

Blessed are the Merciful

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Luke 10:25-37

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

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In the story of the Good Samaritan, a person was beaten and robbed while walking the path between Jericho and Jerusalem. I have hiked a few miles of that twenty-mile journey. You follow a path along a barren landscape, along the top of a ridge line over a very steep gorge that drops down several hundred yards. It's a lonely trail, and there are plenty of places where you could get into trouble, and this fellow did.

A priest walks up to the fallen man and clearly sees him. He wasn't just texting a buddy on his Blackberry, and out of the corner of his eye he saw someone lying on the ground and just shuffled past him. The original word in the story Jesus told literally means "to pass by." However, to this little word meaning to pass by was added the prefix "anti," which means against or opposite. The priest doesn't just walk by the fallen man, he "anti" passes by, meaning he walks way opposite the man or way around the man. It's a great visual image of "I'm not getting involved. He's not my problem. I'm outta here!" The second man, a Levite, walks up. Levites, like priests, were also

religious professionals. Their job was to assist the priests in their work in the temple. He also clearly sees the fallen man, and he also "anti-passes by," walks way around and totally avoids the situation!

The third man walks up and clearly sees the robbed and beaten man lying there. The word that is used to describe what this third man does is fascinating. In our pew Bibles, that word is translated, "He was moved with pity." I prefer the translation, "He was moved with compassion," because pity is a word that means you feel sorry for someone. However, you can feel sorry for someone and not get involved, whereas compassion means you cannot not get involved! Your heart impels you to get into the situation. So instead of being moved to steer clear, anti-pass by and walk way around, avoiding the man, the Samaritan is moved to draw near! Jesus adds a little zing to the story by telling us the person who draws near is a Samaritan and without going into the whys of it all, Jews and Samaritans didn't get along very well, expressing huge prejudicial biases toward one another. So we'd expect, of all people, that the Samaritan

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would anti-pass and instead he is moved to draw near to the fallen person.

When the Samaritan was moved with compassion, the original Greek word, *splanchnon* (*splanchnonidzomai*) is a curious word. An onomatopoeia in our language is a word that sounds like what it means. For example, the word “buzz” sounds like the buzz the word means. *Splanchnon* is an odd sounding word that literally means your innards, your upper intestines, your heart, liver, lungs and so on. In our slang, it’s your guts and, specifically, when you feel your tummy tighten, that’s *splanchnonidzomai*. If you feel nervous about something, you might speak of having butterflies in your stomach because you feel it in your gut. I vividly remember the very first time I met my wife to be, Ann Marie, the tightening of my tummy with the wow of the moment. When we are in love, we speak of a “lightness of heart.” So *splanchnon* is frequently translated affection and compassion. What it means is that when you are moved in spirit, you are moved in your gut to respond! Your tummy tightens, your heart melts and you are impelled to get involved.

We have talked, at times, about the concept of people eyes. People eyes are the eyes of Jesus for people. Jesus was clear that both the priest and the Levite saw the fallen man and were aware of his need, but in

their decision to “anti-pass,” to walk way around him, they were not seeing with the people eyes of Jesus but the selfish eyes of those who put their own agendas ahead of others.

A leper came to Jesus. “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Mark reports that Jesus sees the leper (people eyes), was moved with *splanchnon*, his tummy tightened, his heart melted and he moved toward the man saying, “I am willing, be clean.” When the Prodigal Son ran home and his dad saw him a long way off, the dad had people eyes for his son and was moved with *splanchnon*. His tummy tightened, his heart melted and he moved toward his son, actually running to him. So, compassion is the opposite of the idea of the anti-passing by, the walking way around, the avoidance of “I’m outta here!” When the Good Samaritan saw the fallen person, his seeing was with the people eyes of Jesus, he was moved with *splanchnon*, compassion. When you have compassion, you are impelled, compelled to get involved. Your people eyes see the need, your gut grabs you and you move out to get involved.

Several years ago, *Sports Illustrated* magazine carried a marvelous story about Don Shula, coach of the Miami Dolphins. When Shula was playing football in college, his roommate was another player, Carl Taseff. Don and Carl played together in college and

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then went on to play ten years together with the Baltimore Colts. Continuing as roommates, they were close friends. Finally, Don left the Colts, and the two friends were separated. Soon afterward Carl was involved in a terrible accident. His nose was crushed, he was unconscious for three weeks, he lost fifty pounds, and his life hung in the balance. As Carl began to regain consciousness, he became aware through blurry vision of a figure kneeling in his room praying. The person was Don Shula. Why was Don in that room? The people eyes of Jesus see the need in another, the guts move, the heart moves and you move out, and this is the essence of compassion.

