

Barratt Ministries Challenge

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BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL - The Beatitudes Part 5

By Maurice Barratt

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7) Here is a beatitude that is easy to understand. We all understand mercy, because we have all received it. Yet there is a condition on our receiving mercy. All the beatitudes have conditions: in fact they are all conditional promises. All are promises of grace, yet all have conditions to fulfil. This, in common with the other beatitudes, is not a commandment, "Thou shalt be merciful" .It is just a statement: you're blessed if you are merciful; if you show mercy to others, you will receive mercy from God.

God's Character Is Merciful

Let's remind ourselves of a few things. Firstly, "Blessed" means God-favoured. God favours us, He is pleased with us, when we are merciful. We may also be pleased with ourselves, or we may not. We may feel blessed, or we may not. That's not the point. Blessing is not a feeling, it is how God feels about you: you are pleasing to Him if you show mercy to others. Secondly, let's remember that the beatitudes are progressive. You will never become merciful unless you have first become poor in spirit, unless you have seen yourself and mourned for your own weak and pitiable state. Proud, arrogant people don't show mercy, they usually show the opposite. Their tendency is to condemn others or, at best, to mete out severe justice. Why does God favour us when we are merciful? Because it's His character to be merciful. God has always declared that he is merciful, and He has always shown mercy.

Some people think that God's character changed between the Old and New Testaments, and that He decided to stop being a fearful, law-giving judge and became a pardoning, forgiving, loving God instead. Of course, this is nonsense, and scripture is quite consistent from beginning to end. The two sides of God's character which He always declared are mercy and judgement. In the Old Testament, in all His fearful judgements, He was also merciful. In the New Testament, alongside mercy and grace, he is still the fearful judge at the end of the age, before whom we must all stand.

Here is God declaring His character in the Ten Commandments: "I the Lord am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me: and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6). The law has mercy in it. This is a contradiction! The law says that when a person does wrong, they can justly be punished. It is right to punish them. That's what they deserve, and that's the way they will learn. But mercy fights against justice and says, "Let's not do what's just and right. Let's forgive and pardon and give people what they don't deserve".

Those two sides are always there. When Moses said to God, "Show me your glory", God again declared the two sides of His character. We have already learned that glory is the same as character.

God said to Moses, "I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee..." (Exodus 33:18-19). When God passed by, He proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the father upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6-7). This time He put mercy first.

The Mercy Seat

We know that the Ten Commandments were placed in the ark in the Holy of Holies. But on top of the ark (which was simply a wooden box) was placed a solid block of gold, called the mercy seat. Above this mercy seat, God met with the children of Israel; so the mercy seat, if you like, came between God and His law. Jesus had to expose the Pharisees because they had misunderstood the law. They remembered all the little details but ignored the main points. "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (That doesn't sound like merciful talk, does it? "Woe" is the opposite of "blessed". But this is Jesus and he, like God, is a fearful judge as well as a merciful saviour ...) Ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgement, mercy, and faith" (Matthew 23:23). There we see judgement and mercy again, together in the law. The law, after all, is only a description of God's character, of who He is. But we, like the Pharisees, tend to move towards the state where we "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel". We start off under grace, full of mercy. But as time goes on we become harder, more occupied with the letter of our doctrines, more critical of those who disagree with our viewpoint.

Whenever Christians come to political power, they are never merciful and tolerant. They end up burning people at the stake. History proves it. The natural tendency is to become legalistic and try to enforce righteousness and holiness on others. For example, if the church want the country to be rid of homosexuality and witchcraft, they would have to enforce that in law and make it a punishable offence. But that's not mercy. You can't make a Christian nation like that, only a legalistic, hypocritical nation of Pharisees. Christianity changes people from the inside, not by enforcing laws from outside, under threat of punishment.

A Divine Law

This fifth beatitude is different from all the others in one respect: it embodies what I call a divine law. The condition and the consequence contain the same words. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy". It's a fixed law, of which there are many in nature. The law of sowing and reaping is one. You always reap what you sow. It can't be any other way. It always hold true. Sow cabbages, and you'll always reap cabbages. Sow sparingly, and you'll reap sparingly. Sow bountifully, and you'll reap bountifully. The law of forgiveness is another divine law. How can there be a "law of forgiveness?" Isn't it a contradiction in terms? But the law of forgiveness says "Forgive, and you shall be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). Conversely, if you will not forgive, you will not be forgiven.

