰*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹*"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

One of my favorite stories in human literature is “*Les Miserable*” (lei mizə rab/French), or “Less Miserables” as it should be pronounced. The story features Jean Valjean, a man who would serve nineteen years of hard labor in prison as a result of a crime he committed, stealing a loaf of bread, in order to feed his starving sister and family. Upon Valjean’s release from prison, he starts out on foot to a distant part of the country and he becomes tired and hungry, but inn keepers refuse him food and lodging because he carries a yellow passport which identifies him as a former convict. He even tries the town prison in hopes of finding lodging and some food, but the town prison refused him. He tries the homes of several villagers and from each one he is turned away. He even tries the dog kennel and the dog kennel would not have him. No one welcomes him. He finally arrives at the home of a bishop named Myriel and he invites Jean Valjean to stay the night free of charge and to come and have supper with him. As he eats with Jean Valjean, he treats him with esteem and with respect.

This bishop lives a very simple life. He only possesses two luxuries. The first is a set of silverware and the second are two candle sticks. After Jean Valjean eats, he is shown a room with a clean, soft bed. At night he tosses and turns and he wakes up in the middle of the night. He goes downstairs with his sack in hand and he grabs up the silverware, puts it in the sack, he slips out the door, and he vanishes in the night.

Early that morning, Jean Valjean is stopped by the police and they discover the bishop’s silverware in the sack and they take him back to the bishop’s house. When they knock on the door the bishop answers and he greets Jean Valjean so warmly. He knows that Jean Valjean has stolen his silverware and he greets him warmly. He tells him, “I am so glad that you have come back.” The police show him the silverware in Valjean’s sack and he says, “Yes, I know, I have given them to him as a gift.” Then the bishop chides Valjean when he says, “Valjean, you disappoint me because you failed to remember to take the two silver candle sticks that I gave to you as a gift as well,” and he slips them in his bag. The police exit and the bishop has a few short sentences with Valjean before Valjean leaves and he tells him

that by receiving the two candle sticks he is receiving a commitment to become an honest man. The rest of the story tells of the transformation of Jean Valjean's heart.

In the bishop we see mercy and grace; mercy in the silverware and grace in the candle sticks given to Jean Valjean. This bishop reveals to us a costly and rare mercy. I love this part of the story because the bishop's actions confront my own personal limits for mercy. As I read this story for the first time in high school, I was most surprised by the bishop's response because it had not entered my mind to act this way. I considered that I might have given Jean Valjean, this man in distress, some lodging and some food and that that might have been in my thinking. I considered that I may have even tried to cover for him knowing what he would have to endure if he were arrested again, but never in my wildest imagination had I thought of the response of giving him the candle sticks and adding to mercy, grace.

We study this fifth description that Jesus gives in the life of a disciple. In this description we are invited to a costly mercy: to live a life of mercy, for here Jesus says, "*Blessed, joyful, happy are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*" Jesus identifies mercy as a defining trait of those who have received mercy from God and it is in this fifth trait that Jesus turns a corner in His description of the path of joy. Each description that Jesus gives builds one upon the other; that it is necessary to have the first in order to have the second, in order to have the third, and so on.

We have observed in the first four that the life that is blessed by God is, first, a life of a bankrupt spirit, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit. Blessed, or joyful, is the man who knows his own sinfulness and understands the emptiness of his own soul and his utter inability to earn God's favor. Blessed is that man."¹

Then we studied the second trait and that was a sorrowful sensitivity, "Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed is the man who not only understands his own spiritual poverty, but then he mourns over his own sin and mourns and grieves over his own emptiness."²

Then the third description is that of a meek responsiveness, "Bless is the man who not only mourns over his own sinfulness, but then who submits himself to the resources of God, recognizing that he does not have his own resources in order to address his own problems, but he submits himself to God's resources and to God's rule. Blessed and happy is that man."³

The fourth is a righteous hunger, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed is the man who submits himself to the rule and to the resources of God, but then who yearns for some practical expression of that submission underneath God's resources and rules; who is not content with simply being forgiven but who desires to live the kind of righteous life that Jesus sets before us."⁴

Each of these first four have to do with our relationship with God, but in this fifth Jesus turns a corner and He speaks of how our life with God, this transformation that takes place in the heart of every believer, affects our relationships with other people. The next four Beatitudes will relate to our relationship with other people.

