

Holy Mulligans for Everyone*

Lordy, oh Lordy, please have mercy.

The golfing world would call God's mercy a 'mulligan.' I found this story about an American vacationing in Ireland. Signing up to play golf, he joined three locals for a match. After taking a few practice swings, he stepped up to the first tee and hooked the ball out of bounds. He shook his head, reached into his pocket, and re-teed another ball. Before hitting the second ball, he told the locals that he was taking a mulligan. He pounded one down the center of the fairway.

With a big smile, he asked the others, "In the States, we call that a mulligan. What do you call it?"

After a moment of silence, one of the players replied, "Three strokes."

Have you ever needed a mulligan? Has anyone here lived a fault-free life? I mean sin-free, always attentive to God's commands?

If so, I'll sit down and let you tell us how to live a sin-free life. What, no takers? The fact remains: we all fall short of the glory of God and must rely on God's mercy. Luckily, the Bible provides many examples of God's mercy and why we rely on it. While amateur golfers will take a mulligan, it's unofficial. Unlike our joke, God's mulligans are official and always available to everyone.

Let's start with the definition of mercy. The AOED defines it as: "compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm."

Without question, God can and has punished the Israelites for their stiff necks and faithlessness. He could destroy and has exiled the Israelites many times. The scripture today involved the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Today, I want to focus on mercy. What is it, why do we need it, what it requires, and how to show mercy?

Let's look at a couple of examples of God's mercy.

As slaves in Egypt, He freed them. God takes mercy on them and sends Moses to free them (Exodus 3-15). When freed and while Moses communed with God on the mountaintop for 40 days, the Israelites disobeyed God and made a golden calf to worship (Exodus 31). God threatens to destroy them, but He has mercy and forgives them

Then there is Paul, formerly Saul. I know he would agree with the golfing joke: "My golf game is 90% Mulligans and 10% pure luck." He retells his story in I Timothy 1:12-14:

¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Oh, the Bible contains many more stories of mercy, but I think you get the idea.

Lord, I need a mulligan, please. Because of our human natures, we regularly need God's mercy. A golfer would say: If at first you don't succeed, reload. That's what mulligans are for!" And boy, do we need them.

King David knows all about sinning and seeking God's mercy. The prophet Nathan confronts David for committing adultery. In our responsive reading, Psalm 51, David seeks God's mercy.

Paul speaks to the importance of and our need for God's mercy. In Romans 3:21-26, Paul explains:

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his

righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.
Paul is the poster child of God's mercy.

Jesus constantly shows mercy and calls for us to show mercy. In Matt 5:7, he says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."

In our Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus tells us of God's generous mercy. Jesus holds the king up as an example of God's mercy. The king had the power to hurt his servant. He could have enslaved the man, the man's family, as well as sold everything the man had. But he had mercy and forgave the enormous debt, the equivalent of 20 years of a day laborer's wage.

Unfortunately, the servant didn't learn from the king's mercy. He demanded payment of a much smaller debt from a fellow servant who owed the equivalent of a day's wages. And had the servant thrown into jail.

When the King hears this, he has the unmerciful servant tortured. Jesus clearly states that we need to be merciful too, or God will treat us as we treat others.

I don't know about you, but that sounds challenging to live out in my daily life. When have I been callous to the needs of those around me? When have I ignored the hungry? When have I ignored the person in rags? When have I responded in anger instead of listening with a merciful ear?

Why do God and Jesus emphasize our need to show mercy to others? I think William Shakespeare put it well in the Merchant of Venice (Act IV, Scene 1, Lines 186-190,195-197):

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes...
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

That fact is that without mercy, we would constantly feud with each other. We would be back to the vengeful act of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

If we do not have mercy, we ignore the Golden Rule (Luke 10:25-37 (Parable of the Good Samaritan)). Love God. Love your neighbor. And, yes, as the Parable of the Good Samaritan shows, everyone is your neighbor.

Let me give you a real example of the power of mercy. A friend of mine lived in Las Cruces. He was looking for a church and stumbled into a growing church. He got there early, so the sound and lighting person started talking to him. Interesting story: The pastor robbed a local shop owner at gunpoint. He went to prison. In jail, he found Christ. Upon his release, he started this growing church. Oh, by the way, the sound and lighting person was that shop owner.

What a story of mercy! There is so much mercy in this story, it's hard to know where to start. How many mulligans can you identify? God. The prison minister, who reached this thief where he was. The former robber accepted God. The shop owner's forgiveness. This clearly exemplifies God's mercy is alive and well today. God turned a thief into a person who spreads the Good News, even to his victim. Yes, God works in mysterious ways.

God shows us mercy because none of us is perfect. But it is always available to everyone, like: Paul, the Las Cruces pastor, and even to the thief crucified with Jesus. And face it, we all want mercy from God and from each other. When we accidentally say the wrong thing, When we cut someone off in traffic, When we just screw something up. When we argue with others.

