

## 2. What is a Christian? Living God's mercy

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Date: 25 July 2010

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'll do turn with me, if you would, to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, and have that before you. We're in a short series about the shape of real Christian discipleship, and today it's about living God's mercy.

We're going back to basics again this week, as Jack Nicklaus used to do annually, going back to his first-time coach, Jack Grout, every year, even when he was the great champion of the world, and saying to him, teach me how to play golf.

I don't know if you were watching the Open last week, I found it really very encouraging. I've discovered I'm halfway to being a decent golfer, because I was watching Rory McIlroy, and I can do half of his game, I can do that one where it's all the birdies.

I've just got to learn the other half now, all the birdies. It's very encouraging, isn't it? I'm sure you found that too. But anyway, back to Jack Nicklaus. If the greatest golfer in the world, at the top of his game, knew that to go on in his game, and even to hold his place in the game, he could never allow himself to forget the basics, just the things like holding the grip on the club, putting his feet in the right place, getting the right swing, then how much more should it be for us, even as perhaps mature, experienced Christians, that we also should never lose sight of the very heart of our faith, the very heart of our lives, the basics.

It might well be that you feel at the moment that you are very much at the top of your game as a Christian. Well, if that's true, I rejoice with you. I truly do. But the mark of a real champion, the mark of a real Christian disciple too, is that they're never too proud, are they, to go back to the basics, back to the fundamentals.

[ 1 : 57 ] Because they know that it's there, and they know that it's from there, that all real progress is going to come in their lives. And that's why we're going back to our teacher, our coach, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we're saying to him, Lord, teach us how to be a Christian. Teach me the shape of genuine Christian discipleship. And what better place than the Beatitudes, the beginning of this great Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus himself begins to teach and to preach, to tell us, to instruct us, the gospel of his kingdom.

Remember, that's what he's doing here in this Sermon on the Mount. Look at chapter 4, verse 23. Matthew tells us in advance what he's going to be telling us through Jesus' lips. He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.

And that's what he goes on to do all the way through Matthew chapter 5, 6, and 7. And then in chapter 8 and 9, we have him healing every disease and every affliction. And it's rounded off with that verse at the end of chapter 9 that just acts like a bracket and tells us once again, this is what Jesus has been doing.

And he begins this great sermon by showing us exactly that, the shape of what the life of true kingdom people will be like. It's a portrait, if you like, of genuine Christian discipleship.

[ 3 : 21 ] It's a picture of what it means to become and to be a real follower of Jesus. And as we began to see last week, what a very surprising portrait it turns out to be.

There are surprises galore right from the start. Who is it? Who is it who gains entry into this kingdom of heaven, into the very presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords himself? Well, we looked last week, didn't we, at the shocking surprise of the first beatitude. Look at verse 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It's not the spiritually rich. No, it's rather the spiritually poor. It's the bankrupt. It's those who have nothing whatsoever to offer God, and who know they have nothing to offer God, who can be blessed.

It's astonishing, isn't it? Now, verse 4, is it the happy and carefree who find this blessing? It's those who mourn.

[ 4 : 24 ] Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. It's those who know the reality of their own sin, and who therefore weep, who can find God's blessing.

Verse 5, it's not the mighty in the world's eyes. It's not the self-assertive. It's not those who are in control of their own destiny, who can force their way into the kingdom of heaven. No, says Jesus, it's the meek.

It's those who have been humbled by God, who have therefore had to bury all their own personal pretensions, who have had to realize that all of these things are totally out of their own control, and under the control of another.

It's they who can be blessed in Christ's kingdom. Then verse 6, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Not those who are satisfied with their own righteousness and their own performance. Rather, those who acknowledge their own poverty, and therefore hunger and thirst for a righteousness that must come to them from God himself, and only from God himself.

[ 5 : 32 ] And that's the way, says Jesus, and that's the only way into the kingdom of heaven.

Entrance into real Christian discipleship is all about finding God's grace.

There's no other way to begin. None at all. That's what we found last week. Notice the progression, by the way. Those who admit their poverty before God, not asserting their worth against him, will be those who then weep for their sin, won't they?

Not their self-righteousness. And there'll be those then who humbly submit themselves to God, who realize they cannot assert themselves in their own ability, in their own control.

They'll become those who long, above all, to be right with God, to receive, to be filled with what only God can give. What you cannot extract, righteousness, of a right relationship with God, your Savior. Now doesn't that just turn absolutely upside down the view of our world? It's the very opposite, isn't it, of the way on in the kingdoms of our world.