We begin with the fifth description and it is the first description of the way our life changes in reference to our relationship and our relating to others. That fifth description is summed up in these words, "a merciful love". Jesus would say, "Blessed are the merciful..."⁵

We are going to look at the priority of mercy, then at the practice of mercy, and finally the promise of mercy.

Let us first consider the priority that God places upon mercy. All through Scripture God exalts mercy among His people. God never intended for life in a right relationship with Him to be a life of rote, religious ritual or to be a life of cold conformity to a set of rules even if the rules are right ones. If this describes your life with God, then something is woefully missing. The heart, the core, of a walk with God and a relationship with God is vacant and it is absent.

¹ Matthew 5:3

² Matthew 5:4

³ Matthew 5:5

⁴ Matthew 5:6

⁵ Matthew 5:7

We see God's priority of mercy all through the Scriptures; in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, for instance, we see God's priority on mercy in the life of Hosea the Prophet who was called to live out a life of extreme, extravagant, and costly mercy for he was called to marry a woman who would be a prostitute; a woman who deserved condemnation, a woman who deserved to be put away and to be divorced, and yet God said to Hosea, "Love her and continue to love her even as I love you, and even as I love Israel, the unfaithful people. Love her, Hosea and be merciful to her. She is in misery in her sin. Come along side of her to comfort her in her misery, even when she does not want comfort. Show compassion. Show loving kindness and show mercy."⁶

Hosea then, as a prophet of God, would say in Hosea 6, of his prophesy and in speaking for God,

⁶ For I desire mercy, not sacrifice...

To paraphrase this expression that God recites through His prophet, we might say, "For I desire that you treat others with mercy more than I desire that you would pray prayers. I desire that you others in mercy more than I desire that you come to church and worship on Sunday morning, that you would sing songs, that you would celebrate baptism, that you would partake of communion, or that you would give offerings. More than all of these things I desire for you to be filled with mercy."

It is not that sacrifice is unimportant to God; it is not. All through the Old Testament we saw some very specific instructions on sacrifice, but what God was saying through Hosea is that, "if we have all these other things in absolute correct order and to the absolute right degree of commitment, but we do not have mercy for other people, then all of those things become empty and void of their real value and they lose their praise-worthiness. And what a tragedy that is to live a life of commitment before God and following specific rules regarding righteousness in our life, but to have all of that fall limp and lifeless before God, unable to give any of that as worship because we lack mercy."

We see God's priority on mercy not only in the Old Testament, but more clearly in the New Testament and particularly through Jesus, in His life and in His teaching. His life is an expression of mercy as well as is His teaching. Turn to Matthew 22,

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

³⁶"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷Jesus replied: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'* ³⁸*This is the first and greatest commandment.* ³⁹*And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* ⁴⁰*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

The sum of genuine spirituality hang on these two Commandments: loving God and loving other people. If we look at The Ten Commandments that God gave to His people, in Exodus 20, we see that those Ten Commandments are broken up into two halves. The first half has to do with loving God and the second half having to do with loving people. If we take Jesus' words in the eight statements of The Beatitudes, we see that they break apart into two different groupings; the first four having to do with loving God and the second half having to do with loving people. In the section that has to do with loving people, the first expression of love that God has for us in regards to our relating to other people is this expression and priority of mercy: blessed are the merciful.