This summer, we have been working through a series of Best Spiritual Practices, and the practice we focus on today is that of showing mercy. At the end of the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asks which of the three men who came upon the robbed, beaten man was that man's neighbor and the response was, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Mercy is an incredibly significant concept, at the foundation of which is the tummy tightening, heart melting, moving out compassion that we have been talking about.

Now, let me just comment that clearly mercy is more than a movement based on emotion. Ultimately, mercy is always an

action, a deed offered whether you are in the mood or not. I saw a man at a rest stop on I-95 in North Carolina last week, who knocked on the window of a parked car and asked the driver for money because he had no money for gas. You could see from the expression on the face of the driver of that car that he didn't particularly want to get involved or to help. Yet, I watched as he pulled out his wallet and gave some money to the man. The driver may not have experienced the emotion of mercy but he did, in fact, show mercy. What happens if you see a person in a situation that is difficult and know you could help in some way but you really don't feel like doing it? In fact, to be honest, you actually don't want to get involved or don't want to expend the time, energy or resources? If you choose to "anti-pass by," that is to avoid the situation, you are the priest, you are the Levite. When you get involved, even though your emotions tell you to avoid it, you are showing mercy. Mercy is ultimately an act of forgiveness or an act of kindness regardless of how you feel about it. Mercy is a gift to the person who receives it, but it is a gift that costs the giver who gives it.

There are two basic ways to show mercy. First, mercy offers the compassion of forbearance, and it offers the compassion of kindness. In the compassion of forbearance, mercy withholds a

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punishment or a penalty that justice demands. In the compassion of kindness, mercy addresses the well-being of another person, such as offering a cup of water to a thirsty person.

First, mercy motivated by compassion shows forbearance and withholds the penalty of justice. One evening, I was driving Ann Marie and our daughter Shelley through a large park with a strict speed limit of twenty-five miles an hour. I was happily bombing along without paying much attention to my speed when Ann Marie said, “Honey you are going a little fast for the park.” I replied, “Oh, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it,” at which exact second a whirling red light began to flash in my rear view mirror. Busted! I pull over and give the officer my license and registration. I can hear muffled noises in the car as Ann Marie and Shelley did their best not to break out laughing until the officer went back to his patrol car and we waited. And waited and waited. Finally, he came back and with a twinkle in his eye looking at Ann Marie and Shelley said to me, “Sir, you really ought to be more respectful of the speed limit in the future but I am letting you go with a warning ticket!” That was mercy!! Whew! Of course I drove home very obediently after that and heard muffled laughter for several days.

Mercy is the withholding of a penalty, of a punch, that is due. It’s an act of compassion, because nothing about the behavior of the person who has committed some injustice earns forgiveness. If mercy is not offered, then the penalty, the punch, is still coming. When someone in your life does something that offends you, hurts you, violates you or diminishes you and you want to punch back – punch back with hot words, punch back with legal action, punch back with passive aggressive behavior — but you withhold punch and give it up, not holding a secret grudge, not waiting for a better time for the punch but letting the punch go, that’s mercy. In family life, when there is heat and light, at the office when behaviors are difficult, in life when someone’s behavior is off base and you, in genuine grace, just let it go, that’s mercy. And, by the way, the meaning of the root word for forgiveness is to literally “let go.” You have something against another person and you withhold the punch, you “let go” of what you have against him, that’s forgiveness, that’s mercy.

Some years ago, I was getting ready to attend a major city-wide prayer event. Getting some socks in our laundry room, I happened so see some wet clothes in the washer. I quickly grabbed them, threw them into the dryer, hit “dry” and dashed out the door. The

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speaker that night, Joseph Garlington, spoke on the question, “Would you rather be right or reconciled?” That’s a tough question because all of us want to be right but then, we also want to be reconciled and at peace with the people in our lives. When I arrived home and said, “Hi,” to Ann Marie I noticed a slight chill in the room. Ann Marie was flying to Brazil the next day and had a special white knit outfit which, as it turned out, I had thrown into the dryer set on high temperature and it was now five sizes too small. The question came to mind, “Would I rather be right or reconciled?” and I knew immediately I’d rather be reconciled, and the only way it was going to happen was if I received mercy. My presence here this morning is evidence that mercy was given! One form of mercy is the withholding of a punch, of a penalty that is deserved. My mother and a sister had a serious falling out during the final illness of my father. They both found it within themselves to “let go” of the punch they felt the other deserved and showed mercy to one another, and the result was peace in our home. Mercy is costly to one who offers it, yet its consequence is life!

