



**Westminster**  
**Presbyterian Church**  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

**The Merciful**  
**Matthew 5:7**

Today we come to the fifth beatitude. And I ask you to hear the words of Jesus as I read from Matthew 5:1-7.

**“And when he saw the multitudes he went up on the mountain, and when he had sat down his disciples came to him an opening his mouth he began to teach them saying.”**

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”**

**“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.”**

**“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”**

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be satisfied.”**

And today’s text is: **“Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.”**

You who have been here for the previous four sermons understand my goal is that we as a congregation can recite all eight beatitudes together without looking. And you who know me understand that I often go into mental lapses, but I will try not to look as I lead us, but will you quote with me these first five beatitudes.

Our former President Mr. Bill Clinton told of the first time he met Nelson Mandela. In his conversation with this South African leader, the President said, “Nelson, when you were released from prison, I woke my daughter up at three o’clock in the morning. I wanted her to see this historic event. As you

marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused in on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. That's not the Nelson Mandela I see today. What was that all about?"

Mandela answered, "I'm surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the cameras caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, 'They've taken everything from me that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they're releasing you, but there's nothing left for you out there.' And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying within me, 'Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to make you into a free man, only to turn you into a prisoner!'"

I hope you are listening, for this is maybe one of the most important lessons you will ever learn, and it is a key to living a beautiful life. It is the same lesson Jesus was teaching in the fifth beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy," or in the light of what we learn from Nelson Mandela, "An unforgiving heart, an unmerciful heart, creates bitterness in our souls and imprisons our spirits."

On the surface both the fourth and fifth beatitudes cause for me a theological problem. I spoke about it last week, but today's beatitude also sounds like a form of works righteousness. That is, for us to receive mercy, we must first be merciful -- **"Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy."** My problem comes in the knowledge that in Jesus Christ we have already received his free gift of mercy. We read in Romans 5, **"For the proof of God's love is that while we were yet in our sin, Christ died for us."** Before we did anything, Jesus came to die for us. Then there are those familiar words of Paul in Ephesians 3: **"For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own work lest anyone should boast."** It is not because we were merciful that God came to us in Jesus Christ, it was simply through God's love, even though we tend to be unmerciful.

What I understand Jesus is teaching in this fifth beatitude is the grace to live without bitterness and resentment. It is to come face to face with the person who has done you wrong, who has stolen your money, hurt your family, who has taken your words and misrepresented you, opposed your promotion, and not be bitter, for you have learned the grace of forgiving even the most unforgivable sin against you. In this you receive mercy as a result of your mercy.

I am not one who watches or really cares about the Academy Awards, but what I appreciate is that during the month before the Academy Awards, the Turner Movie Classics channel shows movies that have won awards in the past, so last week I again watched *Gandhi* which starred Ben Kingsley.

You may remember that in 1947 Britain granted India independence, but the land was partitioned into two countries – India where there was a Hindu majority and Pakistan where there was a Moslem majority. Horrible violence broke out, started by the displaced people who had to move. Gandhi began a fast, and vowed to fast until the violence ended or he died.

There is a scene in the movie where a Hindu man approached Gandhi who was weakened from his long fast. This Hindu man threw a piece of bread at Gandhi and said, “Eat, eat--I am going to hell and I don’t want your death to also be on my conscience.”

Gandhi asked, “Why are you going to hell?”

The Hindu man said, “I killed a child. The Moslems killed my boy; he was about this high.” He held his hand about four feet off the ground. “They killed my boy, so I killed a Moslem boy.”

Gandhi said, “I know a way out of hell. Go find a boy who is about this high,” Gandhi also holding his hand about four feet off the ground. “Go find such a child whose parents have been killed in the violence and raise him as your own, only be sure to raise him as a Moslem.”

A look of total shock came to the Hindu man's face, then he realized that Gandhi had shown him in the most concrete way what Jesus taught, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Mercy is the way out of the hell of bitterness and resentment.

Is there anyone here carrying around bitterness or resentment? Perhaps parents abused you, or a friend slighted you, a mate betrayed you, or a partner bailed out on you. I wonder if you could tell me about your anger. Is there a grudge you are carry around?

