

Mercy Mission

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[0 : 00] So we're now going to read from the New Testament part of the Bible. It's one of the biographies of Jesus written by Luke. It's in chapter 6 and verses 17 to 36.

He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.

Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

[1 : 24] Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will mourn and weep.

Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.

But love your enemies. Do good to them. And lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great.

[2 : 49] And you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Okay, Fergus, thank you for that. We're going to look at this passage in the Gospel of Luke together for the next little while. And I'm going to sort of work off the theme that we find in the final verse there, which is this.

Be merciful, just as your Father in heaven is merciful. I don't know what your, especially if you're not a Christian, I don't know what your instinctive thoughts of God are.

You know, if there is a God, what's he like? And you may sort of have this natural intuition, you know, that God is this kind of fiery character who's ready just to jump up and point the finger at you, this kind of scolding God.

And yeah, what we read here is that God has a merciful heart. He loves to show mercy. He's sitting at the edge of his seat, ready to jump up and pour out mercy on those who are in need.

[4 : 01] Mercy is what is most instinctive to God. He delights to show compassion, to pour out love, to come alongside those who are in trouble and lift them up.

And he does that wholeheartedly and joyfully without reluctance. Mercy is what's most natural to God. So God's not who we expect him to be a lot of the time.

He's not who our hearts tell us that he is. He is just and good and he will hold us to account, but he is deeply and mercifully wonderful.

And Jesus says to us that same instinct to mercy, that same kind of reflexive, merciful heart needs to be in each one of us also.

How can we be that deeply compassionate person who can sustain a life of mercy and care towards others? How does that become instinctive to us?

[4 : 57] As we head out of lockdown, how can we be sitting at the edge of our seats, ready to show kindness and mercy to people who have had a lot of hardship and trauma and loneliness and sorrow over the last year?

How do we lavish their lives with love and kindness? That's the challenge for the church. It's a challenge for Cornerstone. And for those of you who are Christians, it's a challenge for you. And so if we do our Thursday thought, then what I want to say is this, that mercy is a reflex reaction for those who live in union with Christ.

Mercy is a reflex reaction for those who live in union with Christ. Now, I'm going to think about two things here. The first is about living as a child of the Father, and the second is running with the heart of the Father.

And then we'll close off just looking at how we then set our communities, our homes, our offices alight with the love of God, the mercy of God.

So I want to think about, first of all, about living with the heart of your Father. If you are a Christian, you should share the Father's heart. Be merciful just as your Father in heaven is merciful.

[6 : 11] So living as a child of the Father. When I was 21, myself and three friends took a car from Chicago to LA, or San Bernardino in California.

And we had six or seven days to get there. It was a tiny little 1979 two-door Toyota Corolla. There was four of us, three months' worth of luggage. We'd been working in a summer camp.

We were broke. And so for a week, we slept in that car. We ate in that car. We drove through the Mojave Desert. There was no air conditioning. The car was filthy.

It stank. And we were filthy. And we stank. And after a week of this, we turned up in San Bernardino to deliver the car to the family that it belonged to.

And I have to say, we were hungry. We were broke. We were needy. But we were also embarrassed and shamefaced about how smelly and dirty we were and how smelly and dirty the car was.

[7 : 11] And so we sort of came to their house and sort of crept up the door and sort of timid knock and felt really embarrassed about the whole situation. That family were amazing. They took us in. They fed us like kings.

They let us use their pool. They paid for a hotel for us for the night. And they were merciful and generous. They were the kind of people who loved to bless others.

And that's how God is. He loves to bless. And so these verses begin with blessing, don't they? God's speaking to his children.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples and saying, here's how to live in relationship with me. If you're my children, if you're my disciples, this is how I want you to live in this world.

This is a way to live a blessed, good, happy, joyful life. And in that, he gives us four do's and four don'ts. And those four do's and don'ts are also found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel.

[8 : 11] This is the same teaching, but Luke's giving it a tighter, more succinct focus. It's in the same location. But Luke says that in a plateau, a flat, grassy area in the hills.

And God says, here's how I want you to live as my people in this world. This is the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church. And it's not a great military strategy for winning the world.

It's not a great business plan for winning the world. It's just pouring out a heart of love. God shows his love through Jesus and through the kindness and love of us, his children.

So here's this four do's and four don'ts. Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who hunger now. Blessed are you who weep now. Blessed are you when men hate you. Jesus is saying, be like this.

