Imitating God’s Mercy

Luke 6:36-42 T Trinity 4

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The first verse of the Gospel text is the heading for everything underneath. Jesus tells us **“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful”**. God is merciful. Throughout Scripture’s story, God acts mercifully towards a sinful people who need help. He’s established covenants with them. He’s given them the law to show their sinfulness and need for God. He’s given them everything they need to sustain their body and life. His mercy is powerful. As Christians, we’re called to imitate God’s mercy. We’re just children watching their father – copying whatever our father does because we love Him. We’re called to show mercy, pity, compassion, and be quick to aid those who are less fortunate. To be merciful isn’t just a feeling. Being merciful isn’t just being empathetic. Though, it includes that. Rather, feelings of empathy lead towards actions of mercy.

How does mercy look like? What actions are associated with mercy? Jesus gives us 4 imperatives from the text that describe mercy – Do not judge. Do not condemn. Forgive. And Give. These are the commands Jesus gives His disciples here in Luke. And Jesus gives these commands to His disciples now.

By not judging and not condemning, we act mercifully. This doesn’t mean that Christians can’t help their brother who is stuck in sin. Or that we should let them continue in sin by not telling them their sin and encouraging them towards repentance. Galatians 6:1 says **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”**

By forgiving our neighbors and by being generous with them, we act mercifully. We don’t hold the wrongdoings of our friends against them – for our wrongdoings, which deserve eternal consequences, have been forgiven us. How can we hold earthly things with earthly consequences against a brother?

The measure of mercy with which we use towards others, Jesus says the same measure will be used towards us. If we’re willing to lock the door and throw away the key in regards to our neighbor’s salvation, the same will be done to us. If this is our attitude towards our neighbor, we surely don’t look like our Father who is merciful.

In our midweek Bible study, we just studied the book of Jonah. I think that Jonah is the perfect example of what NOT to do towards our neighbor. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach repentance to them. But Jonah didn’t want to go. We could imagine why. Nineveh was Israel’s sworn enemy! The last thing Jonah wanted was the success of his enemy! He’d rather not go preach to Nineveh to eliminate even the possibility that they would repent of their sins, and have God’s mercy shown to them! By not going, Jonah was judging them. By his actions, he demonstrated that he thought they were unworthy of God’s mercy and forgiveness! He condemned their actions. He didn’t forgive them. He held their sin against them. He didn’t want to give them anything. But after being swallowed by a big fish, Jonah went to Nineveh.

Reluctantly, and without much enthusiasm, Jonah went and preached and 5-word sermon to the Ninevites. This was all God needed to bring an entire kingdom to repentance. To Jonah’s disappointment, the Ninevites repented of their sins, and they received God’s mercy.

Jonah was angry about it. He wanted to see God destroy His enemies. He even told God that he was fleeing from Nineveh to Tarshish because He knew that He was a God of grace and mercy, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster and judgment to those who repent.

Jonah attempted to lock his neighbors out of heaven by refusing to show mercy to them.

What do you want God to do for your enemies? We cannot fail prey to Jonah’s similar attitude. To be like Jonah is not merciful. We cannot begrudge God’s mercy and grace. We cannot throw the keys of heaven away from anyone, even our enemies. That’s acting in judgment and condemnation. That’s not forgiving, and that’s not giving. That’s not mercy.

God has been merciful to us. He doesn’t judge or condemn us. If He did, we’d be damned! We’d be like how Jonah wanted the Ninevites to be! Rather, out of His mercy, God set aside His judgment and condemnation. He did this at the cross, when the divine law judged and condemned Jesus. Not us. We’ve been shown mercy.

God forgave the sins of the world on the cross. He’s shown mercy to all mankind – even unbelievers – through His Son, whom He gave to atone for the sins of the world. Romans 5:8 says **“but God shows his love for us in that while we were STILL SINNERS, Christ died for us.”** He didn’t die for the righteous. He died for sinners. Even in the midst of us demonstrating ourselves unworthy participants of God’s mercy, God still makes moves of mercy towards us. For He gives His Son to us now – through water, bread, wine, word – to heal, forgive, restore, and bring us to repentance.

Only through the healing and mercy we receive in Christ are we able to imitate God’s mercy towards others. Without it, we remain unchanged. We remain hypocrites. We remain blind as we try and guide other blind people. Jesus says, **“How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.”**

As Christians, we can be hypocrites in one of two extremes. One extreme is not repenting of sins that we have, while demanding others to change their ways. This was the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They deemed themselves righteous in the sight of God, while demanding sinners to change their ways! They preached repentance to who they deemed needed to hear it, but they didn’t listen to their own preaching. They measured others differently than they measure themselves. So, that’s hypocrisy in word because it doesn’t see oneself in his own preaching.

The other extreme of hypocrisy is in what we do. So here, we repent of sins… but it’s just a show. It’s a ritual that we do. But our hearts are far from the words of our lips. And so a cold, thankless heart remains unchanged. Dull. Darkened. Ultimately, we’re called to be merciful as our Father is merciful. Yet at one time or another, Christians fall into a sort of mechanical way of exercising the Christian life. We go to church, say the confession, pray, receive the Sacrament, read Scriptures – we do everything we’re supposed to. We go through the motions, but the heart is far from what’s received. While all this is going on, nothing really changes in us. God’s merciful disposition toward us never really sinks into the depths of our hearts. And so the life of Christ that’s merciful toward and serves others never really happens through us as it should! It’s as if hearts have grown cold. That’s another way of hypocrisy – not being merciful to others in actions, though God is merciful in action toward us.

In the text, Jesus is forming disciples. He’s teaching them how to be like Him. How to be merciful by not judging nor condemning, but forgiving and giving. But disciples aren’t made perfect in a day – hypocrisy is a hard thing to root out. Disciples take a lifetime of training. That’s why Jesus says **“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.”**

You, nor I are yet fully trained. And so we repent. We take the logs out our eyes. We confess the coldness of our hearts to God. We are far from being fully trained disciples. We keep coming back to the throne of grace to receive His mercy. We look to the cross and remember the costly price God went through to save us. And so, just as our Father in heaven is merciful to us, and the riches of His grace sinks into our hearts, so we are merciful to each other.

We’re really just like kids who want to be like their Father. We try and try – but there’s a lot of fails before there’s a lot of success. We fall down, but our heavenly Father picks us up, and says “Watch how I do it.” Our father’s disposition toward the world is mercy. He invites repentance. He invites all to enjoy the life that He gives. And so, as children of God, we imitate our Father’s mercy. We invite all people, all sinners, even though we see as enemies, to repent, coming to God with a clean heart, and to be a part of this merciful kingdom of God too.

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