

Blessed are the Merciful

¹ And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. ² Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: ³ “Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed *are* those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. ⁵ Blessed *are* the meek, For they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled. ⁷ Blessed *are* the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy. ⁸ Blessed *are* the pure in heart, For they shall see God. ⁹ Blessed *are* the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1–12)

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. The first beatitudes focus more on a person's sense of neediness: poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting – someone needing salvation. Here the focus now seems to turn to the attitude or disposition of a Christian.

One of the great South African phrases is “Ag, shame”. We use that word *shame* in all kinds of ways. We usually means it to communicate “oh, that's a pity” or “poor you”. “shame, did you miss their call?” “Shame, that must have hurt.” The true meaning of shame is something you should be ashamed, “shame on you”. But in South African parlance, it comes to be a mild expression of sympathy, empathy, or mercy.

But what is it to be merciful? Is it a broad feeling of “ag shame?” Some people think a merciful person is a permissive person, a judge who feels badly for guilty people and lets them go, a parent who just can't bring herself to spank her little sweetums, a teacher who is willing to accept a wrong answer on the exam, because they know how hard the student tried. But all of that is not mercy. That is permissiveness, even lawlessness. That is being sentimental, falling in love with how easy-going you are, or even just being cowardly and refusing to punish, or condemn, or fail, or discipline when you need to.

That's not mercy. What is mercy? Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave us a good definition when he compared the concepts of mercy and grace.

‘Grace is especially associated with men in their sins; mercy is especially associated with men in their misery.’ In other words, while grace looks down upon sin as a whole, mercy looks especially upon the miserable consequences of sin. So that mercy really means a sense of pity plus a desire to relieve the suffering. That is the essential meaning of being merciful; it is pity plus the action. So the Christian has a feeling of pity. His concern about the misery of men and women leads to an anxiety to relieve it.

Maybe one of the best illustrations of mercy is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan saw the wounded man

³⁴ So he went to *him* and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave *them* to the innkeeper, and said to him, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’ ³⁶ So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” ³⁷ And he said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:34–37)

Yes see the suffering, the misery, and you want to alleviate that. You wish the person was free of

their misery.

Now the Beatitude is liable to a misunderstanding. Some read “Blessed *are* the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy” and they conclude, if I show mercy to others, then God will show mercy to me. If I forgive others, then I will be forgiven. If I don't forgive, I won't be forgiven. Of course, if this were true, no one would ever be saved, no one would ever become a child of God. Because some of the very sins we need to be saved from and saved out of are sins of bitterness and unforgiveness. We need God to forgive us and give us a new heart, and from there, we can begin to be merciful.

What Jesus is saying is that those who are truly repentant receive mercy, because the truly repentant have become merciful in heart. How so?

The beatitudes are not about earning righteousness and trying to internalise it. They are about receiving the gospel, becoming new from within and then fleshing it out. Remember, we begin by seeing how spiritually poor we are and how much we need God. We go on to mourn our sin and wish it gone. We then meekly accept the shame and reputation of being Christians. We hunger and thirst for His righteousness. If you are in that state, you realise you deserve nothing but punishment, and to be forgiven is an act of mercy by God.

Now what does a person who has received all this mercy do towards others? It is Jesus' parable of the servant forgiven ten thousand talents. You look out at others and you see that they, too are stuck in the misery of their sin, and you wish for them the mercy you have received.

The person who has no mercy towards others has good reason to examine his heart, if he is in the faith. Because people who know the depth of their own need begin to look upon others differently. Like Stephen, who when he was being stoned by his persecutors, “knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:60)

Have you ever come to a place when there was someone in your life who has harmed you, hurt you, transgressed against you? And perhaps it was within your power to humiliate the person, shame them, punish them, shun them, exclude them. But then the working of God in your heart began to show you that they are actually miserable. The sin they are committing against you, the sin they are living in is destroying them, harming them, ruining them. Their sin can never bring them joy or peace, or lasting good. And with that perspective, you actually begin to pity the person. You see them through new eyes, as a person needing mercy, needing rescue, deliverance, help, to get them out of their self-imposed prison of sin-misery.

That's when your merciful salvation is working on you to make you merciful. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, (Ephesians 2:4) . The love that is the source of God's mercy becomes the source of your mercy.

Mercy for others can come in many forms. There is physical mercy on people's lack of food, shelter, or their health. There is a social mercy on the loneliness of another. There is the emotional mercy of seeing someone wracked by depression, or anger, or addiction, or a self-destructive behaviour. And there is the spiritual mercy of seeing people without God, and therefore without hope, without a centre, without meaning, and without a heavenly destiny.

Mercy longs to lift people out of their misery. If you received mercy, then you will certainly have it in your heart and give it to others.

