

THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN THE BIBLE

Exodus 34:1-6, 9-10; Matthew 9:9-13

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley at the

First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

February 10, 2013

There is a basic principle in Preaching. In seminary it is the kind of thing that is “Preaching 101.” When you ask a question in the sermon, you don’t give the answer too soon. You want to “string your congregation along,” keep their interest, sharpen their curiosity. Well, my homiletics professor would be rolling over in his grave about now,... if, in fact he was in his grave, which I trust he is not. “What is the most important word in the Bible?” Well, here we have it, front and center in your bulletins: Jesus’ 5th Beatitude: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”*

Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, let’s get to *why* this is “the most important word.” And, more importantly, let’s get to understand what it means to *be* merciful; and, even more importantly than that: *how* the Holy Spirit changes our hearts to be more “merciful” people.

There are, of course, several other candidates for “the most important word.” There is that most wonderful of all four-letter words: LOVE, “the Greatest Commandment,” according to Jesus. Then there is GRACE. The Apostle Paul sums up the Good News of Christ in his letter to the Ephesians, *“By grace alone you have been saved, through faith; it is not your own doing, but the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

So why MERCY? Our First Scripture Lesson this morning brought us up the mountain with Moses (Exodus 33-34), when God poured out His mercy on this sinner/saint who, in his untamed anger had broken the sacred tablets at the foot of the idol the people had made. And now, in God’s amazing mercy, Moses was called up the mountain again to receive a second edition. So overwhelmed was Moses by God’s loving mercy, he asked the Lord something so over-the-top, so inappropriate that no mortal had ever dared ask. *“Lord, show me Your glory!”*

So tender is God’s love for His servant Moses, the Lord said, “I will grant the very thing that you ask. But you cannot bear to see my face; it would be too much for you. So I will put you in a cleft

in the rock, and place my hand over your eyes, as I pass by. And I will reveal who *I AM*, so that you may *know the Lord*.” (See Exodus 3:13-14.)

Early the next morning, Moses chiseled out the two tablets of stone like the former ones. He took them in hand, and ascended the mountain of the Lord. The Lord stood with him there, placed him in the cleft in the rock, just as He said, and passed before him in all His *glory*. Shielding Moses’ face, God proclaimed who He was, and is, and forever will be:

*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...*

The *first* word by which the Lord wished to be known was...*MERCY*.

And then came Jesus. The full embodiment of what this means; what *mercy* looks like. This word is the defining character of Jesus. We see it here in our Gospel Lesson today, when the religious police were trying to throw the Book at Jesus for calling such a notorious sinner to be his disciple—“Matthew, the tax collector?!” Not only this, but Jesus brought His disciples to Matthew’s house to eat with him and his tax collecting buddies?! The Pharisees were utterly scandalized by the whole thing. The disciples probably were too! But Jesus stood by this one to whom He was showing mercy, and simply said to the Pharisees, “*Go and learn what this means...*” And He quoted the great prophet Hosea, “*I desire...MERCY and not sacrifice, says the Lord.*” (Hosea 6:6) Yes, let us “Go, and learn what this means...”

Jesus spent the rest of His earthly life showing them what “mercy” looked like. At a Pharisee’s house for dinner, He allowed a prostitute to come in and weep great tears of remorse over His feet, and dry His feet with her hair. “Simon,” Jesus said to his host, “there is something here you must see. But you cannot see beyond your rule-book religion. What you need to see is this: the one who is forgiven much, *loves much*; and the one who is forgiven little, *loves little*.” And Mercy shined.

He touched lepers to heal them, and the one who came back to thank Him was of the “wrong” race--a Samaritan. Yet he was the example whom Jesus lifted up. And Mercy shined. As if that were not enough, He took His disciples through Samaria itself, and spoke personally with a woman of ill repute. She too was of the “wrong” race, the “wrong” gender, the “wrong” reputation. Yet He gave to her what she needed most of all—*respect*, and the knowledge that she too mattered to God. And Mercy shined.

He fed the hungry, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, lifted up the despised and rejected, forgave the sinners and gave them new life; and at last He died on a Roman Cross praying, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* And Mercy shined; a Centurion gasped; Simon Peter was given hope; the curtain of the Temple was torn in two; and the earth shook. This is the life-changing power of Mercy.

So how do we become people of Mercy, like Jesus? The Savior told two memorable stories that described what Mercy looks like: the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. These two highlight two applications of what it means to live as people of Mercy. First Jesus paints that indelible picture in our hearts--the Prodigal Son turns around and heads for home at last. He has shamed his father’s name all over the “far country.” But when his father first caught sight of his son on the horizon, Hope leaped in the father’s heart! He ran out, at full tilt; his arms wide open to embrace his son. He walked with his son through the whole village, inviting them all to a Welcome Home party. *“This, MY SON, was dead; but now he is alive again; he was lost, and now he is found!”* In this story, Mercy is all about Forgiveness (Luke 15:11-32).

In the equally memorable story of the Good Samaritan, Mercy is all about Compassion in Action (Luke 10:25-37). *“There was a man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho,”* Jesus said. *“He was attacked by violent robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and left him half dead. A priest came by a little later, saw the man...but he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came by the place, he passed by on the other side. But then a Samaritan came along. And do you know what that Samaritan did? He saw the man all beaten up and bleeding, and he was moved with Mercy. He poured some wine on the wounds, and bandaged him up; placed him on his own donkey and took him to an inn in Jericho. The man gave the innkeeper the money to put him up, care for him, and feed him. He did more than that: ‘When I return, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’...Now,”* Jesus said to the Pharisees, *“which one, do you think, loved his neighbor?”* Well, they said, grudgingly, the one who showed him mercy, I suppose. *“Then go and do likewise,”* Jesus said.

