

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## The Merciful Will Receive Mercy

by Dan Trygg

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

Matthew 5:7

“By mercy and truth/faithfulness iniquity is cleansed away, and by the fear of the Lord one keeps away from evil.”

Proverbs 16:6

“For I delight in mercy/loyalty rather than sacrifice, in the true-knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Hosea 6:6

In order to understand this fifth “beatitude”, or “declaration of happiness”, we need to learn a little about the Hebrew and Greek words that underlie this saying. The Hebrew word, *chesed* (חֶסֶד), is an important theological word. It occurs 248 times in the Hebrew OT, and basically means “covenant-love” or “loyal-love”. It describes, first, the attitude of two people in a mutual relationship in which one begins to expect positive actions from the other, and is inclined to do the same toward them. As the relationship develops, trust and faithfulness also grows, and is expected. Eventually, a covenant (Heb. – berith; בְּרִית) may be struck, which clearly expresses the commitment of loyalty, and spells out the terms of the relationship. *Chesed* is the attitude of benevolent caring expressed in action. It is important to note that this is practical, seen in specific acts of helpfulness and loyalty. It was inconceivable to the Hebrew mind that one could have *chesed* as a feeling only. It was expressed in behavior, or it was not *chesed*. [This is an important point. It is a danger for us to think that we have loyal-love for God, or others, because we have some warm, kindly feelings toward them. Unless there is action, -- practical, caring, benevolent acts of helpfulness or consideration – our feelings mean nothing. They are nothing more than “clouds without water”, or “autumn trees without fruit” (Jude 12), holding an expectation of goodness, but having no substance. We mistake the emotion with character. Character is evidenced by the consistent record of our actions, not the memory of warm-fuzzy feelings.]

When the Hebrew OT was translated into Greek (ca. 250 B.C.), the word chosen to translate *chesed*, in most contexts, was the Greek word, *eleos* (ἔλεος), meaning, “mercy”. This word occurs 259 times in the Septuagint (LXX) Greek OT. The variant form, *eleēmōn* (ἐλεήμων), meaning “merciful”, occurs about 25 times. In ancient Greek thought, this word originally referred to the emotion one felt when observing another undergoing undeserved affliction or hardship. The Greeks saw this compassion as an emotional weakness. The highest good for a Greek was to become totally self-sufficient. To have within them a tendency to be affected by the hurts of others was seen to be a troublesome, unwanted and unwelcome vulnerability, ...a liability which they tried to harden themselves against.

In OT thought, however, this ability to empathize and identify with another person was seen as a good and desirable quality. The word usage of *eleos* reflected this Hebrew ideal, so the employment of this term in the LXX served to expand its range of meaning. *Eleos* is a central ingredient of God’s own character and nature. In His self-revelation to Moses (Ex. 34:6) forms of this word are used twice to depict God’s nature to the prophet, “Then Yahweh passed by in front of him (Moses) and proclaimed, ‘Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate, gracious (Gk. – *eleēmōn* – “merciful”), slow to anger and abundant-in-steadfast-love (Gk. – *polueleos* – “much-mercy”) and truth...”. This same formula is referred to on numerous occasions throughout the OT (cf. Neh. 9:17,31; Psa. 86:15; 102:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Since a “loyal-love relationship” is central to the OT view of what God created human beings for, and what He expects of us, *eleos* is a key component of that. It refers to a sensitivity to another person, an awareness sufficiently large enough to motivate a “loyal-love” response from us. This entails more than simply feeling compassion at the sight of another person’s hurt. This ability to empathize and identify with another becomes also the basis for treating them with honor, respect and consideration, ...even when they are not in some kind of distress. It is the foundation for “love your neighbor as yourself”. In order to exercise this ability, we must grow sufficiently beyond our own self-absorption to recognize need (in the case of one undergoing affliction) or opportunity to honor in another person’s life (in the case of one who may not be in distress, but one with whom we are in a loyal-love relationship), and be willing to give of ourselves to help or build others up.

There are several passages that reveal how significant this was in the mind of the Hebrews. They saw it as an essential aspect of salvation. For example, Proverbs 16:6 says, “By mercy (covenant-love) and truth (faith, or faithfulness) iniquity is cleansed away, and by the fear (awe, respect) of the Lord one keeps away from evil.” In light of the sacrificial system, this is a very radical statement! It says that sin can be cleansed not only by sacrifice, but by a changed life-orientation toward God and people. Of course, if a person had true loyal-love toward God, obedience to the covenant would follow that change in life-orientation. Another proverb written by Solomon states, “Do not let

mercy (covenant-love) and truth (faith, faithfulness) leave you; fasten them upon your neck and you will find grace (Gk. - *charis*) and good repute in the sight of God and man” (Prov. 3:3). **Merciful-acts/covenant-love leads to grace from God.** In the Greek text of Daniel 4:27, when Daniel finishes interpreting the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, which warns of judgment to come because of his arrogance, he advises the king to “...*entreat Him* concerning your sins and *redeem your iniquities by merciful-acts* in order that forbearance may be given to you and many days may come upon the throne of your kingdom.” It sounds as though the person who does merciful-acts can almost buy favor with God (the word for “redeem” or “free by paying a ransom” is used). That is *not* exactly what is being said, but it *is* clear that **God values the person who honors Him by serving others through genuine acts of mercy and benevolence.**

