

COMPASSION WITH A CURE

MATTHEW 5:7

There's not a one of us here who doesn't know someone who is hurting. A loved one, an acquaintance, a colleague, a fellow student. We all have people in our lives who are either experiencing some kind of affliction, coping with some tragedy, or nursing some wound.

Some are experiencing these things through no fault of their own, and some because they've made poor choices. Some wounds are self-inflicted. Others are inflicted by other people or circumstances beyond their control. Whatever the case and whatever the cause, one thing is certain: Hurting people are everywhere.

How do you respond when you encounter someone who is hurting?

The answer to that question is one of the most revealing things about you. It reveals the essence of your character. It also reveals the quality of your faith.

We live in the most unique culture in the history of the world with regard to pain and suffering. Because a lot of people actually think they can live lives that are relatively free of it, or at least lives that are unaffected by it. Many think that if they can just control their circumstances well enough they will not have to be bothered with the unpleasant and uncomfortable things in life. Oh, they might be exposed to them, but they can keep that exposure to a minimum.

That is reflected in the way the elderly are treated in our culture. In most every other culture in the history of the world the elderly are the most esteemed segment of society. Typically, the community revolves around them. But in our culture, when someone gets too old or too difficult we tuck them away in a home or an institution so we don't have to be inconvenienced by them and so we can get on with our own individual pursuit of happiness.

In our culture feeling good trumps other values. We have no time, no appetite, and no room for the difficulties of life. So we've devised ways to escape them and ignore them—to keep them at arm's length; to get them out of sight so they can be out of mind.

Which brings me back to the question: How do you respond when you encounter someone who is hurting?

The natural response of people who live in a feel-good culture is to be somewhat detached from them. If we care at all we might refer them to a professional, or point them to some resources we think will help them. But we try to keep an emotional distance. We try not to let them interrupt our pursuit of a pain-free existence.

However, that is not true of *kingdom* people. Kingdom people have a truthful understanding of reality. Kingdom people have the heart of God. Therefore, kingdom people not only see the hurt of others, they *feel* it, and they help to heal it.

Jesus says as much in one of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. **Matthew 5:1-7.** *Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."*

These are the attitudes of those who have encountered the kingdom and become kingdom people. They are the qualities of individuals whose eyes have been opened to see

the truth. Poor in spirit (v. 3) describes those who have seen the truth about *themselves*, that they are morally and spiritually bankrupt and in desperate need of a Savior because there is nothing about them or in them that would commend them to God and earn His favor.

Those who mourn (v. 4) describes those who have seen the truth about the *world*, that the world and the people who inhabit it are under the curse of sin and the dominion of Satan, and that without God's gracious intervention they are destined to perish in a place of eternal torment.

The meek (v. 5) describes those who see the truth about other people, that though these people are victims of sin's curse and Satan's dominion, they are also made in the image of God and are precious to Him, deserving of respect, honor, and dignity.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6) describes people who see the truth about the kingdom of God. They see the kingdom and they *crave* the kingdom.

This morning we are going to discover that those who are merciful have God's heart. Merciful is not so much a reference to having the *mind* of God—that is, seeing the truth about something or someone—but having the *heart* of God—*feeling* what God feels.

The basic meaning of the Greek word translated “merciful” is “to show kindness or concern toward someone in serious need” (Louw-Nida). Mercy is very closely related to compassion, sympathy, and pity. It's the same word that is used in the parable of the Good Samaritan. When the Samaritan saw the man lying in the middle of the road the text says, “*He took pity on him*” (Luke 10:33).

Notice, there is an emotional component to “mercy.” It is a *feeling* that surfaces during an encounter with another person's pain or suffering. Jesus is saying, “Blessed are those who feel deeply about the plight of those who are hurting. Blessed are those who take their pain and suffering to heart.”

The Greeks and Romans who lived during the time of Christ were somewhat dismissive of emotions, and since there is an emotional component to “mercy,” they didn't have much use for it. Stoic philosophers called mercy a “sickness of the soul.” The Romans, who admired justice and discipline, regarded mercy as a weakness, because they associated it with leniency and compromise.

Jews, on the other hand, had great appreciation for the concept of *mercy*. It was one of the pillars of their heritage, and it is highlighted throughout their Scriptures in story after story. One of the most celebrated words in the Hebrew language—a word that would have been familiar to every person sitting on that hillside listening to Jesus—was the word *hesed*. It is often translated “mercy,” “lovingkindness,” or “compassion.”

The Jews cherished the concept of *hesed* because they knew their history. They had a history of unfaithfulness, betrayal, and failure. In their covenant relationship with God they had not kept their end of the agreement. And if God had exercised justice, they would have been annihilated. Instead God exercised mercy...over and over, which is why *hesed* is the theme of many Hebrew hymns in Scripture (Psalms), and the subject of many stories. And it is perhaps illustrated most profoundly in God's response to people who made a mess of their lives, people who did horrible things, and people who were downright evil, but who humbled themselves before God and were truly repentant.

