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As we continue in the Beatitudes, Jesus' introduction to his Sermon on the Mount, I want to keep reminding us that the Beatitudes are inviting people to a life of blessing in the kingdom of heaven. As with all the Beatitudes there is a relationship between the situation or need in our lives Jesus' mentions, and the promise of blessing in the kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus says:

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

To understand what Jesus means, we need to know what righteousness means. In the Old and New Testaments, the term translated as “righteousness” conveys three main senses: first the ethical conduct that is demanded by the Law of Moses; second, the salvation which is the gift of God through Christ; and third the ethical conduct which is demanded of a Christian. Which sense is being conveyed depends on the context. Here in Matthew 5:6, Jesus speaks of righteousness as God's gift.

We can hunger and thirst for all kinds of things, not all of them good, helpful, or hopeful – like drugs or pornography. We can hunger for things that are good in moderation, like ice cream or watching television. We want to watch what we hunger and thirst for because we are what we “eat” not only physically but spiritually.

For example, potato chips, cheese curls, and candy may be some of your favorite things to eat, but a few years ago for a few mule deer in Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park, these foods proved to be deadly. Park rangers had to kill over two dozen mule deer because they became hooked on junk food left by visitors to the park.

Once they get a taste of the sugar and salt, the deer develop an extreme addiction and will go to any lengths to eat only junk food. The result is the animals ignore the food they need, leaving them in poor health and on the edge of starvation. Because of junk food cravings, the deer lose their natural ability to digest vegetation. One park ranger called the junk food “the crack cocaine of the deer world.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus warns us of the dangers of hungering and thirsting for junk because such a diet keeps us from hungering for righteousness and the things of God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* (Spring 1995), noticed by Richard Young, Bossier City, Louisiana.

## **Righteousness in Matthew**

Righteousness, meeting the standards of what is morally right and just, is a repeated theme in the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew. When Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized, John prevented him, feeling it was inappropriate for Jesus to be baptized by him, but Jesus said, *“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all **righteousness** (Matthew 3:15).”* Two more times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will address the issue of righteousness in 5:20, *“Unless your **righteousness** exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,”* and in 6:33, *“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his **righteousness.**”* We will deal with those in future sermons, but I will say today that **Jesus is not lowering the expectations for righteousness, he is altering them and Jesus expects striving to live in the righteousness of God’s kingdom will be the first priority of our lives.**

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is important because the consequences for going into the kingdom of God are so significant. In Matthew 21:32 Jesus says in response to the questions of critics about his authority, *“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of **righteousness** and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”* The tax collectors and prostitutes believed John’s word and they came confessing their sins, being baptized, and living their lives differently. Jesus critics and their spiritual descendants in our time continually fall into the same self-righteous trap of focusing on other people and their sins rather than on their own. This is one of the worst things you can do. Rather than hungering and thirsting for self-justification, Jesus suggests hungering and thirsting for righteousness even though those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will not be filled or satisfied by what they see in the world.

However, they will be filled through Christ in the kingdom of heaven as we see in the Gospels. Jesus said to a woman of Samaria as they talked at Jacob’s well (John 4:14), *“Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”*

In John 6:48-51, Jesus says, *“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors are the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from*

*heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*

Hungering and thirsting for spiritual nourishment, we may turn to Jesus and know he is the pause that more than refreshes, he is the right one baby, he is truly the real thing. In Romans 6:13-6:20, Paul makes the point that after the Lord has done so much for us, then it is up to us, as we seek to grow in righteousness to feed the right hunger and thirst and starve those that are not of Christ. Paul says, *“Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and **present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.**”*

A well known and successful Christian wrote, “I may, I suppose, regard myself or pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets—that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Internal Revenue—that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions—that's pleasure.

It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time—that's fulfillment. Yet, I say to you—and I beg you to believe me—multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, **and they are nothing—less than nothing, a positive impediment—measured against one draft of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are.**<sup>2</sup> Through feeding and drinking on the life and Spirit of Jesus, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.

Jesus also says, *“**Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”*** The merciful will not be taken advantage of, ridiculed or judged as they so often are today when they are seen as weak, pushovers, or naïve. Jesus says they will receive mercy in the kingdom of heaven and on the Day of Judgment.

