

## **The Beatitudes (5)**

**'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'**

It is probable that those who first heard the Lord give the Beatitudes, found the fifth of them the most difficult to accept of them all. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'

We have no trouble with an exhortation to be merciful. We both know and can see why we should be. But this was not so in the world of New Testament times where mercy was largely an unknown concept.

According to the thinking of the people of those times a person had every right to retaliate evil for evil. That had become the law of the Jews. They hated their enemies and despised the Gentiles. They were unashamedly hard and merciless. People of another race or another religion did not matter. For them it was a sign of weakness to forgive a man an injury or release him from some debt or obligation. Primitive retribution was about their one idea of justice. And in startling contrast to this, came the teaching of the Lord in this Beatitude. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'

Many will have scoffed at the idea. It was teaching which was the complete opposite of the prevailing ideas and accepted practices. And in one way or another it is reinforced many times in subsequent teaching of the Lord. We think of the parable of the Good Samaritan and in particular, he who showed mercy to the man who had fallen among thieves. Then there is the parable of the two debtors, Matthew 18, one of whom failed to extend the mercy to the other which he had previously received. And there is much else besides.

According to our normal usage of the word and as the Dictionary defines it, mercy is the "compassion shown by one to another who is in his power and has no claim to kindness." To be merciful, according to the definition, means to show kindness to someone who doesn't really deserve it. It is to relax a demand which might otherwise have been enforced, or to remit a penalty which might otherwise have been exacted. But we must be careful here of thinking of mercy in terms of mere soft heartedness, which it is not.

Mercy is indeed the compassion and the forgiveness which is extended towards the wrong doer. But it is not a sentimental, weak and benevolent thing. It is not something which leaves people where they are and which does nothing to help them avoid their errors and mistakes in the future. It is not a matter of letting people off and making it easy for them to avoid the consequences of their actions. Mercy and being merciful, demands a great deal of us. It involves definite responsibilities. It has in mind certain objectives and if we would exercise it we must know what these are.

In this regard it helps us to think of the Lord's mercy. His mercy is His love towards the whole of humanity in its fallen and unregenerate state. (Arcana Caelestia 3875). It is His intense concern "for the spiritual progress and enduring welfare of the human race." In the exercise of it He necessarily allows us to be tried and tempted, and it is a mercy that He does. Also in the exercise of it He permits us to suffer the consequences of our evils, and though at the time it does not seem so, that too is a mercy for there are valuable lessons which are only learnt in this way. Whilst the Lord is unquestionably merciful towards us His mercy is not some kind of leniency or indulgence. Indeed it would not be merciful of Him to indulge us, simply to let us off, or wave aside consequences we have brought upon ourselves.

If we would be merciful, this must be the pattern of our mercy. Like the Lord's mercy, our mercy must look to the real interests of our fellow man and have concern for their spiritual well being. It cannot possibly be some kind of weak acquiescence or simply waving aside what another has done. To be truly merciful may require us to confront another with what they have done and perhaps allow them to suffer the consequences as being in their best interest to do so. It is not merciful to allow evil to go unchecked or unpunished, or to try to ignore or overlook it. The tendency is to think of mercy as something we bestow when we feel good or magnanimous. Mercy in fact is something which should always be there, embodying as it does a real desire for the good of all others. Mercy is to wish well to another, in the best possible sense. It is to wish them happiness and to do those things which will best bring about that happiness. It is 'to take in the whole of life, and to act with reference to its good.' This is mercy and at the same time this is what is meant by being merciful. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'

As with all of the Lord's blessings, we receive mercy to the extent that we extend it towards others. We are able to receive the Lord's forgiveness, for example, to the extent that we are forgiving towards others. And so too with His love which is present with us in the measure that we reach out with love to others. It is indeed a spiritual law which determines that we get what we give. 'Influx, or the inflowing of the Lord's life' wrote Swedenborg, can only accommodate itself 'according to efflux' (Arcana Caelestia 5228) Though blessings are continually extended towards us, only those receive them who try to extend those blessings to others. The Lord desires to be merciful but only those can receive His mercy who are themselves merciful. He desires to be forgiving but again, only those can receive that forgiveness who are themselves striving to be forgiving. He 'makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust' but all do not go to heaven. Clearly a condition is involved.

The point is, it is up to a person to demonstrate that they want those blessings, that they want to have the life of heaven, to be forgiven, and to receive mercy. Unfortunately there has been confusion on this point, people thinking that God can do as He likes, act arbitrarily and save everyone or only those He chooses to save. But God is a Being of order and acts in an orderly manner. He is unalterably the same towards all people and will save and bless those who themselves wish to be saved and blessed. These things are conditional upon the participation and effort of each individual.

So far in these talks on the Beatitudes I have said nothing about the connection which exists between them. I have taken each one in isolation and looked at what is meant by it. The Lord has listed in the Beatitudes those virtues and characteristics which, when present in our lives, can bring a real sense of blessedness and happiness. And while each is usefully considered separately, and on its own, we must not overlook the sequence between them and the way in which one connects with the other.

We have in the Beatitudes the whole step by step process of how, from being unregenerate a person becomes regenerate. The Beatitudes are a summary of all that is involved, and they take us through every stage we can expect to pass through.

A person commences the path of regeneration by recognising their spiritual poverty and the fact that by themselves and apart from the Lord they can think no truth and do no good. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Having recognised such poverty we must, and if we are genuine, we will sorrow over it. This is the next step. 'Blessed are they that mourn: for they will be comforted.'

If we are genuine, then must follow a willingness to be led by the Lord in all things. This is what is meant in the third Beatitude, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.' Arising out of this desire to be led by the Lord will grow a hunger and thirst after righteousness, which is what is spoken of in the fourth Beatitude. And then comes the manifestation of righteousness in our lives, first of all in our being merciful. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'

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