

In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells His disciples, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” He gives a very similar instruction to the lawyer who challenges Him in our Gospel reading, directing that man to go and show mercy to others. Mercy is a key part of the Christian life.

We show mercy, not only because our Lord tells us to, but first and foremost because He has shown mercy to us. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see our Lord give an example of His mercy, and as we follow in His footsteps, we show mercy as well.

The first thing to note as we look into this parable is to establish that we are not the Good Samaritan. You and I are in the parable, but we’re not the main character, the hero. Where are we found? We’re the man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Jesus says, “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” All these effects of this attack are effects that the Scriptures speak of us suffering because of sin.

Sin steals the innocence that mankind was created with back in the Garden. Remember, it wasn’t until the fall into sin that Adam and Eve felt shame at their nakedness. Our peace and joy are robbed of us by sin, leaving us with the wounds of fear, sadness, and anxiety.

Not only are we robbed and wounded, but we’re left half-dead, as Jesus puts it, by sin. Our physical half, our body, is still alive, breathing, walking, talking. But our spiritual half is dead from our conception, God’s Word describing that, before His saving action, we are dead in trespasses and sins.

And just like a man left half-dead beside the road only has so much time before he finally succumbs to his injuries and completely dies, we too only have so much time in this half-dead state before our bodies finally succumb to the wages of sin and we breathe our last.

But along comes help, or so it would seem. Jesus continues, “Now by chance a certain priest came down that road.” Certainly this priest will help! He likely knows the Law of God just as well as this lawyer to whom Jesus is telling the parable. He’ll know that he should love his neighbor as himself.

And from the context of the story, we can surmise that this traveler who’s been beaten to a pulp is a Jew, a fellow countryman, a son of Abraham and therefore his brother. Surely he’ll help!

But what happens? “And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.” This priest purposely avoids this man in need. Why? Perhaps he didn’t want to get his hands dirty. He’s on the way to Jerusalem to serve in the temple, and if he gets blood on his nice robes, or if the man’s actually dead and makes the priest unclean by touching a dead body, he’ll be delayed in his service. He won’t be able to earn as much of God’s favor if he stops to help this guy.

So he passes by on the other side. If he can get far enough away from him, then maybe that makes it so this guy isn’t his responsibility, his neighbor. The foolishness of this is shown by Jesus in the example, as these roads weren’t that wide. Being on the other side maybe only moved this guy six, eight feet away. When it comes to caring for someone in need, using that distance as your excuse was

obviously insufficient, as even the lawyer has to acknowledge. Yet the priest, and the Levite, try to use it, leaving the man in need.

Who is represented by this priest and Levite, then? This would be false religion, specifically false Christianity. These two guys are doing things commanded by God, serving in the temple according to the Law. But they are not doing so out of faith.

If they were, they'd realize that the whole point of their service in the temple was God choosing to come down and bless His people, forgive their sins, give them His Word, hear their prayer. The priest and Levite may have been serving in the temple, but ultimately it was God who was there to serve. To stop and help this man in great need would have been an obvious way to serve and to show God's love.

But these guys are just going through the motions and thinking that's good enough. When Christians today are tempted to think that just going through the motions of faith is enough, they're following in these guys' footsteps.

St. James addresses this in his Epistle, where he points out that such "faith" isn't true faith if it lacks actual love for others. He writes, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?"

So-called faith that lacks love for neighbor, that is concerned only with doing the minimum required to get to heaven and nothing further, is faith that lacks love and mercy, and therefore isn't faith at all.

But now comes the great example of divine love and mercy. Jesus continues in the parable: "But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion."

The third traveler to happen upon the dying man is the one you'd think would be least likely to help. He's a Samaritan! The Jews hated the Samaritans, considering them "half-breeds", and the Samaritans lost no love for the Jews. According to human nature, he should have passed by and said "Good riddance" as he did.

But this Samaritan doesn't. No, he sees the man, understands who he is and the situation he's in, and he is moved to compassion. The word there for compassion is one in the Greek that is only ever attributed to God or the action of God in an individual. This is a deep compassion, and one that is never just a feeling, but that always moves the person to action.

This Good Samaritan is Jesus. When humanity fell into sin and brought all the wounds and death upon ourselves, the Lord saw, and He had compassion. When we fall into sin in our lives and bring suffering, pain, and death onto ourselves, Jesus sees, and He has compassion.

Because He, the Son of God, is fully God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, He knew from the moment Adam and Eve took that bite, and even before, what it would bring. But rather than destroy us in righteous wrath, or leave us to suffer and cross over and make a new creation, He had compassion.

He was moved with incredible love for this creation, for those whom He had made in His image, and He chose to show us mercy.

What does that mercy look like? Jesus continues in the parable: “So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.” This Samaritan went over to the dying Jew, and using his own goods, tended to the man’s injuries, binding up his wounds, halting the man’s journey toward death.

He poured on oil to soothe and wine to cleanse, things that the Samaritan was either needing for his own journey or perhaps goods he had been intending to sell at his destination. But his compassion for this man leads him to sacrifice his own good for the sake of the other. The Good Samaritan gives of himself to save this man who can do nothing.

That’s how Jesus works. Again, before Christ saves us we are dead in our trespasses and sins, no more capable of bringing our souls to life than those in the cemetery managing to dig their way out of their graves. But in compassion Christ comes to us. He heals our wounds, not with earthly bandages, but by taking on our wounds Himself. Think of the words spoken through Isaiah: “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.”