[ 6 : 48 ] Imagine you going to a job interview and sending in your CV and it went something like this. I have nothing to offer. I have nothing to be proud of.

I have no track record that I can put before you. I have absolutely nothing at all, but please, out of your mercy, would you give me this job? I don't think you have to ask what would happen, do you? I say, thank you very much. Next, please. It's totally foreign, isn't it? This whole way of things absolutely baffles the world. The world just cannot understand it at all and therefore, of course, the world despises this whole way.

But you see, for God's kingdom, the way of life is death. In God's kingdom, the way up is down. And that's because, you remember, the way of discipleship with Jesus is the way of the cross.

It's Jesus' life that sets the pattern for our discipleship. And it's a way of inward death to this world and everything that it offers.

[ 7 : 58 ] The world can't see it, it can't understand it, and it hates it. But God sees it and God cherishes it and loves it. Because the great commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

Not to love the world in that way. And that is real righteousness. That's what you need in the kingdom of heaven. But it's also very, very wrong, and we must be clear about this, to think that all of this is just an inward thing, an inward matter of our hearts to God.

That's impossible. And in fact, the whole point of the Sermon on the Mount is that real righteousness, real heart love for God is something that is abundantly visible.

It can be seen. And the next four Beatitudes speak of things that are supremely visible. They speak of the evidence lived out of the grace of God touching and working within the hearts of real disciples of Jesus.

If it's true to say that entry into the kingdom of God is an invisible thing, it's a change of our hearts that can be brought about only by God's grace. But the Bible is abundantly clear that real grace is visible.

[ 9 : 22 ] It's something that's lived out in this world. A true entrance to Christ's kingdom, in other words, always leads to true evidence of kingdom life.

Finding God's grace, if it's real, will always display the fruit of God's grace. These things go together like two sides of a coin. And that means that as basic to Christian discipleship as finding God's

grace will be living God's mercy.

Verse 7 that we're focusing on today. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Now that is a great challenge. Let's be absolutely clear.

Jesus is saying that only the merciful will receive mercy from God. But he's not saying that being merciful merits God's mercy towards us.

Rather, what he is saying is that being merciful is the evidence, it's the badge of membership of those disciples who truly belong to the kingdom of Jesus.

[ 10 : 33 ] the evidence in their lives that their entrance to the kingdom has been real. It's a visible, unmistakable sign of an inward transformation.

Plenty of doctors in the congregation here and some of you will remember as I do what it was like doing medical examinations. For example, joining the Royal College of Physicians or Surgeons or whatever it is.

You would have to do some spot diagnoses. diagnoses. You'd be taken into a room and there'd be a lady sitting in there and she'd be rather thin and sweaty and tremulous and her eyes would be sticking out and bulging, her lids would be retracting, her pulse would be racing very fast and she'd look as if she'd lost weight.

Well, Dr. Gifford, what's the diagnosis? Thyrotoxicosis. If you can't get that, you're finished. Well, perhaps it would be the next one.

It would be a lady in her 70s. She'd have a bit of a flush on her cheeks and you'd be asked, Doctor, examine this patient's heart. You'd feel the pulse. It was very rapid and irregular. You'd feel the chest and the apex beat would be tapping away.

[ 11 : 44 ] You'd put your hand on the sternum and there's a heave. You'd take your stethoscope out and you'd put it on the chest. There's a very loud first heart sound and a snap and a loud rumbling mid-diastolic murmur.

And then you just think, aha! And you just look around the side of the chest and just as thin as anything, there's a little line going all the way around. And you look up and you confidently say, this lady has mitral stenosis and had a mitral valvotomy about 30 years ago.

And things are looking up for your exam. Because that's exactly what she's got. A narrowed heart valve. And once upon a time, a surgeon in the old days opened it up and stuck his fingers through and waggled it about.

And for such a rather brutal operation, it had remarkable effects. But what you are seeing, you see, are outward, visible signs of a transformed heart.

Now, in that case, it's pathology, isn't it, that you're seeing. But what Jesus is talking about here is the opposite. He's saying that a merciful nature is the clear, visible sign of an inward transformation of the heart.

[ 13 : 00 ] That the grace of God has truly been at work bringing new life to this person who is filled with the righteousness and therefore the mercy of the Lord himself.

But what is mercy? What is it to be merciful? Well, it's not just something natural about your personality. It's certainly not being the sort of person who says, well, anything goes.

