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The Blessedness Of The Merciful- No. 1

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Text.--Matt. 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

I. What is mercy? And who are the merciful?

II. Christ commends the exercise of mercy.

III. What is implied in forgiveness?

IV. Mercifulness has no sympathy with sin and never covers it up from view.

I. What is mercy? And who are the merciful?

These are properly the first questions to be considered.

- 1. Mercy is not to be confounded with goodness, since it is only an attribute of goodness. Justice is another, but justice stands in some respects over against mercy. Goodness is the more comprehensive term, and includes both mercy and justice.
- 2. Justice treats moral agents according to their character and deserts; mercy treats them better than this, and would do them all the good she can, despite of their ill-desert. Thus God sends rain on the unjust as well as on the just, doing good to those who deserve none.
- 3. Justice would execute law; but mercy supersedes its execution wherever she can do so with reasonable safety. Justice is apparently exacting, and omits all efforts to bless the guilty, but makes them a sacrifice to the public good, being in these respects quite distinct from and even opposite to mercy. Mercy would persevere in efforts to do the sinner good; would be forbearing towards even enemies.

II. Christ commends the exercise of mercy.

If, says He, ye only love those who love you, what thank have ye? And if ye do good to those who do good to you, what thank have ye? Do not even publicans the same? In this, what do ye more than others?

- 1. The special manifestations of mercy and justice assume certain peculiar aspects in him who acts as a ruler. Justice becomes more imperative; it may not be at his option to exercise mercy wherever he would. His office demands of him a sacred regard to the general interests of the community. These remarks apply to God in His relations as moral Governor of our race. Those relations hold Him to infinite watchfulness over His kingdom, to secure a due respect for law and the great Lawgiver.
- 2. But God does not embarrass His creatures in the exercise of mercy by devolving on them the execution of retributive justice under His government. He knows they are incompetent to the responsibility. It is well we are not required to bear it. We are now left free to forgive our enemies and exercise towards them almost unlimited mercy. "Vengeance belongeth to God," and He knows how and when to administer it. But we are fully at liberty to seek their good and nothing but their good, save as God, or the demands of society, may make an exception. You are aware that in some very peculiar circumstances God has forbidden His people to seek the good of the wicked. Of the Ammonite and Moabite, God said (Deut. 23:6.) "Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days forever." When God comes forth to execute His law on nations, it removes them from the reach of our mercy. So when He sends sinners to hell, bringing them there under the perfect execution of His retributive justice, we can pray for them no longer, and may no longer seek their peace. But, universally, unless God forbids us to seek their good, we should seek it earnestly. We are to have a merciful disposition always. God has. We may say of Him truly that the attribute of mercy in His bosom is always alive. -- always boiling up from its deep, eternal fountain. He is never malignant, not even towards His bitterest enemies in hell. He would speak as kindly as Abraham is represented to have spoken in the parable -- "Son, remember that thou in thy life time receivedst thy good things" -- where every word is uttered with all the kindness which circumstances admit.
- 3. So human magistrates often curb in their tender emotions. Their hearts are full of love, but their responsibilities compel them to the administration of justice, for they are under God "ministers of wrath" to execute His sentence against evil doers.

Let us here note a very obvious distinction between the magistrate and the man. As a man and in his personal relations, the judge may treat the prisoner with the tenderest compassion, while yet as judge he firmly sentences him to a shameful death. The sheriff may strike the fatal blow that cuts the drop with a steady hand, but faint suddenly thereafter under the fearful shock it gives his nerves to send a guilty man suddenly into the eternal world. As a man, he is merciful; as an officer, he is bound to be just.

- 4. When we read the New Testament we are struck with its broad requisitions to be merciful. In the Lord's prayer, we are taught to pray -- "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," as if we need not expect mercy from God farther than we show mercy to our fellow-men. If my brother trespass against me, said one, how often shall I forgive him? Until seven times? Nay,

replied Jesus, but "until seventy times seven." It is your concern always to seek the good of your enemies and treat them universally with lovingkindness. On this our Lord lays great stress, always putting strong cases and requiring this spirit towards all, friends and enemies.

