

SERMON TITLE- "The Secret To Joy- Righteous & Mercy"

TEXT- Matthew 5:6-7

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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When I do pre-marital sessions with couples I give them a quick personality test called Meyers Briggs. It is designed to sort out what kind of people they are individually. Are they extroverted or introverted, etc? The questions that the test asks do not have right or wrong answers but rather reflect how different people look at the world.

My favourite question is, "What is worse- to be unjust or unmerciful?" It is a question that divides personalities along a particular grid.

We are continuing our series on "The Secret To Joy"- a study of the Beatitudes- the encapsulated statements of Jesus teachings.

The premise of this series is- that Jesus' gift of joy is there for His followers and that those who understand and follow Him will be given that gift- hence "The Secret To Joy."

The Beatitudes are challenging at every level-

Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .

Blessed are those who mourn . . .

Blessed are the meek . . .

These are not things we naturally associate with being blessed and joyful. In fact in the case of mourning, it seems to be almost the opposite. The Beatitudes are supposed to make us stop, be puzzled, think and listen. There is something within them that we are to pursue- and the end result is blessing.

Today we are looking at the 4th and 5th Beatitudes and we are going to look at them back to back because they fit very well into a set of "opposing" concepts that we have to deal with.

Taken independently these 2 beatitudes don't challenge our intuitions the way the first 3 do.

The Fourth Beatitude-

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Matthew 5:6

Jesus' Followers Are On A Quest For Righteousness

What is righteousness? This doesn't appear to be a word that is all that hard to understand. I think we can summarize it, in the Biblical context as "doing the right thing" from a moral perspective.

God, of course, is the ultimate "righteousness." That makes righteousness both easy and difficult. It makes it difficult because God is so "other" and remote. If God is righteous, then of course it is good- but like God beyond human comprehension. It is about absolute purity and justice.

In the context of God, as humans we are also reminded that we fall vastly short of whatever God is.

In the Bible the descriptions of people encountering the righteousness of God were overpowered by it. In the temple elaborate rituals of cleansing had to take place for anyone who was commissioned to approach God.

One of the well known encounters of a man with the righteous God is described in Isaiah-

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. Isaiah 6:1-2

And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. Isaiah 6:3-4

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Isaiah 6:5

That is the "right" human response to the righteousness of God- any other response fails to understand what God is and what people are.

So God's righteousness makes righteousness difficult to grasp just as it is hard to grasp how hot the sun is. We know the sun is very hot but its heat relative to anything we know is so overwhelming that we have not real scale for it. At the core the sun is about 15 mil Cs. A hot fire is about 1000 Cs.

But there is another side to God being the source of righteousness. God created human beings in His image and from that we can infer that something of His righteousness is at least understandable to us.

And I believe it is. I think the evidence of that is the fact that humanity has a deep inner sense of justice. In fact that inner sense of justice is finally what distinguishes us from the animal world. Human beings do terrible things to each other but what makes those things so horrific is that they violate something deep within us.

Some years back I did a lecture at the college in the class of an aggressive anti-Christian. He had introduced me with some provocative comments so I thought I should reply in kind. I suggested that if people didn't believe that human beings were a special creation of God and merely a product of random evolution- then the fact that a human is killed is of no more consequence than when we swat and kill a mosquito.

I'm sure you can imagine the reaction. While I may not have shown full Christian grace in being a little provocative- I do believe that there is a truth in that. I also believe that the reaction of people to a statement like that shows that inside of them exists a sense that some things are simply right or wrong.

This sense that there is something called righteousness goes far deeper than such an extreme illustration.

It is about the injustice that there are people who are living in poverty while other live wastefully.

It is about the injustice of people committing crimes and profiting from them. I remember a news story of a food bank that lost its freezer because a thief stole the wiring.

It is about the injustice of the bullies of the world tormenting people for their own perverse pleasure.

It is things like this and many more that make us rise up and demand that someone must bring righteousness to the world we live in.

And when Jesus says,

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Matthew 5:6

It is not controversial. Of course if we give it any thought we will quickly realize that we ourselves may be less righteous than we might be- but this is not a controversial.

And not only is it not controversial it is a clear direction to the followers of Jesus that when we see unrighteousness in ourselves and in the world we live in- and when we feel the pain and sadness of that state- we are on the right track. We are to hunger and thirst.

And more than this- because we are people of the Kingdom we are assured that this hunger and thirst will be satisfied.

I think that the controversial aspect of righteousness comes from another side of it- a side that is revealed in the next beatitude.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Matthew 5:7
Jesus' Followers Are To Be Merciful

Like the previous beatitude there is something quite sensible about this beatitude. Mercy is a very good thing- everyone would agree.

And what is mercy? Like righteousness, mercy is a Biblical virtue- and like it has its foundation in the character of God. God is merciful and it is a quality that those in trouble appeal to.

Answer me, O LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me. Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble. Psalm 69:16-17

God loves us- and the demonstration of that love is often demonstrated in His mercy to His creation.

The great description of the depth of God's love and mercy to us is John 3:16-

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God loves His creation and the depth of His love is demonstrated not only by a thought- but also by deep and self-sacrificial action of sending His Son to earth to make a way of redemption. God had mercy on us.

And so it is not surprising that when Jesus lists the qualities of those who would be His followers- that mercy stands out prominently.