Jesus, in Luke 10, is going to tell a great story that helps us to understand God's priority of mercy and of the meaning of mercy itself. It is an occasion in which a teacher of the Law, a religious person, asks Jesus a question,

²⁵ "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷He 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'⁷; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'⁸"

⁶ Hosea 3:1-3

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:5

⁸ Leviticus 19:18

²⁸*"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied.*

Jesus is not following this line of reasoning with this man so as to teach him that if he simply works hard enough and obeys enough commandments that he can earn Heaven for himself. Jesus follows this line of reasoning so that the Law itself, these Commandments themselves, would cause this teacher to understand that he is poor in spirit and that he is unable to meet God's righteous commands and so that he would begin to mourn and grieve over the condition of his soul and call out for mercy from God.

That is what the Law does for many. We come right up against these Commandments: what does God require? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind, and we fall face down recognizing that we have not accomplished that; and love your neighbor as yourself.

My dad, early in his adult life, had a conversation with a friend. His friend believed in the "Doctrine of Christian Perfectionism". He was a believer but he held to idea that it was possible in this life to arrive at a state of sinless perfection where one no longer sins. Not only did he believe that, but he believed that in regard to himself; that he had finally come to this point of spiritual maturity. He told my dad that he had arrived at this state where he no longer believed he sinned, so my dad asked him, "Do you mean to tell me that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength?" The man responded, "Yes, I think I do!" My dad asked, "Do you love your neighbor as your self?" That is where the man's face twinged, and he said, "Well, that is a little tougher." It was the Law that came crashing upon his soul that made him recognize that he had not met what God required and that is what the Law is supposed to do, but it didn't do that for this man.

This man looked at those two Laws and he said, "Yes, I have done that. I have fulfilled what God requires." He is about to be really happy until Jesus tells him a story so that he would understand God's priority on mercy and that he would understand his need for mercy from God. Jesus tells him that there was this man who was going on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho and on the way down to his destination robbers jumped him and they beat him to within an inch of his life so that he is laying in the road moaning, almost lifeless. A Levite comes by and he looks at this man and he sees the distress and the misery that this man is in and then he walks by on the other side. We are not told why the Levite walked by on the other side. Perhaps the Levite looked at this man and considered his own schedule. He was a "busy fellow"; he had appointments to keep. Perhaps he looked at this man and thought to himself, "If I stop now this is going to take all day and perhaps more and I have a series of lectures to give at the synagogue on mercy and I don't have time to stop," and he walked on by.

Then Jesus said that a priest came by and he too saw him and he too walked on by and perhaps, we don't know, this priest is thinking that this guy had obviously been beaten up by robbers. That means that robbers are close by and if he stopped it would make him all the more vulnerable. He needed to get to Jericho, his destination, because he was in danger. Perhaps it was fear that drove him. We don't know why, but we do know that these two guys passed by.

Then Jesus said that a Samaritan came by. We have to understand the cultural context in the story. The Samaritans and the Jews had no dealings with one another. They really were enemies and they considered each other roughly. In fact, as often would be the case, if a Samaritan heard that a Jew was having unfavorable circumstances in life the Samaritan would rejoice that they were getting what they deserved.

Similarly, if a Jew heard that a Samaritan was having a rough time they would say that it was about time that they got what was coming to them.

So, a Samaritan comes by, one who would normally rejoice in the misery of a Jew, and he stopped and he had compassion upon this man. It was not just an internal event but he stopped, bound up his wounds, and he put this man on his donkey. Now, he no longer had the comfort of his own donkey to supply for himself and his luggage, but he had this man on his donkey and he had to carry the added burden. They get to a village and he tells the innkeeper to take care of the man, and gave him some extra money so that if he needed anything the innkeeper could make sure that he could give it to him, and if he needed more than what he was providing when he returned he would pay for what the man needed.⁹