III. What is implied in forgiveness?

- 1. In God it implies setting aside the penalty of the law. But it cannot imply this in our case, since we have not this responsibility.
- 2. Pardon under any government sets aside the legal disabilities which the offence created. But in our private capacity, it is only a loving spirit and cheerful manifestations of favor, good-will. Suppose you have been wronged. What does mercy in your case then imply? That you try to reform the offender; and try to save him from the penalty of the law of God under which he must sink to hell unless he repents. Persistent efforts to do him good comprise the true idea. This is our duty to personal enemies. So Christ teaches us to bless those who curse us, to do good to them that do ill to us. To do this, and to persevere in loving efforts to save them, is mercy.
- 3. Our Lord urges on His people the exercise of mercy in many forms and with wonderful energy and fulness. "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." He insists that we shall not avenge ourselves, or retaliate, but go the full length of mercy.

In these beatitudes, Christ enjoined those forms of virtue which are among the most difficult for depraved human nature. If we compare these with other forms of what we call virtue, we shall see the force of this remark. For example, we regard hatred of sin, a sense of justice and an approval of retribution, as forms of virtue. But they are almost natural, even to depraved hearts. It is natural to hate sin -- all but our own, and perhaps those; certainly we cannot approve them. Men never can love sin for its own sake. They love it for the good, though transient, which they hope to realize from it. Who can have any complacency in the character of the devil? No man can approve of real malignity. This is the reason why you see outbreaks of violence and summary proceedings under lynch law. A striking example was afforded a few years since in a case where a steamboat captain violated a young lady entrusted to his care. When his trial came on at Buffalo, his defence seemed determined to make very light of his crime, and even the magistrate was thought to connive at this policy; whereupon public indignation was so aroused that the people threatened to tear down his office, and did compel him to administer justice in the case. That sort of crime, men could scarcely be found who would tolerate. The virtue implied in such indignation against sin, is comparatively easy. But these virtues, commended in Matthew 5, are real and difficult. Perhaps they are the only sure tests of a regenerate heart. If these are absent, the evidence must be deficient.

- 4. There is a species of compassion for the offender which apologizes for sin, looking after the protection of the criminal from punishment, and not after the protection of society from outrage. It cares much to screen the guilty, little to promote the interests of peace and purity. Such a

spirit we often see among Universalists. All their sympathies are wont to go with the sinner. They throw their influence in the way of the administration of justice. Where Universalism prevails, it often happens that you cannot get a jury to convict for a capital crime. Manifestly, this spirit is not with, but against, the law of God. It is easy and natural enough for those who mean and hope to escape from all punishment themselves, to take sides with criminals.

- 5. A merciful disposition is never disposed to take sides with sin and the sinner against right. You see this in the spirit which moved God to send Jesus Christ to die for sinners in order to magnify the law and honor His throne. You see the same thing also in the spirit which Jesus Himself manifested. Both always defended the divine law, and most fully honored and sustained it. Christ came to condemn the sin of the world and not to apologize for it, or justify it. Because He condemned it, He laid down His life for it. He would not ask that sinners be forgiven until He had fully honored and satisfied the law by His own death in the sinner's stead.

It is a curious fact that all that class of men, Universalists, who throw their influence against the administration of law on criminals, set aside the atonement by the death of Christ. They do not recognize the principle on which it rests. They do not believe in making sacrifices of anybody's happiness for the sake of sustaining law and government. What if Christ had been of their mind and had acted on their principle? Then had there been no salvation for our race.

IV. Mercifulness has no sympathy with sin and never covers it up from view.

- 1. Guilt is a condition precedent of the exercise of mercy. The idea of mercy pre-supposes the fact of guilt. No one can be a subject of mercy save as he deserves punishment.
- 2. If ill-desert is small in amount, there is scope for the exercise of only a little mercy. If a man deserves State's Prison for three years, mercy can pardon him for three years only.
- 3. The greater the virtue of mercifulness, the richer is its reward. When exercised under appropriate circumstances, it surely confers intense happiness, but if we exercise justice where the case demands mercy, we fail of the reward. The exercise of justice also, where the case demands it, confers real happiness, but mercy in its appropriate place, much more. We are all aware that when we exercise mercy rightly, it is a special gratification to us, far above what we feel in the exercise of justice. If the public good demands the execution of justice, we enjoy it, but wherever it will bear to exercise mercy, there is great luxury in it.

