

# A Bible Boomerang

(Matthew 5:7)

Many of us have heard of the boomerang<sup>1</sup>—that amazing curved stick, invented by Australian aborigines,<sup>2</sup> which soars gracefully through the air and returns to the thrower.<sup>3</sup>

That is, it returns to the thrower when it is thrown correctly. I bought several boomerangs when my family lived in Australia, and I tried throwing them. They came back in my direction, but not necessarily to me. I had to climb a few trees to retrieve badly thrown boomerangs.

The Bible contains many spiritual “boomerangs.” Unlike my poorly tossed boomerangs, these *always* return to the ones who “throw them out.” Let us consider a few:

... for whatever a man sows [there the boomerang goes, whirling out], this he will also reap [here it comes, back to the tosser] (Galatians 6:7).

Cast your bread on the surface of the wa-

<sup>1</sup>The title of this lesson was based on Hugo McCord, “A Boomerang,” *Happiness Guaranteed* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Dehoff Publications, 1956), 37.

<sup>2</sup>“Aborigines” is a word that means “original inhabitants” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed. [2001], s.v. “aborigine”). In Australia it refers to the people who lived on that continent before the arrival of European settlers.

<sup>3</sup>There is also a non-returning boomerang, which is bigger and heavier and was used for hunting. It is not necessary to explain this, however, since most think of a boomerang as a stick that *returns*.

ters [out], for you will find it after many days [back] (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

“For in the way you judge [out], you will be judged [back]; and by your standard of measure [out], it will be measured to you [back]” (Matthew 7:2).<sup>4</sup>

“Give [out], and it will be given to you [back]. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure [out] it will be measured to you in return [back]” (Luke 6:38).

We are presently studying the Beatitudes. In the heart of them, we find this Bible boomerang: “Blessed are the merciful [out], for they shall receive mercy [back]” (Matthew 5:7). In a world that is often merciless, there is a crying need for men and women, boys and girls, who are merciful. Many commentators believe that, with this beatitude, there is a change in emphasis. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote,

... the first three Beatitudes were concerned with ... our consciousness of need—poor in spirit, mourning because of our sinfulness, meek as a result of a true understanding of the nature of self. ... Then comes the great statement of the satisfaction of the need ... : “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” ... From there on we are looking at the result of that satisfaction. ... We become merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>An example of this principle is found in Judges 1:7. Another example is the chilling sentence pronounced on Babylon the Great in Revelation 18:6, 7.

<sup>5</sup>D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 107.

## “BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL. . . .”

### The Meaning of Mercy

My desk dictionary defines “mercy” as “compassionate treatment, especially of those under one’s power. . . . A disposition to be kind and forgiving.”<sup>6</sup> The most common Greek word translated “mercy” (ἔλεος, *eleos*) means “kindness or good will towards the miserable and afflicted, joined with a desire to relieve them.”<sup>7</sup> Mercy can be expressed negatively. When it is in our power to retaliate, showing mercy to one who has mistreated us means *not* treating him as he deserves, extending him mercy and forgiveness. Looking at it positively, mercy has several essential aspects. It is a disposition of mind that is moved by the plight of those in need. It prompts a desire to assist those in need and is expressed in actually doing what one can to help. Someone has said that mercy involves both *heart* and *hands*. Unless the heart is moved and until the hands reach out to help, it is not mercy.

The various aspects of mercy are illustrated in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10). A man lay by the side of the road, beaten and half dead (v. 30). Several people went by (vv. 31, 32). They were surely sorry to see the man in that pitiable condition, but they were not motivated to do anything. Then a Samaritan passed that way. When he saw the man, “he felt compassion” (v. 33) and did what he could to help him. He treated the man’s wounds and bandaged them. He took him to an inn and provided for the injured man’s continued care (vv. 34, 35). For this reason the Samaritan was described as “one who *showed mercy*” toward the man (v. 37; emphasis mine).

Other illustrations might be given,<sup>8</sup> but the attribute of mercy is best illustrated by looking at God. While the devil is “the father of lies” (John 8:44), God is “the Father of mercies” (2 Corinthians 1:3).<sup>9</sup> How thankful we

<sup>6</sup>The *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed. (2001), s.v. “mercy.”

<sup>7</sup>C. G. Wilke and Wilibald Grimm, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and rev. Joseph H. Thayer (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1901; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1977), 203.