⁹ Luke 10:30-35

It is interesting, because at the end of the story, Jesus asked,

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."*

Do you see what a priority mercy is in the Gospel itself? It is central to the Good News. It is mercy that places us in a right relationship with God and then it is that mercy that transforms us so that we become instruments and expressions of God's mercy to others. As we consider this Samaritan and the picture Jesus painted, and He helps us focus the lens so that we understand what mercy is, this Samaritan first observed the distress and that is the first step of mercy. Then, he felt an internal compassion and that is often where our mercy stops. We might have our eyes opened enough to see that others are in pain and to even have an internal feeling that we didn't like that and that we wished that things were different for the other person, but God's mercy, "Blessed are the merciful", goes beyond that internal compassion and takes external action so as to relieve the distress and so as to bring comfort to the one who is hurting and in misery.

Not only that, but the story teaches us that true mercy, God's mercy, does not know the boundary markers that typically define relationships. Mercy cuts through those lines of prejudice, those lines of offense, those lines of hurt, and those lines of anger and of bitterness. Mercy cuts through all of those things and even to an enemy, someone who hurts us, one, who in our fleshliness, we would delight to see them have a difficult time, mercy cuts through all of that and reaches even those folks. That is God's mercy and that is what Jesus is talking about when He says, "Blessed are the merciful for you will receive mercy."

What might hinder mercy in our lives, because mercy is often hindered? There are a number of things that may hinder mercy, but let me share with you one which Jesus talks much about. It is particularly a hindrance to religious people. It is good to be a religious people, that is to say a people who weekly come together to worship God, who daily open God's Word, who daily pray to God, who daily or weekly serve God, who give offerings to God, and make this a consistent part of the flow of our lives. Jesus says, though, to religious people that there is a particular danger that might cut off or hinder mercy and it is a danger that we would all do well to take care. That great danger is this – that we would have such a strong focus on forms and ceremonies and externals of our faith that mercy would be removed from our view; that the externals would take the dominant focus of our life and the real, weighty matters would be neglected.

How do we know that is a danger? I will give two of many, many illustrations I could bring to you. Matthew loves to talk about God's mercy, I believe, because he was so overwhelmed that he was a recipient of God's mercy, as we see in Matthew 9. Do you remember what Matthew's profession was before he became a Disciple of Jesus? He was a tax collector. When you say "tax collector" you have to kind of have a snarl in your voice, because that is the way the people in his day said it. "He was a sinner! He was a tax collector. He was that low-life, a corrupt individual that you could not trust, out after himself, trying to cheat people in order to better himself, and he was a representative of the Roman government. He was a tax collector!"

Jesus came to Matthew, and in great mercy, in the misery of being alienated from God and of being a tax collector, said, "Matthew, follow me"¹⁰ and what did he do, he followed Jesus. In Matthew 9:10, we read that after Matthew follows Jesus and becomes a Disciple, Matthew gathers a bunch of his friends and the only friend a tax collector had were other tax collectors because nobody else wants to hang out with these people. Matthew invites his friends and he says, "There is this guy, Jesus, who showed mercy to my soul. You need to meet him." Jesus is having dinner at Matthew's house with these other tax collectors, but the religious folks, the folks who represented God to the people, the Pharisees, and we read,

¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."* ¹³ *But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'* ¹⁴

¹⁰ Matthew 9:9

¹¹ Hosea 6:6

Once again Jesus is not saying that sacrifice is unimportant and He is quoting Scripture to people who knew Scripture backward and forward. He is quoting a verse the these folks knew very, very well but that they didn't understand.

It is possible for us to know Scriptures without understanding them and that is particularly true of Scriptures regarding mercy; "Go and understand what it means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" The Pharisees had pre-occupied their hearts with religious trifles. They were enslaved to religious trivia and they missed the weightier matters of the Law.

