

What the World Needs Now is Mercy

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The Way to Grace: The Sermon on the Mount Series

Luke 10:25-37

I want to give you an update on A. Stephen's. A. is at home convalescing. He has lost approximately 25 pounds since his heart attack and still is experiencing some pain associated with his surgery. However, he and his family are in good spirits and is experiencing God's grace during this challenging time. A.'s ministry continues. We want to continue to pray for A. and Queenie and their children and A.'s work in India.

There have been three incidents in the paper recently that I don't know if you caught that I would like to begin with today. There was a story out of Oakland. There has been a lot of controversy regarding the teaching of Ebonics. It has, of course, divided the nation, but even more so the city of Oakland. Some conservative pastors in Oakland have been preaching against the teaching of Ebonics. But one group of very liberal pastors, including some Unitarians, has worked a wonderful plan of racial reconciliation in the city. These liberal pastors have gotten groups of people together, black and white, to dialogue with each other and to help each other understand each other's viewpoints. All the time, the conservatives have been blasting away and the liberals have gotten together to bring about racial reconciliation. It has been a marvelous thing.

And then in Los Angeles, a family lost their home to a fire and the West Hollywood Gay Men's Glee Club took up a collection and bought the family new furniture. They bought the kids toys. And, in fact, they were in the paper presenting one of the children new toys while the Gay Men's Glee Club sang for the kids. Everyone was cheering. It was just really nice.

Then the guy who produces NYPD Blue and a few other TV shows, Stephen Bochco, recently launched a crusade to help kids with leukemia because of pollution from corporate polluters. There are areas of the country where there are concentrated pockets of kids who have leukemia. Often it is very near to where there has been corporate dumping of chemicals. So Stephen Bochco has been launching a crusade to help these kids get bone marrow treatments.

How do you feel when you catch items in the paper like these? The guy who does NYPD Blue or the Gay Men's Glee Club or some group of very liberal pastors offering help. How do you feel when you read those? Or when you just hear me telling these stories out of people's goodness? Excited for the contribution that people are making to the betterment of man?

If you are in any way negative, your negativity is nothing to be compared to the reaction that Jesus got when he told the story that has come down in history known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. See, we love stories of mercy, people helping other people, feel good stories. We resent it when the hero is someone from the other side. He turns out to be the Irish Catholic and who is an Irish Protestant in Northern Ireland. Or he turns out to be a Palestinian associated with the PLO and we are an orthodox Jew helping to build new settlements on the West Bank. Or we are a conservative

Christian and the person who has offered to help is a member of the National Abortion Rights Activist League. These kinds of stories create tension in us. And Jesus was a master storyteller who created tension in his audience and doesn't always resolve all of the tough questions of life.

I have been doing a series from the Beatitudes. The statement today that we are going to be reflecting on is "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy." In order to open that verse up, to crack it for you, what I want to do is look at a story that will be familiar to some of you who were raised in church. It wouldn't have been familiar to me some years ago because I wasn't raised in church at all, but we are going to look together at the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is perhaps the clearest and best exposition of the meaning of mercy that we find in the Bible.

Luke 10:25-37

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

'What is written in the law,' he replied. 'How do you read it?'

He answered, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,' and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'

In reply, Jesus said, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

'Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'

The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'

Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, he said, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Now, people are always coming up to Jesus wanting to argue with him.

"How many people are going to be saved, Jesus? You have been going around saying that you are the Way, the Truth and the Life and that no one comes to the Father, but through you. Well, if that is the case, how many people are actually going to be saved? What about those who have never heard? What about those Aborigines living in Australia? You are just walking around here in Palestine."

"Should we be paying our taxes or not, Jesus? The government is doing a lot of things that we don't agree with. And yet, you are telling us to obey the law and on the other side you are telling us that we need to follow God. I don't get it."

People love to argue about religion. At some point, if folks find out that you are a committed Christian, you can guarantee that someone is going to come up to you to argue with you. It may be a brother in law or someone in one of your classes, or a person at work. But people start finding out that you are a committed Christian, you can guarantee that you are in for an argument.

"You don't really believe that stuff about a whale swallowing a man, come on..."

"What about all the errors in the Bible?"

"You can't prove there really is a God anyway."

"You became a Christian? Why? Because you didn't have any friends, because you needed a crutch?"