You're very lax and liberal and permissive in your nature. You're just not serious about sin at all, so you just let anything go. It's absolutely not that because God is the great standard of mercy, isn't he?

And God is deeply concerned with holiness, with righteousness and with truth. Now, mercy is simply a settled attitude of the heart that reflects the heart attitude of God.

It's related to grace, but it is subtly different, I think. Grace, if you like, is what deals with sin and guilt itself and brings pardon and brings cleansing. But mercy, mercy is what deals with the miserable consequences of sin, the distress, the misery, the mess, all of these things that result from sin in our lives.

[ 14 : 21 ] Mercy is what shows pity, what desires to bring relief and bring care and bring help to the dreadful circumstances that have come about because of sin.

That's mercy. And it's the fruit of grace at work in particular situations where sin has brought its mess and where it's brought its misery to bear on the lives of men and women.

What need there is for mercy in our world of misery and mess. The miserable without the sin are all around us in the world, aren't they?

Think about it on a global scale. So much of the misery that we see in our world and that we see in our news is the result of human sin. So much famine and destitution and so on is not really caused by natural disasters.

They're only in a tiny part. It's really caused by wars and by civil strife and by corruption. I was just reading last week about the aftermath of the great earthquake in Haiti and the lack of progress that's been made.

[ 15 : 28 ] And it's all because of human sin. It's because of corruption and violence and chaos in society. Think about it on a personal level.

Think of the pain and the distress that permeates our communities and our families because of broken relationships. Marriages or families ruptured. and the mess of loneliness and pain and misery and economic hardship and all of these things. The bottom line is that every one of our human relationships is flawed and that is because of our sin. We're fallen people and that is why the world is so full of mess and our lives are so full of mess. And that's why there is such a desperate need in our world for mercy, for merciful people to bring help, to bring cure, to bring relief.

And mercy, says Jesus, is a visible mark of righteousness. Alas, so often people misunderstand that, especially perhaps religious people who so often exhibit the antithesis of true righteousness.

[ 16 : 45 ] I was hearing about a man the other week who was telling a friend of mine that in his church he's beavering away, doing a ministry to those who are alcoholics and seeking to recover from that.

But the elders of his church are absolutely against him, give no help whatsoever and want to stop it because their attitude is they got themselves in that mess, why should we be helping them out of it? Isn't that what we read of in the Gospels among the Pharisees? But the true righteousness has absolutely nothing sanctimonious or moralistic about it because it's Jesus' righteousness and mercy and a merciful spirit is the inevitable fruit of the righteousness of Jesus.

And it's the other side of righteousness being made visible to the world. You'll notice that the first four Beatitudes have a God word reference. It's towards God from our hearts.

He sees our hearts. We're poor in spirit, that we mourn for sin, that we're meek, that we hunger for righteousness. But the second four Beatitudes are very man-word.

[ 18 : 00 ] They're visible to the world and the first of them is mercy. And it's no accident that that's right at the heart of it, the fourth and the fifth Beatitudes. We could go into this at length that there's a great symmetry about the Beatitudes.

I think that the first and the last correspond in the second and the seventh and so on. But right at the heart, the fourth and the fifth are about loving God and loving our neighbour. The great commandment, says Jesus, is to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. That's righteousness. And to love your neighbour as yourself. Well, that's mercy. Two sides of the same coin.

And Jesus says, upon these great commandments, all the law and the prophet hang. In fact, in another place in the Gospels, Jesus explains that great commandment for us and he gives us a great example of mercy and what it means.

You might like to just turn briefly to Luke chapter 10. It's page 869 in the church Bibles. But you know it very well. At verse 25 of Luke 10, a teacher of the law says to Jesus, how then can you inherit eternal life?

[ 19 : 11 ] It's not actually a genuine question. We're told he's testing Jesus. And Jesus turns to him and says, well, what does the law say? How do you read it? And the man says, love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself.

And Jesus says, yes, you read it right. Do this and you will live. Have that true relationship of righteousness with God. And yes, you will find life.

Ah, but who is my neighbour? says the man. Immediately see, he's treating it as a religious matter. He wants rules and regulations. What he really means is, who do I have to love?

Or more probably, well, who do I not have to love? And manage to dot every I and cross every T of this command. And Jesus, instead of giving him a direct answer, tells the story that we know as the story of the good Samaritan.

The man's beaten up and on the road and in great need of help. And first a priest and then a Levite who both know and teach the law of God, walk past on the other side. And then the Samaritan, the

despised half-caste in the eyes of the Jews.

