

**Foundations: The Fifth Blessing**  
**Matthew 5:7 (AFBC 10/7/18--WORLD COMMUNION DAY)**

As we continue our consideration of Jesus' Beatitudes—the eight blessings with which He begins His Sermon on the Mount—we arrive today at the fifth beatitude: **“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”**

If you feel a bit relieved upon hearing this teaching, I can't blame you. Compared to the first four beatitudes, this one seems fairly straightforward—more accessible and understandable than the four preceding it.

Of course, this really doesn't make it more livable, does it? Understandable, yes, but not necessarily more livable—if you know what I mean.

Jesus spoke simply and clearly when He said, “Love your neighbor as yourself;” but I trust we're honest enough to confess that the clarity of this teaching only makes it all the more obvious when we're not putting it into practice.

Since we've arrived at the midpoint of these eight teachings of Jesus, it's worth noting that many Bible scholars see this as an important dividing point in the Beatitudes. Here's why:

The first four beatitudes focus primarily on our relationship with God. They certainly speak also to how we relate to one another, but their main focus is on God and who we are and understand ourselves to be in relationship to Him.

The last four beatitudes, on the other hand, are more concerned with our relationships with one another--not that we can really separate the two. In fact, that's actually the point. We cannot separate how we relate to God and how we relate to one another.

In these eight brief statements, Jesus focuses on both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life. He makes it clear that He expects those who follow Him to reflect high standards in all our relationships.

It seems timely that this beatitude coincides with our observance of World Communion Day. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in

such a way as to communicate the truth that sharing this meal is about our relationships with God and one another.

When Jesus took the bread, blessed it and broke it, and when He poured the wine and passed the cup to His followers, He told them and us that this meal would forever be a reminder of the greatest expression of mercy in the history of humankind—Christ's body broken and His blood shed... for us all.

The way Jesus instituted the meal makes it clear it was not only about each of His follower's communion with Him, it was also about their communion with each other together.

So once again, we have this intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our lives—our relationship with the Lord and our relationships with all others--but especially with those who share with us in the church, the Body of Christ in this world.

So, as Jesus turns our attention to each other, He begins by teaching us about "mercy." We don't need to be merciful toward God, but we do need to be merciful toward one another. Givers of mercy are also RECEIVERS of God's mercy. Thanks be to God!

What is MERCY? Mercy is our decision to identify with the pain in another person's life, to genuinely care about them and then do what we can to help.

It involves our emotions, in the sense of "feeling sorry" for our brother or sister, but mercy is not limited to emotions. Mercy is active. It seeks to respond in a tangible way to the other's need.

Now, in choosing to BE merciful, we are reflecting the nature of God Himself. In **Ephesians 2:4**, Paul refers to "**God, who is rich in mercy...**"

But this is only one of literally hundreds of places in Scripture where God is described as "merciful." So when we show mercy, we are being "godly."

The person who is merciful is kind and caring. They are also compassionate, gracious, generous, and forgiving—like God Himself.

When the quality of mercy is missing from our lives, however, we can be malicious, vindictive, spiteful, and unforgiving. Mercy is not hard to see in a person's life. Likewise, its absence also tends to be fairly obvious.

So, does being merciful mean that we will automatically receive mercy in return? That IS what Jesus said, isn't it?

Well, yes, it is—but let me add a word of caution. If we act mercifully toward someone only because we believe we'll receive mercy in return, then it's clearly only an act and not true mercy.

During His time on earth, Jesus was merciful to many who showed him no mercy in return. Some of them betrayed him, turned against him, and even handed him over to be crucified.

Occasionally, this may happen to us: someone to whom we've shown mercy may respond to us in ways that are unmerciful.

Or think about the person who has cared for others in their time of need, but doesn't receive care in return when they're in need. This happens in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and sometimes in churches too.

Or think about the one who forgives the other, but then isn't forgiven in return. It's obvious that receiving mercy after being merciful is not automatic. One does not always follow the other.

But that's really not what this blessing is about. As we are merciful to others, Jesus said we WILL receive mercy. Hopefully it will come from those we've blessed in some way, or from some other merciful person.

Unfortunately, we can't always count on this. Our Lord is letting us know, however, that we can always count on our Heavenly Father. Because He is "rich in mercy," Jesus is able to make this promise: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

If we are merciful, we will know the blessing of God's mercy. But again, we need to be careful with this. You see, we do not earn God's mercy. We do not receive it because we've been merciful to others, and therefore deserve God's mercy.

We simply reflect in all our relationships in life the mercy we have first experienced in Christ Jesus. We choose to BE merciful because God's mercy has touched and transformed our lives!

And here's the thing: as we bestow mercy upon others, we are opening up our lives to receive God's mercy in greater abundance.

This story should help us understand. A mother once approached Napoleon to plead for the life of her son. The emperor told her that justice demanded that her son be put to death. "But I don't ask for justice," the mother said. "I'm pleading for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon said. "Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all that I ask for." This moved the emperor; and He showed mercy, and pardoned her son.