REMARKS.

1. How sublime and wonderful is the mercifulness of God! Just think what moral grandeur is evinced in His mercy towards our world! He is not only patient and forbearing, despite of our great iniquities, but He loads us down with favors.

Then think also at what expense to Himself. Suppose a man had injured you and had continued to heap wrongs upon you a long time; but you freely pardon him even at great expense. You give your money, your time and your labor, to provide the necessary means of procuring his pardon, and finally

you even lay down your life for him. Would you not think this a wonderful case of love? But, by a most wonderful manifestation, God gave His Son to die for sinners, showing how greatly He delighted in mercy and that judgment is His "strange work."

2. This exercise of rich mercy must have gratified Jesus Christ. Those of us who have exercised mercy towards such as have abused us can appreciate this. We can understand that Jesus must find the richest and most intense satisfaction in the exercise of His great mercy towards sinners.

3. It is by His manifested love that God overcomes the hearts of His enemies. Revealing His great love, He subdues their hearts and brings them under this love-power; and then, though they deserve to be banished forever, He rejoices over them as one who has found great spoil. As when the prodigal son returned, famished and filthy, but penitent, the father is seen rushing forth to meet him, his heart running over with joy.

4. If we may judge of the happiness of heaven from our own exercises, we must conclude that God's most intense happiness is found in the exercise of mercy, and that this is His highest form of virtue. The exercise of mercy has always been with Him a present intention, and in this sense, a present reality.

5. God's mercifulness must greatly strengthen His influence and power as a moral Governor. Angels desire to look into this scheme of redeeming mercy. They were awake to its first intimations, and as soon as it began to develop itself, they caught up the glorious idea and all the heavenly host were on the wing, rushing down to earth to join in the swelling notes of the first great anthem -- "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and good will towards men!" Who can doubt that this manifestation greatly increased their happiness and also their holiness -- their love of God and their joy in His reign?

6. This manifestation of God's mercy must confound Satan and all hell. What can they say when they see the cost at which God exercises mercy! How must they be confounded when they see how their plan to overthrow God's empire by the introduction of sin into our world, has served mainly to strengthen it, by His glorious manifestations of mercy!

7. Some have wondered why God did not annihilate Adam and Eve as soon as they fell by sin. The fact is, He could not afford it. By that event, an opportunity was given Him to do a great work for His kingdom. It was a glorious opportunity and He could not afford to lose it. Mercy was a rich and a glorious attribute of His nature, and the time had now come to manifest it on a wondrous scale. In the case of the fallen angels, He had manifested His justice and its fearful forms; but an ocean of mercy was boiling up from the depths of His heart, and how could it be suppressed any longer? Why should He longer forego the luxury of its exercise? Luxury, do I say? Certainly. So great is His mercy, no luxury can be compared to this. Do you suppose He feels it a sacrifice and an unhappiness to show mercy to lost men? No indeed. It is no less true of Him than of us, -- "Blessed is the merciful!"

8. Those who have not from their hearts forgiven all men are not themselves forgiven. I have sometimes seen persons in great distress of mind for a long time, and have asked them -- Are there not persons whom you regard as your enemies and whom you will not forgive? In many cases, this has been the manifest reason why they cannot find mercy. It is very common for persons to linger long

under conviction of sin and in great anxiety, utterly unable to find peace because they do not forgive their supposed enemies. Some years since we had among us a poor colored man who, coming near death, was greatly exercised about his preparation. I said to him -- Do you forgive all your enemies? No, said he, by no means; I have been robbed almost all my life long of my liberty, my labor, and my very life, and how can I ever forgive the men who have done all this? If I cannot be saved without forgiving my enemies, then I must be lost! I found him in this state several times and labored to show him his duty. At length as I entered his room on one occasion, I saw his face in a glow of joy and peace. As soon as he saw me, he cried out -- "I've got over it; God has helped me over; I love my enemies now!" He was indeed a new man and died in the blessed peace of the gospel.

