

***“Blessed are the merciful, they shall obtain mercy:
The healing power of mercy given and received.”
A Presentation for the Divine Mercy Day of Reflection
Estancia Valley Catholic Parish
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“Blessed are the merciful, they shall obtain mercy.” (Mt. 5:7). We are familiar with the “Sermon on the Mount” in which Jesus laid out a list which was at once an invitation, a challenge and a command. The Beatitudes are sometimes wrongly opposed to the Ten Commandments: the Commandments being a set of cold laws, coming from God conceived of as a stern and strict judge, and the Beatitudes being the call to a warm expression of love and the softer, gentler side of God, one more consistent with our preference to see him only as tolerant, indulgent, without demands and how we would like him to be.

The Beatitudes and the Commandments come from the one, same God, and therefore cannot contradict or oppose one another. God is not confused, self-contradictory or inconsistent. Beatitudes and Commandments all serve God’s purpose, each in their own way, each with its different focus or emphasis on some aspect of the holiness of life God calls us to. God is at once perfect justice, love and mercy—for us human beings, impossible to reconcile in the same being without one predominant over the other.

One way to look at the Beatitudes as a way of holiness is to recognize that in communicating them, Jesus is really describing himself and his own attributes. As God and man, Jesus both shows and is who we should be as his disciples. He is the image and revealer of the Father, as well as our Redeemer, Brother and Lord. If we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48), we must conform ourselves to Jesus. This includes making his qualities and attributes our own, as far as we are able with the aid of his grace.

“Blessed are the merciful, . . .” In this Beatitude we are told that those who *are merciful*, in the way or attribute of Jesus’ own mercy, will be holy, happy, blessed—all ways of understanding “beatitude.” Jesus promises this beatitude to those who are merciful. They shall *obtain* it.

Being merciful implies a deep conversion of heart and a manner of living life in which “being merciful” always finds its expression in acts of mercy toward others in their need, toward our self and even toward Christ himself.

We shall reflect on the Beatitude and consider some ways that this Beatitude might find more fertile soil and bear fruit a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold in each of us. We shall try to understand *how* we can be merciful in different sorts of common human experience and events of life. We shall reflect on the deeper need for appreciating God’s mercy in our lives so that we can be released from what holds us back from being merciful and living lives of mercy. We shall look at some real situations in life for the need of mercy, and what form the mercy takes which we obtain by being merciful, the mercy of healing. I will also offer some very brief spiritual exercises which each of us can use to try to open our hearts and minds and break down any

resistance to forgiveness which blocks the healing effects of mercy in our lives and those around us.

We recall first of all that nothing is impossible for God, and nothing is possible without God. We know that everything God does he does out of love. We remember that we are totally dependent on God. We would neither exist nor know what love, forgiveness or mercy are without the fact that God loved us first and this love enables us to love him and others; chose us first so that we could choose him; and poured his mercy upon us to triumph over our sins and the death it brings, so that we could be merciful to others.

It is the love of God that expresses itself in service and mercy of the Father in Jesus the Son, and which we, if we are to be true disciples, live in such a way that gives God glory and praise, and attains salvation. We know that there is no limit to the ways and means of receiving and expressing love and mercy. They encompass all aspects of our existence, the material and spiritual. While we distinguish various ways and particular circumstances or needs, we recognize that everything in our relationship with God and others is really of a piece, and can never be unrelated or separated from the whole of love and life.

In the following verses from Sacred Scripture, we hear St. John declare the love and mercy of God and the necessity of the disciple to be loving and merciful as God is. We consider and insert the word “mercy” along with love, to appreciate the identification of love with mercy.

“The way we came to know love (mercy) was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion (mercy), how can the love (mercy) of God remain in him? Children, let us love (be merciful) not in word and speech but in deed and truth.” (1 John 3:16-18). Here we see the demand of mercy of the disciple for those in material or physical need.

“In this way the love (mercy) of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love (mercy): not that we have loved God, but that he loved (was merciful to) us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved (is merciful to) us, we also must love (be merciful to) one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love (are merciful to) one another, God remains in us, and his love (mercy) is brought to perfection in us.” (1 John 4:9-12). God sent his Son as expiation for our sins. God’s love and mercy have a profound spiritual focus and purpose—redemption and salvation—so must the love and mercy of the disciple be spiritual in nature and purpose.

“Blessed are the merciful in material *and* spiritual things....”