The poor are those who can see their desperate need and who are driven to dependence on God. The hungry are those who know that they lack so much that is important in life, that they can never truly be satisfied without God's presence.

[9 : 20] Those who weep are those who weep for the loss of God's presence in their lives and the world around them. Those who weep for the pain and injustice that so many face, whose sorrow over the suffering.

And those who are willing to be persecuted are those who are not held captive by what others think, but want to live a life that truly pleases God. To those, God says, rejoice, leap for joy.

Great is your reward in heaven. It's so counterintuitive. If you're willing to realize your neediness, your brokenness without God, if you're willing to grieve for this world and its suffering, you'll have amazing blessing and joy.

You'll have a great reward in heaven because you will have God himself. All that you mourn for, all that you feel lacking in your life, all of that is about God in the end.

And in heaven, God will be there as your reward. You'll know the presence of the God for whom you weep, hunger, and long. It's going to be a great day.

[10:29] And of course, as Christians, we have the now and not yet. We get to taste so much of the goodness and joy and blessedness of Jesus, not just in the future, but in the present.

So he says, be like that, but don't be like this. Woe to the rich. Woe to those who've received their comfort. Woe to those who are well fed.

Woe to those who laugh now. Woe to you if all men speak well of you. So these blessings and woes are like the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy, blessings and woes for obedient people who live in relationship to God.

God blesses them with his friendship and they live a life of love to God and others. And that's the same now. In the New Testament, Jesus says, I invite you into relationship. And in that relationship, I want you to live a life of obedience, of love to God and others.

So don't be like this. Woe to the rich. Well, Jesus had some friends and disciples who were very rich. Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea.

[11:33] So it's not the amount of money that matters, but it's the attitude to money. Do you love money? Do I love money? Am I greedy? Am I haunted by my greed?

Am I longing for more? Do I think that that's where my hope and my satisfaction really rest in life? Don't be like that, Jesus says.

Or don't be like those who are well-fed now, the greedy, the self-satisfied, the easily satisfied. Because they actually lack all that truly satisfies.

And in the end, they'll see that and they'll be hungry. Woe to those who laugh now. This is a kind of self-satisfied gloating of those who think they're better than everyone else and who've got it all in life.

And they're callous. They're derisive. They're scornful of others. And those who are well-spoken of, those who live for the acclaim of their peers, who want everybody to look up to them, those who are driven by a desire for approval, this kind of person, God says, don't be like that.

[12:44] I pity this person. There is woe to them. If all our trust is in wealth, material goods, and the satisfaction we can get now in consuming as much as possible of what the world has to offer in respect and popularity, if that's what we're trusting, it'll become ashes in our mouth.

It will never satisfy us because we're putting these things in the place of God. And if we want a life where God is relegated right down the ranks, way behind these other things, then in the end, our reward will be a life and a destiny devoid of God and his grace.

We've got our reward now if we've got all that stuff that we long for, but we won't have it later. So we need to learn to live as children of the Father, seeing how much we need God and knowing that a life without the presence of God is not a life truly blessed, but that a life that has lived seeking the presence of God, acknowledging our need, our poverty, our hunger, weeping for the need of this world, moved by the heart of the Father within us, that life is rich, it's blessed, it's joyful.

So I want to talk about running with the heart of the Father. You know, what frees us to love? You know, there's a note of doom in here, isn't there? Whoa, whoa, whoa.

You know, we think, how does this fit with the narrative of love, love your enemies, be good, be generous? And it's this, the fact that God sets himself up here as the judge, the righteous judge, to whom all one day will give account, frees us to love others, including our enemies.

[14:34] We don't need to take vengeance, because God will bring justice. We allow the state to exercise the laws and to pursue justice rightly. But at a personal level, we are not vindictive or vengeful people.

We are forgiving, because God will avenge. We are freed by the justice of God to love others with the biggest, most open heart, even those who wound us.

Bless those, your enemies, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who will treat you. How can I do that? Because I can leave it to God to bring justice.

If someone strikes you in one cheek, turn to the other. If someone takes your cloak, don't stop them from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks. This is unconditional, forgiving love, isn't it? In the most difficult, trying situations, the people who in the office trip you up, or stab you in the back, or talk badly about you, or cold shoulder you. People within the family setting who you feel have let you down so badly, and yet you just keep generously giving to them in love.

[15:48] It's an amazing gift to run through life with a merciful heart of love towards others. Luke wrote this book to a man called Theophilus, who was wondering, is it worth being a Christian in a world where there's so much hostility to the message of Jesus and the followers of Jesus?

