

## "Unearned, Undeserved, Unowed"

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Texts: Psalm 136: 1-9, 23-26 and Matthew 5: 1-16

When you were a kid, did you ever play a game called "Mercy" or "Uncle"? Two people would lock fingers and then they would try to bend the wrist of the other person until someone cried "mercy" or "uncle". There are a lot of reasons this game might not have been a good idea, but that's not my point. My point is that some people believe that God's mercy works the same way. Only this time God keeps pressing, pushing, testing, stretching, (you get the idea) a person until they cry, "Mercy!" or "Uncle!" When we are totally spent and worn out, then God grants us mercy. This couldn't be further from the truth. Mercy, rather than something we earn, or something we have to suffer for, or the result of God's testing, is something that is given to us from the God of infinite love.

Richard Rohr states it this way:

Mercy is like the mystery of forgiveness. By definition, mercy and forgiveness are unearned, undeserved, not owed. If it isn't all those three, it won't be experienced as mercy. If you think people *have* to be merciful, or, on the other hand, try to earn mercy, you've lost the mystery of mercy and forgiveness. *I believe with all my heart that mercy and forgiveness are the whole gospel."*

I agree with Richard on many things, but nothing more than this. Any survey of the Bible, especially the New Testament bears this out. In fact, this is the symbolism of the famous text in which Jesus turns the tables in the Temple. "There is no tit for tat, no buying and selling in the Temple...The buying and selling of God is over (Rohr, 136)." We read much of Psalm 136 for an ecstatic description of this fact.

Further, when Jesus could have called down lightning, or whatever else, to destroy those who condemned and crucified him, what did he do? He forgave them. Clearly, they were not deserving, they had not earned it, and they were not owed it, but such is the nature of God. "Mercy is a way to describe the mystery of forgiveness. See Matthew 9:13; or 12:7 in which he says, "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice." The word in Hebrew for this is *hesed* which literally means, "the steadfast love which is unbreakable."

Rohr continues, "God has made a covenant with creation and will never break the divine side of the covenant. It's only broken from our side. God's love is steadfast. It is written in the divine image within us. ***We are the ones who instead clutch at our sins and beat ourselves instead of surrendering to the divine mercy. That refusal to be forgiven is a form of pride. It is saying, 'I'm***

***better than mercy, I'm only going to accept it when I'm worthy and can preserve my so-called self-esteem.' Only the humble person, the little one, can live in and after mercy (emphasis mine, not Rohr's).***" I've never thought about one of the seven so-called "deadly" sins, the sin of pride, being because we refuse to accept God's mercy and called it somehow more faithful. Wish I had the "mind blown" emoji to share with you -- and I've read this several times before.

Maybe it's because it see so many people struggle with mercy. We struggle to give it for sure. I have always believed it's because we struggle to receive it. Same is true with love. Grace. Patience. Whatever... Put succinctly, "We do not attain anything by our own holiness but by ten thousand surrenders to mercy. A lifetime of received forgiveness allows you to *become* mercy (Rohr, 137)."

You know, I wonder if this Beatitude would make more sense to us if we got the direction, or flow, more concretely. What if Jesus had said, "Blessed are those that have had mercy shown them, for they shall be merciful"? I do know that this is the way it works. It always begins with God. God's action inspires human action. Human actions don't inspire God action. If that were true, we would be in control. We would be running things. We would be gods ourselves. Maybe that's our problem?

Look at the times you have withheld forgiveness. It's always your attempt to hold a claim over the one you won't forgive. It's the only way we finally hold onto power, to seek the moral high ground over another person. I will hold you in unforgiveness, and you're going to know it just by my coldness, by my not looking over there, by my refusal to smile, or whatever. Oh we do it just to maintain our sense of superiority. Non-forgiveness is a form of power over another person, a way to manipulate, shame, control and diminish another. God in Jesus refuses all such power.

"Forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" someone once said.

I want to leave you with the following two sentences:

*Perhaps we are finally enlightened and free when we can both receive [mercy] and give it away -- without payment or punishment.*

*Blessed are the merciful; for they shall receive mercy.*

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.