Another illustration Jesus uses is a few chapters later in Matthew, this Gospel of mercy. In Matthew 12, the Disciples were eating grain on the Sabbath and the Pharisees looked in their "code book" because that is what really matters. It doesn't matter that there are guys who are really hungry and they are simply eating a bit of grain to satisfy their poor stomachs because they are hurting and they are in misery because they are so hungry. The Pharisees look up in their code book and say, "That is not lawful. Mercy is not in view about hungry guys. It is the code book!" It is this that took center stage, and Jesus says, "Don't you remember that David fed his men and his companions on the Sabbath?" Then Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 again, so do you think that this verse is important?

⁷ *"If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent."*

Then Matthew records a story so that we get the full import of the priority of mercy that God places. He says that Jesus goes into the synagogue and there, in the synagogue was a man with a withered hand that was completely useless. Once again the religious leaders who were all about the externals and ceremony and law code came to Jesus, and they had their law code in their hands and they asked,

¹⁰ "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

They knew the answer to that because they had their law code and their law code said that it was not and that they had to honor the Sabbath. Jesus looked at them and said,

¹¹ *"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?"*

¹² *"How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*

¹³ Then he said to the man, *"Stretch out your hand."* So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

You would think that at this point the Pharisees would say, "Oh, we finally get it," but notice what they did,

¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

They didn't get the idea of mercy, did they? I wonder how difficult it is for God to help us to understand the weightier matters of our faith.

The second part of this study is the practice of mercy. Mercy is the compassion for people who are hurting and who are suffering. I believe most people, even unsaved people, have a general affirmation of the value of mercy, but it is the application and the understanding of its depth that becomes messy and troublesome, because mercy always costs us something of great value. It certainly did for the Good Samaritan. It cost him his time because he had to stop and lose almost a whole day of business. He was not on the road for no purpose; he was on the road because he was a busy man. It cost him a good bit of money and perhaps more money than he even knew because he was willing to give the credit card to the innkeeper when he said, "Charge it to my account." It cost him his energy when he let this man take his donkey and ride it, but I believe more than anything it cost him his pride to be able to overcome that sense that this is a person whom I should delight that is finally getting something they deserve because this was the way he was treated all of his life. It cost him his pride to humble himself before God and before this man in order to show mercy.

These are all things that it will cost us if we become people of mercy. Mercy is God's ministry to those who are in misery.

There are four applications for you to think about. The first is that mercy calls us to help those who are in physical distress. Physical distress can come upon others as a result of illness or as a result of poverty. God calls His church to be a place of mercy where we help those who are in misery as a result of physical distress. To be sure, we must be wise in our financial assistance because there are many who would readily use God's resources alcohol, drugs, or meaningless things, but you know the fact that we are vulnerable to being used must not hinder us from our joy in giving mercy. How much better is it at the end of our life to be used by many people than at the end of our life never having expressed mercy? Are not we in a much more comfortable position, as we stand before God on the Judgment Day, when rewards are given out, to have God say, "You gave a bit too unwisely," as opposed to, "Where was the mercy?" "Well, I didn't want to waste your resources, Lord." How much a better position it is to be vulnerable? It doesn't mean that we are completely unwise, but friends, I would say that it is important for us as well to help not only with our checkbook but also with our person as much as is possible; in other words to be relationally involved with those who are physically in distress.

Friends, when we show mercy it is an investment that will always make us wealthy. I like what Charles Spurgeon said, "It is quite certain that the Good Samaritan got more out of the poor man whom he found between Jerusalem and Jericho than the poor man got out of him. He had a little oil and wine and two pence and expenses at the end, but the Samaritan got his name in the Bible and there it has been down to posterity a wonderfully, cheap investment."

Isn't that a wonderfully, cheap investment to say, "To spend a day of my life and a little bit of energy walking instead of riding a donkey and then a bit of my money to have my name recorded as an example in Scripture." Friends, I don't know how God will reward you if you show mercy, but I will tell you that it is always a wonderfully, cheap investment.

