

# “Character that Counts: Mercy”

Psalm 51; Matthew 18:21-35 <sup>1</sup>

Μακαριοι οι ελεημονες οτι αυτοι ελεθησονται.

“*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*” (Matthew 5:7).

Once there was a nine-year-old boy named Bobby who lost control of his bladder and wet his pants while sitting at his desk in the fourth grade. Not only did Bobby wet his pants, but there was actually a puddle on the floor. His heart stopped, because he knew that when the other children discovered his situation, life would never be the same again. He would become an outcast, an object of ridicule . . . forever.

Bobby put his head down and prayed, “Dear God, this is an emergency! I need help now!” though he had no idea what help could possibly get him out of his predicament. When Bobby opened his eyes, the teacher was walking toward him, and he could tell that she had seen his distress.

Just before the teacher took him out of the room, thereby revealing what had happened, a girl named Susie walked toward Bobby, carrying a small goldfish bowl. When she passed Bobby’s desk, Susie stumbled, dumping the bowl, the fish, and the water in Bobby’s lap. He pretended to be angry, but quietly prayed, “Thank you, Jesus!”

Now, rather than becoming an object of ridicule, Bobby was the object of sympathy. The teacher rushed him downstairs and gave him gym shorts to put on while his pants dried out. That was the good news.

The bad news was that the ridicule that would have been Bobby’s was transferred to Susie. When Susie tried to help clean up the mess, the other children told her, “You’ve done enough already, you klutz!”

As the day went on, Bobby’s sympathy got better and better, while Susie’s ridicule got worse and worse. The day was finally over, Bobby walked over to Susie at the bus stop, and asked quietly, “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

And Susie whispered back, “I wet my pants once, too.”<sup>2</sup>

The Royers were a kindly Amish family who made their living growing watermelons. Late one night after a football game, a group of drunken high school boys went to the Royer farm and began smashing watermelons.

While the boys were yelling and swearing in the field, a light came on in the upstairs bedroom of the farmhouse. As Mr. Royer came out onto the front porch, the boys were ready for a fight. They weren’t ready for what actually happened, though. Mr. Royer told the boys that they could have all the watermelons they wanted, but that the ones they were breaking were not his best ones. He offered to lead them to the best field and give them as many as they wanted. Mr. Royer even asked the boys to come in and have some lemonade, but they were too embarrassed to do anything except to apologize and go home.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible says that “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*” (Matthew 5:7). The fifth Beatitude has to do with compassion and forbearance, with giving people what they *need*,

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on August 3, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> An illustration used by Dr. Robert Tuttle, Jr., in a sermon in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Haggard, *The Life Giving Church* (Regal Books, 2001).

not what they *deserve*. Susie showed compassion to Bobby. Mr. Royer showed forbearance with those boys.

The fourth Beatitude had to do with righteousness and justice. Mercy is the other side of justice. Righteousness has to do with acting on behalf of those who aren't able to act for themselves, while mercy means going beyond justice when we ourselves are the offended. **Exercising mercy means refraining from exacting penalty even though justice allows it.**

Jesus' parable about the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18 makes it clear that **we must offer mercy to each other if we expect to have any hope of mercy from God**. You may remember the situation. Jesus had been teaching His disciples about forgiveness, telling them how absolutely critical forgiveness is for healthy, durable relationships, as well as for the health and witness of the Church.

Wanting to show that he'd understood the lesson, Peter asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" Peter thought he was being very generous. He thought he was going far beyond what was necessary, and he expected to be congratulated for having learned so well and so quickly.

Jesus' answer was quite a surprise. Jesus told Peter that those who follow Him must forgive "seventy times seven," or 490 times. I don't think Jesus meant a literal 490 occasions. I think Jesus meant that there's no limit to forgiveness—certainly not a limit that can be counted up and calculated.

Then, as He so often did, Jesus used a parable to illustrate his point. The story began with a man who owed the king a mind-boggling amount of money. The actual number Jesus used was 10,000 talents. We're not absolutely sure how much a talent was worth, but fairly conservative estimates place ten thousand talents at something like three hundred million dollars.<sup>4</sup> Calculated at ten dollars an hour, we're talking about a working man's wages for more than *eighty-two thousand years*.

The debt was so enormous that the king ordered that the debtor's property be liquidated and that he, his wife, and his children be sold into slavery as payment against this debt. Hearing this verdict, the debtor fell to his knees with the cry, "Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all." Oh, yeah. *Eighty-two thousand years* of wages! But the king's mercy outran the man's request. He cancelled the debt entirely and let the man go free.

The release was surprising, but not as surprising as what happened next. Amazingly, the man whose mind-boggling debt had been forgiven left the king and apparently went rather immediately in search of a third man who owed money to him. This man's debt was something like the equivalent of three-months' wages, an amount that was essentially nothing in comparison with the wages of 82,000 years!

Hard as it is to believe, given what had been done for him, the just-forgiven man grabbed his debtor by the throat and demanded immediate payment! And, as had happened only a few hours before, this debtor, too, fell to his knees, pledging to pay the entire amount if the lender would only be patient—almost the exact words the lender himself had used to beg for mercy.

This big-time borrower and small-time lender knew what it felt like to be absolutely unable to pay his debt, to be completely dependent upon someone else's mercy. He also knew the incredible relief of rising from his knees with the weight of the world removed from his shoulders.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/a/Talent.htm>

But now he did not choose to be merciful. He closed his heart to his friend's desperation, and had him arrested and thrown in jail. When word about this cruelty got back to the king, the first debtor was hauled off to jail himself, presumably until 82,000 years' wages were paid.