I had a religion professor in undergraduate school who the first statement he made on the first day of class was this, "Anyone who is orthodox in their faith, whether they are Jew or Christian or Muslim, but anyone who is orthodox in their faith is guaranteed to be a failure in school, in sex, and in athletics." Can you imagine that? Sitting there in class and having a prof begin his class with the central premise that you are a failure.

People love to argue about religion. Now why?

I think that you can take the arguers and break them up into at least two very different groups. First of all, there are folks who want to be proven wrong. And there are literally millions and millions of people like this.

"I am challenging you, but I am secretly hoping that maybe, just maybe, you might be able to show me that there really is someone out there who is good. Someone out there who will love me no strings attached. I am secretly hoping that someone will prove to me or lead me to a person, a faith, a viewpoint, that is big enough to handle the size problems that I have."

A lot of people argue and probe and discuss because they want to believe. They want to be proven wrong. Some of you were in this category. Give me a reason, a basis, a foundation for believing. That is what I am looking for.

For people like that, it is helpful to say, "Well, lets talk about the Bible. I know that you have heard that there are a lot of errors in it. What errors are you concerned about?"

Most people who say that there are errors in the Bible have never thoroughly studied the Bible. They have heard that repeated. They may have read an article in the newspaper where someone said that. But I have met very few students of the Bible who say this. There are some, but they are not typical. And I think it is our responsibility as committed Christians, those of you who have made a decision to follow Christ, to do enough reading so that you have answers for sincere and genuine questions.

There are a lot of reasons why I believe the Bible to be the Word of God. One of the reasons that I believe the Bible is because of the amazing accuracy of the prophecies in the Bible. Biblical prophecy is not like Nostradamus or the Psychic Hot-Line where they say, "You will meet a man in the next three months who will have brown hair and whose name will be John." I mean, that is a tough prediction in the United States.

Or to say to someone, "You are going to have some financial problems in the next year." Really, Wow. That's amazing.

Or words of knowledge: "There are some women here who have female problems." That is real revelation.

Biblical prophecy is of a whole different order. 700 years before Jesus ever walked the earth, there was a prediction that a virgin would have a baby in the city of Bethlehem. And that this baby would grow up to be a miracle worker, a powerful teacher, who would be rejected by the Jewish people in large measure. That their rejection would lead to them killing him by spreading him out and nailing him to some object.

The exact year, month, and day of Messiah's crucifixion was predicted 550 years before. The fact his clothes would be divided, that a friend would betray him for exactly 30 silver pieces, the type of tomb he'd be buried in, and the fact of his physical resurrection were all things predicted at least 500 years before Jesus ever walked the earth.

And I could take you through the scripture and show you dozens of other fulfilled prophecies and so could many other committed Christians. There are incredibly powerful reasons why we Christians believe that the Bible is God's Word. This is not a leap of faith in the dark as some suspect.

There are millions of people who are looking for some reasons to believe. It would be appropriate for you to have done enough reading and enough study, if you are a committed Christian, to offer those reasons. That is one group of people who argue.

On the other hand, there are people who engage and debate in argument not in order to believe, but in order to keep Christ at arm's length, to keep him away, to push him out on the periphery so they don't have to deal with the implications of his claims. I mean if for a moment a person stopped arguing and really opened himself up to the possibility that this whole deal about Jesus might be true, that thought process would require a change of everything. I mean if you just consider for a moment, what if that crazy Christian is actually onto something, what if Jesus really is the ultimate answer, that my eternal destiny turns on what I do with Him, what if this poor Jewish Galilian really was God come in the flesh, then you are going to have to do something with him. There are a lot of people who really do say to themselves, "I am not ready to change. The bottom line is that I am not willing to do what I think Jesus would require me to do."

That is a tough thing to admit. It is a tough thing to admit that you don't want to face the truth. And the reason why you don't is because of something as basic as sex. That the bottom line issue in your life is sex. You want to keep sleeping with your girlfriend. And so you argue against the claims of Christ because you don't want to give up the good thing you have going.

Or you don't want to give up career advancement or popularity or whatever you suspect Jesus might interfere with if he was really true. I think people rightly suspect that Jesus is an interferer. In fact, he is the ultimate interferer with all of our plans and all of our ambitions. And anyone who has ever met Jesus has discovered that he interferes with everything. But I haven't met very many people who will admit that their objections really boil down to sex or greed or ambition or personal pride.

