

## **Blessed Are the Merciful ...**

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

This beatitude seems rather straightforward – be merciful and you will experience mercy. So, what does it mean for us to be merciful? And who will show us mercy? And when? And how?

The ideal of mercy or compassion is a frequent theme in all the Gospels. Matthew’s Gospel presents two principal acts of mercy – almsgiving and forgiveness.

Almsgiving arises from the compassion one has for those who have suffered some misfortune – the sick, the lame, the poor, the widowed, etc. “Compassion” means “suffering with.” A compassionate person feels the sufferings of others, even if he does not share them directly, and responds to them, whether by personally attending to the suffering person or offering some needed financial support. Blessed Teresa of Kolkata is an outstanding contemporary example of a compassionate person.

Forgiveness entails looking beyond the offense committed to advance the healing process, for both the other person and oneself. When one person injures another, both need to be healed for a proper relationship to be restored. Too often, an injured person seeks only retribution, perhaps hoping to even things out through an act of justice. But it is in forgiveness – an act of love – that the healing process truly advances.

Each of us commits acts that hurt other people. We each need to forgive others for some of their actions and to be forgiven by others for some of our actions. In the Lord’s Prayer, we say “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The good news is that God doesn’t limit himself as our prayer might imply – he forgives us more readily than we forgive others. Our prayer is not meant to urge God to act as we do, but to have us reflect on the process of forgiving, and by so doing, enhance both our willingness to forgive and the quality of our forgiveness. God is the model for us to follow, not vice versa!

In his parables about the Kingdom, Jesus teaches about the importance of being merciful. Those who act mercifully towards others are rewarded at the Last Judgment, while those who neglect to show mercy are rejected by the King, who says to each group that what they did or failed to do for the neediest, they did or failed to do for him. In his ministry, Jesus repeatedly shows mercy towards those suffering in any number of ways, often at the price of harsh criticism from the religious leaders of the time. But he never backs down and his mercy is never exhausted. Even in his dying moments, he forgives his persecutors and extends mercy to one of those crucified with him, assuring him of the salvation he will experience that very day.

The merciful will be shown mercy by God himself – that is the promise of this beatitude. We may experience God’s mercy in our daily lives – in the healing he provides us in times of illness, the help he provides us in times of need, the peace he provides us in times of trouble. And when we enter into the fullness of his Kingdom, we will experience the magnificence of his boundless mercy towards us for all eternity.