

21. Mercy and legalism

February 14, 2016

We'd love to have mercy from the Lord for our sins, don't we? I don't know about you, I do need a lot of mercy from Him everyday because of my sinful nature. But what about extending the same mercy to others who offend us? Our Lord Jesus mentioned about mercy in His profound sermon that is known as "The Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew chapter 5:

Matthew 5:7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

What is mercy? According to Dictionary.com, it is "compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person". In the Bible, mercy, compassion, and pity are running together in a very similar meaning. They are mentioned 345 times in the Word of God. Do you think that mercy is kinda important to God? If it is important to God, it should be important to us.

Dr. Dwight Pentecost, a great theologian of yesteryear once said, "Mercy is God's ministry to the miserable." The miserable people are us without God. We should not only be mercy receivers from the Lord, but also mercy givers to fellow humans.

But legalism has no pity on people. Legalism makes my opinion your burden; makes my opinion your boundary; and makes my opinion your obligation. Legalism is an expression of a person's pride – thinking that others should follow his or her example, not necessarily God's Word, otherwise they would categorize anyone who disagree with them as unspiritual. Humility is not one of the virtues of legalists. They all walk around with their noses stuck up high in the air.

This morning we are going to meet a group of Jewish religious leaders who could care less about the miraculously healed man who was bound in his infirmity for 38 years. The only thing that mattered to them was that he was healed on the Sabbath and he dared to carry his mat on the Sabbath against their worthless rules, but not against God's Word. I believe that the Lord is going to teach us not to be legalistic like them. Because, as we grow older in the Lord, it is so easy to tell others what they should do instead of telling ourselves how we should imitate our merciful Savior and Lord and be merciful to others.

A. THE NEW OVER THE OLD

Matthew 9:14-17 Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

The Pharisees fasted often twice a week, but not out of humble repentance to the Lord which is the true reason of fasting. They did it out of their desire to impress themselves and others with their spirituality. Jesus was not against fasting, but the way it was done and it was forced to be done by the Pharisees. Thanks to the legalism that was imposed by them, the Judaism had become a burdensome thing, not as the Lord intended. The poor people were weighed down by rules and regulations that were impossible to obey.

Jesus' reference to the wineskins is His announcement that the present institutions of Judaism could not and would not contain His new covenant. He would form a new institution, the church, which would bring Jew and Gentile together in a completely new body.

Ephesians 2:16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.

Jesus reminds us that what is old and stagnant often cannot be renewed. God will often look for new vessels to contain His new work, until those vessels make themselves unusable.

This is not limited to Judaism only, but even some of the Protestant denominations, such as, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. They all started with great intentions and willingness to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. But later what they intended was replaced with human-generated religions and now many of these denominations would have nothing to do with what the Lord teaches in the entire Bible. They accept the portions of the Word of God that they like and discard what they don't want. Now many of them embrace the things, such as, homosexuality, abortions, etc. that are against the Word of God. Don't think that it would not happen to Calvary Chapel. Though it was started by the Holy Spirit like many other denominations, if we put our traditions and rules over His Word, we, too, will fall away from the Lord.

2 Timothy 3:5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

B. THE MISERABLES AT THE POOL OF MERCY

John 5:1-9 After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. 3 In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. 4 For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. 5 Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" 7 The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." 9 And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath.

The original name of the gate was the 'Lion Gate,' but the worshipers of God brought their sheep to here and washed them in the pool before they took them to the temple and sacrificed them on behalf of their sins to receive God's mercy, it was more known as 'Sheep Gate.' This pool was located at the northeast corner of the temple in Jerusalem, and it is known as 'Bethesda' which means 'the Pool of Mercy.'

The story about an angel coming down to the pool and stirring up the water so that the first one who went in could be healed may not be anything more than a legend.

Think about it, ladies and gentlemen, Jesus saw this man who had an infirmity 38 long, lingering years, He had mercy on him. I wouldn't be surprised if Jesus intentionally stood between this man and the pool blocking his view of the water. Then the Lord popped him a question that seemed so cruel and rather dumb, "Do you

want to be made well?" What kind of silly question is this to a sick person who was at the Pool of Mercy and wanting to be healed?

At this point, the man with the infirmity probably glanced up at Jesus and then leaned around Him to keep his eyes on the water of the pool and answered, "No duh!" OK, he didn't say that. I made it up. This man didn't know Jesus from Adam, nor did he have any faith in Him. The only thing that mattered to him was getting into the pool before the others so that he could be healed.

I am sure that it was 38 long years of misery, shame, embarrassment, and despair, but, by the mighty power of Jesus, this man was healed instantly.

