

The Heavenly Citizens Charter 5

Blessed are the Merciful for they shall receive Mercy.

Psalm 57

Matthew 5:1-12

I recall that in the eighties just after I was ordained, a burglar raped a vicar's daughter. The crime was headline news in the popular press, but the vicar's reaction to the crime was the biggest sensation of all. He said he forgave the rapist, and his eyes showed they meant it. Many people were more upset by his response than by the actual rape. Feminists were outraged. Psychologists said it was unhealthy. An opinion poll indicated that most people believed rapists should be castrated. Everyone seemed to condemn the vicar because his spirit of forgiveness opposed the popular sense of justice - yet it was exactly the attitude Jesus commends in the fifth of His eight attitudes, which all true Christians should always possess. M5:7 Once again, Jesus' attitudes demonstrate that authentic Christianity is the reverse of western society. Whenever there's a sensational trial, the media always show the anger of victims relations towards the culprit; they say their lives have been ruined and no sentence could ever be too harsh. Any suggestion of mercy would be dismissed as ridiculous. Ordinary people repeat this in their everyday lives. When their children are bullied, they complain to the school and demand that the culprits are dealt with. When a neighbour does something wrong, they tell their other neighbours about it. When someone at church makes a mess of a task, they promise not to ask them to do it again. They think that mercy - in these circumstances - is an unhelpful response. Jesus disagrees!! His fifth attitude is another stage in the development of a perfect character. His first four attitudes underlined the spiritual bankruptcy and overwhelming inadequacy felt by authentic Christians - they're poor in spirit, they mourn, they're meek before others, they know they're empty and need

to be filled. Now the positive side of the character begins to emerge. They're merciful.

The final four attitudes - mercy, purity of heart, peace making, and persecution - are all based on the first four. They are their direct consequence: they're the character, which develops in men and women who see themselves honestly and who know the basis of their relationship with God. Jesus is always more concerned with His followers attitudes than their actions, more interested in their thoughts than their behaviour. So here, instead of commending those who do acts of mercy, He congratulates those we are full of mercy! They were filled at the end of the fourth attitude, and now he reveals what they've been filled with.

Christianity deals with what a man or woman is, rather than with what they do. Jesus knows our actions are the outcome of our attitudes, so He offers a radical mind-change, which, if accepted, results in the possession of His attitudes. This means the Church makes a serious mistake when it presents repentance as a change in behaviour - because it literally means a change of mind. Repentance is not stopping a bad habit, it's starting a new way of thinking; it is not turning from sinful actions, it's embracing a new set of values. Repentance means nothing short of a Spiritual/mental revolution. We all think we can control our behaviour - and most of the time we can - but we all know that we can't control our thinking. I might be able to stop myself thumping my neighbour when he parks in my space, but I can't stop myself wanting to thump him! I might have the self-discipline not to say something hurtful to a colleague, but I can't stop myself thinking hurtful thoughts about them - unless, that is, my mind has been radically changed by God.

Our actions express what we are, they demonstrate our inner attitudes: and the lives of Jesus' followers are supposed to show mercy - because they've experiencing Gods mercy and have been filled with it by God the Holy Spirit. Mercy isn't the

easygoing attitude, which says that nothing matters, that laws aren't important, and that people should be allowed to do, as they like. In fact the mercy Jesus describes is the opposite of this because it's found in the people who've hungered and thirsted for righteousness and have been filled with it by God. Mercy is only authentic when it is set in the context of God's high standards and Jesus' perfect life.

Sadly many Christians stop at the fourth attitude. At righteousness. They know God is just and holy. They know His standards and are hungry for them. They have been and are being filled with righteousness. But they're judgmental, not merciful. For example, tight-lipped women and sharp-suited men denounce those who have fallen in any way, in a way, which reveals they are empty of mercy. They might show God's righteousness, but they don't show His mercy - so their words and lives give a false picture of God.

Some Christians talk about abortionists, or drunkards, or adulterers, or members of sects/other religions, in terms that show they've only made it halfway through the attitudes; they possess all the negative attitudes and none of the positive ones. Unlike God, they're not merciful.

Mercy is very like Grace but in essence it's different. The noun *eleos* (Mercy) always deals with what we see of pain, misery and distress. These are the results of sin; and *Charis* (Grace) always deals with the sin and guilt itself. The one extends relief, the other pardon; the one cures, heals, helps, the other cleanses and reinstates. So Grace here is not the short prayer which some people say before meals, it's the technical word which describes the way God freely gives everything - forgiveness, life, gifts, himself - to undeserving men and women without any terms or conditions.