The second application is that mercy calls us to show kindness and to comfort those in emotional distress. An emotional distress may come upon people as a result of grief, depression, the loss of a loved one, or as a result of inner turmoil. It is important for us to reserve judgment as to why others are so sullen and why others are grumpy or distressed or depressed.

It is easy to look at a grumpy person, or one who is sullen and negative in life, and think, "That person need not be so sad if only they would count their blessings and name them one by one."¹² If only they would begin to embrace the promises of God, then they would have something to be cheerful about."

First, I would say, we don't know the inner-workings and difficulties that any one individual faces in their life so we should reserve, out of humility that we don't know. But, secondly, let us say that it is true, and sometimes, in fact, we may say that often it is true that the person should count their blessings and they shouldn't be so grumpy and that they should be grabbing onto the promises of God. Let me ask you, where is the virtue in such a thought? Is it not much more of a greater virtue to say, regardless of why they are in misery, whether it is their own fault or the fault of another, they are in misery and God has called us along side, not to condemn them and tell them exactly what they are doing wrong to add to their misery, but God has called us to come along side of them and comfort them and help.

I understand that sometimes, when people are in emotional distress, it is scary. We do not know what to say and we do not know what to do. Often times our fleshly fear causes us to shrink away from those in emotional distress. Someone who is emotionally hemorrhaging is much messier than to come along side someone who is physically hemorrhaging. But, God doesn't ask us to fix the problem. He alone is the One who heals. He calls us to come along side and to let them know that we love them and that we are going to be with them. Perhaps someone is saying, "I should have come along side such-and-such a person, but I haven't, and now it is too late." I will tell you that it is never too late to show mercy. If God reveals someone who is near you, who is emotionally hurting, rather than giving into your fleshly fear, make that phone call and move toward them and be Christ. Isn't this what Christ did for us when He took on human flesh?

The third application is that mercy calls us to tell the Gospel to those who are in spiritual distress. Everyone is in spiritual distress in their natural state. This is the ultimate expression of mercy. There is not great value to helping someone's physical or emotional need without addressing that which eternal and that which is the most significant

¹² "Count Your Many Blessings," Chorus, Johnson Oatman, Jr., 1897

misery that they would ever possibly encounter in life; that is separation from God Himself. God calls us to courageous, bold, and merciful by bringing the Good News of mercy, the Good News of the Gospel, and the Good News of hope, and to show compassion; not only to feel it internally, but to take the external action of communicating the Gospel.

The last application is that mercy calls us to forgive those who sin against us. Jesus tells the story that is titled, “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant” and that is the servant who refused to forgive someone who owed so little to him after being forgiven so much.¹³

We will look last at the promise of mercy. This text of Matthew 5 can be easily understood: blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy. Is this salvation by works? Is this God saying that we can earn mercy? I tell you that the very definition of mercy resists such an interpretation. If Jesus is saying that we can earn mercy, then mercy is no longer mercy, it is a wage and it is something that we merit.

Jesus is not saying, “If you do ten acts of mercy, then on Judgment Day there will ten sins for which God will be merciful to you.” This is not, somehow, a payment or a wage in which God is recording acts of mercy for the Day of Judgment to see how many acts of mercy He will provide for us. What is it?

What Jesus is saying is that blessed are the poor in spirit who come to understand their great need and who begin to mourn over it, and who responds to God’s resources and then hunger and thirst after a different kind of life, and who show mercy. When a person begins to show mercy they are giving evidence of God’s work in their life and of their transformation, and they can be assured that they will be shown mercy. This is the evidence we have of spiritual health, of spiritual vitality, and of spiritual life itself, for everyone who enters into God’s mercy is changed by it. That was what was so wrong with this unmerciful servant; he never entered into the mercy that was given to him. He accepted it, but he never entered into it, and so it is, God calls us to enter into His mercy.

The Apostle Paul would say, in Ephesians 2,

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ...

