

On The Way

The Beatitudes: Blessed are the merciful...

The pursuit of justice that we considered last week leads logically to the pursuit of mercy. Indeed, justice should always lead to its constant and necessary complement, mercy. Moreover, when we strive for that justice that is a right relationship and union with God, then we will – we must – share his desire for mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. There is something both beautiful and severe about this Beatitude. Beautiful, because of its insistence on and its promise of mercy. Now, this doesn't contradict justice but leads beyond it. Indeed, the pursuit of justice brings us to that point at which we ought to consider mercy. The justice-alone mentality produces a culture of competition and rivalry, a view of reality as a zero-sum game of "mine and yours." This Beatitude breaks us from that unhealthy view of justice as a stingy and strict calculation of who deserves what. When followed, it has transformed cultures by leading them beyond justice, to the generosity and liberality of mercy.

At the same time, there is a severity here: *only* the merciful will receive mercy. Those who show no mercy should not expect to receive any. This reminds us of our petition in the Lord's Prayer: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* It's extraordinary that we can say those words at all. Consider what they mean: we *want* to be forgiven as we forgive. We ask God to extend to us the same mercy we extend to others. This is such an amazing petition that it's the only one that our Lord singles out for commentary (cf. Mt 6:14-15).

This severe mercy flows from the oneness of love of God and neighbor. As we cannot claim to love God without loving our neighbor, so we cannot expect to receive mercy from God if we have failed to extend mercy to our neighbor. Nor is this a capricious divine decree. It comes from the fact that the human heart has only one opening. Now, that's bad biology. But it's good theology. The heart has only one opening by which it extends love to both God and neighbor. The degree to which your heart opens to forgive, so also it opens to receive forgiveness. The unmerciful will not receive mercy, not out of any defect or lack of mercy on God's part, but because by closing their hearts to their neighbors they have also closed them to God.

Finally, there is something therapeutic about this Beatitude. It shows us the way to healing. Being merciful to others helps end our self-focus and self-pity. When we think of others, we must come out of ourselves, stop wallowing in our own misery, and attain some degree of self-forgetfulness. Here again is the fundamental Christian paradox: we receive to the degree that we give. Those who forget about themselves and show mercy to others will find themselves and experience healing. For whoever wishes to save his life by focusing on his own sufferings, will lose it. But whoever loses his life by showing mercy to others in need will find it (cf. Mt 16:25).

Saint Augustine associates this Beatitude with the Spirit's Gift of Counsel, by which we judge rightly about what's to be done. In particular, Counsel helps us to discern how to reply to *suffering*, and therefore how to console and show mercy to others.

– Fr. Scalia