9. Some say -- "I can forgive but cannot forget." Probably they do not really forgive.

Many get a hope and deceive themselves. They do not fully and heartily forgive their enemies, neither does God forgive them.

10. Sometimes men say -- "If those who have injured me have repented, I can forgive them -- not otherwise." That is not the right ground. God will take care of their repentance before Him, and can judge of its sincerity far better than you can. He does not devolve on you the responsibility of finding out whether your enemy is truly penitent or not. All He asks of you is to feel a merciful spirit towards him. That is your part.

11. The gospel is an illustration of the spirit of the law, for the law requires the exercise of mercy because it requires perfect benevolence, and this of course involves mercy. In His death for sinners, Christ gave us the true meaning of the law of God in its spirituality.

12. The gospel therefore is not contrary to the law, but illustrates it truly and beautifully. God's character as seen in the gospel is like His character as seen in the law, save that the latter omits some manifestations made in the former. The manifestations are similar so far as the comparison extends. You have more in the gospel than in the law, but nothing contradictory -- nothing discrepant in the one as compared with the other.

13. The Jews in Christ's time had a very low estimate of the law. Hence Christ needed to labor much to elevate the law above their standard. We see this running through most of His sermons on the mount. The whole system of forgiveness and love of enemies assumed a higher standard. Christ taught men not to resist evil, but to exercise the utmost forbearance and mercifulness. Repeatedly Christ said substantially -- Ye teach a virtue common to saints and to sinners -- doing good only to those who do good to you. I come to give you new and higher conceptions of virtue.

There is a state of feeling which resembles mercy and is often mistaken for it, but falls short of it. Christ alludes to it when He says -- "If ye love them who love you, what reward have ye?" It is a partial mercifulness while you love only particular persons, and there are some towards whom you have no forgiving spirit. So long as there is one for whom you cannot pray, it is plain there is one whom you do not sincerely love. If you are in such a state of mind that you cannot labor affectionately for his salvation, you prove yourself to be radically wrong. For you are bound to forgive all. Else, how can you honestly offer the Lord's prayer -- "Forgive us as we forgive"? Luke has it -- "Forgive us for

we forgive." How can you have the face to say this before God when you do not forgive?

14. It will not suffice to pray -- Lord, enable us to forgive others. This is not the language of the Lord's prayer by any means.

15. Reformers are very apt to be deceived by the exercise of partial benevolence. They mistake hatred of sin for love of souls and to being in general They can denounce slavery and slaveholding terribly; so might the devil. No doubt he abhors it as one of the meanest sins in his kingdom. It is impossible that he should not hate sin and wickedness. He cannot love it for its own sake, for there is nothing lovely in it. He must treat sin and sinners with the utmost contempt, for he is a moral being. No moral being can truly say -- "Evil, be thou my good."

16. It is remarkable that some professed reformers manifest no mercifulness towards sinners, but would apparently bring down curses and vengeance on them instead of blessings. Until they get a right spirit themselves and really try to improve the moral state of men's hearts, they will do little to bless mankind. Until the Temperance Reform took on the Washingtonian type and gave its warm right hand to the drunkard to help him up, it accomplished very little indeed. Then it took a mighty stride. When the temperance men lifted their fallen neighbors up out of the gutter, washed and clothed them, and led them forward in kindness to take the pledge; went to their desolate homes and spread joy in sad hearts there, and supplied wants long unsupplied, then it was that men turned in crowds from the path of the destroyer.

