

1 Sermon, August 11, 2013

Texts: Matthew 9:9-17, 2 Corinthians 5:12-21,

Title: "The Rewards of Christian Faith: A New sense of self"

1. There are many people who do not *need* the Christian faith
2. There are many for whom sacrifice is a daily chore
3. Mercy won't fit unless it's accepted
4. Mercy – we live no longer for ourselves
5. Mercy – we don't regard others from a human point of view
6. Mercy – a new creation

1. There are many people who need no mercy

I'm going to start out my sermon with a radical statement. Then I'll explain it to you.

There are many people who do not *need* the Christian faith.

Yes, they would benefit by the Christian faith. Yes, their lives would be much richer with the Christian faith, but they don't need it.

You see, they're doing pretty well. They have their health, they have a comfortable place to live, plenty to eat, many things to distract them. They have earned a living, and can feel that they are self-sufficient. They can be content without the Christian faith — at least until a crisis hits, and then they discover they're missing something.

They don't *need* Christian faith because they need no mercy. They haven't done anything terrible to need forgiveness for. They don't sense that they may need forgiveness for the small things. They don't see that they owe something to God.

Mercy is forgiveness from someone with greater power, and they don't feel inferior to anyone. So why would they need mercy?

2. There are many for whom sacrifice is a daily chore

Then there are the people who know they need mercy, but can't accept it. They know that they fall short. They know that they have done things they wish they hadn't, and not done things they should have. So they are working hard to make up for things.

They keep trying to do good things for other people, fulfill their duties, be a good parent, be a good child, earn a living, keep peace in the neighborhood, listen well to others, give to charities, etc, etc. But it never seems to be enough. There are always more demands. At times they feel powerless.

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These people are sacrificing themselves daily, trying hard. Yet they're not always appreciating what they make sacrifices for. They try to please God. Yet they never feel worthy of God's mercy.

And to both kinds of people, Jesus says, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

3. Mercy won't fit unless it's accepted

When Jesus talked about mercy instead of sacrifice, he said that he came for the ones who know they need mercy. He came for the sinners in need of forgiveness. He said that it's the sick who need a doctor, not people who are well.

Then in the very next paragraph, we read that Jesus talked about celebrating. His disciples did not fast because they were not mournful and sad. They were with him. How can you grieve in the middle of a wedding? When the wedding stops, and the bridegroom is taken away, then there's time for fasting.

Could it be that mercy is about celebrating the love of God — a love that so outweighs our human failings — that we just have to change our whole way of looking at things?

Could it be that mercy is not just the begrudging act of a vengeful God, but the very *nature* of God? Or to put it like Jesus did, mercy is not just a patch to be sewn over the arbitrary nature of God. No, mercy is who God is in the whole cloth.

Mercy is like the flexible nature of a new wineskin, which expands to contain the gas that is produced as the wine ages. Mercy is the expansive nature of God.

This was a radical departure from the idea of gods (small g) in the time of Jesus. Gods were seen as jealous and deceitful and petty, and you needed to placate them with sacrifices. Greek religious rituals were mainly performed at [altars](#). These were typically devoted to one or a few gods, and supported a statue of the particular deity. Food, drinks, or other special objects would be left at the altar to placate or entreat the gods. Sometimes animal sacrifices were offered at altars, too, with most of the flesh eaten, and the entrails burnt as an offering to the gods.

Most religion in Jesus' time was about sacrifice. But Jesus said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

God doesn't need those offerings. God instead wants to offer peace and joy *to us*.

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And this is not just about who God is, it's about our attitudes, too. If we think that life is a veil of tears only to be replaced temporarily with the joy of the Lord – then that's like applying unshrunk cloth as a patch on an old garment. It may seem to fit temporarily, but when you wash it, the patch puckers the whole garment.

If we go about our lives thinking we are in control and self-sufficient and then meet misfortune and decide we need God — well, God can't just be a temporary patch to get us over the rough spot and then we go back to our old self-centered ways. It won't work. We have to change our whole way of looking at things.

Or if we go about our lives thinking we're not good enough, and won't amount to much in God's sight — well, the peace and joy of the Lord won't work as a temporary patch here, either. We have to change our whole way of looking at ourselves and the world.

That, I believe, was what Jesus was talking about. We have to start out at the bottom and learn to look at the world in a way that does not put ourselves first. Jesus said the first will be last.

If we want to see that mercy in our lives, we also can't earn it. We are worthy, by God's grace.

The whole new mindset that Jesus was talking about — that flexible wineskin, if you will — is an attitude of humility and hope and wonder.

Fortunately, the Apostle Paul described it in 2 Corinthians 5.

4. Mercy – we live no longer for ourselves

In verse 15, Paul wrote:

And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

Repeat it.

It's about living for God, and living for others. It's not about me.

Mercy is about relationship.

It's not about sacrificing for others as an effort of will. It's about being available to others and to God.

If we accept God's mercy, and pass mercy along, it is done in relationship. Relationship is not easy, but it doesn't get any easier when we are just sacrificing instead of talking and listening.

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I'm reminded of Mary and Martha. Jesus said that Mary, who was listening to him, chose something better than Martha, who was slaving away in the kitchen.

5. Mercy – we don't regard others from a human point of view

In Verse 16, Paul wrote:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

Hmm, we regard no one from a human point of view. Does that mean we start to see things God's way? Since God is love, do we learn to see things through the eyes of love? Mercy is taking on the mind of God. God's purpose is grace. So to see no one from a human point of view means to look with the eyes of grace.

6. Mercy – a new creation

Lastly, Paul writes in Verse 17:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Everything becomes new. Maybe that's why Jesus taught in parables. Parables have the power to surprise us and shake us out of our way of thinking.

One of the invisible rewards of Christian faith is to have a new sense of self. It is a new sense of self because we no longer see things from a human point of view, because we live no longer for ourselves, because we have taken on a merciful worldview.

That merciful worldview is not something that needs to descend on us all at once. There are people who have been drug users or gang members or whatever and suddenly turn to Christ and have a change of heart. But that's not most of us.

There are fast-track successful executives who suddenly have an epiphany and write a book and become a motivational speaker. But that's not most of us.

Most of us Christians, because we've been taught from a child, or because we've been loved by the church, have developed a merciful way of looking at things.

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It has just become a part of us, so much that we don't even think about it. We just know we're blessed because God has mercy on us, so we want to pass along the blessing.

God's mercy has kept us flexible in our outlook, like a new wineskin. We know that we're not in charge, so we're not trying to control everything. We also know that we're not helpless, because God's in charge. We know that we're somewhere in between, and God is still working on us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." 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, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.""
Matthew 9:9-17, NRSV.

"We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians 5:12-21, NRSV.