**Why “loyal-love”?** It is an expression of our duty toward God, who directs us back toward serving the human family. We are *all* brothers and sisters of His creation. If we despise the poor, we despise *Him*. If we do good to our fellow human beings, we honor *Him* (Prov. 11:12; 14:21,31). **Our loyal-love toward God demands a loyal-love toward others. The two are inseparable.** God was less concerned with sacrifices and religious practices than with justice and compassionate treatment of others. The strongest statement of this, using these terms, is found in Hosea 6:6, “For I desire *mercy* (covenant-love) and not sacrifice, and *the true-knowledge of God* rather than burnt offerings.”

**This same valuation of righteousness being expressed in merciful acts is carried over to the NT in many places.** For example, Tabitha was an example of godliness, “full of good works and *merciful-acts* (Gk. - *eleēmosunōn*) which she was continually doing” (Acts 9:36). In the very next chapter, Cornelius, still a gentile who did not know the gospel, was described as “devout and fearing God with all his household, doing many *merciful-acts* to the people and entreating God through all” (Acts 10:2). When the angel came to him from God, he said, “Your prayers and your *merciful-acts* have ascended unto a memorial before God” (vs. 4). In other words, his merciful-acts were noticed by God, as well as his prayers. **These examples are presented to us in this fashion because Luke, and the early church, were steeped in the LXX Greek version of the OT. They saw duty toward God in terms of *eleos*, mercy or covenant-love.** For example, Micah 6:8 says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and **what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, to love kindness (Heb. - *chesed* - ‘covenant-love’; LXX Gk - *eleos* - ‘mercy-that-acts’), and to walk humbly with your God?**” Thus, *anyone* who was truly *devout* toward God would be *actively engaged* in helping their fellow human beings (e.g., Job 29:1-17). **The theme of covenant-love, filtered as it was from the Hebrew through the Greek word, *eleos*, directed the focus of the man or woman of God toward serving others as a way to show honor to God.**

**This notion was noticeably absent from the manner of life of the Pharisees. They were not notoriously merciful or gracious to others.** In fact, it was quite the opposite. They *despised* the “rabble”. They and the chief priests, who together had become the figureheads and recognized spokespeople of religious righteousness were generally arrogant, proud and self-absorbed. Their *focus* was on *religious behavior*, not people. **They scrupulously kept the Law, ...which included the giving of alms to the poor..., but they did not do it out of compassion or love.** They had *disdain* toward the unfortunates, composing scenarios in their minds as to how these people must somehow *deserve* their lot in life, rather than compassionately giving of themselves to help them. **Giving alms, then, was an empty act of legalistic duty, not an expression of a compassionate heart. It made people feel small and put down, not valued, loved and built up.** Outwardly, they seemed pious and proper, but their façade was not fooling anyone. They were motivated by pride and self-importance, not by mercy or loyal-love. They *refused* to identify with others. Their actions and attitudes underlined that they thought they were far above the “sinners”, as they referred to most people. It was because of a disregard for justice, compassion and listening to God that Yahweh had driven the Jews from their land before (Zech. 7:8-13). The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were walking down that same path.

**Jesus’ statement was an assault on the religious establishment of His day. He was saying that those of the Kingdom of God would be those who were merciful, those who had loyal-love toward God and people.** This was the first of several times where He hearkens back to this OT theme of *eleos* as *what God is really looking for* (Matt. 9:13; 12:7). **If our religious life does not produce this, then we are missing the Kingdom of heaven.**

**It would seem that the background of this fifth “declaration of happiness” is Proverbs 11:17, which says, “The merciful person does good to his own soul...”. God has made the world so that those who do good are generally rewarded with good returned to them. This verse seems to indicate that God’s favor and grace will be to those who give to others out of love for Him. “With the merciful (Heb. - *chesed*) You will show Yourself merciful...”, wrote David (Psa. 18:26). “The one pursuing righteousness and loyal-love (Heb. - *chesed*; LXX Gk. - *eleēmosunē* = compassion) finds life, righteousness and honor” (Prov. 21:21). Thus, Jesus could confidently declare, “Fortunate are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Yahweh is the compassionate, covenant-keeping God who will return faithful-love to the ones honoring *Him* with faithful-love toward Him and others. The merciful will be mercied.**