We must CHOOSE to be merciful. When we do, it will be our gift to those who don't deserve it—just as God's mercy is a gift to us.

In the time remaining, I want to share with you four statements that, if we put them into practice, will demonstrate that we have personally received God's mercy and, as a result, we are being merciful to others.

**1.** The first statement is this: **I will help those who are needy.** There are needy people around us every day. Some of them are "down and out"—homeless, unemployed, in many cases addicted to something—which can make it more difficult to help.

In other parts of the world, the needs are often multiplied, and the resources to meet these needs can be very limited. This is a needy world, and many, many people are "down and out."

Others, though, are "UP and out." We likely run into these folks more often. They have an abundance of food and possessions.

They may have everything money can buy—but they're still needy people. There's a hurt deep inside them. Their lives are broken. Their families are broken. Their hearts are broken. They are full of need.

I still love the stories of Tony Campolo. You may know this one. He tells of a woman he knew years ago—middle-aged, divorced,

but financially very secure. She wanted something meaningful in her life, so she wrote to Mother Teresa, asking if she could come and assist her in her work among the poor in Calcutta, India.

It took a while, but finally she got a response. Mother Teresa told her simply: "I received your letter wanting to come to India. Thank you for your offer, but I want you to go instead and find your own Calcutta."

We don't need to look very far to find someone who needs compassion and care. Let's make it our aim to be merciful, to be sensitive to those about us, to watch for the opportunities we have daily to show mercy.

As we do so, even in the smallest of ways, we're sharing the mercy we have received in Christ. And the blessing is that we'll continue to receive God's gift of mercy.

**2.** Now this: in choosing to be merciful, we resonate with this statement: **I will accept those who are different.**

This is World Communion Day. There are lots of people in this big world who will share the Lord's Supper together today—many of whom are quite different from ourselves—although, maybe not so different as we sometimes think they are.

Still, we all have our differences—right? Ours just don't happen to be as offensive as the differences we see in others. As they say, **"Everybody's different—once you get to know them."**

Some differences, of course, are obvious before we get to know the other person. Race and ethnicity, certainly, but this could also include religion, sexual orientation, political persuasion, or the really big stuff, like the football team we pull for!

Many people seem to be getting less tolerant of differences. Some are very "in your face" about this, but others just try to avoid contact with persons they don't already know.

I heard a story about a couple who, after five years in the same house, were being transferred out of state. A moving truck was backed up to their residence. They were about to start loading.

Just then, however, a neighbor came walking across the lawn carrying a plate full of muffins. “Isn’t that thoughtful?” the wife said to her husband. “They must have realized we’ve already packed up all our kitchen stuff.”

But about the time she got those words out of her mouth, the neighbor appeared at the door, smiled real big, stuck out her hand, and said, “Welcome to the neighborhood.”

Maybe we all have confessions to make. The differences aren’t always BIG. The new person in the neighborhood, or at work, or in your Sunday School class or sitting just down the pew from you—they may be different... simply because... they’re new.

So, is there a merciful way to respond to them? Sure there is. Put yourself in their situation—and that’s not always easy to do. You may never have been in their situation. But try, and then ask yourself how you would want someone to respond to you?

Merciful people really do ask these questions and then treat others the way they would hope to be treated. They’re sensitive to others, sympathetic, and action-oriented in reaching out to those who are different. And they receive a blessing for doing so!

**3.** Now let’s make this a little tougher: **I will forgive those who wrong me.** This is also what merciful people do—because this, friends, is what God does. Mercy and forgiveness walk hand in hand in the New Testament.

You recall when Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness—he wanted to know “Is seven times enough?” But Jesus was looking for a bit more. He replied, “Seventy times seven...” making it clear that “enough” simply does not exist when it comes to forgiving others.

We hear that, and we know that forgiveness is important; but sometimes we act more like the man who, when he learned he had rabies, started making a list of the people he wanted to bite!

Forgiving others is a familiar theme in the teachings of Jesus. The Apostle Paul, taking his cue from Jesus, often emphasizes this need in his letters, like here in Colossians **3:13**: **“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”**

**4.** Which brings us to a final principal to live by: **I will share with others the mercy I have received.** Of course, if we have not first *received* God's mercy, we have no mercy to *share*.

If we HAVE received God's mercy, though, we won't keep it to ourselves. We'll share it. We're so grateful for the gift, we must share it. As we do, even more of God's mercy comes our way: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

In just a moment, as the Communion bread and cup come your way, handed to you by one of our Deacons or by the person beside you in the pew, let this simple act be a reminder that you are a receiver of God's mercy in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And then, as you pass the elements on to the person beside you, be reminded that you are commissioned by our Lord whose body was broken and blood was shed for you to also be a giver of mercy.

Dear friends in Christ, it is in receiving mercy that we are able to give it; and it is in giving mercy that we receive it. What a blessed way to live! What a Christlike way to live!