The one who offers us the ultimate expression of mercy is Jesus. He sees you with his people eyes – sees the stuff in your life, sees the pain inside of you and the ugly and inappropriate behaviors in your life and

yet, instead of being put off and walking away, that is, anti-passing by you, he draws near to you. Jesus loves you more than you love your next breath. Think about this. When Jesus saw a person who in some way had been hurt, wounded, taken down or taken out, it gripped his gut, his heart moved and he moved near in mercy. When Jesus Christ sees you today in a hard place, a painful place, a hopeless place, a place forced upon you or a difficult place that you brought upon yourself, his deepest longing is for you to know that if you approach him openly and humbly aware of your sin and shortcomings that he, in mercy, utterly forgives you and draws you near.

One of the most famous prayers in the Christian world, almost as famous in some places as the Lord’s Prayer, is known as the Jesus Prayer. While it is prayed in many forms, perhaps the classic express is simply, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Sometimes it is shortened to, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner,” or simply, “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.” To ask for mercy from Jesus is to receive it! His mercy doesn’t depend on how many times you pray the prayer. It’s easy to suddenly realize you’ve really messed up and to say to Jesus over and over and over again, “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me,” and while repeating the prayer may make you feel

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better, his actual mercy was yours the very first time you said it. In fact, his mercy was yours before you even opened your mouth but the inclination of your heart had turned to him to acknowledge you'd messed up and to ask for mercy.

So, we see that mercy is the compassion of forbearance, the withholding of a punch or punishment that justice demands. Mercy is also the offering of kindness out of compassion, which is what the Good Samaritan offered the fallen man. With his people eyes, Jesus saw the dead son of the widow from a place called Nain and raised the boy to life, offering the mercy of kindness to the boy's mother. Jesus is approached by a mother whose daughter was suffering terribly, and out of the mercy of kindness, Jesus heals the girl. When you take muffins to someone moving in next door, when you visit someone in the hospital, when you help coach a child struggling with a sport, you show the mercy of kindness.

A couple of weeks ago, our daughter Lindsay visited us for a week. At one point, she wanted to visit a friend in Arlington, so I drove her there and spent a few hours working in the Panera Bread in the Ballston Mall. Later, on the way home, it dawned on me that we were near Yorktown High School, which I attended, and not far from the home in Arlington where I had lived during my high school years. I

asked Lindsay if she'd like to see it! She said, "Sure, Daddy," and off we went. When we drove up to the house, she leaned out of the window to take a picture of it, and a young man opened the door, obviously wondering what we were doing. Lindsay hollered, "My dad lived in your house 40 years ago!" He disappeared and his mother came to the door, and Lindsay repeated that I'd lived there. Immediately and without missing a beat, this dear woman said, "Would you like to see the house?" I was so stunned I just sat for a moment because to invite people off the street into your home and to do it without first running around picking up this or that was rather breath-taking hospitality. Finally, I said, "Yes, thank you very much, I would love it"

I saw the dining room, where our family of four kids had sat around the table growing up. The living room, where the Christmas tree used to be. The bedroom downstairs I shared with my brother and where Ann Marie and I stayed when we visited my parents with our two-week-old newborn son. The lady of the home took us into every single room in her home, allowing me to see and to relive some very wonderful memories. What an incredible experience, all because of the kindness of mercy shown to me and to Lindsay by a person who didn't even know us!

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Two weeks ago, Glenda spoke about hospitality, and she very carefully defined it as “making room for love” and that’s all that mercy is – making room for love! Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they receive mercy.” Blessed are those who withhold the punch or penalty justice demands out of mercy for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are those who offer kindness out of mercy for they shall receive mercy. Jesus loves you; his mercy is upon you every moment of every day. Open your life to him, receive his mercy and allow yourself to offer the same mercy to the people in your life.