Keep in mind that in all things of our Faith and the life of God and our relationship with him, we are delving into deep mystery. We may speak, write and pray with a tone of certainty. This certain confidence is possible because of faith and the trust it produces through the working of the Holy Spirit. But we never lose sight of the ineffable mystery God is, and our humble status before him. Part of this mystery is the truth that he cares passionately about each and every one of us, how we are treated and how we treat others. Therefore, we are always striving to live as he

would have us live, as he has shown us. This even extends to superhuman ability to love, to forgive and to be merciful, because of the supernatural life of his grace which empowers us.

In the Office of Readings of the Liturgy of the Hours for Monday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time, the Church presents to us a portion of a sermon by St. Caesarius of Arles. St. Caesarius was Bishop of Arles in France, and died in the year 543. His thoughts frame well our reflection on the Beatitude:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. My brothers and sisters, sweet is the thought of mercy, but even more so is mercy itself. It is what all men hope for, but unfortunately not what all men deserve. For while all men wish to receive it, only a few are willing to give it.

“How can a man ask for himself what he refuses to give to another? If he expects to receive any mercy in heaven, he should give mercy on earth. Do we all deserve to receive mercy? Let us make mercy our patroness now, and she will free us in the world to come. Yes, there is mercy in heaven, but the road to it is paved with our merciful acts on earth....

“There is, therefore, an earthly as well as a heavenly mercy, that is to say, a human and divine mercy. Human mercy has compassion on the miseries of the poor. Divine mercy grants forgiveness of sins. Whatever human mercy bestows here on earth, divine mercy will return to us in our homeland. In this life God feels cold and hunger in all who are stricken with poverty; for remember he once said: *What you have done to the least of my brothers you have done to me.* Yes, God who sees fit to give his mercy in heaven wishes it to be a reality here on earth.

“What kind of people are we? When God gives, we wish to receive, but when he begs, we refuse to give....

“What do you wish for? What do you pray for, my dear brothers and sisters, when you come to church? Is it mercy? How can it be anything else? Show mercy then, while you are on earth, and mercy will be shown to you in heaven. A poor person asks you for something; you ask God for something. He begs for a morsel of food; you beg for eternal life. Give to the beggar so that you may merit to receive from Christ.... It baffles me that you have the impudence to ask for what you do not want to give. Give when you come to church. Give to the poor. Give them whatever your resources will allow.”

We are all aware of the plight of the materially poor. God has a special place for these in his Divine Love. The Gospels relate from Jesus’ own lips the necessity of caring for the legitimate needs of the materially poor in order to attain salvation. This generosity in order to relieve the material, physical sufferings of the poor is reflected in the story of Lazarus and the rich man, and the image of the judgment of the nations in the 25th Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. (“Whatever you have done to the least of my brothers, you have done to me....”)

But what of those around us who are not materially or physically poor? What about those who are spiritually poor? What of those who are so spiritually poor they cannot recognize their sins and failings? Or those who are so poor that they do not know they can be forgiven, or loved? What about those who are so poor they refuse to ask for forgiveness or mercy? *What about us?*

Has our pride choked our ability to see beyond the sins of others and see their need? Does our anger and resentment lead to the poison of hatred because we refuse to forgive others even though God has commanded this? Do we refuse others the love and mercy we beg from God because we are not repentant and converted enough to forgive our brother from our heart? Is there a limit or selectivity to our being merciful? Was there ever a limit or selectivity in the mercy of God?

First, let us see our relationship with Jesus for the concrete insight into the gift of mercy. But here we will find a twist to mercy we wouldn't expect. Here we see someone being merciful to Jesus, and, what a return, what an obtaining of mercy this person received!

In his book, *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, Archbishop Fulton Sheen examines each of the Beatitudes and his reflection exposes a definition and example of mercy given and mercy returned. Of course, the mercy of God poured out in the sacrifice of the Lord on the Cross makes all things possible. Everything must be redeemed. Sheen writes that the way of the world, its standard is that one serves oneself first, it is self centered first last and always, and that strict justice knows no mercy: "Mercy, he (Jesus) reminded us, was something more than a sentimental, emotional tenderheartedness. The very word mercy, is derived from the Latin *miserum cor*, a sorrowful heart. Mercy is therefore, a compassionate understanding of another's unhappiness.... Disliking misery and unhappiness, the merciful person seeks to dispel the misery of his neighbor just as much as if the misery were his own. That is why, *whenever mercy is confronted not only with pain, but with sin and wrongdoing, it becomes forgiveness which not merely pardons, but even rebuilds into justice, repentance and love.*" (Italics mine).

