

The Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the merciful.

Do you ever feel like a bit of a split personality? We may not literally hear voices telling us to do things, but probably all of us at times can feel there are opposing thoughts battling inside our head. Like Paul in Romans 7, strong, conflicting feelings pull us in different directions.

Some of the most common seem to be these. On one side we may feel guilty about something, sad, and afraid of what may result. But another part of us feels indignant at some hurt we have received and we're bitter and angry.

These can prove a deadly combination, actually bringing on sickness, depressive moods, anti-social behaviour, even thoughts of suicide.

As those taught by God's Word we shouldn't really be surprised. This goes with being flawed people living in a fallen world. We both sin and are sinned against by others and the resulting emotional turmoil hinders us from living in freedom and joy. Often the devil will use this inner conflict to hinder Christians from living in victory and celebration over sin and from being fruitful in service for Christ.

We see it in the world around us all the time – sinful greed and lust leading to abuse of other people. Then those hurting people themselves nursing grudges or vengeful malice, an endless cycle of hopeless destruction.

The Lord Jesus the Son of God came into the world and looked on the crowds. People who were in various ways guilty before God. People who were suffering in many ways as a result of their own sinfulness or others sins against them. People pretty much like us.

And we read the Lord had compassion on them. He could have righteously wiped us out as a failed experiment and started over but He didn't. In love He chose to show us grace and mercy. These are

related but distinct in this. Grace deals with sin. Mercy with its consequences.

Jesus brought grace to pardon our sin, preaching the good news of God's Kingdom of love and new beginnings. Then he went on to die, the righteous for the unrighteous, that our sin and guilt be washed away and we be given a new birth as children of God's kingdom.

He brought grace to pardon our human sin and He brought mercy to comfort people suffering the consequences of human sin. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick. He delivered people from the binding influence of evil spirits. On occasions He even raised the dead.

It's worth noting that one very common way for an evil spirit to gain access to a person or a family is at a time of hurt or injury. People are distraught, perhaps indignant at something which seems unfair. The demon enters and fans the flames of resentment and unforgiveness and before long a person, yes, even a Christian or indeed a fellowship is 'bound', hindered, unfruitful and unhappy.

How important and liberating to also note that Jesus went about showing mercy to people, not just forgiveness but love, kindness and deliverance from the dark forces that seek to keep us bound and miserable, focussed on our suffering instead of our Saviour. Even when slandered by the Pharisees He continued to do good, bringing help and relief to many. And He says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy".

Christians who live in gratitude for the mercy we have received from Him, seek to treat others with patience, understanding and kindness for His sake. They are blessed with a little of the light of Christ in us and we are further blessed, for in walking in obedience in our Master's footsteps we come closer to Him and become more aware of His presence and kindly attitude towards us. Just as the negative thoughts conspire to take us in a downward spiral, 'mercy begets mercy', good and positive and loving thoughts of forgiveness and

restoration lift us up where we belong to speak and act as citizens of Heaven.

So, to follow the Lord Jesus Christians must preach His grace – share the message of forgiveness of sins through faith in His atoning death – and back the message up with the practice of mercy, showing compassion and care to people in all kinds of need. And it should be obvious that our words about the Gospel of a loving, forgiving God will be much better received when accompanied by acts of unrepayable kindness shown to strangers and even enemies.

Now we're not naïve. We don't leave people unprotected. We don't expect women and children to stay and act nicely in situations where there is real danger of abuse. We still need to practice justice. And at times we still need to say difficult things where something wrong needs challenged. But we refuse to stay bound in bitterness. We are determined that mercy shall triumph over judgement in our Christian life and witness. So we look for opportunities to show mercy and kindness for Jesus' sake and find ourselves blessed by our Heavenly Father, Who loves to show mercy daily, sending sun and rain on the good and the bad, feeding those who love Him and those who don't even acknowledge His existence.

Our knowledge of God and our experience of Him which has made us aware of our poverty of spirit and sorrowful over our sin, meek and humble to trust, hungering and thirsting above all else for the Lord and His righteousness, now turns us to our fellow human beings, determined to treat one another with mercy, purity of heart and motive, a desire for peace and even cheerful patience in the face of hostility. It's far from easy at times but let's reflect on the One Who from the very cross promised a dying criminal paradise and prayed for us all "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do".

In practising mercy and compassion we obey and honour Him, and are blessed.

Amen