

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany February 23, 2025 jj
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Jesus teaches, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” It looks like He’s adding on to the Ten Commandments. And more than that, He’s apparently even strengthening those rules, like those Old Testament Commandments weren’t enough to scare you into obedience. You thought Moses was mean to you in laying down these impossible laws etched in stone—well, Jesus is really going to tighten down on you so that you finally throw your hands up and say, “I give up! I can’t be as good as Jesus wants me to be!”

In another place, our Lord teaches the Commandments this way: “You have heard it was said, You shall not murder or commit adultery; but I tell you, even if you think an angry thought against your neighbor, you have killed him already. If you entertain even the slightest sexual temptation with a fleeting thought or glance, you have broken the Commandment.” So it seems clear that we are being introduced to two tiers or levels in the Law of God: one standard that we try to follow to the best of our ability, and the higher one to stand as an accusing finger that wags in our face as we’re caught in our most minor of slip-ups—“No, no—you have not been perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. You may have claimed to have kept the whole Law, but since you have stumbled in one point, even if it was the least of the least points, you nevertheless stand guilty of breaking all the laws.” That’s too much! Anyone who claims to have surpassed that higher standard, that person is either a hypocrite or a deceiver, and they seem to prove the point of those people who stand in judgment of you and your Christian faith, ironically at the same time throwing Jesus’ words back at you: “Judge not, lest you too be judged!”

How can I be merciful, when I am in no way like my heavenly Father, who is merciful? God

must not understand how badly I have been hurt by someone I thought was a friend. I have been betrayed; the rug was pulled away out from under me and now I’m flat on my face with nowhere else to go. My friends try to cheer me up and comfort me, but they seem to be worse than the three friends of Job, because they seem to be only interested in fixing me or to convince me somehow God has a plan for me and I just have to learn to be patient. That does not help! I can’t be merciful! I hurt too much to be merciful!

Think about Joseph from our Genesis reading, as we’re today picking up on a portion of the extended story of all that happened to this second-to-last son of Jacob— a story that encompasses a whole 14 chapters of this first book of the Bible. Joseph the firstborn son of Rachel, the favorite wife of Israel, was the favored son who was given the coat of many colors. At a very young age God gave him dreams that set him up as the future ruler and provider over all the rest of the family. The envious brothers sold the teenager Joseph into slavery in Egypt after thinking better of killing him in their rage. The young man became prosperous in Egypt, then wrongfully accused and imprisoned, then finally brought out of the dungeon at the age of 30 to interpret the Egyptian Pharaoh’s dream and suddenly become leader under him, set in charge over all the land. It was telling to note that Joseph said, at the birth of his firstborn son, “God has made me forget all my suffering and my father’s family.” So far, Joseph would rather not think any further of what his brothers did to him. I’m done. They’re dead to me.

But that would change when the famine hit, and Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt to get food. They had no idea that the man who had spent seven years saving up all this grain to sell was

the little brother they thought they had gotten rid of. Would Joseph take his opportunity at this point to exact revenge? Would he make his brothers suffer as payment for the evil they did to him? He certainly tightened down on them and made them squirm, even though at the same time he was showing them favor. Up until the last minute, it appeared, Joseph's plan was to have Benjamin his little brother, the youngest son of Jacob, stay in Egypt and send those other older brothers away back into Canaan. His intense love for his father and his desire to see his face again led Joseph to finally set aside his anger and respond in mercy and forgiveness instead. What made Joseph turn around like this? What prompted him to forget justice and retribution and act in kindness and self-emptying hospitality? I don't know about you, but I find the answer in chapter 44 with the brother Judah, the ancestor of Jesus Christ Himself. In a stunning similarity to Jesus, Judah offers up his life as surety, as a substitute for Benjamin so that their aging father could receive back his beloved youngest son. When confronted face-to-face with Christlike atonement, with a payment ready to be made for another out of sheer selfless love, Joseph's heart melted and his eyes were finally opened—God had put together this whole ordeal so that I would provide and show love and mercy to my whole family. Finally the dreams of my youth have come true and now make perfect sense. I would be great, sure, I would have all my brothers and even parents bow down to me, I would even become like a father to the Egyptian king, but I had not realized until right now, that this position of glory was intended for me to serve in mercy. I would be elevated, so that I would willingly make myself a lowly servant to those whom I love. Evil was done to me in my life, but God had turned it around for good. I just couldn't see the good while the evil was happening to me.

It's the same reason why you can't see the fullness of God's perspective during your tough times. In fact, you may want to take the next

person who tells you "This will all work out for your good" and throw them into the next pit or sell them to slave traders like the angry brothers did to Joseph. Then you look on the cross, meditate (that is, turn it over and over in your mind) on what Jesus willingly did in His suffering and death for your sake, in your place, for your redemption and freedom. Know that He went, not to a dark Egyptian dungeon, but to the depths of the earth, having paid the full price of the entire punishment for the world's sin. He was brought up in vindication and glory, not merely to feed you grain during a worldwide famine, but to welcome you to the heavenly feast of resurrection glory and eternal life with your beloved Father who created you, and is longing to embrace you in homecoming joy. The One who assures you all things work for your good, He was the one to whom all things worked evil for Him. Like His earthly forefather Judah, Jesus offered His life as replacement for your own, and only then does the realization click correctly in your mind, like it did for Joseph. Only with Jesus doing all His good things, all His doing of mercy, all His selfless and self-offering works of generosity for you—now you know what Jesus means when He teaches you, Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

There's no upper tier to God's commandments! There's no tougher standard that you, or someone who seems to be holier than you, can do to earn God's love for you. Be merciful is not a commandment or requirement at all! It's a gift straight from Jesus. This is who you are, who He made you to be, who He baptized you to become. In fact, the original Greek in Luke 6:36 is "Become merciful," that is, be remade into the image of God that you had lost as a sinner. Become a giver, and not thinking about getting repaid. Be a friend to others without looking for an angle that benefits you. Be kind to the unthankful and evil and rejoice when you get mistreated. This is God's pattern of blessing in the midst of persecution and adversity of this evil world that you have now received. That's

exactly how evil things do work out to be good—certainly not by themselves, but with Jesus taking that burden you have and making it His instead. He’s not interested in helping you work it out yourself. That’s not how the cross operates.

Joseph may have been clothed in robes of royalty far greater than what Dad gave him as a boy. But spiritually speaking, he was still in dingy rags of slavery as long as he harbored any feelings of anger, resentment, and condemnation against his brothers for their evil. If he had a Facebook or TikTok account, those brothers would have all been blocked. I don’t even want to see their next funny video post. But what set Joseph free, what unlocked for him all those blessings Jesus teaches about, blessings that come into your life from loving your enemies as our Lord Himself loved us, His once upon a time enemies, that liberation was the payment Christ made—for your sin and for the sins of those done against you. That Judah-substitute-sacrifice He made is your green light to give, and it will be given back to you, like money put back in your grain sack, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and poured into your lap. Look at your list of enemies, your blocked friends (whether on social media or in the personal justice accounting of your mind), and ask yourself if the time has come or may come again in the near future, to be who you are, who Jesus says you are now thanks to Him: Become merciful, since your Father made you merciful like He is.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.