We cannot think about mercy without thinking about the cross, for the cross is the ultimate expression of mercy to a sinful and fallen man. If we were left to ourselves we would be left in a state of misery, of pain and suffering, and of Hell itself, not just in time when we are separated from God for this short life, but forever and ever and ever and ever. God, in His great mercy, sent His Son Jesus so that you and I could have an opportunity to be forgiven.

Have you received God’s mercy? Like Jean Valjean in “*Les Miserable*” we first need to be shown mercy before we can truly give mercy. That story falls short in that it is not being shown mercy by another human that changes us, but it is being shown mercy by God Himself and that is what we need. Have you received God’s mercy?

When my youngest son, Jackson, was about three or four years old, he did something I considered to be rebellious and traitorous, so it was time for judgment day for little Jackson. It was time to execute righteousness in his life. I don’t remember the specific crime at this time, but I remember his response. By this time I had two older boys who went through what we will call “a series of spankings” throughout their early years, so I had grown accustomed to the pre-spanking ritual and explanation. I had grown used to hearing one of three responses right before discipline was to be applied. The first response that often came to me right before discipline was applied to one of my sons was, “I am not guilty! I didn’t do it. I didn’t do anything wrong!” When it became evident that that strategy was not working, because the evidence was overwhelming against them, the second strategy would be employed, and that is, “I did it because of my brother. It was their fault. If it had not been for them and what they had done, I would have never done this!” At that point, they soon learned that strategy didn’t seem to have a great affect upon my response. So, the third strategy was shrieks of sheer terror, “AAAAHHHHHHHHH! NOOOOO!”

That is why, on this particular occasion, what Jackson did absolutely startled me and let me speechless. On this occasion, I explained to Jackson what he had done wrong and it was time to receive the just recompense for his sin,

¹³ Matthew 18:21-35

and Jackson fell down upon his little knees and he looked up at me with tears in his eyes and he said, “Mercy, daddy! Mercy!” What is a dad to do?

I believe, as we consider our life with God, we are very much like little boys as we consider standing before Him as the Righteous Judge. In this life in particular, I believe we often employ those two strategies when we say, “Not guilty! I know I have not done everything completely right, but I am not that big of a sinner, Lord, to deserve judgment, to deserve eternal condemnation, and to deserve Hell. That is not me! I am not guilty of that extreme of an offense.” Then, for those who are graced enough to realize that, yes, their sins are many and they are deep, and it is not just the act of the sin but it is the nature of the heart as well that is an offense to God.

Another strategy may be, “That might be true, but it is not my fault! This is the way I grew up and I started running around with this group and with these kinds of friends and this is why!” Scripture tells us that when we stand before God we stand all by ourselves and not with a group of friends to whom we can point. Each one of us is responsible for our own actions and our own heart before Him.

The third response is the response that, I believe, many will give when they finally do face God and they realize their own guilt and they realize God’s righteousness and His holiness and His own justice, and they realize no excuse is going to remove them from the place of being accountable before God. I believe that there will be shrieks of terror, but the Gospel brings us a better Word.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ says that it is possible for us to be relieved of the just penalty of our sin and to be given mercy. That is, as we understand, that Jesus came down, took on human flesh, and died in our place, and we get down on our knees, one who is impoverished in spirit and mourning and grieving over our own sin and we call out, “Mercy, Lord Jesus! Mercy! Mercy!”

It tell you that the offer of mercy is free to everyone who would come humbly before Him, but the blessing of mercy is given to none except those who come humbly, asking God, through Jesus Christ His Son, to give them mercy. I ask you, have you received from God mercy? Have you called out upon God and said, “Mercy, Lord! Mercy to me a sinner!”

If you have, I tell you that you will be shown mercy for God is a great and merciful God.

Mercy there was great and grace was free.
Pardon there was multiplied to me.¹⁴

Such is the mercy of God.

¹⁴ “Mercy There Was Great,” Chorus, William R. Newell, 1895