



Sevenfold mercy

Works of mercy

"You have done that for Me"

The words of Jesus about separating the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25 are very well known. When does this separation take place? *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory."* (Matthew 25:31; cf. 24:29-31) With these words Jesus refers to his own return, to his second coming. Then he will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left hand.

Why this separation between right and left?

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat." Or just the opposite: "I was a stranger and you did not invite me in."

Together with that astounding revelation: *"I tell you the truth, whatever you did or did not do for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."*

Simple things lead to the separation between the sheep and the goats – to separation between righteousness and unrighteousness: food and drink, housing and clothing, care for the sick and imprisoned (and the dead).

Works of mercy

On the basis of Jesus' words in Matthew 25:31-46, the church has for centuries spoken about the so-called 'works of mercy'. They were based on the words of Jesus in this chapter of the Bible:

"Because

- (1) *I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,*
- (2) *I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,*
- (3) *I was a stranger and you invited me in,*
- (4) *I needed clothes and you clothed me,*
- (5) *I was sick and you looked after me,*
- (6) *I was in prison and you came to visit me."*

(Matthew 25:35-36)

After the fourth century also burial of the dead was added to the works of mercy. Therefore there is a long Jewish-Christian tradition in which burying has been considered to be an (added) work of mercy. For this reason I thought it necessary to consider it within the framework of this series of articles. However not everyone considers burying of the dead to be a work of mercy. This has led to some speaking about six, and others of seven works of mercy.

In the past I have written about these seven works of mercy. I list the themes and also the titles of the different articles once more (see table).

Topic	Movement	Possible actions
1 – hunger	Give food to the hungry	Food projects Meal projects Moderation projects
2 – thirst	Give drink to the thirsty	Water projects Environmental projects Moderation projects
3 – support for strangers	Providing hospitality for strangers	Orientation Host Families Fight Prejudice
4 – nakedness	Clothe the naked	Clothing collection Second hand stores Clothing exchange and Fashion shows
5 – sickness	Visiting the sick	Attention to caregivers Visiting the sick as volunteer World-wide health care
6 – prisoners	Caring for prisoners	Visiting prisoners as volunteer Children's gift projects Prayer groups for prisoners
7 – death	Burying the dead	Involvement with funerals Support for hospices Volunteer work in terminal home care

Common thread

A common thread in the previous articles was the recurring phrase:

"Jesus urges his followers to remain involved with mercy. If you do not do this then you will fall short and stand with empty hands on the day of the (last) judgment. Mercy begins with simple things: food and drink, shelter and clothing, care for the sick and imprisoned (and burying the dead)."

The context of Matthew 25:31-46 lets us see that being busy with mercy stands within the framework of the return of Christ. Matthew 24 and 25 are about the future of God's people and about the coming (return) of God's Son (Jesus). Here Jesus attaches an urgent call to watchfulness (24:42). This call is worked out and always addressed to the followers of Jesus. A follower of Jesus can be a foolish maid (25:1-13), or a lazy servant (25:14-30) or a listener who does not put into practice the basic mercy that is part of the kingdom of God (25:31-46).

Mercy

The word 'mercy' originates from the Latin word 'misericordia.' In it you can recognize the word 'misère' (misery) and 'cor' (heart). That is to say: mercy is about the misery that has touched your heart. You become 'wretched' from this misery. You are stirred from within: in your heart, in your 'inner self'. In Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) and in Greek (the language of the New Testament) words are used for 'mercy' that have to do with your bowels (as a sensitive area).

Jesus is touched in his deepest center when he encounters a burial procession formed by people who are burying a mother's only son. He wakes the boy from the dead and gives him back to his mother (Luke 7:11-17). Literally it says that Jesus felt it in his bowels. The NBG - 51 almost always

translates the Greek word with *"moved with compassion."* In this respect He is a true Son of his Father, God in heaven.

God: Abundant mercy

The Bible makes clear time and again that God is merciful. When God descends in a cloud from the mountain of Horeb to stand with Moses, after the sin with the golden calf, and proclaims the name LORD, then mercy is the first word (Exodus 34:6 KJV):

"The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth."

God takes care of people who are victims of overwhelming misery. He has abundant concern for widows, orphans, strangers and the poor. In this way God is like a father who takes care of his child (Psalm 103:13) and like a mother who cannot forget her baby (Isaiah 49:15). A person in need can always appeal to God's mercy (Psalm 25:6; 79:8). For his mercy knows no limits and has no end (Lamentations 3:22).

God's mercy was especially abundant, limitless and endless when He gave his own Son to save sinners, as Mary and Zacharias enthusiastically sing about in their songs (Luke 1:50, 54, 72, 78). Also the apostles Peter and Paul are never done speaking about God's mercy. Peter comes with a song of praise: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."* (1 Peter 1:3) Paul also connects God's mercy to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead:

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

(Ephesians 2:4-7)

For Paul God is the true and complete origin of all mercy:

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort."

(2 Corinthians 1:3, KJV)

Christ: Deep emotion

Because God gave his own Son as the Redeemer of sinful people, Christ Jesus, the Son of God, is the ultimate example of mercy. Paul, through the Spirit has described this in an exceptional way:

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

(Philippians 2:5-8)

During his life on earth Jesus has shown us his great mercy in his deep compassion towards the fate and misery of people. Often the gospel says that he was moved with compassion...

Motion from emotion

Jesus himself calls us to be merciful following the path of his Father in heaven: *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* (Luke 6:36) This call Jesus underlined and worked out in three characteristic depictions of mercy that are appropriate in the kingdom of God:

1. The depiction of the king who settled accounts with his servants (Matthew 18:23-35). His servant owed him ten thousand talents but the king had compassion and he demonstrated his mercy.
2. The parable of the merciful Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), who was moved with compassion, when he saw the badly injured traveler lying there.
3. The parable of the lost son and of the merciful father who was moved by compassion when he saw his youngest son again (Luke 15:11-32).

Ultimately mercy is an action, a movement that begins with God. You are so moved by the misery of your neighbor that you are moved to action, because you have a heart for your neighbour who is poor and needy.

The works of mercy are part of and supported by that action, a motion from emotion.

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