Jesus makes this absolutely clear in the powerful parable about the king who forgave a servant a huge debt. The servant then met someone who owed him a very small amount, and demanded

that he pay it immediately. When the king heard that his servant had shown no mercy, he arrested him and "delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him" (Matthew 18:23-34). Jesus concludes "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (verse 35). The servant in the parable had received forgiveness, but then he had that forgiveness taken away because he didn't practice what he had experienced. "So shall my Father do unto you ..." .It's a fearful thought. Blessed are you if you are merciful; but, conversely, woe to you if you are not merciful. We have to show forgiveness and mercy to others if we want to hold onto the forgiveness and mercy we have received from God.

Saved By Grace

We must always remain conscious that we are sinners saved by grace. Only out of that attitude, that deep acknowledgement of heart, can we have the attitude that will show mercy, and do it, not legalistically (because Jesus says we have to), but, as Paul says, cheerfully. "He that showeth mercy, [let him do it] with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:8). Thank God, the beatitudes as they progress help us to see ourselves, as they become real in our experience; and if we follow Jesus' way we will become more and more aware of our weakness and sinfulness, and not, like the Pharisees, less and less aware. Towards the end of his life, Paul confessed to Timothy that he was the chief of sinners. His walk with Jesus had impressed his frailty and unworthiness more forcibly upon him. Only this self-knowledge produces mercy in us.

Mercy And Grace

Mercy and grace are two different things. We often identity the one with the other, but they are not the same. Mercy is an act, a decision or choice to not punish. Grace is a mark of character, a general attribute. We can "grow in grace", but we cannot "grow in mercy" .God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you", not "my mercy is sufficient for you" .Grace is an attribute, like strength or weakness; mercy is an act. There is a scripture that mentions both mercy and grace, and illustrates the difference between them: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). In the Old Testament, the "mercy seat" was indicative of God's acts of mercy and forgiveness. In the New Testament, the "throne of grace" is indicative of God's character, and from that throne of grace we can obtain an act of mercy. Mercy is God making the decision to give us grace.

A Right Spirit

We prove what spirit we are of by whether we show mercy or not. "Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh" (James 3:11-12). James goes on to say that there are two opposite types of wisdom, earthly and heavenly. The heavenly wisdom is "full of mercy" (verse 17), but the earthly wisdom is characterized by "envying and strife" (verses 14,16). We are going to have one or the other. We cannot have both; the two are incompatible. It we find that

despite our best religious appearances we are secretly envious of others in our hearts, if we find we are inwardly critical, resentful and hard-hearted towards others, then there cannot also be mercy in us.

It is not altogether a bad thing to discover this. It may be upsetting and unpalatable to us, but knowing the truth about ourselves is the key to spiritual progress. In fact, only God can show us ourselves in this way, and when He exposes us, His motives are good - He wants to heal us and change us. But we have to see ourselves as we are. If we have envying and strife in our hearts, it is a good sign that we have not properly realized or considered that we have been shown mercy. It does us all good to "remember the pit from whence we were dug" and to meditate long and hard on the mercy that has been shown to us. Jesus' parable about the king and the servant seems so obvious, so extreme that it is silly; but Jesus never gives silly illustrations. It is all too powerfully true. The debt we have been forgiven is greater than we can imagine; yet we can too often be found "exacting payment" of our fellows. God forbid that we should fall into the trap; it is a terrible place to be, because it ensnares us in a pit of selfishness, legalism and hypocrisy (and that can never make us happy or contented!) "The merciful man" says the proverb "doeth good to his own soul: but he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh" (Proverbs 11:17). Worse than this, it is a terrible place to be because when we are like this, God offers us no mercy, only judgement.

Forgiveness, like mercy, is a decision. To refuse to forgive is rebellion against God, and we cannot be Christians and rebel against God. The person who says "I will not forgive" is not a Christian. That's not to say that forgiveness is always easy. Sometimes it is very hard. Forgiving someone who said an unkind word to you is a different matter from forgiving the man who raped your daughter or murdered your child. But weakness is not a problem to God; only rebellion is a problem. You may say "I forgive", and then find resentment and hurt flooding back into your heart. That's not rebellion; that's only your weakness. You just have to say "I forgive" again, and keep on saying it. Rebellion says "I will not forgive" .(The person who says "I cannot forgive" is really saying "I will not forgive") .A weak person can be forgiven; a rebellious person cannot.