Is it really worth it? And Luke's saying, don't be surprised, Theophilus, when people persecute you, or curse you, or take advantage of you.

But find in the heart of God mercy to love these people well. I went for a run yesterday in the hills with somebody, and running uphill is hard work.

It's a total slog. Grinding your way up. Running downhill is amazing. Just amazing. Striding downhill. Gravity on your side. Feeling free and energized.

In a Christian life, there's a lot of uphill moments of grinding and slog, but they will give way to joy. What keeps us going in the Christian race? The heart of the Father.

[16:54] His heart of love beating in our chests. And that heart of love is not just to those who deserve it. It's for the hard up. It's for the hurting. It's for the haunted.

It's for the helpless. And it's a non-transactional love, isn't it? It's not a love that is looking for what it can get out of others. It's a love that is willing to give.

So what's the best that you can do for the worst person? Go ahead and do it. What would you wish others would do for you? Go and do that thing for them. Who are the ones that you're tempted to be nasty to?

Go and lavish generosity on them. And don't just love where love has returned. Don't just do love in a transactional way. If I do this for you, then you have to do this for me.

That doesn't work in marriage, does it? Where we just do for our partner in the hope that then they'll give back to us what we want. And it doesn't work in other relationships either.

[17:51] God frees us to love unconditionally, freely, with mercy and generosity, no strings attached. I'm going to just get to the end of the sermon now.

I want to say, let's set the city alive with love. Wouldn't it be amazing? Wouldn't it be amazing for the people of Edinburgh if we lived the way Jesus describes in this passage?

You know, not all religions are the same. Not all gods are like this God. Not all teachers are like Jesus. Not all saviors have his heart of mercy.

If we all believed in this God and reflected his heart in our hearts, if his ways became our ways, this world would be free of violence, revenge, division, class wars.

There would be no more ignoring the needy, the poor, and the suffering. Imagine if Neil McMillan and all the other people in Cornerstone take Jesus seriously here. If we love like he loves, if we have our Father's heart of mercy in us.

[18:57] What would your home be like if you loved like this? What would your family relationships be like if you loved in unconditional, non-transactional ways? What would your office be like if it was grace, not grudges, generosity, not grasping, giving freely without expecting favours back?

This is what Morningside and Edinburgh are waiting for. The Jesus people to live the Jesus way, the Jesus people to love the way Jesus loved. For them to be able to say, Cornerstone, these are the kindest, kindest, most generous people I've ever met.

Let the love revolution show up in Morningside in a thousand acts of kindness. Let us disown materialism. Let us live simply and give generously.

Let's not be snobby about who gets in the door. Let's give to those who are needy and hurting. And let the exuberance and joy of this love spread through us.

Be contagious. May there be an outbreak of goodness, kindness, and love. May there be an extraordinary upsurge in the data for acts of love and kindness recorded in Morningside.

[20:12] Consider God's rich mercy for your life if you're not a Christian or even if you are a Christian. How do I know God's love or God's heart is full of mercy and compassion for me?

The evidence of my life suggests otherwise. I've been mistreated, betrayed, abandoned, taken advantage of. I'm carrying a pain that will never die until I die.

But the evidence of mercy is not seen in our life but in Christ's death that he was abandoned, betrayed, and rejected eternally for us. God sends his son to walk through the valley of condemnation, rejection, and hell so that we can trust in him.

I'm going to finish with a quote from a book called Gentle and Lowly. Whether we've been sinned against or we have sinned ourselves, into misery, the Bible says God is not tight-fisted with mercy but open-handed, not frugal but lavish, not poor but rich.

That God is rich in mercy means that your regions of deepest shame and regret are not hotels through which divine mercy passes but homes in which divine mercy abides.

[21 : 26] It means the hardest things about you which make you cringe the most make him hug the hardest. God, whoever you are today, God is a great heart of mercy and sympathy for you and all that troubles you and he will help you and out of that heart of love we want to love others.

Let me say a short prayer. Father, please do help us to respond to your mercy today. May we see that there is no condemnation for us if we are in Christ Jesus.

May we see your tenderness towards us. Please be with those who feel condemned and shamed this morning. You don't treat them that way, Father.

You invite them into forgiveness. You honour them and you bless them. Lord, help us where we are failing to show mercy to those who hurt and sorrow.

Grant us grace, we pray, to show your generous goodness to all who need it. Give us sympathetic and kind hearts.

[22 : 31] Amen.