[ 20 : 22 ] He walks past. But no, he doesn't. He stops and he helps. He pays for the man's care and his healing. And then Jesus says in verse 36, not, as we often read it, who then is my neighbour?

You've heard it said that way many times, haven't you? And used as a point to say, oh, well, everybody is our neighbour. No. Jesus says, who then proved to be a neighbour to this man? In other words, who showed by his actions that his heart truly was in line and in tune and in keeping with the loving and the merciful heart of the Father?

The answer? Verse 37, the one who showed him mercy. Not the ones, notice, with the outward marks of religion necessarily, even a religion of perfect understanding of the law and the prophets, but those marked by mercy.

The mercy of the living God. The outward sign of a true inward transformation. And what Jesus is saying is the faith that loves is the faith that saves.

[ 21 : 42 ] Righteousness full of mercy is true righteousness that displays true right with Godness. That's another surprise, isn't it? It's the opposite.

It's the very antithesis of the religious moralist, of the Pharisee. And by the way, many, many of us are Pharisees, even if we think we're not religious at all. Maybe you don't think you're even remotely religious.

You despise religion. But Phariseism can have any type of religious flavor and any type of political flavor. You get moralists of the right, of the establishment.

Probably you read the Daily Mail if that's you. You have a tendency to scorn and to have no mercy for the disadvantaged, for the poor, for the dispossessed. That's because you have pride in your own hard work and your own achievements.

Maybe a self-made person. You've got no time for scroungers and spongers. And your danger, you see, is that you will be unmerciful because you think mercy is something that you yourself are never going to need.

[ 22 : 47 ] People who are proud of their own achievements, whatever form, so easily to be judgmental, isn't it? Because they've got no conception in their own hearts of how every good thing that they have actually comes to them not from their own achievements but from God and his gracious providence.

They've no idea either that but for the grace of God they might find themselves in the position of that person they despise and disdain. Of course, you get just as much religious moralism on the left from the anti-establishment side, perhaps even more and uglier.

So often, absolute scorn, isn't there? No mercy whatsoever from those kind of people for those who they perceive to be privileged and therefore to be despised. There's nobody so intolerant as the great liberal-minded, as we so often find.

You'll remember just how the Guardian newspaper delighted in hounding to the very end Jonathan Aitken when he made such a mess of his public life. No mercy at all and still they hound him to this day.

But you see, it doesn't matter what our natural bent is politically or socially or religiously or whatever it is. Every one of us, friends, by our own nature tends to be unmerciful. And that is because none of us, none of us, none of us have truly grasped what is the truth about our own standing with God.

[ 24 : 20 ] That we ourselves are in his sight spiritually bankrupt. That we are ourselves in need of great mercy for sin and that we have no might of our own, only meekness, emptiness of what really counts with God, righteousness in his eyes.

And because, you see, we think we need no mercy from God or we need a lot less mercy than other people might need, we can become unmerciful people.

But you see, Jesus is telling us that the one who has really seen the truth about their own standing before God, the one who has really genuinely been humbled and broken and wept bitterly over their sin, but has received, therefore, the blessing of the amazing grace of God that has pronounced them blessed from heaven, accepted, belonging to the kingdom.

And who knows that it's all from God, this great mercy that's been poured into their life. Then for that person, God's mercy simply cannot but overflow.

It must overflow in their lives because God's mercy is so vast. It's so full, it's so expansive, it just can't be contained. It must flow to others. So let me ask you a question this morning.

[ 25 : 45 ] Are you merciful? Is there pity, Christ's pity in your heart? Pity for the mess and the havoc of sin and its consequences.

For the wounded and needy lives of people who have been felled. Yes, felled through their own folly and their own sin. Is there pity and mercy enough in your heart to mean you're getting your hands actually dirty to help and to cure, to bring the balm of the Lord Jesus Christ into situations like that? Having a good test of that is to ask yourself the question whether you're the kind of person that somebody could ever come to to share in their distress when they've got themselves into a real mess, when they've failed, when they've sinned, when they've done something so awful that they're just overcome with shame and with sorrow.

Did that person come to you and find mercy? The gambler or the drinker who's lapsed again and is just feeling utterly defeated? Or the young man who's battling with his addiction to pornography on the internet or with his homosexuality and he's fallen again badly and he's feeling filthy, he's feeling ashamed?

Did they come to you for help? Or the young woman who is eaten up by the dark secret that she's had an abortion and the guilt is just crippling her whole life and she wonders if it's possible that she can really be a Christian, that she can remain in the church of Jesus Christ?

