

MERCY:

Loving those in Need

Matthew 25:31 - 46

Mercy comes from mercy. Our mercy to each other comes from God's mercy to us. The key to becoming a merciful person is to become a broken person. You get the power to show mercy from the real feeling in your heart that you owe everything you are and have to sheer divine mercy. Therefore, if we want to become merciful people, it is imperative that we cultivate a view of God and ourselves that helps us to say with all our heart that every joy and virtue and distress of our lives is owing to the free and undeserved mercy of God. – John Piper¹

The key to becoming merciful, Piper explains, is not strength but brokenness — a deep awareness that everything we are and have is a divine gift. He writes that “mercy grows up like fruit in a broken heart and a meek spirit and a soul that hungers and thirsts for God to be merciful.”

If we want to become people marked by mercy, we must first become people who see clearly. This means cultivating the kind of awareness that recognizes every part of our lives — our joy, our growth, even our distress — is sustained by the sheer mercy of God.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

It might be difficult, but try to imagine that this week, as you were walking down the street, you saw Jesus. Maybe He was sitting on a park bench feeding the birds or reading a newspaper. I'm not sure how you knew it was Him — but imagine that somehow, without a doubt, you recognized the man before you as Jesus, the Son of God.

Right in front of you sat

“the firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 1:15),

“the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25),

and “the Lord of lords and the King of kings” (Revelation 19:16).

Can you imagine how your heart would pound — with joy, with fear, with awe — as you saw, for the first time with your own eyes, your Savior and Lord?

Put down this book for a moment and try to picture it. How would you respond?

I don't know exactly what you imagined, but I think I know what you wouldn't do. You wouldn't be too busy to notice Him. You wouldn't pass by pretending not to see. And surely, you wouldn't look down on Him or decide He wasn't worth your time or attention.

If it were really Jesus before you, you would do whatever you could to show Him your love, your respect, your devotion. You would stop whatever you were doing and sit with Him. You'd listen. You'd speak from your heart. You wouldn't care what others thought — because the only opinion that mattered to you would be His.

Now stretch your imagination a little further. Imagine that in the middle of your conversation, you learned something almost unfathomable: Jesus needed a place to sleep that night. Or He was hungry and hadn't eaten. Or He was sick and needed medicine. It's hypothetical, of course — but what would you do?

Hopefully, most of us would respond without hesitation.

If He was sick, we'd rush to the pharmacy and buy whatever He needed. If He was hungry, we'd take Him to our favorite restaurant and order the best meal. If He needed a place to stay, we'd invite Him into our homes — gladly offering Him our best room, even our own bed. And we wouldn't do it reluctantly. We'd consider it a joy and an honor to serve our King — to show Him how deeply thankful we are for all He's done for us.

And yet... in a strange and deeply uncomfortable way, this is exactly what Matthew 25 is all about.

THE RETURN OF JESUS

Just days before His crucifixion, Jesus' disciples asked Him to explain what would happen at the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). In response, Jesus gave them a sweeping picture of the days to come — including specific instructions on how His followers are to live faithfully in the "last days." This phrase, used by Jesus and the New Testament writers, refers to the era between Christ's resurrection and His return.²

Jesus warned that during this time there would be many false prophets and false messiahs. Wars, famines, earthquakes, and persecution would mark this age — a period of both upheaval and witness. All of these things mark the time between the cross and Christ's glorious return. He made it clear that no one would know the exact time of His return, but He urged His followers to stay alert, faithful, and ready.

He ended this great teaching with the story of the sheep and the goats — His final parable. This is the conclusion to His teaching about the last days and His final exhortation for His followers. It serves as both a warning and a practical picture of what readiness looks like.

When Christ returns, it will be glorious. The Son of Man will come in His glory and sit on His beautiful throne (Matthew 25:31). At last, His kingdom will be fully and finally established. The King will take His rightful place to rule the nations. As Jesus shares this vision, He draws His disciples' attention to the prophetic imagery in the Book of Daniel:

He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

Jesus is this Son of Man. And one day all the nations will see Him and worship Him. His kingdom will never pass away.

But this return also brings judgment. It will be a day of reckoning and of justice — a time when everything is brought into the light and the true worth of our way of life is revealed. Jesus says He will separate the people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Just as a shepherd easily knows the difference between the two, so Christ will be able to distinguish the righteous from the unrighteous.

Those on His right will be called blessed by my Father. They will inherit the kingdom prepared for them — a kingdom that has been in preparation since the very creation of the world. They will be honored not just as residents but as co-heirs — those who reign with the King.