It's Our Choice

We each choose which side of God's character we will face: His mercy or His judgement. "By no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers unto the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me ... Showing mercy to thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." His commandments are here in the beatitudes. The beatitudes fulfil the law. Let us pray with David, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24); and let us always "remember His mercy" .If we are always conscious of His mercy, we will always be merciful to others, and we will obtain mercy, not judgement, from Him.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Freedom Through Failure

From the very first time I met Sarah* we really hit it off together. I was hoovering my lounge one day when I heard a knock at the french window, and as I looked up I saw Sarah waving to me from the other side of the glass. Maurice and I had been conducting a crusade in Scotland a short time before and he had told Sarah that she would be very welcome to visit us at Barratt Ministries any time she wanted to come. She'd decided there and then that she was going to take him up on his offer, and without thinking to let us know, she arrived with her baggage on the doorstep with the intention of staying for a long weekend. She was with us for the next three weeks.

As it was a sunny day when Sarah arrived I went into the garden and invited her to sit with me at our garden trestle table, where she embarked on the story of her life. I'd never met her before and she seemed so chatty and friendly as her story just poured from her lips. I couldn't honestly believe what she was saying to me although I knew she was telling the truth. Her appearance told me that she was quietly spoken, sweet, gentle and very lady-like – and yet her story told me that she'd come from a very different background altogether. Sarah had delved quite deeply into witchcraft and drugs and had been a member of a motorbike chapter akin to "Hell's Angels". She had done some despicable things in her past and hadn't been averse to casting spells on people. In fact she and some of her mates had cast a spell on the assistant minister of the church where her parents were members. After casting the spell they rang to tell him what they had done and prophesied that he would have a fatal car crash very soon. Obviously the minister was not frightened by what they said and told them that he was under the protection of God, and nothing they could do to him would harm him – but then he had a car crash! He wasn't killed, but he still had a car crash!!

A Miracle Happens

Sarah's parents and the whole church kept her under special prayer asking that God would bring her to complete deliverance from all the things she was involved with. Sarah would not entertain any conversation whatsoever about Jesus Christ or God when her parents tried to speak to her, so therefore she was absolutely stunned to find herself actually inside the church her parents attended, when in actual fact she had intended to be meeting a friend at the pub! From her own lips she had asked the taxi driver to take her to the church in Scotland, and even as she was telling me the story I could see that she was still stunned that this had come from her own mouth, as she had no recollection whatever of saying it. But that was the day God had planned to meet Sarah, and she didn't leave the church until she was totally delivered. Her life was transformed – and that is an understatement. She was alive and burning for God and very spiritual indeed, probably because of her spiritual involvement in other areas.

She seemed to know without anybody telling her what was and was not acceptable, and because she'd enjoyed our ministry so much whilst we were on crusade in Scotland she wanted to come and

have personal fellowship with us so she could be built up in her Christian life. She wasn't yet filled with the Holy Ghost and during the course of her time with us she asked us on numerous occasions to pray that she would be, but nothing happened. Then on the last night that she spent with us, God intervened and she opened her mouth to pour out the beautiful language God had baptised her with in a very demonstrative way.

A Great Witness

During her visit I was working on another album and we were using a recording studio to do our recording. We took Sarah along with us as I know it's very exciting for people to see a recording studio at first hand, and whilst we were there she got into conversation with the directors who seemed so overwhelmed with her testimony that they actually invited her out to dinner. We were told later by one of them that he, and the other directors who were husband and wife, had listened to her story over their meal with rapt attention and amazement as she bore witness to them of what the Lord had done for her. I know that Sarah made a big impression upon them and was very grateful that God had sent her to us because for a long time we had been sowing seeds there and Sarah seemed to make a big statement. From that time on we kept in touch with Sarah and she became a very close friend. She had been such a blessing to have around that we invited her back again the next year.