[ 27 : 27 ] Or the married man who's had an affair and the consequential collapse of his marriage and his family is crushing him so that he just feels he can't bear the pain on his own anymore?

Could somebody like that come to you knowing that they'd find in you not somebody to berate them in anger but somebody to be with them in their agony?

not someone to wag their finger with superiority but somebody to weep with them in solidarity hurting with them in their sin? With somebody in that situation who just doesn't know where to turn who feels that they could open their heart to no one they say but I could go to him I could go to her because I sense I know that they would be merciful to me I thank God that I've had friends in Christ throughout my life who've showed me mercy real mercy restoring mercy when I've got myself into a real mess I thank God especially for my pastor in student days William Still thank God for my father my greatest mentor and friend these were men who understood and cherished the grace of God so greatly that they exuded abundantly the mercy of Christ and people just knew

I know I could go to him and you all find him merciful are you merciful were the people who came to Jesus sensed that in the same way they could come to you just like they could come to him and they would find someone who would help them with their burden not someone who would tie up an even heavier burden and put it on their shoulders and then not lift a finger to help them like the Pharisees another good self-test you know is to think about your reaction when you hear about somebody who's fallen and maybe disgraced themselves in some way when you hear about that do you relish in it do you delight in it do you feel very superior about it do you say to yourself well he certainly got what he deserved I always knew he was a fraud easy to do that isn't it or are you sad and sorrowful do you weep quietly in private and you say oh lord that is such a tragedy do you acknowledge to yourself oh lord but for your grace that could have been me blessed are the merciful says the lord of heaven but mercy costs doesn't it it's hard it costs time and money costs diversion from tidily laid plans that was certainly so for the samaritan wasn't it it costs in terms of getting dirty yourself getting yourself in the dirt and the mess that surrounds real sin in people's lives and that often means being misunderstood and being scorned it often means being sneered at by the very tidily religious by the very clean and proper types who would never sully themselves with such people that's what the priests and the

Levites wouldn't do sully themselves with another man's uncleanness and mess I sometimes come across people who want to be in Christian service but they won't do that sort of thing either they're so tied up with the theological correctness and exactitude that they just can't cope with untidiness and chaos and mess that reigns friends in the real world of Christian mission and evangelism there are people who just don't want to have their consciences tainted by having to do anything in a situation that isn't just quite right and according to the book it's like the Pharisees who said we would never eat and drink with people like that but Jesus would and Jesus did for he was full of grace and truth and therefore from him true mercy just overflowed and he took his mercy into the middle of our mess mercy led our

[ 32 : 00 ] Lord Jesus Christ out of the beauty and the cleanness and the glory of heaven and into the filth of our world the filth of a stable first of all being an outcast in society and dying naked on the cross in the midst of a rubbish tip in a dirty smelly dusty place outside Jerusalem are we merciful

are there visible signs to one another to the world of an invisible inward transformation of our hearts once there was a woman who was roundly criticized for pouring out expensive ointment on Jesus feet he was in the house of a very prominent religious man a Pharisee called Simon Luke tells it in chapter seven of his gospel he outwardly looked apart and in the world's eyes he was a top man with God he was a well-known elder he was respected in the church he was no doubt respected in the community as well and this woman by contrast well everybody knew she was a notorious sinner and yet

Jesus staggered them all when he said to them it was she who was truly acceptable to God not Simon the Pharisee because Jesus knew that it was she who truly loved him not Simon how did he know well this is what Jesus said you Simon you gave me no water for my feet no oil for my head no kiss of warm greeting but this woman hasn't stopped wetting my feet with her tears she's anointed my feet with ointment she hasn't ceased kissing my feet that's how I know that she's received God's forgiveness her sins which yes Simon are many are forgiven because I can see that she loved much it's a visible sign of that inward transformation of the true grace of God that forgives sins and friends so it is with mercy

Jesus is telling us as the great physician that a merciful spirit is a cardinal sign that the flood of God's mercy has been poured into a human heart it's a cardinal sign because you can see it flowing out that's why he says blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy living God's mercy is just living the life of those who have truly found God's grace grace let's pray gracious God our father how we rejoice in your great and abundant mercy to us Lord touch our hearts afresh we pray kindle the love of mercy and of pity of compassion and grace within us let us not forget the greatness of your love to us make us we pray truly people who live your mercy for Christ's sake amen for for following two months s thatili if you say how you cannot trust

Unfica from whom am and the event another ask helpful as if you can see Him that how you have