Why? Because their lives bore the marks of mercy. Every time they saw the King hungry, they gave Him food. When He was thirsty, they gave Him a drink. When He was a stranger, they invited Him in. When He needed clothes, they clothed Him. When He was sick or in prison, they looked after Him and visited Him.

These men and women are marked as the blessed ones by the King because they served Him faithfully. Their righteousness was not just belief — it was a lifestyle of mercy, embodied in love.

Then Christ will turn to those on His left. These, too, will be surprised — not with joy, but with incredible grief. The Son of Man will call them cursed by God, and they will hear the most devastating words: “Depart from me.” While the sheep enter the kingdom, the goats are sent away — to receive what was never meant for them but for the devil and his angels: eternal punishment.

Their failure wasn’t just neglect; it was personal. They had seen the King hungry and turned away. They ignored His thirst. They had no time to visit Him — no desire to go near places like prisons. Their unrighteousness wasn’t just inaction — it was indifference. A refusal to serve the King.

These two groups had one thing in common: they were both given many opportunities to serve the King. What separated them was how they chose to respond.

THE GREAT SURPRISE

The story takes a turn we never would have expected — even the righteous are amazed on that day. Both the righteous and the unrighteous ask the same question: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison?” (Matthew 25:37–44).

They search their memories for something that surely would have been unforgettable: seeing the King of kings and Lord of lords in need — hungry, sick, or in prison. But they can't remember it. None of them realized that in all those moments of need, they were encountering Him. And so they ask again, "When, Lord?"

Then the King responds with the words that change everything: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

This is the crux of the passage — the truth Jesus urgently wants His disciples to understand. Every act of kindness to the outcast, every cup of water given in love, every invitation to a stranger is received by the glorious King as if it were done to Him. And the reverse is also true: every act of indifference, every refusal to show mercy, every time the needy are ignored — it is received by the Son of Man as a personal rejection.

What we never would have imagined — unless Jesus Himself told us — is this: The King of Heaven identifies Himself with the outcast.

He doesn't just "secure justice for the poor and uphold the cause of the needy" (Psalm 140:12). He loves the poor, the foreigner, the refugee, and the forgotten so deeply that He chooses to identify with them. He remembers those the world overlooks. He sees those we often choose not to see.

And this is the surprise — and the invitation — at the heart of Matthew 25: A life of mercy is how we stay ready.

To live with open eyes, open hands, and an open heart toward the least among us — this is what it means to live faithfully in the time between His resurrection and His return. Jesus told this story so that His disciples — and we — would stay alert, faithful, and prepared to meet our King.

A FEW IMPLICATIONS

If we truly believe what Jesus is saying, then we must take seriously how we choose to respond. At the very least, His teaching has profound implications for how we view our encounters with the poor and the needy among us. These moments should not be something we seek to avoid or merely tolerate. We cannot walk past those in need with cold hearts or blind eyes. Jesus redefines these encounters as holy opportunities — moments in which we are invited to serve Him.

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked a question: what would you do if you saw Jesus on the street? In many ways, that question is not hypothetical at all. Every day, you are running into Jesus.

He is coming to your church and walking through your neighborhood. He is the one asking for spare change, the one needing a place to sleep, the one who has been forgotten in prison. If you want to faithfully serve Jesus and demonstrate your love for Him, He tells us how: care for those in need.

Since we would never ignore Jesus, neither should we reject or avoid those around us who bear His image — especially those He chooses to identify with. In fact, if we take His words seriously, we wouldn't merely refrain from avoiding them — we would seek them out. We would look for the hungry so we could give them food. We would search for the thirsty to offer them something to drink. We would watch for strangers to invite them in. We would notice those who lack clothing, care for the sick, and visit those in prison.

Because in serving the least among us, we serve our King.

PRACTICALLY SHOWING MERCY TO THE LEAST

Peter has made it a personal practice to pay attention to people on the street who ask for help. When he is able, he buys them something to eat or drink. When he has no money, he still tries to show them love and respect by stopping to listen, speak with them, and offer a word of blessing. He refuses to treat them as invisible or undeserving of his time or energy. Instead, he treats them the way he would want to be treated — if he were in their place. His example has inspired others from his church to go out every Sunday to offer sandwiches, prayer, and presence to those living on the streets.

In Sofia, a student group once organized a six-month project to visit a local orphanage. Every Saturday they helped the children with their schoolwork, and they also sponsored special vocational training to help them prepare for college or the workforce. Years later, long after the official project ended, some of the students still return regularly to offer support, friendship, and love.

A church I once belonged to made it a practice to visit the local prison. There they would meet with prisoners, listen to their stories, and spend time with them. Around Christmas, they organized a program filled with songs, skits, and the message of God's good news.