Max Lucado wrote, "Resentment is the cocaine of the emotions. It causes our blood to pump and our energy level to rise. But, also like cocaine, it demands increasingly larger and more frequent dosages. There is a dangerous point at which anger ceases to be an emotion and becomes a driving force. A person bent on revenge moves unknowingly further and further away from being able to forgive, for to be without the anger is to be without a source of energy.

"That explains why the bitter complain to anyone who will listen. They want – they need -- to have their fire fanned. That helps explain the existence of various hate organizations. Members of these groups feed on each other's anger. And that is why the resentful often appear unreasonable. They are addicted to their bitterness.

Earlier Johnny read the story Jesus told about the king who decided to close out his accounts. A man was brought to him that owed him billions and he could not pay. He was shown mercy and the debt was forgiven. The man was set free to go on his way, and on his way he saw a co-worker who owed him twenty bucks. And when this co-worker could not pay, the first man had his co-worker thrown into prison. When word reached the king, he became livid. And Jesus said, "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed."

Could someone actually be forgiven a debt of billions and be unable to forgive a debt of twenty bucks? Can a person who has been set free imprison another?

You don't have to be a theologian to answer the questions; you only have to look in the mirror. Who among us has not begged God for mercy on Sunday and then demanded justice on Monday? And I would contend that the point of the beatitude is that we, like the unmerciful servant, will be thrown into prison, not one with bars, but the prison of our own bitterness, which will ruin our life. An unforgiving heart creates bitterness in our souls and imprisons our spirits.

A woman wrote, "I caught my husband making love to another woman. He swore it would never happen again. He begged me to forgive him, but I could not – I would not. I was so bitter and so incapable of swallowing my pride that I could think of nothing but revenge. I was going to make him pay and pay dearly. I'd have my pound of flesh.

"I filed for divorce, even though my children begged me not to.

"Even after the divorce, my husband tried for two years to win me back. I refused to have anything to do with him. He had struck first; now I was striking back. All I wanted was to make him pay.

"Finally he gave up and married a lovely young widow with a couple of small children. He began rebuilding his life – without me.

"I see them occasionally, and he looks so happy. They all do. And here I am – a lonely, miserable woman who allowed my selfish pride and foolish stubbornness to turn me into a bitter woman."

Unfaithfulness is wrong. Revenge is bad. But the worst part of all is that, without mercy and forgiveness, bitterness is all that is left.

What did Jesus say? "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

Maybe Frederick Buechner can help us understand. He wrote: “When somebody you have wronged forgives you, you are spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive someone who has wronged you, you are spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride for both parties. Forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside your own skin and to be glad in each other’s presence.” That is giving mercy and receiving mercy.

John Muir is the father of our National Park system. Muir was born in Scotland, and was reared in a somewhat abusive Calvinist home. As a child he was forced to memorize the Bible. I understand he did not stop with the beatitudes, but he did memorize the New Testament, and some of the Old Testament.

As he roamed in the wonder of our nation’s wilderness, he pretty much rejected his Calvinism and became a Naturalist. One of his biographers wrote, “The fusion of nature and God was not a static order created by a distant Great Mind. ‘God’ for Muir was a deliberately loose and imprecise term referring to an active, creative force dwelling in, above, and around nature. Continuously animated by that divine force every part of the natural world was in a constant flux—the earth moving under foot, glaciers flowing down mountainsides, plants and animals evolving and spreading. Always the flux was purposeful. Always it moved toward beauty. Always and everywhere it was holy.”

Of course, I have some problems with Muir’s theology. But I was struck by that statement. Isn’t that a wonderful way to describe God? Not all that loose and imprecise stuff, but the concept that where God is there is a movement toward beauty--that is what I am talking about. Our loving, merciful, forgiving, redemptive God is always working toward beauty. The problem is us. Often times we are not moving in that direction.

Jesus said, “**Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**” I don’t know what grudges you hold. I don’t know where you are driven to

enact revenge. I don't know what it is that causes bitterness in your soul. I have heard it so many times, "I simply cannot show mercy. I cannot forgive. You have no idea what they did to me." "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, that is what the good book says." Some will always be bound to bitterness, and some will use their lives to move toward beauty. That is the godly thing to do. **"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."**