I just finished reading Kings and Chronicles in my daily devotions, and I was struck by God's response to the very *worst* king in the history of Israel and Judah. His name was Manasseh. He was an idolater and he set up idols and altars throughout the land. He defied

the Lord and His commandments, practiced sorcery and witchcraft, shed innocent blood, and sacrificed some of his own sons to pagan gods.

But when he was being punished for his evil deeds, and he came to realize what he had done and how he had defied and displeased the Lord, we are told in Chronicles that *“he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. ¹³ He prayed to him, and **God was moved by his entreaty** and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God” (2 Chron. 33:12-13).*

“God was moved by his entreaty.” He was moved by his contrition. He was also moved by the contrition of Ahab, the most wicked king of the northern kingdom of Israel. What is more, He was moved by the contrition of Nebuchadnezzar, the prideful pagan king of Babylon, when *he* humbled himself before the Lord (Dan. 4:28-37), and He was moved by the contrition of the king of Nineveh, who was known for his brutality (Jonah 3).

We read about these wicked men and all the sin they committed and blood they shed and some of us think, “Why wouldn’t God just rid the world of them? Why wouldn’t He just pluck them out of their circumstances and drop them straight into the pit of hell where they belong?”

He certainly could have. But instead of exercising justice He exercised mercy, which is His prerogative. And He exercised mercy because it is who He is by nature.

Don’t forget that in Matthew 5 Jesus is describing the attitudes and ethics of kingdom people—those who have had a personal encounter with God through the Lord Jesus Christ and have been born again. Because our King is merciful, kingdom people are also merciful. Part of the reason for this is that we have been treated so mercifully by God ourselves. Remember, we became kingdom people after we became poor in spirit—when we realized our moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Our only hope was God’s mercy, because by nature we are sinful through and through. And when God had mercy on us instead of exercising justice we became eternally indebted to His mercy. We realize that everything we are, everything we have, and everything we hope for, is all because of His mercy.

Because of that, it’s unthinkable that we could be cold, hard, or callused to other people. Even bad people. Even people who have done or are doing really bad things.

But the main reason that kingdom people are merciful is because God has given us His nature. We have a new operating system—the Holy Spirit—and as a result it is now in our nature to be merciful.

So, what does it look like to be merciful in real life? I want to suggest four things: *First, a merciful person moves toward people who are hurting.* I mentioned earlier that we live in a culture that has become adept at keeping pain and suffering at arm’s length. That is something kingdom people have to overcome.

But there is also a *natural* tendency to keep our emotional and physical distance from hurting people. And it’s not always because of cold-heartedness or indifference. It’s because of fear, uncertainty, feelings of inadequacy. After all, wounded people are needy. Getting involved can be time-consuming, demanding, unpredictable, and emotionally draining. People who are hurting sometimes say things and do things that make us feel uncomfortable. They might vent, they might weep, they might require follow-up, they might need our financial assistance.

Indeed, investing in hurting people is risky. You don’t always know what to say or what to do. You cannot control the outcome, and you don’t often know the outcome. More

importantly, it's really easy to get emotionally involved. Getting involved might break *your* heart.

But merciful people don't let those risks prevent them from moving toward those who are hurting. Partly because merciful people never forget where they themselves have been—that they themselves were rescued and healed by God's mercy. And in light of what God has done for them in Christ, they cannot help but show a similar kind of mercy to others.

I remember watching a documentary which profiled a woman who had once been homeless and destitute, but had been rescued and put in a clean, comfortable, safe environment where all her and her family's needs were given careful attention—medical, educational, nutritional, social, etc.

The correspondent who was interviewing her took her back to the streets where she had scrounged and begged and struggled to survive. While they were there they were accosted by another young woman who was homeless and hungry and utterly helpless. The one who had been shown mercy tried to reason with her, she tried to convince her that she understood what she was feeling, that she had been there herself. Then, suddenly, in the middle of her sentence she stopped.

It hit her afresh. This woman, with whom she was pleading, was her, just two years before this. But for the mercy of one who had cared enough for her to rescue her, there she would have remained.

And she grabbed the street lady and embraced her and began to weep.

A merciful person moves toward people who are hurting or broken, and they enter into their sorrow with them. Because they themselves were once in their predicament, and they were rescued and healed by a merciful God.

2. A merciful person has the sensitivity and the wisdom to know *how* to minister to hurting people. Remember, mercy is a divine attribute and so the way to be merciful is to let the Holy Spirit, our operating system, take control of us and express His mercy through us. If we try to muster up our own mercy, we are going to fail. We'll offer some pious platitude when we should be listening. We'll try to fix the person so he can stop hurting when maybe God has a purpose for the process.