Sheen goes on, "Mercy is one of the dominant notes in the preaching of our Lord. His parables were parables of mercy.... We must, like our heavenly Father, be merciful to those who, according to human estimation, least deserve it.... There is no mistaking his point of view; he was interested in sinners not because of their merits, but because of their misery." St. Paul likewise reminds us that Christ loved us to the end, to the sacrifice of his life for us *while we were still sinners*. Jesus revealed to St. Faustina the shocking incongruity that the greatest sinners have the greatest *right* to his mercy.

On Calvary, Sheen writes, there were three crosses, on two of which hung convicted thieves. But these two were not alike. One was bitter and self centered and taunted Jesus. The other was *merciful to Jesus*. We think of that "good thief" as somehow being saved only by expressing the budding of salvific faith in Christ. True enough. But he also protected and defended him. He comforted him by his kindness, his compassion in his misery—expressions of his mercy. And because of this, he became the only person we know of to hear those words, "This day you will be with me in paradise."

It has been a longstanding devotion in Catholic spirituality to do acts of repentance or penance, acts of reparation for our sins. Some of the great saints commended prayers and pious acts to comfort Jesus in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane and all through his passion and death. This is more than poetic piety. St. Alphonsus Liguori writes in his Stations of the Cross that we should “compassionate” Jesus suffering on the cross. This is a plea to be “merciful” to the Source and Perfection of Mercy.

The “good thief” obtained mercy and the gift of salvation because of his merciful, kind compassion toward our suffering Lord. Might we also bring our own sufferings, our acts of prayer and penance to Jesus on the cross, unite our sufferings to his to comfort him and be merciful to him, for his sake, our own, and the sake of others? “Blessed are the merciful,” even to the Savior of all.

Sheen goes on to remind us of the biblical injunction that “as we sow, so shall we reap.” If we sow sparingly, or not at all, we shall reap sparingly, or not at all. He states that, “Our Lord has made mercy the very soul of his Church. I think that is the reason why he chose as the head of his Church, not the innocent, the pure, not the virgin disciple John, but the impetuous, strong man called Peter—the one who had denied him and cursed and swore that he knew not the Man.... And so he who knew by experience the mercy and forgiveness of our Lord was chosen the head of the Church so that the Church might forever practice mercy and kindness. There is every reason in the world for mercy. There is some good in the worst of us, and there is some bad in the best of us. The good are those who try to find some good in others, and they generally do find it. The evil are those who look for the faults of others, and as a result never see their own.... If on the last day we would receive a merciful judgment, we must begin here on earth to be merciful to others.... By constantly thinking of ourselves, we render ourselves incapable of receiving the kindness of others. Only to the extent that we have emptied ourselves of ourselves can God fill us with himself.... How can God answer the prayers we address to him unless we answer the prayers of others addressed to us? Do we answer the prayers of the poor? the maimed? the lame? the sinner? If not, then by what right can we expect God to answer our requests?”

We know by faith and reading the Scripture that Jesus is the great act of God’s mercy. He “sets aside” his glory by allowing it to be veiled by human nature. He comes to his sinful people to save them. In his book, *Divine Mercy, A Guide from Genesis to Benedict XVI*, Dr. Robert Stackpole, quotes the Jewish scholar, C. G. Montefiore, that the parables of mercy (the prodigal son, the lost sheep, and the lost coin) “emphasize the one absolutely new thing that Jesus came to say: ‘The idea of a God who will invite the sinner back is not new; the idea of a God who will welcome the sinner back is not new; but the idea of a God who will go and seek for the sinner, and who wants men to do the same, is something completely new.’” (p. 59).

God who wants men to do the same says so when his Son says the words, “Blessed are the merciful....”

I might add, if I may be so bold as to venture to add anything to what the likes of St. Caesarius, Archbishop Sheen, and Dr. Stackpole have to say, is that every man and woman has a deep *need* to be merciful. We all long for peace. We all long for love and life. We all seek them, often in

ways and places and with persons who not only fail to give us what we need and desire, but who actually thrust us further away from our destiny and purpose. Without the gift of healing through forgiveness and mercy—that we receive from God through his Church, and that we receive and extend to others—there will be no peace in the hearts of men and women, in families, among races or nations.

Now let us spend some time contemplating how we become blessed by being merciful, some obstacles to being merciful, and what sort of mercy it is we obtain when we do, in fact, become merciful and are blessed, as God promises us we will be. We will also look at some antidotes to the things that prevent us from being merciful.

