

GOD EXPECTS US TO EXTEND MERCY



Think of God's offer of mercy as a banquet to which you are invited. The table is filled with the most luscious foods: spicy appetizers, gourmet entrées steaming on heated plates, a vast array of juicy fruits, iced deserts, and cool, sweet drinks. The table is so large that it has enough room for more than the few who have come. But strangely enough, outside the door to the banquet hall stands a crowd who will not enter. They cry out, "I'm so hungry, so hungry!" You can almost hear their starved stomachs rumbling from lack of food. Yet for some reason, they will not step through the door and help themselves to the free banquet provided for them. A. W. Tozer gives this analogy when he writes:

We may plead for mercy for a lifetime in unbelief, and at the end of our days be still no more than sadly hopeful that we shall somewhere, sometime, receive it. This is to starve to death just outside the banquet hall in which we have been warmly invited. Or we may, if we will, lay hold on the mercy of God by faith, not allow skepticism and unbelief to keep us from the feast of delicious foods prepared for us.¹

God extended His mercy to us even before we were born, and before we acknowledged our need for His forgiveness. Without our Lord's sacrifice on the cross, we could not have a relationship with God. Now, because of Christ's willingness to die in our place, we can have a deep intimacy with the God who loves us unconditionally.

THE MERCIFUL EXTEND MERCY

One day Peter asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive someone. Peter thought that forgiving seven times was pretty good. "No!" Jesus replied, "seventy times seven!"² Then Jesus gave an illustration showing how God looks on our responsibility to forgive:

One day, a king was going over his accounts, settling old debts. He saw that one of his servants owed him millions of dollars. The king ordered the servant brought before him. When he arrived, the king demanded that the servant pay every penny. But the amount was beyond the servant's ability to pay. The king ordered the man and his family sold into slavery to pay the debt. The servant fell before the king and pleaded for mercy. The king felt pity and forgave him this tremendous debt.

That is such a wonderful picture of God's mercy. We are like the servant who could not pay the debt. But God, in His mercy, took pity on us and erased our sin debt completely.

But what did this servant do? He found a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars and demanded payment. Just imagine. He came from the throne room where he had been extended so much mercy and grabbed his friend by the throat and demanded payment! The friend begged for mercy. But the servant would not forgive him and had him thrown into prison.

When the other servants saw the injustice, they went to the king and reported what had happened. The king was angry! He called in the servant and demanded to know why the man had acted so harshly toward his friend when he himself had been forgiven so much. Then the king commanded the servant be thrown into prison until he had paid every penny.

God gave His only Son to die in our place. That is mercy be-

yond comprehension, beyond description. How, then, can we ever refuse to give mercy to others when we have received so much mercy ourselves? What others may have done to you does not compare with what God has forgiven you. That is why God expects us to have mercy on others. To the degree that we show mercy to the poor, the wretched, and the guilty, we are like God. The lesson is clear: the merciful shall obtain mercy. And who among us is not a candidate for more of God's mercy?

OUR NEED FOR MERCY HELPS US SERVE OTHERS

Just like the unforgiving servant, sometimes the hardest place to extend mercy is the area where God has given us the most mercy—our area of weakness.

Ed DeWeese came home one afternoon to find that thieves had gone through his home. The TV, stereo equipment, and jewelry were missing—about \$3,000 worth. He called his wife, Beth, at work and she rushed home. The police arrived and took a report. Because the DeWeeses had just moved in, they had not taken out homeowner's insurance. After the policemen left, they prayed, "Lord, we have no insurance and cannot afford to replace these things. Please return them to us."

That is when Ed's situation really hit him. He was an ex-offender. He had gone to jail for embezzlement—sophisticated burglary. He said to Beth, "We must first forgive."

After the thief had been arrested and released on bond, Ed asked a police officer to take him to the offender's home. When Ed met the man who had robbed him, he said, "I'm the man you ripped off. But brother, I forgive you in the name of Jesus."

Ed continued to visit the thief and gave a Bible to his little brother who had assisted in the crime. Soon, the robber told the police where the stolen things were hidden, and the officers recovered the DeWeeses's belongings. When the young man pleaded guilty to burglary, Ed testified in his behalf. He then helped the young man find a job. And Ed says, "Best of all, he and his brother did receive Christ as Savior."³

Our past failures can make us more sensitive to those who need

mercy in the very areas in which we once needed mercy. We can minister to others in a more meaningful way because we understand and have experienced the reality of God's mercy in our area of weakness.

MERCY MEANS LETTING GO OF OLD HURTS

Corrie ten Boom encountered a situation in which her willingness to forgive was challenged. During those horrible days in 1944 in the Ravensbruck concentration camp, grim guards in blue uniforms and caps bearing the Nazi swastika stood in a line with leather crops swinging from their belts. The emaciated women dressed in prison garb worked long hours every day under the watchful eye of these guards. Corrie's sister, Betsie, died in Ravensbruck, a victim of the tortuous conditions.

