

MATTHEW 5:7  
MERCY GROWS MERCY

He's sitting on the pavement! He has a paper cup on the pavement or in his hand and a sign beside him that reads "blind; genuine beggar". He's there every day in life; it's the only place he can go to survive. He's blind so he can't work; he can't work so he can't support himself, never mind his family. It's a fairly busy road, but not many people pay him much attention, he's almost part of the wallpaper; he's there and they know he's there, but they walk past. But hold on a minute: there's a bit of a commotion building up; there must be a crowd walking along the street; there is more noise than usual. Perhaps this is an opportunity to persuade more people than usual to give. "Who is it? What's the fuss?" When he hears who it is, he shouts out for help, for mercy! The crowd tell him to be quiet and not interrupt, but he shouts again, looking for mercy! He gets the answer to his prayers; he can see! Mercy indeed!

Bartimaeus was the blind man sitting on the pavement on the road out of Jericho, probably the road going to Jerusalem. Jesus was walking along the road surrounded by the crowd listening to His every word, maybe asking questions. What happened? Bartimaeus asked Jesus for mercy. There were two reactions to the blind man begging on the pavement: first of all, there is the crowd reaction - "*many...*" (Mark 10:48) They saw him as a nuisance, an interruption to their conversation, and to their time with Jesus; maybe these people had walked past him every day in life, they lived in Jericho and had ignored him before. Secondly, Jesus' reaction: "*Call him... What do...*" (Mark 10:49f) Other versions of this story tell us that Jesus had compassion on Bartimaeus, something He felt towards a needy person and then He healed him; Jesus gave him what he needed, exactly what he asked for. Bartimaeus cried out for mercy; Jesus was merciful towards him.

"*Blessed are...*" (Matthew 5:7) The Beatitudes are a group of eight sayings that make us think about our values. Here are eight qualities for the disciple of Jesus. These are not eight groups of people, some poor in spirit, some merciful; these are eight qualities of the one group of people. Disciples of Jesus are to aspire after these qualities: we are to aspire to be poor in spirit, to be meek, to be merciful - these are qualities to be sought after and lived out. They all come in the same form: there is a quality to aspire to and then a blessing which will be added to the disciple who aspires after this quality. "*Blessed*" is about more than feeling good or happy with ourselves; it is about the sense that these are people whom God will bless, and that the whole of God's blessing rests upon people who live life in this way. These qualities take a new turn today: for the first time this is about how we relate to other people; till now these have been about how we are in relationship with God. Now it is about others and how we are with others.

The best way for us to try to understand what it means to be merciful is to look at Jesus. Not only did He teach His disciples that these qualities are important, but He also lived them out in His daily life. There is no better prayer in this regard than to say "Lord, make me more like Jesus!" In the way He dealt with people there were all kinds of qualities that we see embodied in Jesus, qualities that we admire in our better moments, but also qualities that we find really hard to put into practice. We see compassion in Jesus, forgiveness, kindness, care for people in need and we admire all of these and would love to be like that, but we find it really hard to be like that. Equally we live in a world which suggests that compassion and forgiveness and kindness can be seen as weakness; to get on in the world, you need to be ruthless, focussed on your self; "you'll never make the top if you're thinking about other people!" The only way to survive, never mind to succeed, is to concentrate on oneself, the "me-generation". These are not the values of Jesus.

Let's go back to Bartimaeus for a moment and try to feel our way inside his story. What is Jesus trying to do? Here's the question: "*What do...*" (*Mark 10:51*) There are all kinds of things that lie behind that question: Jesus doesn't assume that he knows the answer; He doesn't assume that He knows what this man needs; He is ready to listen and the man's answer is clear: "*Rabbi...*" The first thing that Jesus is trying to do is to understand Bartimaeus' life and what's going on in his mind and heart. How can He feel compassion for someone unless He understands this man's situation? What is life like for Bartimaeus? Only when He finds out the answer to that question will He be able to help him. When He listens to Bartimaeus, when He puts Himself inside Bartimaeus' life, then He is able to help him. Mercy is two things: first of all, mercy is compassion for people in need; and secondly, a response to that need to help people. Of course, this is at heart of Jesus' whole ministry: His whole life is about getting inside human nature to understand what life is like for us so that He can bring mercy to the world and mercy to human beings from the inside; Jesus is one of us, and knows what our life is like, how we feel, what makes us afraid, and He brings the compassion of God into our world and into our lives.