Pride, the root of all sin and rebellion, is the great obstacle to peace. We can't love nor be merciful if we are prideful. It kills and prevents the growth of a virtue necessary for salvation—humility. In our pride we refuse to recognize our dependence on God and our ultimate weakness, the moral weakness of our nature. Dr. Stackpole quotes Jesus from the Diary of St. Faustina: “With My mercy, I pursue sinners along all their paths, and My Heart rejoices when they return to Me. I forget all the bitterness with which they fed My Heart and I rejoice in their return.... What joy fills My Heart when you return to Me. *Because you are weak* (italics mine), I take you in My arms and carry you to the home of the Father.” (*Diary*, 1728 and 1486). Pride gets in the way of us admitting that we are weak, that we need God. We may say these things, but how do we act and really believe? We think, we convince ourselves that we are strong, that in some, perhaps unspoken way, that our strength comes from ourselves. We fail to see that our strength does come from within, but that we are not the source, that it is God within who gives us, in our weakness, his strength. Pride authorizes us at some deep level to despise the weakness of others, and thereby, we judge whether they are worthy of real love, forgiveness and mercy.

The example of Peter, full of himself, his own idea of self sufficient pride, able to withstand even death as he promised Jesus he would suffer rather than betray or abandon him, has his pride broken the hard way—he fails utterly. He is overcome with the shame of his wretchedness. But he repents, and his bitter tears of contrition gain him the restoration of his relationship with Christ and his place in the Church. Shortly after I realized and accepted my vocation after years of our Lord pursuing me with it, the “old man” within me asserted himself once again, and I like Peter, but in a different way, betrayed our Lord. In a flash, my vocation was gone. God took it away from me. I felt like Adam, cast out, or like Peter, having to bear the guilt of ingratitude. I begged to be restored, and like Peter I was. I still recall and can feel the terror of that experience. It has made me much more compassionate and merciful to others.

Shame sometimes prevents us from being merciful and extending the forgiveness that leads to healing of ourselves and others. There is a difference between healthy guilt and shame. We experience a healthy guilt when we have sinned or failed in our love of God and neighbor. It helps us to contrition and repentance. Shame is the destructive self punishment, self condemnation and deep sense of unworthiness which blocks our ability to accept God's forgiveness and peace. It prevents us from being merciful, because we are not merciful to ourselves. We cannot live as God wants us to with this burden. Stackpole quotes Pope John Paul II from his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, on the effect of mercy received and the liberation the Savior gives us: “Mercy—as Christ presented it in the parable of the prodigal son—has the

interior form of the love that in the New Testament is called *agape*. This love is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin. When this happens, the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and ‘restored to value.’” When we continue to shame ourselves after being forgiven, we do not blossom into the fullness of life that the mercy of God intends.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Sacrament of Divine Mercy, there is much healing of all sins. As a confessor, I have experienced this in my own confessions, as well as in ministering God’s mercy to others. One woman whose confession I heard had had thirteen abortions. She was an emotional, psychological and physical wreck. I thought of the story of Mary Magdalene and Jesus casting out seven demons from her. Our Lord in the Sacrament enabled this woman to begin anew with hope. She was comforted and calmed by the knowledge that her children were with God, and they knew her, but didn’t hate her. In fact, they loved her and prayed for her because they were with God, and because they are with God, all they know how to do is love. She took courage in knowing this and knowing that in and through the Holy Spirit she could speak to them and ask them for their forgiveness and tell them she loves them. More, in the Holy Spirit, they could extend their love and forgiveness to her. From that encounter with her merciful Lord, in which she came to the realization that no matter what, God loves her, and wanted to forgive her, she could begin to forgive herself, be merciful to herself, and take those first tentative steps toward healing. She was at the beginning of living in God who, in his mercy, “restores her true value.”

Offense, insult, betrayal, in short, all kinds of hurt can prevent us from being merciful if we refuse to extend the mercy of forgiveness. Family members, friends, trusted and loved people in our lives in whatever relationship can hurt us by cheating us, putting us down, especially as we are growing up, because their ridicule and cruelty crush our spirits and deeply damage our interior self. People whom we love, especially those to whom we are most vulnerable, and from whom we have a right to expect love in return, can break our hearts and spirits.

Fr. Robert DeGrandis, a priest with a gift and ministry for healing wrote a book called, *Healing the Broken Heart*. In one of the stories a woman who had been sexually abused as a child by her father, prayed at his death bed. In 85 years he had never spoken to her about it or asked forgiveness. She decided to be merciful to him by a prayer of forgiveness. He could no longer speak, but she prayed with her hand on his chest, and felt a heat spread through her hand to his body and back again. She was profoundly aware of a message coming to her from his heart: “I’m sorry.” Peace was restored to them both in that moment shortly before he died.