In 1947, after the war, Corrie spoke to a group of Germans in a sparsely furnished Munich church basement. Her mission was to help those who were ravaged by the war. During her talk, she said, "I have a home in Holland for victims of the war. Those who have been able to forgive their former enemies have been able to rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those, however, who have nursed their bitterness remain invalids. We, as Christians, have every reason to forgive each other, for our God richly lavishes His mercy on us—if we only ask Him."

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When she finished her talk, she was approached by a balding, heavyset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his nervous hands. Horror filled her as she realized he had been one of those guards who had abused Betsie in the camp. His name was Joseph.

Joseph thrust out his hand. "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

Dumbfounded, Corrie did not take his hand.

He went on, “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?”

Corrie remembered how he had pushed Betsie with the butt of his gun. Corrie looked down at his outstretched hand. She whispered to herself, “Jesus, help me.” Her hand slowly moved toward his. Their hands touched and she finally vigorously shook his hand. With tears in her eyes, she said, “I forgive you, brother . . . with all my heart.”

God loves us no matter what we have done. He forgives us when we ask Him. No sin is too big to be thrown into His ocean of forgiveness. Since God richly lavishes His mercy on us, we must show mercy to one another. And that means letting go of all those old hurts caused by others.

EXTENDING MERCY HAS A COST

Often the most difficult place to show mercy is in close relationships—our family and friends. A middle-aged man sat in the pastor’s office, nervously wiping perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand. “There is absolutely no way I can tell this to my wife,” he said. “She would be devastated. She would never forgive me. I just cannot tell her. But I want forgiveness. I need relief from all this guilt.”

In this family’s case, the wife’s career had soared with success, while the husband’s work had plateaued. She traveled on extended business trips, gaining all kinds of recognition and earning a big salary. Meanwhile, the husband was at home keeping the family fed and attending to household chores. In a weak moment when loneliness drove his attention elsewhere, his wife’s best friend began to meet his sexual and emotional needs. He was caught in an ugly trap of betrayal, with seemingly no way out.

After counseling with the pastor, the husband went home and confessed his sin to his wife. He told her exactly what had happened and why. He admitted he was very wrong and assured her

that his adulterous relationship with her friend was over. Much to his surprise, she forgave him, and they started all over again. This act of mercy came at no small cost to this rejected wife, but it led to the restoration of the relationship they once had.

God will reward us when we show mercy. One of mercy's rewards is the intimacy we enjoy in our human relationships. Another reward is the intimacy we experience in our relationship with our Lord. Since mercy is of the highest priority to God, when we are merciful, we become instruments of blessing and enjoy communication with God.⁴

GOD'S MERCY HELPS US IN OUR FAILURES

If you ask Steve about God's mercy, he can tell you that it is bottomless. He worked hard in his local church, raising four children with a wife he loved dearly. Yet he was not walking in God's Spirit. He began to have a problem—greed. Little by little, he began taking money from his job. In time, his \$100,000 embezzlement was discovered, and he was taken to court. Still, Steve was not truly repentant. He did not realize his great need for God's mercy and help.

Because this was his first offense, the judge was lenient. Steve received a work-program sentence in which he had to spend his weekends doing community service. He was assigned to the sheriff's department. At first he did simple jobs like washing police cruisers, but soon police officials began trusting him with greater responsibilities. Eventually, they put him in charge of handling sales of items such as pepper spray. Over the next year, Steve began embezzling money from the sheriff's department until he had taken more than \$20,000!

As you might guess, he was caught once again. But this time, the court did not have mercy on him, and he was sentenced to several years in prison. Because of a paperwork mix-up, he was sent to the state penitentiary for violent criminals. Suddenly, Steve's world collapsed. His wife divorced him and he was not able to see his children. Sitting in that prison cell surrounded by men for whom violence was a way of life, he decided to commit

suicide. His birthday was coming up, and he felt as if his life was over.

His three daughters sent him a birthday letter in which they said, “Dad, all we ever wanted was you. We didn’t want the money.” Their words pierced Steve to his very soul. At that moment, he threw himself upon God’s mercy—including his greed and his pride.

When Steve was paroled, he began rebuilding his life. At first, he felt so unworthy that he did not think he could ever serve God again. But little by little, God began to restore him and heal his hurt. Three years after his release, Steve felt God nudging him to work in the singles’ ministry in his church. He approached the singles’ pastor, his conviction papers in hand. “I want to be honest with you, Pastor Ron. I am a convicted felon. But if you could find any place for me to serve God, that’s what I want to do.”

After learning about Steve’s past failures, Ron smiled and said, “Of course, we have a place for you to serve. We just won’t put you in charge of any finances.”

Since then, Steve has humbly served God in evangelism and church leadership ministry. In His mercy, God restored Steve gently and lovingly. He will do the same for you when you come before Him in humility. God wants us to be bold in asking Him for mercy when we need it.⁵ If we are in distress, guilt-ridden, persecuted, lonely, facing disaster, experiencing the contempt of others, struggling with our weakness, or undergoing some other difficulty, God wants us to come humbly to Him in prayer seeking His help.

