

## **The Way of Jesus: Streams of Mercy** **Matthew 5:7**

### **Introduction – Stagnant Ponds and Flowing Streams**

The Jordan River looms large in the Scriptures. It forms the eastern boundary of the Promised Land for the Hebrews. It flows in the north from the slopes of beautiful Mt. Hermon, the highest point in the biblical lands. From there it goes into the Sea of Galilee, a rich fishery in Jesus' day that supported many thriving communities, even as it does today. From the Galilee, the Jordan flows southward until it empties into the Dead Sea.

The Jordan is nothing like the Missouri River. In size and sometimes character, it is more like our James River. In places, it is less than thirty feet across, but at flood stage it can expand to over a mile. Even with its comparatively small size, the Jordan was a significant barrier to travel and trade in biblical times.

But the Jordan River is more than just a flowing stream. It is also deeply symbolic. When the Israelites crossed the river they were going into their Promised Land. It was a new era of God's blessing that was ushered in when their feet hit the other side. Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, washed himself seven times in the Jordan River and was healed of the awful disease of leprosy (II Kings 5). And most significantly, it was in the Jordan River that John baptized those who repented from their own ways and sought to follow God. The Jordan River, flowing from the heights of Mt. Hermon through the Sea of Galilee was a stream of blessing and life to the people of God in the Bible.

But when the river reaches its end, everything changes. Indeed, the end of the Jordan River is the *Dead Sea*. The waters of the Jordan River flow *into* the Dead Sea but they don't flow out. It is one huge stagnant pond. It is nine times saltier than the ocean. While there are places today where you can "swim," – and I say "swim" in quotes because you just sit in the water without moving – you certainly would not want to have any cuts or let the water get in your eyes. Nothing lives in the water. It is a dead sea. Kind of like this...



No, they don't have boat tours and skeleton mermaids. But the contrast between the Dead Sea and the Jordan River is a perfect picture illustrating the difference between those who show mercy and those who don't. Jesus said,

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Matthew 5:7

## Prayer

### The Nature of Mercy

This message is the sixth in our series on the Way of Jesus. It is the fifth of the eight beatitudes found in the Sermon on the Mount. This is a good place to stop and review where we've come from. As I have studied and prepared for each of these messages, these verses have struck me to the core. They have challenged my assumptions about how I live my life and have given me comfort in the promise of God's blessing when I am aligned with his word.

This passage of nine verses called The Beatitudes stands as one of the unique treasures of Scripture that people often memorize and love. They are like Psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer, and the Love Chapter found in I Corinthians 13. It's almost unfortunate because we tend to sentimentalize them and in so doing, we forget that they are the very words of Jesus to his followers. These words were not given to make plaques and greeting cards. They were meant to be lived. The beatitudes are the way of Jesus for those who would follow him. Every one is

radical. The description of the blessed in the beatitudes is the exact opposite of how the world expects people to live.

It all begins with being poor in spirit. Every one of the beatitudes starts there because the one who recognizes their need before God is the one who will receive his blessing and help. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. God will comfort those who mourn, especially those who grieve over their sins and the sin they see around them. Meekness is “power under control” and it refers to how we relate to other people. But the foundation of meekness is a confident trust in God that allows the person to rest in his promise. The meek person does not need to manipulate or lash out at people who oppose him. The meek know that God will take up their cause and win the day. Last week, we discovered that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are seeking after God. And when they encounter him, they find that they are satisfied, only – like eating Lay’s potato chips – they long for even more.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Mercy, like meekness, has to do with how we relate to other people. And like meekness, our outward action towards others has everything to do with how we understand how God has acted towards us. Mercy is action, but it begins with compassion. Compassion, when you break the word down, simply means that we share the feelings of another person. “Com” means “with” and “passion” refers to “feeling.” To have compassion toward another person is to actually feel their pain.

I used to think that students who didn’t get A’s or B’s were simply lazy. After all, that’s how it was with me. If I wanted an “A” all I had to do was want it and I could get it. When I reached the end of my sophomore year in high school with a 3.3 GPA, my brother told me I would need to step it up if I wanted scholarships to go to college. OK. Simply by setting my standards higher, I 4.0’d my last two years. It’s all simply a matter of desire and goals.

