

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204

704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

THE AUDACITY TO LIVE MERCIFULLY

Gospel of Matthew 5:38-48

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The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



Your life is different because of mercy; and you co-create with God through mercy.

Elaine Prevallet tells of the day she was in a doctor's office waiting for an appointment when a young mother with a gentle face entered. She was pushing a young girl in a wheelchair; maybe three or four years of age. It was clear the child lived with cognitive and physical disabilities. Her hands could not grasp anything and her eyes were unable to hold focus. Her voice could make small sounds but she could not pronounce words. The mother set the child's wheelchair so the child and mother were face to face. The mother began singing softly to the child and doing hand motions to "Itsy Bitsy Spider" directly in front of her daughter's face. Attracting her attention, the mother repeated the song over and over. At times, the loving mother would catch the child's hand as it flailed in the air and kiss each finger. Then, with tender mercy, she would whisper, "I love you; Mommy loves you so much." Prevallet writes, "For a moment, I felt like an intruder in a sacred space. In that child I saw myself and in that mother I saw the face of the merciful God who touches our neediness and suffering which limit each of us."

She is right, you know. We have gathered this morning to be kissed by God's mercy. *Your life is different because of mercy; and you co-create the world with God through mercy.*

FIRST, CONSIDER THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GRACE AND MERCY.

Grace describes your experience of RECEIVING what you DO NOT deserve. If someone gives you a gift you do not deserve, you have received grace. Mercy describes your experience of NOT RECEIVING what you DO deserve. If you hurt someone or fail and a person has every right to hurt you in return for the pain you caused them or to embarrass you due to your failure, but they choose to seek the best for you rather than hurting you, then you have received mercy.

SECOND, CONSIDER WHAT JESUS TAUGHT HIS FOLLOWERS ABOUT MERCY.

As followers of Jesus, you have never said, *'I am only going to follow Jesus so far.'* You have never told God, *'Lord, I will not follow Jesus beyond this point. This is as far as I go.'* Jesus teaches you that to follow him, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and obey him. Basically, you must have audacity to follow Jesus. Audacity is boldness expressed without being limited by boundaries. Your cross of discipleship includes the audacity to live mercifully.

Once I was leading a Bible Study session around the phrase in the Lord's Prayer, *'forgive us our debts – trespasses – as we forgive our debtors – those who trespass against us.'* I pointed out that this use of the word, "as," literally means *'in direct proportion to'* or *'in equal measure to.'* In other words, Jesus taught us to pray, *"Forgive us our sins IN EQUAL MEASURE to how we forgive those who sin against us."* A fine gentleman lifted his hand and said, "The Bible also says, *"an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth."* "Yes," I said, *"this is an ancient law which can be traced back to the 18th century B.C. It was known as the Law of Proportionate Retribution so the one or ones offended should only retaliate damages against to the offender in ways equal to original damages caused by the offender. Yet, Jesus taught his followers to live mercifully seeking reconciliation and redemption rather than retribution and retaliation.*

Jesus gave examples of living mercifully. In the Middle East, still today, it is an act of contempt to strike someone with the back of your hand on the right cheek. This act sends the message that the offender views the other person as inferior. Jesus says, *'rather than retaliating and escalating the violence, have the audacity to live mercifully; turn your other cheek.'* When you turn your other cheek, you are not choosing to be a victim; you are choosing to be stronger than the offender. You are showing the bully that you have a confidence and a value that transcends violence and abuse. John Claypool interprets Jesus here by saying, *"If in order to defeat the beast, I become like the beast, then bestiality reigns."* Jesus teaches mercy, not revenge. Merciful living requires the audacity to relate with others the way God relates with you.

Jesus also used a court of law when someone is suing you for the literal shirt off of your back. Go ahead and give to the abuser your outer garment as well. Let the person who is treating you unfairly become aware they are causing you to have nothing. In the Society of Jesus' day, causing someone to be destitute by taking advantage of them was a shameful act.

