

THE BEATITUDES: PORTRAIT OF THE MASTER
PART 6: BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY WILL BE SHOWN MERCY

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

Biblical mercy means two things: giving and forgiving. Jesus commands his disciples to do both, following the example of our merciful Father: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Stop judging, and you will not be judged. Stop condemning, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and gifts will be given to you, a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you” (Luke 6:36-38).

Jesus embodies both aspects of mercy. Throughout his public ministry, he constantly gave of himself for others, especially those who were most in need, and he repeatedly forgave others their offenses. His supreme act of mercy, though, was the gift of his life for us on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Christ gave the fullest measure of mercy, and he received an overflowing measure in return, rising from the dead into a new, glorious life.

If righteousness means following God’s commandments and ensuring that everyone has all that they have a right to, what we mean by justice, mercy means going beyond the demands of justice and giving others that to which they have no right. In our sin, we had no right to Christ’s saving sacrifice, and, in justice, deserved condemnation. Yet, in mercy, Jesus freely gave himself for our forgiveness and salvation. In this way, we see that forgiveness is really another form of giving. When we forgive those who harm us, we are giving them that to which they have no right. In justice, they deserve to be harmed in equal measure to the harm they have caused us. In mercy, in union with Christ, we forego our right to such retribution and give them a second, or third, or seventy-seventh chance at a renewed relationship with us (Matthew 18:22). Only by showing such mercy to others can we ourselves expect to be shown mercy, as we hear in the words of the master to the merciless servant: “‘You worthless wretch! I canceled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant as I dealt with you?’ Then in anger the master handed him over to the torturers until he paid back all that he owed. My heavenly Father will treat you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (Matthew 18:32-35).