<sup>8</sup>For instance, in the parable of the prodigal son, the father showed mercy to his son when he returned.

<sup>9</sup>“Mercies” is from a synonym of *eleos*: οἰκτιρισμός

should be that “the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful” (James 5:11), that He is “rich in mercy” (Ephesians 2:4)! If God were only a God of justice, there would be no hope for mankind, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). However, He is also a God of love. He “knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Psalm 103:14). As a loving God, He bestowed on us His mercy: He sent His Son to die for our sins.

. . . on the cross “mercy<sup>10</sup> and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Ps. 85:10). Truth says, Man’s sins block him from the city of God; Mercy says, Let Christ’s blood cover man’s shortcomings! Righteousness says, It is not right for a sinner to cross the portals of heaven; Peace says, Let Christ be the mediator that there may be reconciliation between man and his Maker!<sup>11</sup>

To comprehend God’s mercy, it helps to see that quality expressed in the life of Jesus (see John 14:9). Mercy caused Jesus to come to this earth. Mercy caused Him to move among the sick and the suffering. His mercy not only took in the afflicted and the poor, but it was also offered to the proud Pharisees and the cold-hearted Sadducees—and, yes, even to self-satisfied and unbelieving Jerusalem. His mercy extended to human sin as well as human suffering. His mercy at last took Him to the cross, and now, in heaven, He is our “merciful and faithful high priest” (Hebrews 2:17) at the right hand of God.

### The Need for Mercy

As we consider “the mercies of God” (Romans 12:1), this challenge comes to us from Jesus: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). What does it mean to be merciful as the Lord is merciful? It first means that our *hearts* will be touched by the

(*oiktirmos*), which refers to “pity, compassion for the ills of others” (W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985], 404).

<sup>10</sup>This quotation is from the KJV. The NASB has “lovingkindness” instead of “mercy.” The Hebrew word translated “lovingkindness” [*hesed* or *chesed*] is nearly always translated as “mercy” [*eleos*] in the LXX (or Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures). (Ibid., 142.)

<sup>11</sup>McCord, 38.

needs of others. People begged Jesus, "Have mercy on us" (see Matthew 9:27), and He did. It is frequently said that He "felt compassion" or was "moved by compassion" (see Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34). Even so, you and I are commanded to "put on a heart of compassion" (Colossians 3:12).

One of Ralph Bumpus'<sup>12</sup> favorite stories was about a man who had experienced bad times. He applied for a loan with a banker who was renowned for his aversion to loaning money to anyone who actually needed it. After listening to the man's sad tale, the banker said, "I'm a good man, so let me make you a proposition. I just spent a great deal of money for an artificial eye. It looks *exactly* like my real eye. Here, then, is my proposition: If you can tell me which eye is the artificial eye, I'll loan you the money." The man studied the banker's eyes for some time. Finally, he said, "The left eye is the artificial eye." The banker said, "Are you sure?" The man said, "I am certain." The banker was astonished. "You are correct," he said, "but how could you tell that the left eye is the artificial eye?" "Because," the man replied, "in your left eye, I saw a tiny spark of compassion."

When people look into our eyes, can they see genuine compassion? Like Jesus, we need to sympathize with the weaknesses of others (see Hebrews 4:15). We need hearts that are touched by the needs of others.

We also need *hands* that reach out to help. Remember, it is not real mercy until both the heart and the hands are involved. If we see brothers or sisters "without clothing and in need of daily food," it is not enough to feel sorry for them. We need to "give them what is necessary for their body" (James 2:15, 16). I like the expression used regarding Jesus: He was "moved with compassion" (see Matthew 20:34; Mark 1:41; emphasis mine). When Jesus felt compassion, He was moved within and then was moved to *do* something; His mercy was expressed (see Mark 5:19). Even so, you and I are to "practice kindness ["mercy"; KJV] and compassion each to his brother" (Zechariah 7:9).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Years ago, Ralph Bumpus was a featured speaker at many area-wide Bible school workshops. I heard him tell this story on several occasions.