Do you remember the story of Job? Job was the object of God's pride and delight. According to God's own description, there was no one like him, blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil. Satan, for reasons we won't take the time to explore, was given permission to do anything he wanted to him short of actually taking his life. And so he destroyed his possessions, his wealth, his sons and daughters, his reputation, his status in the community, his marriage, and, finally, his health.

To say that Job was a broken man is putting it mildly. Everything had been taken away, his life shattered. His faith, the one thing Satan wanted to destroy most, was the only thing that remained intact. But just barely. He searched for God but couldn't find Him. The more he reflected on his circumstances the more bewildered he became, and the more his faith was shaken.

Along came Job's three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They came to encourage him. They came to help. At first, their care and concern was demonstrated in remarkable ways. After traveling a great distance these wealthy men ventured to the town garbage heap where Job sat among the ashes, scraping the itchy, festering boils on his body with broken pieces of pottery. For seven days and seven nights they sat there with him, weeping, covering themselves with ashes. But the most conspicuous thing about these

friends is what they did *not* do for seven days and nights. They did not speak. They were absolutely silent.

If the story ended there we would praise these men for their extraordinary sensitivity and self-restraint. Unfortunately, however, most of the book is the conversation and dialogue that takes place between them and Job when they finally did open their mouths. And it's disturbing. You know why? They thought they knew what was going on. They thought they were speaking for God. They thought they knew what Job needed. They had made some assumptions that were false, and when Job protested they got angry and defensive and more vehement until it turned nasty.

They came to Job with a measure of mercy, but ended up being merciless, and God came down very hard on them when all was said and done.

Merciful people know what to say and when to say it. They are not in the relationship to push their own opinions or their own agenda. They give a wounded person what he needs in order to help him heal. Most of all, they rely on the Holy Spirit to express His mercy through them. And if the Holy Spirit is in it, there will be sensitivity and wisdom.

3. A merciful person is merciful to *everyone*. He doesn't discriminate between those whom he considers to be worthy of mercy and those who are not. She doesn't decide to be merciful to one person because he/she is more loveable or agreeable than someone else. Real mercy is impartial. It is imparted to all who need it, not just those we feel naturally inclined to give it.

Remember, mercy is a divine attribute. And one thing you can say about God's mercy when you read the Bible is that it is immeasurably wide—astonishingly wide. God was merciful to people who least deserved it, even those who thumbed their nose at Him, even those who attacked His loved ones, even those who did incredible damage to His name and reputation.

A merciful person, because he has God's nature, is also merciful to everyone—friend or foe, acquaintance or stranger, young or old, upstanding or downtrodden.

4. Finally, *a merciful person is always willing to forgive those who have wronged them*.

One of the inevitable things of life is that we ourselves will be offended and wounded by others. The natural response to these offenses and wounds is to hold onto them, nurse them, and become resentful and bitter. But this kind of response has no place in the life of one who has encountered God and received His mercy. When we consider what He has done for us, how can we even think of holding something against someone?

A story is told about the great painter Leonardo da Vinci. Just before he began to work on his "Last Supper" painting he had a violent quarrel with a fellow painter. So enraged and bitter was Leonardo that he determined to paint the face of his enemy into the face of Judas, and thus get his revenge.

The face of Judas was one of the first he finished, and everyone could easily recognize it as the face of the painter with whom he had quarreled. But when he came to paint the face of Christ, he could make no progress. Something seemed to be holding him back, frustrating his efforts.

After much deliberation he came to the conclusion that he could not paint the compassionate, merciful, forgiving Lord, after what he had done with his enemy.

When we focus our attention upon Christ, and understand who He is and what He has done for us, it is impossible to harbor bitterness or hold grudges.

Are you merciful? Do you move toward wounded people? Do you give them what

they need? Are you impartial in your mercy? And are you quick to forgive?

The promise for those who are merciful is that they will receive mercy. God's mercy. That means that when they see Him face to face, they will not see a frown or a furled brow. They will not feel shame or condemnation because of their own failures and shortcomings. They will see His smile and enjoy His favor and soak in the sea of His forgiveness and bask in the warmth of His approval—for all eternity.

To Him be the glory forever and ever, amen!

“Compassion with a Cure” **Matthew 5:7**

Main Idea: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”

The Pronouncement: “Blessed are the merciful”

The meaning of “merciful”

The reason kingdom people are merciful

The Source and Supply of mercy

God’s instruments of mercy

What Being Merciful Looks Like

1. A merciful person _____ people who are hurting
2. A merciful person has the _____ and the _____ to know *how* to minister to hurting people
3. A merciful person is merciful to _____
4. A merciful person is always willing to _____ people who have _____ him/her

The Promise: “They shall receive mercy”

What does this mean?

When will this happen?