The key difference between grace and mercy is that grace is linked to people in their sin, whereas mercy is associated with people in their suffering. Grace is the word of God's response

to human sin as a whole' and mercy is the word for the way He deals with the Suffering which stems from that sin.

Mercy is practical pity for the suffering of a particular person - plus a desire, an intention and an action to relieve that suffering. It's a deep concern about the problems and shortcomings of another person - plus starting to do something about them. Its sympathy mixed with action. Of course, many ordinary people have this sort of feeling for women and men who are obviously needy - for the ill or homeless or bereaved or inadequate. But the mercy Jesus expects in His followers goes much further than this; for the suffering it pities and wants to relieve includes things which ordinary people long for - the miseries of materialism, affluence, power, greed and all the other consequences of selfishness and sin.

Jesus does not specify the categories of people He has in mind to whom His disciples are to show mercy. He gives no indication whether He is thinking primarily of those overcome by disaster, like the traveller from Jerusalem to Jericho whom robbers assaulted and to whom the Good Samaritan 'showed mercy', or the hungry, the sick, the outcast on whom He himself regularly took pity, or of those who wrong us so that justice cries out for punishment but mercy for forgiveness. There was no need for Jesus to elaborate. Our God is a merciful God and shows mercy continuously; the citizens of His Kingdom must show mercy too.

Of course the world (at least when it is true to its own nature) is unmerciful, as indeed also the Church in its worldliness has often been. The world prefers to insulate itself against the pains and calamities of life. It finds revenge delicious, and forgiveness, by comparison, tame. But those who show mercy will find it (MT5:7). The same truth is echoed in the next chapter: 'If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you' (6:14). This is not because we can merit mercy-by-mercy or forgiveness-by-forgiveness, but because we cannot receive the mercy and forgiveness of God

unless we repent, and we cannot claim to have repented of our sins if we are unmerciful towards the sins of others. Nothing moves us to forgive like the wonderful knowledge that we have ourselves been forgiven. Nothing proves more clearly that we have been forgiven than our readiness to forgive. To forgive and to be forgiven, to show mercy and to receive mercy: these belong totally together, as Jesus illustrated in His parable of the unmerciful servant or, interpreted in the context of the attitudes, it is 'the Meek' who are also 'the Merciful'. For to be Meek is to acknowledge to others that we are sinners; to be merciful is to have compassion on others, for they are sinners too.

All 8 attitudes act like a mirror to our lives. And this fifth one asks me whether I'm merciful. How do I react to people I dislike when they fall under my power? What's my response when the neighbour who lights his bonfire whenever my washing is out suddenly asks if he can borrow my lawnmower because his is broken and he's expecting guests? What do I do when the woman who's been extremely unkind to me is taken ill and has no one to collect her shopping? What do I feel when my daughter's untrustworthy boyfriend spills coffee over my iPad and ruins it? When I check on the milkman and find out he has been overcharging me? When I discover that my boss is having an affair? Am I angry or pleased, or judgmental, or just full of mercy? Am I filled with a feeling of pity about their plight, and with the desire to ease their discomfort or am I vindictive and glad of the chance to get my own back?

God is the only acceptable example. He gave humanity to this beautiful planet. We ruined it. He gave men and women freedom to love Him. We rejected Him. He sent His son to show the extent of His love. We crucified Him. He sees our suffering, our misery, our pathetic ambition, and our love of possessions. He hears our lies, our arrogance, our posing, and our trust in false wisdom. And what does the Holy, Just and Righteous God do? *He responds with Grace and Mercy.*

Surely their experience of Gods grace and mercy will affect their attitude to others. Surely their awareness of their human flaws and failings will make them react with mercy towards other people who suffer because of similar human limitations. Women and Men will be filled with the Attitude of Mercy when they know they're eternally indebted to God's mercy, and when they're deeply conscious of the fact that they're only what they are because of the Grace of God. The Vicar's experience of mercy made Him merciful to a rapist. Similarly Gordon Wilson, a few years later in Enniskillen forgave the bombers who killed his daughter Marie. How fortunate they are, for they - and people like them - will receive mercy: their merciful attitude proves that they've already begun to receive it.

Pastor David
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