Or so I thought. My assumptions came crashing down when I had children. (Happens a lot, doesn’t it?) My daughter would study her spelling words every night from Monday through Thursday just to pass the test. My son never studied his spelling words. In fact, when he was in

first grade, I had to send him out of the room while I was working with my daughter's fourth grade words. He would spell them for her as I was quizzing her.

You see, my daughter had to overcome learning problems that I never had. She couldn't just set her goals higher and make it happen. And when I taught first and fourth grades in the public schools I had compassion for the children who suffered from some of the same struggles. I gave them patience, time, and attention. I called for IEP s— Individual Education Plans – that teachers before me never initiated. I brought understanding to the parent-teacher conferences that they had never known before. Through my actions, I was merciful because I had known a similar pain through my child.

Some of the best teachers are those who have had to overcome challenges. They can feel the pain of others and give mercy for those who struggle. And for young children especially, that kind of compassion and mercy is essential so that their spirit is not crushed. Hope is the offspring of mercy for those who suffer. And hope is essential for living well.

Mercy is not some abstract idea or feeling. Mercy is active. It is demonstrated through helpful, thoughtful, and kind actions that relieve the suffering of the downtrodden.

### **Misery of the Unmerciful**

But not everyone is merciful even though everyone suffers in this life. Some take their suffering and let it fester into a soul-infection of bitterness. Bitter people have no capacity for mercy.

They are wrapped up in their own misery, unable to even consider the suffering of others. Bitter people close themselves off from others, suffering in a tomb of self-imposed darkness and resentment. Ebenezer Scrooge comes to mind...

Proud people aren't merciful either. They don't remember their time of need. They believe that they have overcome their problems through their own efforts and expect others to do the same. They can not know the blessedness of being merciful because they aren't poor in spirit. Jesus ran into those people and condemned them in the strongest way. The Pharisees come to mind...

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and *mercy* and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

Matthew 23:23-24

Jesus told a parable which we read earlier in the service. Forgiveness is an act of mercy granted to a person who is in moral or financial obligation to you. Do you remember what it was like when you needed a person to forgive you? You feel completely helpless. Sometimes, your remorse is so deep because of how much you value and love the person you have wronged. Remember how that felt?

It's an awful feeling.

...you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

Ephesians 2:1-5

Christians who are not merciful towards other people have forgotten the mercy that God has showered on them. They have forgotten the wretchedness of their own sin. They are like the Dead Sea. They are stagnant, stinking pools of water that happily receive the runoff of God's mercy but then keep it all for their own benefit. They are the Pharisees of John 8, dragging a woman caught in adultery to Jesus. Full of their own self-righteousness and the blessings that came with being a pious Hebrew, they demanded her death by stoning. Instead, (look what Jesus did) as the only truly righteous person there, Jesus extended mercy. He didn't throw a stone. He

offered forgiveness to a desperate woman. Mercy. And Pharisees walked off in shame. They forgot the mercy that God had lavished on them as the people of God.

### **A Culture of Mercy**

Friends, let's not be like the Pharisees. Instead of stinking, stagnant ponds of self-righteousness, let's remember the mercy that God has given to us and then extend it freely to others. This is the way of Jesus. It's radical. It's not how the world lives. The world says "Promote yourself and step on the little guy." Jesus says, "Humble yourself, remember the mercy that you've received and extend it to others." It is only the merciful that will receive God's mercy. Remember the terrible fate of the unforgiving servant in the parable told in Matthew 18. ("...should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt." v. 33-34)

Extending mercy is the way of the Jesus-follower. It's as simple as that. If you follow Jesus, you will extend mercy to others. I have an assignment for you this week. I don't know how you'll do it but I'm sure you can fulfill it. This week, I want you to look for an opportunity to show mercy. If you look, I'm confident that you'll find that opportunity. It may be helping with some financial need. Or it may be offering physical help of some kind. Perhaps it might be the profound act of granting forgiveness that you have withheld for a long time. Or it might be as simple as just listening to someone who wants to talk with you when you're really busy.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

Each of us, every day, continually receive a steady stream of God's mercy. Let's not be like the Dead Sea. Let's be a free-flowing stream of mercy that passes on God's blessing unto others. "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8).