Another church I know has taken intentional steps to care for the refugees living among them. They have brought clothing, blankets, food, and other supplies to the nearby refugee camp. A group regularly visits to offer language lessons so that refugees can find jobs or begin schooling. Others in the church have formed deeper friendships and invited refugees into their homes for meals — and into their churches for worship and community.

Each of these examples is a testimony to what happens when God's people take His Word seriously. These believers have chosen to love and serve those in need. What's striking is that none of these acts are especially complex or extraordinary. Mercy is not beyond us. It begins with small steps — a choice to notice, an intentional decision to show love, and a heart that is open to compassion. They have learned that God's will is:

*...share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood.
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;*

*then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. (Isaiah 58:7-9)*

May God work in all of us so that we, too, would become people of great mercy — people whose light breaks forth, and in whom the glory of our God goes forth.

LIVING IN TUNE WITH JESUS

I love music. When I was in high school, I played bass guitar in a jazz band with some of my friends. We played small concerts for our school and community. I still remember one concert where I forgot to tune my instrument beforehand. The moment we began playing, I could tell something was wrong — nothing I played sounded right. Eventually, I had to stop, step off the stage, and tune the bass before I could rejoin the group. I had been ruining the entire song.

I once heard a pastor define righteousness as living in tune with the heart of God. That phrase has stayed with me. A righteous life is one that resonates with God's character and purposes — caring about the things He cares about, aligning our values with His, and learning to live in step with His grace. When we live like that, our lives begin to sound more and more like Jesus.

Conversely, unrighteousness is living out of tune with what God is doing in the world. It resists His rhythm. It clashes with His melody. And in the end, it disrupts the beauty He intends.

So what is the tune of God's heart? The Bible is clear: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Psalm 103:8)

From beginning to end, the story of Scripture is a story of mercy. God delights to show compassion. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. And the clearest expression of His mercy is the cross — where Jesus gave Himself for a world lost in sin and desperate for grace.

The proper response to that kindness and grace is to become people of mercy. Living in tune with Jesus means being people marked by mercy. We are called to be so shaped by God's mercy that we forgive those who've hurt us, share with those in need, welcome those on the margins, and love those the world calls unlovable. It means doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

This is exactly why the sheep in Jesus' parable were commended. They had received God's lavish mercy — and responded by extending mercy to others.

This is righteousness. This is the sound of a life in tune with the heart of God.

DEALING WITH SOME COMMON OBJECTIONS

Reflecting on the mercy of God helps address two common questions that often come up when studying the story of the sheep and the goats.

First, we might be tempted to think that the sheep are saved because of their good works. But Scripture makes clear: righteousness always begins with God — He is its source. The sheep are righteous and merciful because they have come to know the righteousness and mercy of God. Their acts of compassion are not what saved them, but the evidence that they had been transformed by His grace. Their mercy is the outward fruit of a heart that has been changed by God's mercy.

Likewise, the goats' unrighteousness shows that they do not truly know God or reflect His character. They have not received or responded to His saving mercy. We are saved only by the grace and power of God — not by our works. But saving grace will always produce change. It brings us out of the way of death and into a new kind of life. Those who are truly saved by God begin to look and live more and more like Him — through the power of the Spirit and under the lordship of Christ.

As the Spirit of mercy lives in us, we too will become merciful. We will give food to the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner — not as a means of earning salvation, but as a response to the One who rescued us. For this reason, it is essential that disciples of Jesus regularly remember and reflect on the grace and mercy they have received. Only as we know God's mercy will we be able to show mercy.

Second, people often ask: What about those who are difficult to help? What about the sinful, the broken, the people who may misuse our help — the drug addict, the drunk, or the one who takes advantage of others?

Here again, reflection on God's mercy helps. God did not show us kindness because we were good — but because He is merciful. In fact, He showed us mercy while we were still His enemies. Jesus puts it clearly:

“Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you... Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”
(Luke 6:30–36)

To live in tune with God's heart is to reflect His character — even toward those who are ungrateful or wicked. Of course, we want to give with wisdom, so that our help is truly merciful. But we don't wait for someone to “get their life together” before we extend mercy. That's not what God is like. He gives freely, and He holds each person responsible for how they respond to what they've been shown.

Because we have known and experienced the goodness of God, we are now free — and called — to show mercy. This is what it means to live in righteousness.

And this is the good news: one day, when Christ returns and His kingdom comes in all its fullness, He will say to all who have responded to His mercy with mercy, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”

We will be welcomed into a kingdom completely shaped by God’s mercy and grace — a place where forgiven sinners will know only His goodness, His care, and His joy. Every citizen of that kingdom will reflect His mercy forever, living in love, humility, and service to one another for all eternity.

Let us live now in faithful readiness for that moment.