Hatred can prevent one from being merciful. Hatred is not anger at acts of injustice or uncharity. Hatred, like love, is in the will. Hatred is willing evil on someone. Love is willing the good for someone. The ultimate good is salvation, eternal life. We can love someone, even if we don’t have feelings of love. We can have no feelings, or even feelings of anger, or disappointment toward someone and still pray for them—for their good, their conversion, their repentance and turning to God. In such a case, we truly love them.

All the commandments of God are hard to follow. What are the hardest? What requires the greatest act of obedience to God? I personally think that Jesus' command to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us or harm us, and to forgive from our hearts, are the hardest to comply with and surrender to. "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your transgressions." (Mt. 5:14-15). He doesn't provide any exceptions. Think about it. What right do we have to refuse to be merciful and forgive others in light of Jesus' sacrifice for us?

I once worked as a live-in home hospice care aide. I and another hospice worker were caring for a 45 year old woman who was dying of lung cancer. I would live with her and care for her for 4 days out of the week, and the other worker, a young woman, came for the other three days. Our patient didn't sleep much until she got within a few weeks of dying. She and I would talk long into the night. I got to know her and her story very well. We talked about God, his love, what life and death meant to her and what he had in store for her. She was divorced from her husband. He was an alcoholic who was now in recovery. She divorced him because he had been very physically, verbally and emotional abusive. She had been afraid of him, and I thought at some level she still was. One night he appeared at the door asking to see her. I didn't let him in, but asked him to wait. I went into her bedroom and told her that he was there and wanted to see her. She told me to let him in. I left them alone. They were together about a half hour. On the way out, he thanked me for taking care of her. After he had gone, I went in. She told me that he had apologized for all the bad things he had done and asked her to forgive him. I asked her whether she did. She said, "Yes. I thought, if God has forgiven me so much, who am I not to forgive him?" In forgiving him, she was being merciful to the man who had sinned against her. She obtained God's mercy and became his agent of mercy.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, 16th century founder of the Jesuit order, was a wise and holy man. He understood how deeply we might be hurt and how angry and stubborn in our refusal to forgive we could be. He was also aware that Jesus' command to forgive, no matter what the offense or who committed it, was necessary for us. So in his wisdom he gave this advice: If someone has hurt you so much that you can't forgive, pray for the desire to forgive. If you have been hurt so much that you can't even pray for the desire to forgive, then pray for the desire to have the desire.

Habits of criticality and modes of thinking, and ingrained, unconsciously operating and self reinforcing negative attitudes towards others prevent us from being merciful. How often do we hear spontaneous comments coming from people that are hateful, uncharitable, harsh or critical? I know a woman who constantly comments harshly and negatively about people over the slightest matter. She harbors a critical attitude toward anyone she does not like, or even mildly agitates her. She even has to comment critically about people whom she does not even know in the news or on television, who have done something wrong or stupid. These automatic, spontaneous comments prevent a spirit of charity from warming her heart. This person is not happy. Though she is a very decent and good person at heart, she lacks a spontaneous spirit of compassion, love and mercy toward those who, in human estimation, do not deserve it, or manifest human imperfections.

As Jesus is the God who pursues the sinner with his love and mercy while never forcing anyone to accept them, his disciples should cultivate a virtue, a good habit of a charitable and merciful attitude. This leads to a ready compassion, even for the sinful and stupid, and prompts one to pray for the other's good rather than tearing him or her down. How do we change an unloving and unmerciful attitude into a loving and merciful one? We can pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and ask the Spirit to grant us a share in divine love. We can cultivate through prayer and reflection a conscious awareness of all of our thoughts, an immediate "in touch" sensitivity of all we think and say. Then, we can evaluate them, and work to decide what to think and what to say, and thereby reform our interior attitudes of mind and heart. This will give rise to a flow of thoughts, words and actions that are worthy of being presented to God at any time. We can examine ourselves in light of the Holy Spirit with Jesus as our guide. In this examination we can reflect upon and ask God to make clear to us who we really are and why we think and act as we do. As we gain self knowledge, not for its own sake, but rather so that we can reject anything contrary to God's love and will, we can become changed, loving, patient and merciful people. We become happy people in the process. This is not easy. Most often we need a guide, a spiritual director, or spiritually mature companion to accompany us. We need to examine *all* relationships and habits we have developed. We direct our prayer to pierce our habits of reaction, our rationalizations, our denial and all we have masked over in order to be honest about ourselves, and who we need to become in Christ. This is the path of discernment and personal conversion.

All along the way, we will become more loving and merciful. We will begin to understand and experience that the mercy we obtain by being merciful is the intimate union with the mystery of our God who loves us with an infinite love, and who is pleased to give us his Kingdom.