Blessed are the Pure in Heart

¹ And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. ² Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1–12)

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

This beatitude appears right in the middle. It feels like it should either have been first, since seeing God is the great purpose of faith, or maybe the conclusion. Instead, it is in the middle. But that is no mistake, for the ones before it lead up to it, and the ones after it follow logically from it.

Lloyd-Jones “Now the first three Beatitudes were concerned with our need, our consciousness of need—poor in spirit, mourning because of our sinfulness, meek as the result of a true understanding of the nature of self and its great ego-centricity... Then comes the great statement of the satisfaction of the need, God’s provision for it, ‘Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.’ Having realized the need, we hunger and thirst, and then God comes with His wondrous answer that we shall be filled, fully satisfied. From there on we are looking at the result of that satisfaction, the result of being filled. We become merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers. After that, there is the outcome of all this, ‘persecuted for righteousness’ sake’. In the first three we are going up one side of the mountain, as it were. We reach the summit in the fourth, and then we come down on the other side.”

What does it mean to be pure in heart? Well, first, notice that this has to do with the heart. Much of the Sermon on the Mount contrasts true righteousness with the Pharisees’ form, which was all external, all washing of hands and pots and dishes. Jesus does not say pure in deed, or pure in ritual, or ceremonially pure. Pure in heart.

In the Bible, the heart is a wonderful combination of ideas that we have separated in modern psychology, and modern ideas about man. We talk about the mind, as if it is this isolated brain activity, and then we talk about the emotions, these wild and flighty things, and then we talk about the will, this choosing faculty. But the Bible really combines all three in the term heart. Scripture speaks about heart as a place you think “As he thinks in his heart, so is he”. It speaks of the heart as a place of affection “Love the Lord your God with all your heart”. It speaks of the heart as the place of choice “Set your heart to seek the Lord” Biblically, your heart takes in knowledge, is shaped to love or hate what it thinks, and then moves in the direction of its loves. And that composite knowing, loving, choosing is what the Bible means by heart.

What then does it mean to be pure in heart? Purity of heart points in at least two directions. First, the Bible often talks about our hearts being divided. James talks about the double-minded man. Our hearts are drawn away by lesser loves, by idols. David prays in the Psalms “Unite my heart to fear your name”. One of the signs of our depravity is how spiritually adulterous we are, casting our eyes wistfully at the world, thinking perpetually that there is a better deal for us than life in Christ, a better life for us in worldliness. This is a wavering, divided, lukewarm heart. It was the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who said, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” He meant a single-

minded focus on God. A heart that confesses and forsakes its idols.

Spurgeon: "God is not truly sought by the cold researches of the brain: we must seek him with the heart. Love reveals itself to love: God manifests his heart to the heart of his people. It is in vain that we endeavour to comprehend him by reason; we must apprehend him by affection. But the heart must not be divided with many objects if the Lord is to be sought by us. God is one, and we shall not know him till our heart is one."

But a second kind of purity of heart is the kind that is clean from sin. To put it another way, this is a heart that is Christlike. And how would we summarise the heart of Christ? Christ loved God supremely, Christ lived for the glory of God. And all sin is ultimately choosing something other than God, choosing the promise of something God forbids, choosing a pleasure or a thing which does not display the glory of God. To be pure in the clean, undefiled sense is then very close to the first sense. Because if you are undivided in seeking God, you will be like Christ in what you say yes to and what you say no to.

Now why should this kind of purity lead to seeing God? The answer is that in the spiritual realm, light does not mix with darkness. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.' If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:6–7)

¹⁴ Pursue peace with all *people*, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: (Hebrews 12:14)

But what is this seeing of God? Does it mean in the future, when we see the beautiful vision as we saw this morning in John 17. It certainly does mean that. Or as John puts it "² Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. ³ And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 John 3:2–3)

But there is a kind of seeing of God in Christ which takes place even now. It is the Christian's privilege that through the work of the Spirit we can recognise God where others do not see Him. We see His work in creation. We see His hand in history. We trace His work in our lives. We see His fulfilled promises. And as we pick up the Scriptures, we see the glory of God in the approximately 444477 Hebrew and Greek words that make up our Bible. Those impure in heart, because they are not born from above, not granted new hearts, do not see this glory now, and have no promise of seeing it in eternity.

So how do we get this pure heart? Well, the major work is the work of God in granting us this new heart at the moment we repent and believe on Jesus Christ as our Lord, and Life, and Righteousness.

But then there is a work for us to do as believers. James writes 'Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.' Paul writes, "¹ Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (2 Corinthians 7:1)

By the inworking Spirit, I can seek to sin less, even if I am never sinless. I can put off old and evil ways, and put on Christlikeness. I can renew my mind with Scripture, so that I increasingly love what God loves and hate what He hates. As I draw near to Him, I can expect to see Him more and more.