We are to be a merciful people. The great story of mercy is the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is answering the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The answer comes in a story form in which Jesus describes the actions of 3 men who come across a man wounded by robbers. As we know 2 of them passed

by the man and carried on with their journey. Only one stopped and helped. After the story is told Jesus asks-

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Luke 10:36-37

That we are to be a "merciful" people is very clear. As followers of Jesus- as children of God- we must have this quality. Like the Good Samaritan we are to reach out to those who come on hard times.

Those who have accepted Jesus' call, "Follow Me!" are to be people who not only are grieved when unrighteousness takes place in the world around us- we, like the Good Samaritan are to reach out an actual hand. Mercy is about action as Jesus' final words indicate- "Go and DO likewise".

When Jesus describes the end of time and the judgment that we will all face He does it with the picture of a judgment hall and God presiding. He welcomes the righteous with this explanation-

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me . . . I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25:35-40

It was in the doing that the proof came. Mercy is not about a feeling that we may have- mercy is about turning that feeling into action.

As followers of Jesus we are to behave in a way that demonstrates mercy.

Again, in principle, it makes a lot of sense that mercy should be one of the core values of the Kingdom of God. It also makes a lot of sense that those who show mercy to others will have mercy shown to them. The 5th Beatitude and the parable of the sheep and the goats demonstrate this. God will show mercy [and forgiveness] to those who have shown mercy [and have forgiven]. It is something that we repeat every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer.

So are these 2 Beatitudes the common sense Beatitudes that don't particularly challenge our pre-suppositions? No, I think that there is a challenge to our normal way of looking at life in these to as well- but it is when you put the 2 together that the challenge comes. And where does it come from?

We Live With The Clash Of Righteousness And Mercy

Righteousness and mercy are in a conflict of interest and those who wrote the questions to the Meyers Briggs test understood it very well.

Justice/righteousness are qualities of the human character that reflect the ideal that God put into our beings. The problem comes when we, or those around us fall short. Then things need set right.

Mercy is not just about compassion to people who have come onto hard times- such as the man in the story of the Good Samaritan. The core of mercy comes from a deeper principle that is easy to overlook.

Mercy is good extended to those who don't necessarily deserve it. In the Psalms this call for mercy is heard over and over- few places as powerfully as Psalm 51, David's cry to God when he is discovered in sin-

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love according to your great compassion

blot out my transgressions . . . For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge . . . Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Psalm 51:1-6

Have mercy on me, David cries. But what is mercy? It is overlooking a breach of righteousness and in this case a grievous breach.

This Psalm is so famous because we all understand what it is like to need mercy. We have been there, most of us far more often than we care to think about. We have crossed the line out of righteousness- we are facing the consequences and they are painful- and now we are crying out for mercy.

It is then that we understand the clash between these 2. The clash is that righteousness demands that the price is paid for crossing the line and mercy extends compassion and forgiveness.

The clash is illustrated when we look at our natural applications of righteousness and mercy.

When we look at the world "out there" we have an easy time seeing "unrighteousness". The sin in the world is obvious and painful. There are wars, there is crime, there is injustice. These are things that need fixing. It is very natural for us to cry out against these evils and cry to God asking that He wipe the unrighteous from the earth.

On the other hand mercy is something we naturally apply to those we love. It is why when someone is accused of a crime the victim's friends and the accused's friends line up on opposite sides. We want those we love to receive mercy and we want those who have wounded us to receive justice.

And what do these beatitudes do? they make us look at those positions from the reverse. We and those we love must also face justice and those we would not naturally love must also be granted mercy.

And that is where the clash comes.

The bottom line of the Kingdom challenge is-

1. We are to be people who love righteousness. When we see an unjust world and it causes us discomfort- we are feeling what God feels. Unrighteousness is the reason for the vast majority of the grief and suffering in the world. There is some grief caused by the laws of nature and pure accidents- but the deepest sadness comes from the things that people do to other people. It is about dishonesty, jealousy, anger and selfishness. These must be contained.

The stories of Rwanda and Darfur and Germany require someone to step in and pay the price of righteousness. And as God's people we must be prepared to pay the price. And the most difficult price of all is knowing that mercy is to extend along side of justice.

2. We are to be a merciful people. And when we demand justice we must never forget that those who have transgressed are people just like ourselves- people who need mercy. At the extreme end of the spectrum we are reminded that- the person who flaunts the law and must be contained and brought under discipline is someone's son/daughter, brother/sister, father/mother. Those who break the law are not simply evil monsters- they are people like those we love- and people for whom we would naturally and easily extend mercy.

And in this case the tables are turned- mercy is good- but mercy, for Kingdom people does not exist without justice.

And we are on the horns of a dilemma.

So where is the joy of being perched on the dilemma of righteousness and mercy?

There is the joy that hungering and thirsting for righteousness. It is the joy that rises out of lining ourselves with the character of God.

There is joy in mercy- when it is our privilege to give help to those in need. There is also the joy of knowing that because of our obedience- God promises to grant us mercy.

But I believe that there is also joy that comes from knowing that we have not been given the easy way out in the conflict that often comes when we have to live in the tension that arises between righteousness and mercy.

There is no question that we would rather be on one side or the other- but we aren't given that choice