<sup>13</sup>This would be a good place to make application regarding some specific needs of your listeners: the need

Again, let me emphasize the natural progression of the Beatitudes. The person who realizes his spiritual need (beatitude number one) and mourns because of it (number two) will become meek and humble (number three) and desirous of spiritual nourishment (number four). One who has come this far in his understanding will recognize that others have the same spiritual needs he has and the same deficiency of spirit. This should prompt him to be full of pity, sympathy, compassion, and love in dealing with them.

How important it is, therefore, for each of us to evaluate ourselves! Let us ask, "Am I merciful, or am I so focused on my own needs and problems that I am not concerned about others?" In Hosea 6:6 the Lord said, "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice." The word translated "loyalty" in the NASB is חֶסֶד (*chesed*), the word usually translated by *eleos* ("mercy") in the LXX. The KJV has "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice." Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 twice in the New Testament, and each time He challenged His listeners to learn what the words mean (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). Does God want sacrifice?<sup>14</sup> Yes, but sacrifice without mercy is worthless. At the risk of being misunderstood, let me say that being baptized and partaking of the Lord's Supper are important, even essential—but if there is no compassion or mercy in our hearts, our outward compliance with God's will is little more than an empty gesture (compare with 1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

Notice the term used in our text: "Blessed are the *merciful*." The English word "merciful" means "full of mercy."<sup>15</sup> An old man was asked if he was a Christian. He replied, "In spots."<sup>16</sup> We are not to be merciful just "in spots." Being "merciful" does not refer to an occasional, isolated act of kindness. Rather, it refers to a

---

to be forgiving, the need to be kind, the need to help others, etc. If this lesson is used in a class, ask the students to list ways they can express mercy.

<sup>14</sup>In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices were required. In the New Testament, our *lives* are to be the sacrifice (see Romans 12:1, 2).

<sup>15</sup>The Greek for "merciful" is *eleemon*, the adjective form of *eleos*. It refers to being "actively compassionate" (Vine, 404).

<sup>16</sup>Don Humphrey, *The Beatitudes* (Burlington, Mass.: Eternity Press, 1969), 44.

lifestyle of caring and helping. May God help us not to be self-centered, but to be “full of mercy” towards others.

### “ . . . FOR THEY SHALL RECEIVE MERCY.”

Do we need mercy? My grandmother would have rolled her eyes, raised her hands up into the air, and exclaimed, “Oh, my, yes!” Look to the past. How could we have survived this far without mercy? Look at the present. How much we need God’s mercy today! Look to the future. How could we go on without it? Remember, though, that mercy is only promised to the merciful. The “they” in our text is emphatic:<sup>17</sup> “Blessed are the merciful, for *they* shall receive mercy.” We have seen the boomerang spinning out; now let us watch it soaring back.

#### Mercy in This Life

The merciful are blessed because, as Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). The wise man wrote, “Happy is he who is gracious to the poor” (Proverbs 14:21). William Shakespeare had one of his characters say,

The quality of mercy . . . droppeth, as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: It is twice bless’d:  
It blessed him that gives, and him that takes.<sup>18</sup>

The merciful are blessed because they are more likely to receive mercy from those around them. This is a general truth, not an absolute one—but, as a rule, others treat us as we treat them.<sup>19</sup> If you smile at others, they usually smile at you. If you say “hello” to others, they are likely to say “hello” to you. If you help others when they are sick, they will probably help

---

<sup>17</sup>“They” is emphasized by the combination of the Greek word for “they” before a verb form that includes the word “they.”

<sup>18</sup>William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.184.

<sup>19</sup>When I recently taught this lesson in a class, I asked for examples of mercy coming back to the merciful, and the class members struggled to think of examples. When we smile at someone and he smiles back, we think little of it. We expect it. What we *do* remember is when we smile at someone and he does *not* smile back, or when we do good to someone and he does *not* return the favor. In other words, we remember the exception, not the rule.

you when you are sick. Peter gave the negative side of this truth: “Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?” (1 Peter 3:13; see Proverbs 16:7). We might think of this as the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) in reverse: As you do to others, so shall they (usually) do unto you.

Most important, the merciful are blessed because God will be merciful to them. God has said that if we are merciful to the poor, He will deliver us. “How blessed is he who considers the helpless; the LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble” (Psalm 41:1). He has promised that if we are merciful in forgiving others, He will forgive us. “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matthew 6:14).