**Mercy is a hugely important theme in the Gospel of Matthew.**

In 9:13 when Jesus' critics attacked him for eating with sinners he replied,

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Preaching Today*.

**“Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”**

In 12:7 his critics ripped him for violating the Sabbath laws by plucking and eating heads of grain as he and the disciples went through the fields on the Sabbath (did all these folks do was follow Jesus around looking for things to criticize and attack?), Jesus replies by telling two Bible stories and again says, “But if you had known what this means, **‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’** you would not have condemned the guiltless.”

**There are few things that could have a greater impact on improving the quality of human life at every level than an increase in mercy.** Many times in

Matthew people with physical needs begged Jesus for mercy for themselves or their loved one (9:27, “Crying loudly, ‘Have mercy on us Son of David!’

15:22, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David;”

17:15, “Lord, have mercy on my son,”

20:30-31 “they shouted, ‘Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David! But they shouted even more loudly, ‘Have mercy on us,”). Each time those asking for mercy received mercy.

Being merciful in Jesus’ name within our families, our church, community, and in the world is one of the most attractive and inviting, and Christ-like things we can be. Being merciful not only makes us more like Christ, it makes you feel better, lowers your blood pressure and your stress level, and it is one of the most effective ways of earning a hearing for the gospel.

**One can also argue pretty convincingly that the strongest condemnation of Christ is reserved for those who are not merciful.** In the parable of the unforgiving slave in Matthew 18:33-35 Jesus says through the king, **“Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”** And in anger his Lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. **So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”** How ironic is it that when God speaks of torture it is for those were not merciful but rather tortured and abused others.

In Matthew 23, a chapter filled with blistering judgment for the unmerciful, self-righteous, hypocritical critics of Christ, Jesus says in a “woe,” which is the opposite of a blessing, that they **“have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.** It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others (verse 23).”

**God has shown us incredible mercy and we are to do the same to others, it is as simple as that. Mercy is hugely important throughout the whole Bible.**

In Luke chapter one the song of praise of Mary and the Holy Spirit inspired prophecy of Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, have multiple references to the mercy of God (1:50, 54, 58, 72, 78, “By the tender mercy of our God).”

**In Luke 10:37, the parable of the Good Samaritan, who proved to be a neighbor to the man fell among thieves - “The one who showed him mercy.”**

Paul describes God in Ephesians 2:4-5, “**God, who is rich in mercy**, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.”

**We need mercy the most when we deserve it the least.**

In his book, *The Life Giving Church*, Ted Haggard reminisces about a kindly Amish family, the Royers, that lived near his childhood home: “One night a group of drunken high school boys went to the Royer farm after a football game and began breaking watermelons—the produce that provided the mainstay of their annual income. While the boys were yelling and cussing in the field, the light of a glowing lantern began flickering in an upstairs bedroom of the farmhouse. From the field the boys could see the light being carried down the stairs and then onto the front porch. As the light approached them through the darkness, the boys prepared for a fight.

(Take a moment and think about what you would have done if you were Mr. Royer, you may even want to write your answer down)

Instead, Mr. Royer told the boys they could have all the melons they desired, but that the melons they were breaking were not his best. He offered to lead them to the best field and give them as many as they wanted. The boys were embarrassed and respectfully apologized before leaving. Mr. Royer invited them in for a glass of lemonade—he said they needed it. But the boys declined, trying to soak in their vivid lesson on Christian character.<sup>3</sup> How many of you wrote, “Offer the drunken vandals the best watermelons and a glass of lemonade?” I didn’t come up with that answer either.

Hebrews 4:16 encourages us when we have been “breaking watermelons” or we’re feeling tempted to do so to turn to Jesus, “so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Perhaps the strongest words about the importance of mercy other than those of Jesus come in James 2:13 and they are words Mr. Royer truly

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<sup>3</sup> Ted Haggard, *The Life Giving Church* (Regal Books, 2001).

understood and lived by, **“For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”**

Pastor and author Gordon MacDonald tells a story about an experience he and his wife Gail had once on an airplane flying to Boston. He said, “We were seated almost at the back of the airliner in the two aisle seats across from each other. As the plane loaded up, a woman with two small children came down the aisle to take the seat right in front of us. And behind her, another woman. The two women took the A and C seats, and one of the children sat in the middle seat, and the second child was on the lap of one of the women. I figured these were two mothers traveling together with their kids, and I hoped the kids wouldn’t be noisy.

