

Read also Matthew 12:1-8, 11:29-30. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Do you remember the movie *The Fugitive*? Dr. Richard Kimble was convicted of murdering his wife. But while being transferred to death row, the bus he was on crashed, then was hit by a train, and he escaped. Most of the movie revolves around him narrowly escaping getting caught by the U.S. Marshal.

David's problems with Saul continued to escalate until it was no longer safe for David to remain in the city. Jonathan realized he could no longer protect David from his father so the two men made a covenant of loyalty and kindness to each other and their families, sealed in God's name. David was now on the run. He was a fugitive. This would go on for several years.

Saul had mastered his capabilities for cunning and violence and David could waste no time. He left in haste – no food, no weapon, and only a few men with him. Over the next few weeks we will follow his story as he flees for his life.

What's it like to be hunted? Did he, at times, worry or question or ask *why, God?* When we read his Psalms we find the answer to that. Yes, yes he did! He was a fugitive, but we also learn he had purpose. Just like Dr. Kimble was hunted; but since he was wrongly accused of murdering his wife, he wanted to find out who killed her. So he had purpose. David found purpose in clinging to God's ways.

When things go bad for you, when everything falls apart, do you draw closer to God or do you turn elsewhere for help? David turned to God. He spoke to God as if God were right there:

“Fierce enemies are out there waiting, LORD, though I have not sinned or offended them. I have done nothing wrong, yet they prepare to attack me. *Wake up! See what is happening and help me!* O LORD God of Israel, wake up and punish those hostile nations. Show no mercy to wicked traitors.” (59:3-5 italics mine)

But by the end of that same prayer he worked through his anguish and writes this:

“But as for me, I will sing about your power. Each morning I will sing with joy about your unfailing love. For you have been my refuge, a place of safety when I am in distress. O my Strength, to you I sing praises, for you, O God, are my refuge, the God who shows me unfailing love.” (59:16-17)

That's amazing to me that in such desperate straits he found God to be a full source of solace, protection, and love. Would you like to be there in your faith? I would!

When David ran, he ran to the temple. Hear the story. READ 1 Samuel 21:1-6

Temples were not everywhere so he had to go to the city of Nob. That's where he felt he could find immediate help. Do you see the church, the place of worship, as a sanctuary, the place to go for help? Do you sense the presence of God here where you can pray about any real problem that you have? David did.

But, he wasn't quite forthcoming with his problem. He lied to the priest! 'I'm just here on a mission – sent by the king.' Never mind the truth that he was being hunted down like a fox! So the people in the Bible are not models of perfect behavior, far from it.

The Bible is so real and that is why it helps us. Even though this lie caused great suffering later and David deeply regretted it, we still see how God works with us, even when weak, desperate, and full of shortcomings and mistakes.

So then David got right to the point and asked the priest for food for him and his men. But the priest didn't have any ordinary bread. He only had holy bread.

Holy bread was placed in the temple on the Sabbath as a thank offering. It was called "Bread of the Presence" meaning that God is with us always. It reminded the people of God's feeding the children of Israel in the desert when they had no other provisions. So that's why the bread was given back to God. Each Sabbath twelve loaves were put on the sanctuary table. Then the next Sabbath fresh, hot bread replaced it and the priests were given the old bread for themselves and their families. They were the only ones allowed to eat it.

I can't really think of week-old bread as being that appetizing!

This was a long-term, sacred practice that had been initiated years before. So Ahimelech the priest had a decision to make. Giving the bread to David broke the law of the Lord. Yet, David and his men were desperate and hungry. The priest had no other food. This bread was supposed to be for him. Should he "break the rule" and give it? *Does anything go?*

Ahimelech decided to put human need above the rules.

Isn't God great? Isn't God reasonable? God is concerned for human need. His yoke is easy and the burden He gives us is truly light.

Jesus verified this when the Pharisees protested His letting his hungry disciples pick grain on the Sabbath. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27)

He told them, "Learn what it means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'"

When Ahimelech offered the bread on the Sabbath, he thought it through. He didn't say, "I need to be paid for this. He was not concerned with the personal loss. He only considered *do these people respect God?* The bread is holy. Its presence is sacred. So he gave it with the stipulation that the soldiers must have kept their vows of ritual cleanness.

Warriors in those days observed rules of sexual abstinence during active duty, and David, as their leader had kept them faithful to this observance. He was a commander with integrity. So Ahimelech gave the bread.

So Ahimelech was merciful, and at the same time, he also used discernment.

What drives you? Mercy or keeping the religious law? It might help if we understand what mercy means:

- *Compassion*
- *Kindness*
- *Understanding*
- *Consideration*
- *Benevolence*
- *Pity*
- *Sympathy*
- *Concern*
- *Gentleness*
- *Generosity*

Think of people that have treated you in this way. Didn't that make a difference when you were in trouble?

But having mercy does not necessarily mean that you accept a standard of "anything goes." That is, when we help someone, there is the need for discernment. We aren't to judge; but it is reasonable to have some expectations.

Take for example the fact that Jesus would often heal people or help people but He felt free to say,

- ~ "Go and sin no more." And often he would say,
- ~ "Go back to the church, show yourself to the minister, and thank God for what He has done for you," or
- ~ "Go and tell your friends how God has helped you," or
- ~ "Before coming to the altar, go settle your differences with your brother."

It is important to act with mercy toward those who have need, just as Ahimelech did. It is also important to point that person to respect for God, for that helps people see God as the ultimate source of the blessing.

David sought help from God and was blessed that day. But there was also someone else in the temple that day. He was quite the opposite of David. His name was Doeg, Saul's servant, possibly Saul's palace guardsman. He would have known David and all that was going on. He heard the lying, saw Ahimelech help him.

I just hate to tell you his story. It's a grievous story. I wish it had not happened.

Doeg was there for some sort of religious observance. But he was not there to find or honor God. A man like this only uses religion for his own benefit. He was a political opportunist and he turned Ahimelech into Saul.

Saul was so consumed by evil and so venomous toward David that he then ordered all the priests of Nob to be killed. His soldiers refused to carry it out. They knew Saul owed it to the nation to protect its priests. But Doeg carried it out. David assumed full responsibility for this tragedy, and he took the one surviving priest, Abiathar, into his own home and protected him. He also sought protection for his parents from the King of Moab, who gladly helped him.

Saul and Doeg were corrupt to the core. But David was a man of integrity and a man of God. Many of Saul's supporters deserted him and began to follow David.

The sanctuary is a wonderful place of refuge when we seek and find God's help and mercy; when we live into it and offer it to others. But the sanctuary can be a place where terrible things happen if while here we do not touch God; do not gain respect for God and do not allow our hearts to be opened.

Be merciful, all the while being discerning and reverent toward God. For God is merciful. He will help you when you are in trouble and open your heart to others in need.

AMEN