"Now, preacher, that's OK for Jesus, but for us?" Well, yes! The challenge for us is to be like Jesus. First of all, to be merciful, there is a spirit, an attitude. Compassion is the word that we'll use to describe that spirit, that attitude, that emotion. A few weeks ago, we talked about the native American prayer: "Don't criticise anyone till you have walked a mile in their shoes". William Barclay describes mercy as "the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until we see things with his eyes, think with his mind, feel with his feelings." He is right to say that this demands deliberate effort on our part; doing this will give us a better understanding of how things are for the people we meet and so have deeper sense of compassion on them for their situation. What is it like to care for an elderly relative? What is it like to have three young children under five and a husband working away from home? What is it like to be a leader of the church when society is turning its back on the gospel? What is it like to be a person living on their own, elderly and frail? What is it like to be the person sitting opposite you in the coffee shop, sharing a scone with you? What is it like to be a student in your class whose friend has just committed suicide? What is it like for the family whose member has just been diagnosed with cancer?

How do we do that? Well, we can use our imagination and begin to put ourselves in their place and imagine how we think life will be like for people in these kinds of situations. Even better we can listen to them. Jesus listened to Bartimaeus; we should listen to the people we meet and who are in need. It is easy for us to think we know what someone should do or be, but it is much better to listen to the people themselves and develop a sense of concern and compassion for their needs. For example, it is easy for those of us who were brought up in a different generation and who went to Church every Sunday as family group – it is easy for us to criticise today's families as not interested in Church! But then, you listen to some of these families and you learn about the financial pressures they face, or the work pressures that mean that someone is away from home four days a week, that grandparents are looking after the children and that come Sunday, there is football training, rugby, swimming and you won't want to deny the children these fun things because life is otherwise so pressured. I would hope that we would develop compassion and mercy! Walk a mile in the other person's shoes – how does it feel? What is it like for them? We need to learn compassion!

Then we help people! Mercy is not just a nice warm feeling of compassion; mercy is doing something to help. Mercy is forgiving the person who had wronged you, treating them as if they have done nothing wrong. Mercy is supporting charities like

Fresh Start and Tearfund who work to help people in need across the city and across the world. Mercy is doing something to support people who are struggling with life, babysitting for the family who just can't find space to get out for an evening. Mercy is a church trying to find ways and patterns of church life that support people in need rather than expecting people to fit "our way of doing things"., Mercy is Jesus giving Bartimaeus his sight! Compassion is good, but needs to go to work. Mercy is campaigning for the needs of the poor, to change things in the world so that the lives of the poor are changed for ever.

*"Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:7)* Here's a final thought: "Nothing moves us to forgive like the knowledge that we are forgiven; nothing proves more clearly we have been forgiven than our readiness to forgive. To show mercy and to receive mercy belong indissolubly together." (Stott) We do not make God merciful to us by showing compassion and kindness to others, but we show kindness, compassion and grace to others because God has been gracious to us. I once came across two boys: their grandfather was in hospital and one had gone to visit, but the other hadn't! What made the difference? The one who went to visit his grandfather had himself been in hospital and knew what it was like; he knew how it felt to both to be in hospital and to have people come to visit; so he went. The other hadn't had that experience, so he didn't go! We don't receive mercy from God because we are merciful, but people with open hearts, prepared to be merciful, these same hearts are open to receive mercy from God. Being merciful and receiving mercy are indissolubly linked in our human experience. The person whose heart is hardened towards the needs of others, his heart will also be closed to the mercy of God.

Mercy: the feeling of compassion. The challenge for us is to think ourselves inside the head, heart, and life of someone in need. What is life like for them? Listen to them - what do they need from me? "Do not criticise your brother until you have walked a mile in his shoes!" Then put that compassion into practice. Jesus listened to Bartimaeus; He learned what his life was like, what he really wanted and needed; He felt compassion, and then gave him his sight! How can we be like Jesus? Do we love mercy? This Beatitude is all about the way in which we see other people, the way in which we relate to other people, the quality which Jesus would have us embrace in our relationships with others. Embrace mercy, compassion, kindness, grace. *"Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:7)*