

**“When Mercy Seasons Justice” | Luke 6:37-42
(The Sermon on the Plain)**

**The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican
Preaching Draft | June 9, 2024
(Discussion questions on page 8)**

In the play *The Merchant of Venice*, a wealthy moneylender named Shylock makes a loan to Antonio, and sets the security for the loan as “a pound of Antonino’s flesh.” When a bankrupt Antonio defaults, Shylock demands his pound of flesh.

This sets the stage for a famous speech. Portia, friend of Antonio and aware that justice is not on his side, makes her appeal for mercy:

*The quality of mercy is not straiend.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*

Can we Christians, who love righteousness, laud justice, hate sin and strive for godliness—can we say that our strivings for righteousness and justice are *seasoned with mercy*? Do we who believe that on the cross of Jesus Christ, justice and mercy kiss, do we foster communities where mercy is “enthroned in hearts,” where even as we seek justice and righteousness, mercy soars above the “sceptered sway.”

Luke 6 records a sermon by Jesus known as The Sermon on the Plain. In it Jesus calls disciples to a new way—a new type of character, a new way of treating others. They are to be a counter-cultural people, a new humanity, shining as lights in a dark world, being salt within corroding cultures.

Central to this new culture is *mercy*. In the verse immediately prior to our passage Jesus states this succinctly: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (6:36).¹ That is the great

¹ Mercy, in Greek, “ἔλεος,” BDAG, 316, means, “kindness or concern expressed for someone in need, *mercy*, *compassion*, *pity*, *clemency*.”

theological truth underlying the previous passage (about loving enemies) and ours, Luke 6:37-42. The climatic work of Jesus Christ is his death and resurrection. An act that is the great revelation of the mercy within God's heart—His Son, laying down his life in order to offer forgiveness to unjust and unrighteous sinners.

Our passage continues to teach what it would look like if the mercy of God flowed through the people of God. The focus in verses 37-42 is on the inter-personal relationships between Christians. What would mercy look like in our community or in your relationships? We will consider three things: **(1) Evidences of Mercy** [vv. 37-38a]; **(2) Rewards of Mercy** [v. 38b]; **(3) Blind Spots Keeping Us from Mercy** [vv. 39-42].

I. Evidences of Mercy (vv. 37-38).

Text: In verses 37-38 Jesus gives four commands. Two are about things *not to do*, and two about things *we ought to do*:

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you (6:37-38a).

Don't judge. Don't Condemn. Do forgive. Do give. If mercy is flowing through a community, there will be less *condemning judgementalism* and more *forgiveness and generosity*. Let's consider the negatives first—if mercy is present, we should see less of these.

Negative Evidences: less condemning judgementalism

Jesus' words "do not judge" can be misinterpreted and misapplied.

Jesus does not mean that Christians should not be discerning between good and evil. Elsewhere he commands, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (Jn 7:24). Christians are to "discern between good and evil spirits" (1 John 4:1; 1 Cor 12:10), "watch out for evildoers" (Phil 3:2), and "watch out for false prophets" (Matt 7:15). Jesus is not dismissing discernment.

Neither is Jesus dismissing the good purposes of our legal courts and judges, nor the role of parents who at times must judge a child's behavior as bad or unwise.

What Jesus has in mind is a type of judgementalism rooted in arrogance and aimed at cutting someone off from the possibility of God's favor.

Christians know that we are not the final judge. God is. Therefore, our judgement cannot fix in stone our view of others or their destiny—we don't know God's ultimate plans for them.

And Christians know we ourselves have come under God's judgment and been found wanting: "Why do you pass judgment on your brother" asks Paul? "Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Rom 14:10).

Moreover, when we judge we invite that same evaluation of ourselves. We imagine our judgements are like pointing a spotlight, we are pointing out another's fault, bringing it into the light. But our judgements are more like turning on the houselights, which brings everything into the light—including our own failings. Can we stand in that light? When we start toward judgement, may we have Jesus' words in our ears, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:7).

Jesus is not against sound and godly judgements. He is against a judgmental attitude, like that of the Pharisee who prayed, "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector!" (Luke 18:11, NLT).

Let Christian judgement be marked first by humility—because we ourselves have been judged and found wanting. And second by hope—because not only have we received mercy (a fresh start, a second chance!), but we long to see it extended to our brother or sister.

Positive Evidences: *forgiveness and generosity*

Next Jesus turns to positive evidences of mercy—things we ought to do. "Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you" (6:37-38a). These are searching counter-demands, which further probe the attitude of our heart.

Not only should we avoid self-righteous judgementalism. We must stand ready to forgive. This doesn't mean overlooking wrongdoing. We do not pretend one is innocent when they are not. Rather, we are not to hold an action *permanently* against another, especially once they have repented.²

And we are to be generous, we are "to give." Even though our world, and our community are not filled with perfect people who perfectly deserve our gifts, we are generous nonetheless. And generosity extends beyond alms giving—we are to give ourselves, and to be lavishly generous in the giving of forgiveness.³

This teaching is important to take to heart. An ironic twist to our increasingly post-Christian and post-truth world is its passion for morality—at least in regards to justice and fairness. And all human judgement has a touch of egoism—one person putting themselves above another.