Jesus picked up the burden of our sins, under which we had been crushed, and put it on the cross on His back. And then, hanging there, He gave forth those things which truly heal us, not oil and wine, but the water and blood that flowed from His own side.

We were naked and brought to shame by our sins and the devil’s mocking accusations, but Jesus has covered our spiritual nakedness by clothing us with His own righteousness. We were half-dead, but He gave forth His life, the life of God Himself, to bring us back to life.

What happens next? Jesus continues: “He set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’”

The Good Samaritan doesn’t just bandage the guy up and then wish him well and go his way. No, his care, his compassion, his love continues. The man had been beaten so badly that he couldn’t even limp alongside, so the Samaritan walks instead while his animal carries the man. He then brings the injured man to an inn, that he might recover in a safe environment.

Despite being rescued and safe, the injured man still has no way to pay for this, all his possessions having been stolen. And so the Samaritan, once again acting out of love and compassion, provides for the man’s continued recovery. He gives the innkeeper two denarii – two whole days’ wages – to care for the man, and then gives his word that, should anything more be needed, he’ll repay it when he returns.

Such is the love of the Good Samaritan that, even having done all this, he promises to come back, to make sure the man is in fact better and that all his needs are provided.

The imagery here is just so wonderfully rich. Jesus grants us new life, binds up our wounds, pours His life into us to bring us out of spiritual death – and then what does He do? He brings us to His great spiritual inn: the Church.

Though Jesus has brought us to life, our old sinful flesh is still clinging to us, our new man still needing strengthened against temptation and vice. We are restored, but still recovering. And so our Lord gathers us to His Church.

Just like how the Good Samaritan provided to the innkeeper what was needed to care for the man, so Jesus gives to His Church the means to care for the sinner-saints in her care. Jesus provides His Word, saying “He who hears you hears Me,” and that Word strengthens our faith, comforts our fears, dispels our doubts, and grows our love.

He gives His Church His gift of absolution, saying, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them,” so that when Christians fall into temptation and sin, and then repent, they might know that they are again forgiven before the throne of God Himself.

He gives even His own body and blood in His Supper, saying, “Take, eat; this is My body... Drink of it, all of you; this is My blood,” allowing us to partake of that great, once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God and a foretaste of the great banquet of heaven. None of it comes from man; it is all provided by the Good Samaritan, so that His Inn might care for His people until He returns.

And His return is certain. Notice how the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two days’ wages. If that’s two days’ worth, what’s implied? He’ll be back on the third day! After Jesus had to leave His disciples momentarily to perform His great work of salvation on the cross, when did He come back? The third day! Our Lord has ascended into heaven, but He most certainly will return on the Last Day, and bring us, resurrected and completely restored, to the New Jerusalem, which will be our home forever.

Our Lord Christ is the Good Samaritan, who in compassion and mercy has done and continues to do everything to bring us to life and keep us in His grace. In response, then, we heed the words He speaks to the lawyer: “Go and do likewise.” As Christ has shown us mercy, we then are blessed with the privilege to show His mercy to others. What does this look like? Remember the parable.

Remember who you are: one who was a lost and half-dead sinner who has been healed and brought to salvation by Jesus. You and I were utterly crushed under the weight of sin and bleeding out from its wounds. There was nothing we could do to save ourselves. We are totally dependent on God to save us.

Therefore, do not look at others with the pride of the priest or the hypocrisy of the Levite, thinking that you’re above such people. As St. Paul says, having spoken of damning sins to the Christians at Corinth: “And such were some of you.” Every person out there has been looked upon with compassion by Jesus, and He gave His life for all.

Remember also who saves and how He saves. The Good Samaritan didn’t come along and give the guy a pillow and a big drink of wine so that he might be comfortable as he died. No, he put on

wine, which might have stung in those cuts and wounds. He picked the man up to put him on the donkey, which would have been excruciating to those broken ribs and dislocated joints. But he did it all in order to save the man's life.

Our Lord saves by His Word and Sacraments. Sometimes that Word will sting and burn, especially as it contacts those parts of the conscience infected with sin. Sometimes those Sacraments will feel unpleasant, having to confess sin, calling people to be faithful to their Baptism, administering the Supper according to the Word of God and not our human desires.

But through these means, the forgiveness, life, and salvation that Jesus won on the cross are given, that true and lasting healing – even eternal life – might take place. Our job isn't to make sinners comfortable on the path to hell. Our job is to bring the healing Gospel of Jesus to them, that they might be brought to the path of life.

Finally, remember that it is Christ who will sustain His Church until His return. It can seem at times that the inn into which we have been brought is coming under increasingly harder times. Fewer people seem to be in its hallways and dining rooms, there are less activities in its ballrooms, and an angry mob outside keeps calling for it to be bulldozed that a shopping mall or sports arena or Planned Parenthood can be built in its place.

But the Lord has not abandoned His Church. He defends her with His almighty power in ways we can't even see. He continues to bring in sinners whom He has restored. And until the day when He comes in glory, He will not fail to maintain His Word and His Sacraments in the Church, that His people might be sustained and strengthened to care for others.

The Good Samaritan has bound up our wounds, brought us to safety, and provided everything we need out of His great mercy to us. That mercy, His mercy, is what we are able to show to others.

In the name of Jesus, amen.