Now comes the challenging part. God requires us to show mercy to each other, but how do we do that? Lorene Hanley Duquin published a list of ways to practice mercy.

Dare to really care. Allow yourself to look beneath another person's surface needs and feel what that person is going through. Maybe it is physical or emotional pain. Or, maybe it is loneliness, rejection,

discouragement, or fear. Imagine that you are seeing this person through the eyes of Jesus. Then decide how you can help that person.

Don't judge. Merciful people don't say, "You got what you deserved," or "You caused this yourself." Maybe the person acted recklessly, or refused to see a doctor, or continued to smoke or eat junk food. Let God be the judge of what happened. You are called to offer mercy and help in whatever way you can — no matter what the circumstances.

It is easy to judge when you don't know the facts. Many times, I ate crow after arguing when I misunderstood something or didn't have all the facts. Oh boy, did I feel foolish.

Avoid gossip. Merciful people refrain from gossip because they know that gossip is another assault on an already injured person. Proverbs speaks of the evil of gossip 6 times. In Prov 26:20-21:

Without wood a fire goes out;
without a gossip a quarrel dies down.
As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.

For the corrosive effect of gossip, look no further than the state of our politics. Watch the ads. They rarely talk about their plans. They almost always attack the character of their opponent with gossip and innuendo.

Refuse to retaliate. Merciful people don't hold a grudge or try to even the score. They let it go, giving whatever happened to God and forgiving the other person. Forgiveness allows you to let anger, hurt, and bitterness drain out of your heart. It restores a sense of peace to your soul. Without forgiveness, you become a prisoner to your own resentments. With forgiveness, you mirror God's mercy.

I have previously spoken about my daughter's experience in France...We don't resent them. In fact, we wish them well.

Don't turn away. When faced with an opportunity to be merciful, our greatest temptation is to look away. It's easy to rationalize that someone else is better able to help than you are. But when we turn away from

someone in need, we are turning away from Christ himself. We hear this from Jesus in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31-46). If we want to be more merciful, we have to stand beside the other person — even if it makes our own lives more difficult. When we do that, we become humbler, kinder, and more compassionate.

Most of you will remember Antonio Trujillo's story of being in seminary and unable to go home for the holidays. He was in a crummy mood, so he walked the streets of Chicago. Along the way, he met a homeless man who invited him for bread and wine. It didn't lighten his mood until he got to the church just in time for communion. It suddenly dawned on him that he just had communion with Christ in the form of the homeless man.

Cultivate little kindnesses. Small chances for kindness arise every day. No opportunity for mercy is ever insignificant. Allowing another car to merge into your lane, calling a grieving friend, checking on an elderly neighbor, helping a coworker, and holding the door for someone are just a few examples. Sometimes, a smile or a word of encouragement can change a person's whole outlook.

For years, I felt challenged by Luke 6:30a when it says: "Give to everyone who asks you." For years, I ignored the homeless on the street corner, and it bothered me. Since then, I created goodie bags to hand out on the street corner. It has been a tremendous success.

Accept mercy from others. It takes humility to admit that we, too, need mercy. When you allow others to be merciful to you, you give them the opportunity to reach outside of themselves and enter into your pain. When that happens, they become instruments of God's love to heal and comfort you. We set aside arguments about "I'm right, you're wrong." Like retribution, this argument only goes in circles.

If you are like me, this one can be hard. I grew up in the Midwest and learned to deflect compliments. "It was nothing," or "Well, I could have done better..." It seems strange, but I had to learn to accept the mercy of others.

Pray for mercy. Pray to become more merciful. Pray also for family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and people whom you know need mercy. Pray for people who hurt you. Pray for people around the world who are suffering. Pray that everyone in the world will respond to

God's mercy and, in turn, be merciful to one another. Like the unmerciful servant, mercy does not always come easily to us. We need to recognize God's mercy, and In accepting God's mercy, show mercy to others.

Lordy, oh Lordy, have mercy on us.

I know today's scripture demands a lot of us. I am constantly challenged to meet God's perfection, but to live as God commands us, we must show the mercy we desire from others. This is what Christ is telling us in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

In the world of golf, God would be the ultimate pro player. God never needs to take a mulligan and tries to teach us how to become better golfers. Me, I couldn't even call myself an amateur player. I'm an infrequent player who would need so many mulligans that my score would merely be a fantasy of epic proportions. But, as followers of Christ, God commands us to show the same mercy that God gave us. Like the parable of the unmerciful servant, God will treat us the same way we treat others. By being merciful to others, God will be merciful to us.

God gave us an unlimited number of mulligans, but unlike the unmerciful servant in today's parable, freely share your mulligans with everyone.