

De Sales

SPIRITUALITY CENTER

"The Merciful: The Generous"



The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus begins this discourse with the well-known Beatitudes, one of which is: "Blessed are the merciful; mercy shall be shown to them."

Let us begin by first examining more closely our understanding of "mercy" itself. It is defined as "kind and compassionate treatment of an offender, enemy, prisoner or other person under one's power; clemency. A disposition to be kind and forgiving. Mercy emphasizes compassion in a general way; it suggests relieve from a fate of considerable severity, without further implication." (American Heritage Dictionary, New College Edition)

Synonyms associated with mercy include leniency, clemency, forbearance and charity.

We turn our attention to the Gospel of Matthew to understand the importance that mercy plays in our relationships with God and our relationships with one another.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, unique to Matthew, is "one of the sternest passages of the Gospels. It reinforces the duty of forgiveness by appealing

to another motive: the forgiveness granted by man to man as a condition of forgiveness granted to man by God." (The Jerome Biblical Commentary)

In the parable, a king ultimately cancels a huge debt owed to him not by a slave but a high officer of state. This same officer, by contrast, when confronting a subordinate who owed him a mere fraction of what the former owed the king, refuses to hear the subordinate's plea of mercy. When word gets back to the king, the official is condemned for his unwillingness to show mercy and is turned over to torturers.

The Jerome Biblical Commentary concludes: "The conduct of the king is not a model by which we should learn about the providence of God. The detail that is most significant is the difference in the debt owed by the unmerciful servant and the debt that he claims. The model is the forgiveness of God, which knows no limit, and neither should man's forgiveness. If man does not forgive, he cannot expect forgiveness; if he does not renounce his own claims, which are small, he cannot ask God to dismiss the claims (*presumably much greater*) against him." (*Ibid*)

Francis de Sales places a high premium upon the mercy of God. He wrote: "God did not save us out of justice for anything we have done but according to God's mercy." (Treatise, Part I, Chapter 18) God's mercy not only saved us, however, but also enables us to be the people that God calls us to be: "God assists us to strive toward the life to which God calls us. In this way God shows us divine mercy, by not asking us to strive for something that is unobtainable."

How seriously do we think about the Lord's Prayer when we pray it?

How conscious are we of the explicit link that we acknowledge that exists between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of one another?

How conscious are we of our obligation, as followers of Jesus, to be as merciful with others as God is merciful with us?

Make no mistake about it: we are most human when we show mercy to others. In fact, we are most divine when we show mercy to others. If that's not motivation enough, Scripture is quite clear: if we wish to enjoy God's mercy, we must extend mercy to one another from our hearts.