I knew a case in Boston. In a Methodist meeting one cold winter evening, my friend saw a man slip in at a late hour and lean, shivering with cold, over the stove. After service he spoke kindly to the sufferer, who replied with a humble apology for intruding himself there; said he hoped he had done no harm. On being questioned, he told a pitiful tale of destitution and sorrow, and revealed the fact that he had been living the life of a miserable drunkard, and that his family were suffering extremely. My friend says -- "I will go home with you;" then took his arm and proceeded onward, calling at a provision store to order some provisions sent, and at a coal yard to order some coal. Thus with his own arrival came also these welcome and greatly needed supplies. It seemed to the poor sufferers in that home of sorrow that his visit was that of an angel of mercy. His words too and his whole bearing were those of kindness. He said to the father of that family -- I cannot bear to see you drunk ever again. You must drink no more. I had rather be whipped unto blood than to see you turn back again to the pathway of death.

I mention this case to show you the difference between chasing a man down with justice and following him with mercy.

17. I have spoken of the difference in their relations and duties between the magistrate and the man. The same difference obtains between the citizen and the man. As a citizen, one may be bound to give information against crime, while as a man, he has no right to avenge himself. The execution of law looks towards the protection of the public. In view of the public interests, we have no right to refuse to inform against those who destroy property and disturb the peace. Suppose a villain should come into your house and commit murder there. You are bound to arrest and report him to the proper authorities. The good of other families, exposed to the murderous spirit of such a man, demands it.

But at the same time, you are bound to pray for him and do all you can to bring him to real repentance before God. You should say to him -- Come now, you have committed an awful crime; I have informed against you as I was bound to do; but I love you still, and I beg you to repent of your sin and give yourself up to Christ.

18. As a private individual, no man may indulge revenge. Suppose you have been wronged never so much, yet if you cannot pray and labor for the reformation and salvation of him who has wronged you, you are not right before God. If you cannot rejoice in the prosperity of any human being whatever -- if it mars your happiness to see anyone happy, you are greatly wrong in heart. This fact shows how impossible it would be, if you were in heaven, to enjoy its bliss.

Many have a malignant disposition, and seem to love to lay up and brood over their grievances with malignant feelings.

Often backslidings begin with grievances, cherished and not forgiven. You will find that backsliders are almost always censorious. They cherish the spirit of quarrels and go through life elbowing their way along, at odds with somebody always and often with many.

Suppose you die in this state; you surely go to hell! How dare a man live in a state of unmercifulness towards another! It is horrible to live so! You may die suddenly; you certainly cannot die in peace, while that evil spirit of enmity lurks in your bosom. You may have had a quarrel with a neighbor, and are saying -- "If he goes to heaven, I don't want to meet him there." If he should go to heaven, you will not meet him there in your present spirit -- that is very certain. But if he goes to hell, you will meet him there! You cannot go to heaven unless you can forgive everybody, and with a free heart too. One woman who had a bitter quarrel with another was asked -- What if you were to meet her in the eternal world? "I would rake her up in hell" -- was her reply. Do you expect to go to hell? "I have none but the spirit of hell! It burns and boils in my soul perpetually."

Two men, professed Christians, had a quarrel one evening. The next morning, one said to the other -- "We shall love each other better after we have taken a ground-sweat." -- as if lying in the grave till the resurrection would sweat off such rancor of spirit! No indeed, the grave has no such power. The "ground-sweat" never does that work. Nothing but the mercy of Jesus and His dying love can reach this malignity of spirit and cure it; and this cure must be wrought here on earth.

Are you going to your death-bed with an unforgiving spirit? Do you say to your enemy -- He has wronged me; I cannot forgive him? Oh awful state! Suppose I have to preach your funeral sermon. Shall I say -- This man has gone to heaven? God forbid that I should speak treacherously and deceive the living!

But you say, I have been so injured and wronged! You have? And had not Christ too been injured? Yet did He not cry -- "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"? Had not Stephen been injured? Yet hear him pray -- "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!" Thus men die who are going to heaven. But ye who have no forgiveness in your souls, don't sleep over your unforgiving spirit. Go to Jesus; bathe your soul in the tears of repentance till you can offer the Lord's Prayer without a fear lest being forgiven only as you forgive others, you should bring down only curses on your soul!

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.
5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it

consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.

8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.