Her visit coincided with bonfire night. At the recording studios, instead of having a Christmas party as other firms usually do, they had decided to have a bonfire night party to which they not only invited members of staff but all their clients, who included radio and TV personalities and celebrities working in the entertainment field, including Maurice and myself. Because they had heard that Sarah was with us at this particular time they asked if we could also bring her. We saw this as a great opportunity because who knows what the Lord could have done on such a night as this. We took Sarah along quite happily. The place was buzzing with people and there was lots of food and drink for everybody. During the course of the evening we got separated, Maurice and I mingled with friends and Sarah got chatting with other people, it wasn't until a couple of hours later that one of the directors came to tell me that he had put Sarah into a taxi and sent her home to our house as she was absolutely blind drunk and had been verbally abusing their very important clients. I could see from the expression on the director's face that Sarah's behaviour had been totally intolerable, and both Maurice and I were devastated at the outcome of the evening.

"Oh God, Why?"

We drove home as quickly as possible from the party and found Sarah in the guest room at our house, totally inebriated. Being the woman I felt it my duty to help her into bed and as I did she vomited all over the new quilt that I had just bought and the new carpet that had just been laid, and I looked at her totally disgusted and very angry. I went to bed myself some time later but I couldn't sleep and I was so disturbed that I had to get up and go into the prayer room where I begged an answer from God as to why He should allow such a thing to happen. For years we had been witnessing and "living the life" in front of the people at the studio, during which time we had built up

really good relationships, and many of the barriers and defences had come down so that people could be honest with us and not be afraid to discuss deep and personal things. I knew that the directors had been very angry indeed at what had taken place. They had accepted Sarah because they respected Maurice and I so much, but I knew without any words being spoken by them that her behaviour tonight was a direct reflection upon us, and I felt awfully embarrassed with the situation we had been plunged into.

The Servant's Choice

I prayed aloud for quite a while but it seemed that the heavens were as brass and I couldn't get any peace in my mind. Eventually I decided to open the bible at random and ask God to direct me to a place where I should read for my answer. I opened the Bible at Exodus 21 and read the first six verses, but couldn't for the life of me understand why God had directed me to such a scripture, as it all seemed to be about a servant's attitude towards his master after a six year period of service. If the slave had not enjoyed working for his master he was entitled to go out free, but if he decided that he loved his master and wanted to stay, then his master was obliged to take him to the door post and pierce his ear through with an awl and put a ring in it, and this would be a sign to everybody that the slave was now there through choice not because he was forced.

Decision Time

I stared for ages at these verses trying to understand what God was saying – and then suddenly He gave me the revelation. I remembered what Sarah had told me about becoming a Christian, that as far as she was concerned she hadn't even intended to go to church, let alone be delivered from all those terrible things she had been involved with. For years she had been totally ruled by the devil, and then suddenly God intervened and gave her a chance to see what it would be like to be ruled by Him. It was now time for Sarah to make her own decision as to who she wanted to serve. She could either return to her former lifestyle and serve the devil, or else she could stay under God's protection and be a Christian. God had been very kind allowing her to see both camps, but her's was the decision to say either, "I will go out free", or "Pierce my ear, Lord".

The Risk God Takes

God then began to remind me of my own past life, particularly concerning the incident I wrote about in the last issue of "Challenge", and I realised that every single one of us, at some point in our Christian walk, has to make the decision for ourselves whether we will serve God from choice or because we have been forced. So many things began to fall into place in my mind as to why God allowed us to fall into sin and make so many stupid mistakes. Whatever condemnation and guilt I had suffered up until that point was completely removed because I realised God needed to face me, like He was doing to Sarah, with the truth about myself so that I could make a rational decision concerning my future. From the very moment that I made my decision that God could pierce my ear and have rights to my life, I know that things have been very different – I made a wise choice.

God takes that risk with every single one of us; we could choose to go in the opposite direction but nevertheless God makes sure that we make our own decision without any pressure from Him, because that's what He's after, heartfelt love and not forced love. My attitude to all weak and struggling Christians has totally changed since God gave me this revelation. I no longer condemn and judge, because I understand the process that has to take place in their lives. The man in the bible who was condemned so harshly for not forgiving his brother his debt was only treated like this because he had forgotten that he too had once owed a tremendous debt that he hadn't been able to pay, but had received forgiveness and pardon; and Christ told us this story in the bible to give us an example – to follow and copy!

* Name changed to protect person's identity.