² Darrell Bock, *Luke*, 607, is helpful in his commentary: "There is a difference between applying this [the command not to judge but to forgive] at the individual and civic level: states are charged with creating an environment where its citizens are safe. The courts have the right to sentence the guilty. Jesus did not deny the right of Caesar to exist nor did he deny the roles of the soldier or tax collector. What is warned against is evaluating others with such a harshness that the result is an unforgiving attitude and an approach that ceases to hold out hope as if someone is beyond God's reach. The text's emphasis is on reflecting mercy, begin able to forgive, and refusing to judge harshly."

³ How many times must we forgive? Jesus answers: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matt 18:22).

This creates a temptation for Christians, for we are, by definition, people who care about *righteousness*—the moral order of God’s world. Study of God’s law makes us better and better at spotting instances where people are not living up to it. And pride, like the helium in a balloon, carries our piercing gaze high above others, until we condescendingly look down upon them.

Jesus is watching this happen to the Pharisees in his day. Those called by God to represent him, are instead using his law to look down on others.

Perhaps we can all keep the Cross of Christ in our purview when we view others, recalling that if the house lights are turned all the way up, and our lives brought center stage, we would cry out for mercy, not judgement. And from this foundation of receiving mercy, we learn to show mercy. A river is not stronger than its source—we will not show God’s mercy if we have not first experienced it ourselves.

In Portia’s speech, she says mercy is “twice blest: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.” She is saying that mercy comes with reward, for both the receiver and giver, which brings us to our second point—*Rewards of Mercy*.

II. Rewards of Mercy (v.38b)

Do we not see the idea of reward in our passage? The person who does not judge, avoids judgment; the one who does not condemn, is not condemned. The one who forgives, receives forgiveness. And then, most emphatically,

Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you (6:38).

Christians first are to show mercy is because of God: God has shown us mercy. And we, bearing the image of God, must model mercy.

However, Jesus introduces a second reasons for practicing mercy, and with a statement that reads like something from the book of Proverbs: “with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” (6:38).

Jesus is not implying that we earn God’s mercy. Mercy, by definition, cannot be earned. Rather, Jesus is reminding us that there is a certain logic to how the world works: “we reap what we sow” (Gal 6:7).

The person who sows only judgement and condemnation brings upon themselves an atmosphere is judgement and condemnation.

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis speaks of a woman is a grumbler, and as such, risks becoming herself one endless grumble:

The question is whether she is a grumbler, or only a grumble... [you'll] have had experiences.... It begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, embrace it. You can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine.... In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

I am someone who struggles with being critical. It's my nature. This has some advantages when it comes to performing in school or on the job. But it can also lead to a certain way of being, when one is prone to notice the errors of others without always seeing the errors in oneself. And I can understand how this type of inner tick, if left unchecked, can grow to the point of a pervasive attitude.

And haven't we all experience the lightness, the sweetness—the rewards!—, of showing mercy, offering forgiveness, or of being generous. Does not a generosity of spirit not flow back to us?

I once said something hurtful to a friend. I felt justified in the moment; but I was wrong. It effected our friendship. After some time passed, I wrote him a note, acknowledging what I'd done, that it was wrong, and asking his forgiveness. After that we experienced a deeper reconciliation, and enjoy a great friendship to this day. I can tell you that when I received forgiveness from him, it acted like a positive force within me; it made me want to offer forgiveness to others. And it only doubled my affection for my friend. He sowed forgiveness toward me, and he reaped increasing respect and love.

If we sow good things—kindness, forgiveness, generosity, mercifulness—these seeds produce good fruit.

Speaking of generosity, I have witnessed families in this church be incredibly generous with their lives. There are families who have opened their homes to host fellows, and done so for years. This is tremendous generosity. And I have seen how this measure of generosity abounds back to many. Once I was officiating a wedding for two former fellows. The fellows host families where there. And I observed at that wedding, this whole new network of relationships—fellows that felt like families toward their host families; the parents of fellows now in close relationships with these host families. It was like witnessing a garden bursting with fruit.

In a fallen world, there are no guarantees that acts of mercy will be met with rewards in this life. But God will reward the generous and forgiving man or woman in heaven:

Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High (Lk 6:35).

There is, however, this logic to how relationships work. And often, by sowing mercy, we reap its rewards even in this life. Sow judgement and condemnation and you reap them. Sow forgiveness, generosity, mercy, and you will be “twice blest.”

Finally, consider two images about blindness that follow vv. 37-38.

III. Blind Spots Keeping Us from Showing Mercy (vv. 39-42)

In verses 39-41, Jesus cautions against following blind guides—both because they lead us into a pit, and because we end up looking like the people we follow.