Two pictures Jesus paints for us of what the Merciful look like: the father forgives his son; the Samaritan relieves the suffering of the victim. Both, in their own way, were copying God...the God who reveals Himself as: *“merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”* Both, in a kind of unplanned, spontaneous moment, were *“learning what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’”*¹

Now, this week

¹The prophet’s word that Jesus quoted to the Pharisees was not talking about the “sacrifice” that we know is very much a part of showing Mercy. We sacrifice our own freedom, our own money, our own time in order to show someone else Mercy. The “sacrifices” that the prophet Hosea was talking about were the ritual sacrifices of bulls and goats and pigeons that were so much a part of Old

I desire Mercy...,” I want you to take with you the confidence that you are not alone in this “learning process.” It’s not all up to you to re-invent yourself as a Christian.

The Holy Spirit has a very effective way of teaching us to live like Jesus. No sooner do we hear Jesus’ teaching in church or in our personal Bible reading, than we are given an opportunity to put it into action. But we have to be alert, and not miss it. First, there may be someone in your life who annoys you terribly; or maybe even someone you hate. It may be someone who has hurt you or cheated you, and you have such a root of bitterness in your heart, you have NO MERCY. You can’t even imagine having any mercy for such a jerk as this. He is wrong, and you hope he gets what he deserves. End of story.

Now, please stay with me here. Pay attention right now to how the Holy Spirit may be working in your life. Someone comes to mind. You are surprised that this person has entered your consciousness. “Where did he come from?,” you may be asking. Perhaps for others, it may be someone more obvious who comes to mind. Either way, it is someone you have written off as hopeless, condemned, irredeemable...just as the Pharisees had written off this Matthew character. And now, just maybe, you will be given the opportunity to do something to show that person the Mercy of forgiveness. Now watch!...just maybe, as you think of this person, and start muttering in your heart about what a jerk he is, or she is,...the Holy Spirit even gives you the idea of what you could do.

So now, you can have a reasonable certainty that what is happening in your consciousness is of God...the God of *mercy*. Now you are really stuck; because you know that if this is of God, then you will have to act! And you don’t have the *heart* to act; you don’t *want* to act; you don’t see why you *should* act. It’s not fair.

And now, you are seeing your name written in our Gospel Lesson today. And you recognize you’re not on the right side. Checkmate. This is not a story from the past we read. It has turned out to be a right-now story; it’s about you: “*Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire Mercy and not sacrifice.’*” And the same God who brought the person to mind, and gave you the idea of what you could do, is the One who...maybe even now...is beginning to soften your heart.

Now, maybe this morning you are not connecting with anyone against whom you hold bitterness

Testament atonement. The prophet’s protest was that what mattered to God was not Religiosity, but Mercy for the suffering, and Justice for the poor.

in your heart. For you, maybe the “mercy” the Holy Spirit will be teaching you this week will be in some opportunity that will cross your path to show Mercy like this Good Samaritan did. Compassion in action. It will probably come to you at a time when you are rushed. You have a tight agenda for the day, and you are full of yourself. So it surprises you when *you notice* the significance of the opportunity that crosses your path. You may, nevertheless, make a split second decision *not* to respond. You may even realize, as you are rushing on, that you are playing the role of the Priest or the Levite in Jesus’ story. After all, they were busy. The Priest was probably late to Mass; the Levite was late to his Bible Study. You may feel guilty about it; but “It is what it is,” you say; “I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do.”

But look! Take heart in this: *you recognized it for what it was!* God was working in your life. You failed Him. But even in the failure, God can show *you* Mercy—the mercy of a second chance. I can’t tell you how many times I have missed the moment. I always feel terrible for having missed the moment. And as I “mourn my sins,” as Jesus taught us, I am “blessed” to find my will fortified and my resolve strengthened that, next time, I *must* do it differently! And Mercy shines.

Oh, but how about this...If, by God’s amazing mercy, you actually responded spontaneously to the opportunity to help someone in distress, what a day it has been! You may have had a day that day, when everything had gone wrong. You messed up on an exam, you didn’t make your quota, you forgot an appointment, you had 20 things on your list you “had” to do, and you only got to the first three. But now, something happens and YOU NOTICE someone in distress; or YOU REMEMBER someone you need to check up on. You stop; or you call. And somehow, it all turns out right. Now, as you go home at night, how do you assess your day?

You got “nothing” accomplished of what you set out to do; you screwed up with this or that. But it has been a GREAT day! The BEST day you have had in a long, long time. Why? Because you realize this is all that really matters. And your soul knows it. You have “copied God”! You have shown MERCY. By the mercy of God, you have lightened someone’s burden; you have given hope to someone in despair; you have performed some practical service that meant the world to the one who came to mind, just at the right time. And here’s the kicker: you look back on this experience, and you know that God set the whole thing up. It was God who helped you to notice. It was God who softened your heart. It was God who helped you let go of your precious schedule. It was God who gave you the idea of what to do and how to do it. And then you know it’s true: *You go nowhere by accident; wherever you go, God has sent you. Wherever you are, God has placed you there...*

This is how the Merciful are “blessed.” Hallelujah! Amen.