Jesus also used the example of a Roman soldier forcing a civilian to carry their equipment for a Roman mile (1,000 steps). Jesus taught that when you count to 1,000 steps, keep going. Let the person who thinks they are exercising power over you see that you refuse to relinquish your personal power to them. Basically, Jesus teaches you that overpowering bullies and those who abuse power of position is the antithesis of the Kingdom of God – utilize the power of mercy.

Let us remember that Jesus does not merely ‘tell’ us to live mercifully. Jesus shows us the pathway to godliness revealing how mercy transforms people’s lives. When people mocked Jesus, he refused to mock them in return. When people challenged Jesus authority, he told stories to challenge them to a new way of living. When people manipulated his arrest, Jesus did not resist. When they laid a cross on Jesus’ back, he carried it to the place of his execution. When people nailed him to a cross, Jesus prayed for them. When his disciples denied him and abandoned him, he forgave them and sent them out to continue his ministry. Jesus exemplifies for you the audacity to live mercifully.

Jesus teaches that if you just go through life treating people well when they treat you well and treating people poorly when they treat you poorly, you are the same as people who are not committed to godliness. Your relationship with God should show up in your character.

The key is not so much, ‘what’ you do unto others or ‘how’ you treat others. The key is ‘why’ you treat other people the way you do. Your discipleship is related as audacious mercy.

THIRD, CONSIDER WHAT YOU ARE TO DO WITH THIS MERCY?

Here in Matthew, Jesus is reported to have said, “*Be perfect as God is perfect.*” The word interpreted, ‘perfect,’ is ‘*telieos*,’ which means *complete, perfect or mature*. Luke reports Jesus’ words as “*Be merciful as your Father in heaven is perfect.*” Again, you do not say, “I will follow Jesus no farther than here.” You say, “*I want to become more spiritually mature in relating the nature of God to others.*” As you live the beatitudes and obey the mind of Christ in following the will of God for your life, you mature in the audacity to live mercifully.

One woman, after holding a grudge against someone for twenty-one years, finally decided to express mercy toward the woman. She said, “*I had no idea that holding a grudge and trying to hurt someone demanded so much of my energy or was so complicated.*”

James McGinnis tells of the day when he learned the power of God's mercy at work. For him, mercy became personal and spiritually transformational. He was part of a group who went into a prison for a three-day program called "*Residents Encounter Christ,*" (REC). For three days, the inmates were treated to banquet dinners with beautiful place settings and candles and attentive listening accompanied with words of encouragement and hugs. At first, the inmates could not believe this was all for them without any strings attached. They asked, "*Why have you busy people given up three days for us? We are all criminals, the extreme losers and failures in society. Why do you care about us?*" Eventually, the prisoners came to realize that the group's compassion for them was real and did not originate with them. They were passing on to the inmates the mercy they receive from God and they too are loved by a gracious and merciful God who seeks to redeem their lives. By the end of the three days, the inmates were crossing racial, cultural and gang lines to wash one another's feet. Yet, most amazing was how this new community started to be shaped inside the prison in the months that followed. McGinnis described his experience: *'I have discovered that ministry is more than giving to another person. Ministry is expressing mercy to another person so they can give themselves to God.'*

Mother Teresa said, "***I always give thanks to God for the person who mistreats me or hurts me or is rude to me for they are giving me the blessing of maturing in mercy.***"

John wrote it this way: "*Beloved let us mercy one another, because mercy is from God...everyone who does not mercy does not know God, for God is mercy. God's mercy was revealed to us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is mercy, not that we expressed mercy to God, but that God expressed mercy to us...Beloved, since God has the audacity to love us so much, we ought also to mercy one another*" (Paraphrase of 1 John 4:7-11).

Friends, we are followers of Jesus. If we do not take mercy to the world, who will do so? Let us go into the world with the audacity to live mercifully. Amen and AMEN!