No matter how miserable your life has been – I am not only talking about physical condition, but also spiritual and emotional condition, Jesus can change all that. The real question is: Do you want to be made well?

Please note the answer of this man in v7. The man's answer was, basically, "Yes, I want to be made well, but I don't see how this can happen." The sick man did what we mostly all do. For many of us, we create a small box in our heads and try to put our Mighty God into that tiny box.

Much to our surprise, some people don't want to get well spiritually. It's easy to become accustomed to life around the pool of misery. The people around there don't mind you being there with them since misery loves company.

You might be the one who is around that pool of misery without anybody from the church knowing – addicted to pornography, alcohol, drugs – whether it is illegal or prescribed, never-ending worries, frequent anger issue, or whatever you are trapped in. You think that you cannot escape from it, nor can your God rescue you, because you've been that way for so long and you've put your God into that tiny box in your head.

But maybe, after years of inner spiritual poverty and misery, you're looking for a change, longing to be restored to everything God created you to be. If so, Jesus is the ticket out of the spiritual slum through His mercy. If you really want to get well, He will give you the mercy and strength to get up and walk. Just as the Lord Jesus healed this man who had been in his 38 years of infirmity, He can do that to you as well.

Now I need to speak to the other group of people in this room. You are not around the pool of misery, because the Lord blesses you with strong spiritual health. I am happy for you. But don't think that you have your great spiritual health, so that you can flaunt it to others.

Jesus had compassion on this man who had absolutely no hope of his own. He WENT to the man and extended His mercy on him. Our Lord expects us to do the same. Mercy begins with how we see people – through the eyes of God's compassion. There are a lot of hurting people in this world. You will say, "I cannot help everyone in the world." No, but can you help someone sitting next to you, maybe in front of you, or behind you, or your brothers and sisters across this room? Ask the Lord to whom He wants you to share His blessings and mercy. Be a channel of God's mercy to the other family members of God.

It is impossible to know what your brothers and sisters in Christ are going through during our short greeting time in the service. Maybe you can invite someone from our church to a lunch – of course, you pick up the tab if you guys go out to a restaurant, or invite them to your home. Get to know them instead of rushing out the door as soon as the service is over. Hang around and let the Holy Spirit speak to you and you do what He says.

C. THE MORE MISERABLES AT THE POOL OF MERCY

John 5:10-15 The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed." 11 He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" 12 Then they asked him, "Who is the Man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" 13 But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in that place. 14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." 15 The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Can you believe these religious leaders who were supposed to take care of their people? They could have been careless about this man's well-being and the incredible healing miracle that was sent by God Himself. The only thing that mattered to them was that Jesus had the audacity to tell this man to carry his bed on the Sabbath. I am sure they thought, "Who does He think He is, God?" Why yes, He is, as a matter of fact!

In contrast to the two commands of Christ – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; You shall love your neighbor as yourself," the Pharisees had developed a system of 613 laws – 365 negative commands and 248 positive ones. By the time Christ came, their Talmud and Mishna had produced a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of self-righteousness.

These legalistic Pharisees were actually more miserable people than the physically miserable people around the Pool of Mercy, because they didn't have mercy toward others.

According to their rules and regulations, carrying anything that weighed more than the combination of two dried figs was considered a burden to bear. So this formerly sick man carrying his bed was a major violation of their Sabbath rules.

These Pharisees turned into a bunch of cold-hearted legalists, sin sniffers, and sin list-makers. Somehow they thought that it was their solemn duty and obligation to tell others how to live according to their own rules and they did with delight.

Some might say, "Well, pastor, that was the first Century. We no longer have legalists, sin sniffing Pharisees around. We are living in the grace of God." Wouldn't that be great if that was true? We still have them.

The most vicious people in the body of Christ are those people that make it all about self-made rules that apply to other people's lives. They don't care about showing mercy or doing good. And they'll find some out-of-context Bible verses to justify their behaviors. And they really don't like the Book of Romans because it speaks so much about the grace of God.

Micah 6:8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

By reading v14, we can tell this man's sin that he committed 38 years ago caused him to have the infirmity. Jesus told him, "*Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.*" What can be worse than 38 year suffering from a debilitating disease? Eternal suffering that is the result of unrepentant sin, that will be worse. St. Augustine once said, "If I weep for the body from which the soul is departed, should I not weep for the soul from which God is departed?" It would be too late for anyone to change.

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) God is everything for those who deserve nothing.
- 2) Being like Jesus means being merciful to others, instead of being harsh with them.
- 3) We are in a dangerous place when we regard God's mercy towards us as our right. If God is obliged to show mercy, then it is not mercy – it is a duty.
- 4) The church isn't a parking lot for believers to do their Sunday morning religious duty, but it's a launching pad to do His will.