Blind Guides

Jesus is cautioning his disciples from following the Pharisees. These are the religious leaders who know the letter of the law but miss its spirit. These are the leaders who refuse to see a man’s withered hand healed on the sabbath for the sake of observing the sabbath. They are all judgement, and no mercy, no love.

If we are not careful, we too can follow leaders or movements that squeeze out mercy and leave room only for judgement. Again, in this cultural moment, there are movements that prize justice, or prize morality, but can end up looking like scorched-earth policy—burn to the ground all who disagree, all who don’t live up to whatever standard we have.

Who or what are you following, are we following? There is not movement, nor political scheme, that can perfectly hold together justice and mercy. Only Christ can do this, and only through the Cross.

Take whatever good you can from the movements and leadership of people and culture—but make Jesus your true teacher; put no one above him. And when you follow him, he will help you season your judgements and strivings, with mercy.

Blind Individuals

After cautioning against blind guides, Jesus turns to blindness in us. With an almost comical image of someone pointing out a speck in another’s eye, when they have a log in their own (vv. 41-42), he calls for serious self-examination.

How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye (6:42).

Self-deception seems as natural as our drive for survival. We have to protect ourselves; we have to keep our self-esteem up. And it is easier to show ourselves sympathy than others. Why? Because we know the complexity that surrounds mistakes we make; we know that things are not always as simple on the inside as they appear on the outside. But with others, it’s easier to

be strict, black and white, objective. “We have a rosy view of ourselves and a jaundiced view of others,” said John Stott.⁴

It is simply easier to show ourselves sympathy than to show it to others.

I think one way to guard against our own blind spots is this: when we notice something about another person that bothers us, we pause and ask ourselves if we are not guilty, in some degree, of the same.

Suppose we come across a wretched liar. And in the name of justice, we must be critical of them. But we take a moment to pause. We ask ourselves: “How truthful are we? How often do we slant reports and stories to make a point or earn favor?”⁵

A friend recently reminded me of a scene from one of my favorite novels, *The Brothers Karamazov*. An old man who refers to himself as an “old Buffon” comes to see the elder monk, Fr. Zosima. The man is angry about so much, but after wrangling about religion, the old Buffon finally breaks, throws himself on his knees and cries out,

What should I do to inherit eternal life?... The elder looks up at him and says, Above all, do not lie to yourself. A man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point where he does not discern any truth either in himself or anywhere around him, and thus falls into disrespect towards himself and others.... A man who lies to himself is often the first to take offense. It sometimes feels very good to take offense, doesn't it?⁶

There are so many reasons to be angry. There are some many faults about the world—so many injustices, so many bad actors, so many liars and cheats and people who think differently than you. Reasons abound to see flaws in others. Pause, Jesus says, and take stock of our own life. Don't lie to ourselves. Take the log out of our own eye. Then, and only then, can we begin to see clearly the faults of those around us.

Later, in some of his last words, Fr. Zosima addresses the younger monks:

Love one another, fathers.... Love God's people. For we are not holier than those in the world because we have come here and shut ourselves within these walls, but, on the contrary, anyone who comes here, by the very fact that he has come, already knows himself to be worse than all those who are in the world, worse than all on earth ... And the longer a monk lives within his walls, the more keenly he must be aware of it.... Let each of you keep close company with his heart, let each of you confess to himself untiringly.⁷

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 152.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: And His Confrontation with the World* (Baker), 108.

⁶ Dostoevsky, *Brothers K*, 44.

⁷ Dostoevsky, *Brothers K*, 163, 164.

Jesus has not come to tear us down, but to build us up. Our self-examination may hurt in the moment, but it can always lead to confession, repentance and forgiveness—in other words, it can lead to receiving an outpouring of mercy.

And can we not let mercy overflow? Can we be humble toward our opponents, gracious even toward those who may offend us? We can, because Jesus calls us to entrust ourselves to him. And rather than turning our hearts or community into a cauldron of condemnation, we can make it a living stream of mercy and grace.

*mercy is [as Portia says] above this sceptered sway.
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*

“Be merciful,” Jesus says, “as your heavenly father is merciful.” Do not judge. Do not condemn. Forgive. Be generous. And your cup will overflow—both in this life and the life to come.

Small Group Questions

1. Jesus says we are to be merciful as our heavenly father is merciful (Lk 6:36). Do you find it easier to judge or to show mercy? And why?
2. What are some ways you have received mercy from God? How might this receiving of mercy impact your judgements of others?
3. Jesus commands us “not to judge” (Lk 6:37), but this does not mean discernment, legal courts, and discipline are bad. What is the difference between judging in a Christlike way and being judgmental?
4. Read Luke 6:41-42. What are some ways we can work at taking the “log” out of our own eye, so we see better to remove the “speck” from our brother or sister’s eye?