The flight started, and my prayer wasn’t answered. The two children had a tough time. The air was turbulent, the children cried a lot—their ears hurt—and it was a miserable flight. I watched as these two women kept trying to help and comfort these children. The woman at the window played with the child in the middle seat, trying to make her feel good and paying lots of attention.

I thought, *These women get a medal for what they are doing.* But things went downhill from there. As we got towards the last part of the flight, the child in the middle seat got sick. The next thing I knew she was losing everything from every part of her body. The diaper wasn’t on tight, and before long a stench began to rise through the cabin. It was unbearable!

I could see over the top of the seat that indescribable stuff was all over everything. It was on this woman’s clothes. It was all over the seat. It was on the floor. It was one of the most repugnant things I had seen in a long time.

I watched as the woman next to the window patiently comforted the child and tried her best to clean up the mess and make something out of a bad situation. The plane landed, and when we pulled up to the gate all of us were ready to exit that plane as fast as we could. The flight attendant came up with paper towels and handed them to the woman in the window seat and said, *“Here, Ma’am, these are for your little girl.”*

The woman said, *“This isn’t my little girl.”*

*“Aren’t you traveling together?”*

**“No, I’ve never met this woman and these children before in my life.”**

Suddenly I realized this woman had just been merciful. A lot of us would have just died in this circumstance. She had found the opportunity to give mercy.<sup>4</sup>

We are told so many times in the Bible that **“The Lord your God is gracious and merciful** – in Exodus 34:6, Deuteronomy 4:31, 2 Chronicles 30:9, Nehemiah 9:17, 31, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 116:5, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, James 5:11.

**We worship a merciful God so we should not be surprised Jesus says the merciful are blessed and shall receive mercy.** In the last few weeks there has been much in the news about terrorism, Islam, and the concept of Jihad or Holy War. Obviously there are some fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity and one of them has to do with mercy. As John Stott observed, “The repeated promises in the Qur’an of the forgiveness of a compassionate and merciful Allah are all made to the meritorious, whose merits have been weighed in Allah’s scales, whereas the gospel is **good news of mercy to the undeserving.** The symbol of the religion of Jesus is the cross, not the scales.”<sup>5</sup>

Most of us don’t deserve mercy, yet God has given it to us because we need mercy the most when we deserve it the least. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessing: “Beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ And have mercy on some who are wavering; and have mercy on still others with fear,” “May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.” Jude 1:21-23; 1:2.

For more on mercy read the scriptures referenced below in their entirety in your Bible:

### **Mercy in the OT**

Psalm 23, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

Psalm 103:4, “Who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,”

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon MacDonald, from sermon “Pointing to Jesus: Generosity,” preached at Grace Chapel, Lexington, Massachusetts (2-22-98).

<sup>5</sup> John Stott in *Authentic Christianity*.

Psalms 112:4, "they are gracious, merciful, and righteous,"

Ps 119:77, 156, "Let your mercy come to me, that I may live, Great is your mercy, O Lord,"

Psalms 123:2-3, "until he has mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,"

Proverbs 28:13 "and forsakes them will obtain mercy"

Jeremiah 3:12, "I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful,"

Jeremiah 16:5, "says the Lord, my steadfast love and mercy," 42:12

Daniel 9:9, "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness"

Hosea 2:19, "in steadfast love, and in mercy"

Zech 7:9, "Show kindness and mercy to one another"

Remember the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark?

The mercy seat is on top of the Ark of the covenant.

### **New Testament**

Mark 5:19, "and what mercy he has shown you."

See Roman 9:15-23; 11:30-31; 15:9 "that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy."

1 Timothy 1:13-16, "

2 Timothy 1:16-18, "the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on"

1 Peter 1:3, "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into "

1 Peter 2:10, "once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

2 John 1:3, "Mercy and peace will be with us from God the Father."