Peter, the disciples, and anyone else who heard this parable would of course have been scandalized by the unthinkable behavior of the unforgiving debtor, and would have been quick to say, "Serves him right!" when the final judgment was passed. They may not have been quite so ready for what Jesus said next—and neither are we: "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart."

Now forgiveness—mercy—is hard. It's always hard. The Cross was hard, too. Hard wood, hard nails, hard pain.<sup>5</sup> Forgiveness tends to be an *idea* rather than a *reality* for us **until we begin to come to grips with the debt that we ourselves owe** before God, as the first debtor should have done, and then beg God's forgiveness and healing for our own sin. We can hardly give to others what we've never received ourselves.

Our journey toward becoming merciful, toward becoming compassionate and forbearing, necessarily begins with asking God for what David asked in Psalm 51: "*Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. . . . wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.*"

The first debtor had no grief over his debt except the grief of being held accountable. He had never groaned before God in sorrow, saying, "*O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner*" (Luke 18:13). He had never experienced the wonder of living under God's mercy, with a grateful heart . . . but you and I can . . . if we will. And once we experience God's mercy ourselves, we'll be able to offer it to others.

Wayne Cordeiro has a friend named Gene who takes him to lunch every week. This has gone on for a long time, and Gene always insists on paying for lunch. Wayne thought this was very nice of Gene, and that maybe this was some sort of ministry that Gene does, so he let it go for nearly a year. Finally, though, Wayne had had all he could take.

"Gene," he said, let me pay today. You always pick up the tab." Gene said, "No, I'll get it." Wayne said, "Come on. I want to do this." Gene said, "No, I'll do it."

Well, the next week, Wayne got to the restaurant early and told the waitress, "When the bill comes, please give it to me." She responded, "Gene said you might say that, but I can't give it to you. I have to give it to him." "You're kidding." "No, that's what he said."

So Wayne sat down and said to Gene, "Gene, would you let me pay for the lunch?" "No, I'll get it."

"Come on, Gene, I want to pick up the tab." "No."

"Gene, I yearn to pick up the tab." "No."

"Gene, I'm starting to dream about picking up the tab." "No, I want to pick up the tab."

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<sup>5</sup> William S. Stoddard, quoted in *Wisdom from a Pastor's Heart*, ed. Douglas Connelly (Jossey-Bass, 2001).

“Gene, I beg you, let me pick up the tab.” “No.” And to this day, Wayne has never paid for his lunch.

“Now listen carefully,” Wayne added as he told this story. “Jesus has picked up your tab—not once, not twice, but thousands of times. Once you truly understand this, you begin to feel compelled to do the same thing for other people. We love because He loves; not because we learned it in Sunday school, not because we get points for it, not because we think we’re going to gain God’s blessings if we do. *We love others because He first loved us.*”<sup>6</sup>

How does Jesus’ love flow from us to others in merciful ways? Gene and Susie and Mr. Royer showed us several ways. This last story shows one more:

Chush is a Jewish school for children with special needs in Brooklyn, New York. According to Rabbi Paysach Krohn, the father of a Chush student once delivered an unforgettable speech at a Chush fundraising dinner. Let’s call him Bill.<sup>7</sup> After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, Bill said,

“Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my son has challenges most other children don’t have. Where is God’s perfection?”

The audience was shocked by the question. “I believe,” Bill went on, “that when God brings a child like Shaya into the world, that as wonderful as he all by himself, *part of the perfection that God seeks is in the way people respond to him.*

“One afternoon Shaya and I walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, ‘Do you think they’ll let me play?’ Now I knew that most boys would not want Shaya on their team, but I also knew that if Shaya were allowed to play, it would be very important to him.

“I went over to one of the boys and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he said, ‘We’re losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team, and we’ll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning.’

“The boys gave Shaya a glove and sent him out to play center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya’s team scored a few runs but was still behind by three.

“In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya’s team scored again. With two outs and the bases loaded, Shaya was scheduled to be up. I was surprised that they gave him the bat. Shaya didn’t even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. But as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly.

“The first pitch came in, and Shaya swung and missed. One of Shaya’s teammates came up to him, and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya.

“As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat, and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball on a high arc to right field.

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Cordeiro, “A Personal Relationship,” *Preaching Today* audiotope #225.

<sup>7</sup> This story has been edited slightly to fit our congregation.

“Everyone started yelling, ‘Shaya, run to first. Run to first!’

“Shaya had never, ever gotten to run to first base. He ran down the baseline, startled and wide-eyed. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman, but he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman’s head instead.

“Everyone yelled, ‘Run to second, run to second!’

“Shaya ran toward second base as the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, ‘Run to third!’

“As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, ‘Shaya, run home!’

“Shaya ran home, and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as if he had really just hit a ‘grand slam’ and won the game for his team.

“That day,” Bill said quietly, “those 18 boys reached God’s perfection.”<sup>8</sup>

My friends, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, God does for you and for me what those boys did for Shaya. And what God says to you and to me this morning is this: **“Pay it forward. Pass it on.”**

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”*

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<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Paysach Krohn, *Echoes of the Maggid* (Brooklyn: Artscroll Mesorah, 1999); [www.truthorfiction.com](http://www.truthorfiction.com); [www.snopes.com/glurge/chush.asp](http://www.snopes.com/glurge/chush.asp)