This does not mean that being merciful and forgiving is all that God desires or requires. We are to live by “*every* word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; emphasis mine). It does mean, however, that, all other things being equal, it is the merciful man who will be blessed. Any way you look at it, “the merciful man does himself good” (Proverbs 11:17).

#### Mercy After This Life

We need mercy now, but we will need it even more desperately when we come before the throne of God in judgment. His mercy to us on that occasion will be, to some extent, dependent on our having been merciful. Paul wrote,

The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me—the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day [the day of judgment] (2 Timothy 1:16–18a).

What if we are not merciful in this life? Then we will receive no mercy. In Matthew 18:23–35, Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant. His master had forgiven him a debt of millions of dollars,<sup>20</sup> but he would not forgive a fellow servant a debt of a few dollars. His master said

---

<sup>20</sup>It is difficult to express the size of the servant’s debt in modern terms, but it was a debt that could *not* be paid. The servant was dependent solely on his master’s mercy.



to him, "Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?" (v. 33). Then his master, "moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers" (v. 34). Jesus closed with these sobering words: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (v. 35).

In James 2:13 we find some of the most chilling words in the Bible: "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy." To have judgment without mercy is to be without hope since we are all sinners and the wages of sin is death (Romans 3:23; 6:23)—spiritual and eternal death (see Revelation 21:8). I want mercy on the Judgment Day, don't you? Then you and I must be merciful now.

## CONCLUSION

When Jesus pronounced His "woes" on the scribes and the Pharisees, He told them that they had "neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice *and* mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23; emphasis mine). May God help us not to neglect being merciful. Wherever Jesus went, people cried, "Have mercy" (see Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30, 31). Even so, the world cries out today, "Have mercy!" As the Lord's disciples, *we* are the ones who should answer that cry. Let us, like Jesus, have compassion on all who are suffering physically and spiritually. Remember: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

I urge you to examine your heart to see if compassion for others is there. I also urge you to consider whether or not you are concerned about your own spiritual needs. You cannot help others until you yourself are right with God. Have you thrown yourself upon the mercy of God? Do you believe in Jesus as God's Son, and have you expressed your faith in obedience (John 8:24; 14:15)? Do you need to confess your faith and be baptized (Acts 8:36–38; KJV)? Do you need to recommit your life to following the Lord (see James 5:19, 20)? Long ago, it was written, "The LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if ye return unto him" (2 Chronicles 30:9; KJV). If you need to do so, I pray that you will return to Him today.

## • Notes •

Commentators spend considerable time debating whether we are to be merciful *because* we have received mercy or *in order to* receive mercy. I believe Richard C. Trench was right when he wrote,

According to the view given in Scripture, the Christian stands in a middle point, between a mercy received and a mercy yet needed. Sometimes the first is urged upon him as an argument for showing mercy (Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32), and sometimes the last (Luke 6:37; James 5:9).<sup>21</sup>

On the surface it appears that the motivation in Matthew 5:7 for being merciful is to receive mercy. However, the fact that we have received mercy and should therefore extend mercy cannot be ignored. A blending of the two motivations seems called for in our discussion of the text.

There is a close relationship between the words "grace" and "mercy." Sometimes the words are found together in the same passage (see 1 Timothy 1:2; Hebrews 4:16), indicating that they can have slightly different meanings. In other contexts the words appear to be used interchangeably. For instance, some passages say that we are saved by God's grace (see Ephesians 2:5, 8), while others say that we are saved by His mercy (see Titus 3:5).<sup>22</sup>

You could preach a related lesson on "Bible Boomerangs" in general, using passages from this lesson plus others. If desired, you could buy a boomerang or make a model to use as a visual aid when you tell about the boomerang.

Centuries ago the Australian aborigines developed this amazing curved throwing stick. Perhaps, rather than an invention, it was a fortunate accident which occurred when a bushman threw a curved stick that came back to him. With clever reasoning, the aborigines learned what made the stick return. It has been said that once you fully understand a boomerang, you can understand any aeronautical principle. David Roper

<sup>21</sup>Richard C. Trench; quoted in James M. Tolle, *The Be-attitudes* (Fullerton, Calif.: Tolle Publications, 1966), 58.

<sup>22</sup>If you are interested in a further discussion of the relationship between the two words, see my lesson "To God Be the Glory," in "Romans, 8," *Truth for Today* (June 2006): 10–14. You could also review the comments on "mercy" on page 27 in that issue.