For Personal Reflection

?

1. How merciful and forgiving am I?
2. Do I try to treat others with mercy, leniency, clemency, forbearance and charity?
3. In what ways or situations am I tempted to not extend mercy toward others?
4. How has God been merciful to me? How has God been lenient, compassionate, kind and forgiving to me?
5. Do I try to be as generous as God is generous?
6. What are some things in my life that make it more difficult or challenging for me to be merciful: to forgive, to be generous?

Further Reading

Gospel According to St. Matthew. Various Editions. Chapter 18: 21—32

Jerome Biblical Commentary. Raymond S. Brown, S.S.; Joseph Fitzmeyer, S.J; Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., Editors. New Jersey: Prentice Hall , 1968. 43: 127—130.

Treatise on the Love of God. St. Francis de Sales. Book I, Chapter 18; Book II, Chapter 9; Book XI, Chapter 6)

De Sales

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To Be Generous As God is Generous

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

Blessed are the Merciful

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus begins this discourse with the well-known Beatitudes, one of which is: "Blessed are the merciful; mercy shall be shown to them."

Let us begin by first examining more closely our understanding of "mercy" itself. It is defined as "kind and compassionate treatment of an offender, enemy, prisoner or other person under one's power; clemency. A disposition to be kind and forgiving. Mercy emphasizes compassion in a general way; it suggests reprieve from a fate of considerable severity, without further implication." (American Heritage Dictionary, New College Edition)

Synonyms associated with mercy include leniency, clemency, forbearance and charity.

"From the heights of heaven Jesus Christ mercifully looks upon you and graciously invites you there…"

We turn our attention to the Gospel of Matthew to understand the importance that mercy plays in our relationships with God and our relationships with one another. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, unique to Matthew, is "one of the sternest passages of the Gospels. It reinforces the duty of forgiveness by appealing to another motive: the forgiveness granted by man to man as a condition of forgiveness granted to man by God." (The Jerome Biblical Commentary) In the parable, a king ultimately cancels a huge debt owed to him not by a slave but a high officer of state. This same officer, by contrast, when confronting a subordinate who owed him a mere fraction of what the former owed the king, refuses to hear the subordinate's plea of mercy. When word gets back to the king, the official is condemned for his unwillingness to show mercy and is turned over to torturers.

"Mercy, empathy and sympathy are closely related. They enable us to enter the mind, heart, shoes or skin of another person. They enable us to put ourselves in the place of another. They enable us to truly know and understand one another…"

The Jerome Biblical Commentary concludes: "The conduct of the king is not a model by which we should learn about the providence of God. The detail that is most significant is the difference in the debt owed by the unmerciful servant and the debt that he claims. The model is the forgiveness of God, which knows no limit, and neither should man's forgiveness. If man does not forgive, he cannot expect forgiveness; if he does not renounce his own claims, which are small, he cannot ask God to dismiss the claims (*presumably much greater*) against him." (*Ibid*)

Francis de Sales places a high premium upon the mercy of God. He wrote: "God did not save us out of justice for anything we have done but according to God's mercy." (Treatise, Part I, Chapter 18) God's mercy not only saved us, however, but also enables us to be the people that God calls us to be: "God assists us to strive toward the life to which God calls us. In this way God shows us divine mercy, by not asking us to strive for something that is unobtainable."

Mercy, empathy and sympathy are closely united. They enable us to get into the mind, heart, shoes or skin of another person. Such awareness enables us to practice forgiveness.

But for Francis de Sales, mercy is not limited to forgiveness: while it does includes forgiveness, mercy is much bigger than forgiveness. In the Salesian tradition mercy is synonymous with *generosity*. Francis writes: "God assists us to strive toward the life to which God calls us. In this way God shows us divine mercy, but not asking us to strive for something that is unobtainable." (Treatise I: 18)

"O God, how merciful is God's goodness to us...In the end, all of the good we do depends on God's mercy."

How generous is God? "God acts in our works, and we co-operate in God's action. God leaves for our part all the merit and profit of our services and good works; we leave God all the honor and praise thereof, acknowledging that the commencements, the progress, and the end of all the good we do depends on God's mercy…finishing what God had begun. O God, how merciful is God's goodness to us in thus distributing his bounty!" (Treatise XI: 6)