Remember, people all around you need to be pointed to the mercy of God. Their hearts ache for that unconditional love and complete forgiveness. As ambassadors of Christ, we know the comfort of God’s mercy and can show others how to receive this unlimited gift.

GOD’S MERCY DOES NOT ELIMINATE ALL CONSEQUENCES

Isn’t it wonderful to celebrate the mercy God has given us? At the same time, God will not remove all the consequences of our ac-

tions just because He is merciful. In Steve's case, his sin of embezzlement still cost him his marriage. The pain for his children was real. If he could go back and do it all over again, he would rather rely on God's strength to keep him from sin and not on God's mercy to rescue him from his wrongdoing.

When David and Bathsheba committed adultery, God forgave David after he confessed his sin. Nathan the prophet says about David's forgiveness, "The LORD has forgiven you, and you won't die for this sin. But you have given the enemies of the LORD great opportunity to despise and blaspheme Him, so your child will die."⁶ But David was also restored. Later, God allowed David and Bathsheba to have another child. That child became the wisest man who ever lived: King Solomon.

God does not forgive halfway. He cleared the sin-debt against David. But God, in His wisdom, knows that if we never suffer consequences for our actions, we will not learn our lesson completely. What would unbelievers think if believers got away with all kinds of misbehavior with no consequences? What would the world say about us? That we serve God because He makes everything easy for us? Instead, our consequences can be a way to glorify God.

EXTENDING MERCY IS NOT BEING TOLERANT

People today, even many Christians, are more concerned about a need for *tolerance* than a need for *mercy*. There is a great difference! Josh McDowell, a fellow Crusade staff member and founder of the "Right from Wrong" campaign, says that tolerance and Christian love cannot coexist. Similarly, tolerance and mercy cannot coexist. The Word of God exhorts Christians to speak the truth in love.⁷ Mercy rooted in love demands that a person be told if he is doing something self-destructive or harmful to others.

The problem we encounter in separating mercy and tolerance is that we live in an age where the majority of our society does not accept the idea of absolute truth. The Biblical concept of sin has been replaced by a demand for tolerance of any activity. Consequently, tolerance has replaced mercy, especially in govern-

ment, schools, colleges, industry, and the media. Tolerance is demanded for almost every bizarre and perverted belief and behavior.

When tolerance reigns and absolutes are eliminated, when diversity becomes the catch-all phrase for accepting even gross sinful behavior, then people feel no need for the mercy of God. Instead, many rationalize their behavior with excuses like these:

“Even if I am unfaithful to my wife, I’m sure God will understand. After all, He knows I have needs that are not being met.”

“Remember, this is my first time with drugs. I am basically a good man who looks after my wife and kids, and I know God will recognize that.”

What has happened? We have tried to reduce God to our size, to our standards, and to what we feel He ought to be like. This makes us feel comfortable. Too often we want *Him* to respond like *we* would respond to sin and injustice. We want *Him* to accept *us* on our standards of behavior. Since we are tolerant and non-judgmental with other’s sins, we want everyone including God to be tolerant with ours. In this way, we do not have to change our ways or feel guilty about them. “Live and let live” is the world’s philosophy, but it is not God’s.

God set the example. He extends mercy and maintains His standards perfectly. He made the dearest sacrifice for our forgiveness; yet He judges and disciplines people for their sin. He loves unconditionally; yet He completely understands our weaknesses and failings. That is what mercy is all about. It is not sweeping bad things under the rug (like tolerance) and looking only at the good side. Mercy sees the whole picture, maintains right from wrong, and loves with the whole heart.

Can you do that? None of us can without the help of the Holy Spirit. Through Him, we can extend strong mercy without compromising with an attitude of unbiblical tolerance toward sin. Tolerance toward wrong behavior is not love; mercy is the loving response. Let us then follow Christ’s example as we receive mercy from God and in return extend mercy to all we meet.

LIFE APPLICATION



WRITE IT ON YOUR HEART—Memorize the following statement and verses. Then as you encounter situations during this week where you need God’s mercy, claim these promises by faith.

- Because God is merciful, He forgives me of my sins when I sincerely confess them.
- Daniel 9:9—“The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against Him” (NIV).
- Hebrews 4:16—“Let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.”

COUNT ON GOD—Are you, or is someone close to you, in desperate need of God’s mercy? No matter what you have done—large or small—God’s mercy is sufficient. Go to Him and repent. Confess your sin, turn from it, and open your heart to His love and forgiveness. Your God of mercy will heal and restore you.

OBEY GOD—Are you harboring resentment against someone? Did someone wrong you and now you are having difficulty forgiving him? Read over the parable of the ungrateful servant in your Bible (Matthew 18). God has forgiven every sin you ever committed and any sin you will commit in the future. God has bountifully bestowed mercy on you. How ungrateful not to forgive someone who has wronged you! Obey God and go to that person today. Forgive him and experience the joy of showing mercy.