"I just hate the idea of someone else telling me what to do, even if that person is God who made me."

So rather than admit any of that, we argue, we debate.

"After all, this can't be proven. If it can't be proven with mathematical certainty, then I don't have to change."

Now, I want to pause here and speak to those of you who have made commitments to follow Christ because I think it is important for you to discern whom you are talking to and what the source of their objection is. It is important that you be discerning regarding the source of people's objections. Not every single statement is coming from the same source. Some people's problems are not philosophical they are personal.

For example, a woman may say, "How can you believe in a good God when there is so much evil in the world?" What about that? And it could be that that woman has taken a class in philosophy, Philosophy 101, in which the problem of evil was raised and she wants to discuss with you the issues raised in her class of free will and God's control. But what if her questions regarding God's goodness spring from personal pain? What if she is still grieving over the death of her daughter who was run over by a drunk driver?

Do you see that you speak differently to a person who is a debater, who wants to keep God at arm's length, over against a person who is in personal pain? That is why it is so crucial; again I am speaking to those of you who have already made commitments to Christ. It is so crucial that we listen and that we hear people's hearts – what is the source of their argument – before we weave out our canned answers.

Now there is a problem with arguing with Jesus. The problem that people encounter, especially debaters, is that Jesus doesn't play fair. He just doesn't play fair. For one thing, he doesn't argue back. It is like hitting someone your ace serve and they just don't return it. You are looking forward to this wonderful game in which you can match wits. This lawyer, like all lawyers, is one who I picture him to have done extensive preparation for this case. Before he asked the question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? He has studied what all the experts have said. He has citations and quotes and cases and maneuvers and documents enough to fill two large filing drawers. He is ready to battle. He is going to have a little fun with Christ. Maybe Christ can talk to widows in an old-age home and wow them, but let's see if he is up to serious debate and discussion.

So he raised the question about eternal life, which is of course, one of the most controversial things a person could ever ask. "Tell me Jesus, what is the way to ultimate life? To living with God after I die?"

And this lawyer has all of the moves scoped out. If Jesus says that the way is to be related to me, then you say, "Well, why did God give the whole Old Testament?" If he says the way is to follow the whole Old Testament, then what about relating to you? I mean, Jesus, you can't have it both ways, can you?

Whatever he says, the lawyer is thinking, I have six follow-up questions. He is like a chess player who has the whole game mapped out in his mind. But as I said, Jesus never plays fair. That is so frustrating about relating to Christ. Instead, he does what he does with me all the time. He pierces my defenses by simply asking a question. And that question could be posed through the mouth of a friend or my children or my wife. Jesus answers a question with a question. He forces us to think. He forces us to really face the truth about ourselves, to really search out our motives.

You know, it is almost comical how hard we work to keep up the illusion that we are honest followers of God, that all of our questions and all of our discussion with our counselors are really designed to move us toward forgiving that other person, or toward change or repentance. That the only reason we are debating this is because we are

really sincere, we absolutely want to give. We want to give our money and we just need some help. So we will talk.

“Well, you know, God my real problem with doing your will is that I just don’t know what it is. I mean I kind of do, but I kind of don’t. It is all so gray.”

“I just don’t know how God wants me to behave in my dating relationship. If only he would just speak louder, then I would know what is appropriate and what is not.”

“I just don’t know what God wants me to give financially.”

Jesus will have none of this nonsense. He immediately asks the question, “Well, what is written in the law? How do you read it?”

I don’t think you catch the depth of comedy here, because you may not know that every morning during the lawyers prayers, he would take two boxes, they were small boxes with certain Old Testament passages inserted in the boxes, and he would tie one of those boxes onto his left arm with a leather strap and the other box with these Old Testament passages he would tie onto his head. Among the Old Testament verses that would be tied on this head, right between his eyes, and tied on his arm would be, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.” It is like there is a post-it note with John 3:16 written on it. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. And whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.” And that post-it note with John 3:16 is stuck on the inside of your glasses. You have the glasses on and you are saying to Jesus, “Now, I just don’t get the way to eternal life. I don’t understand it.” And this verse is right in your face.

Jesus says, “Well, how do you read? Tell me what is stuck on your head?”

He is forced to answer, “Well, love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus says, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live. Good boy.”

Of course, it is upsetting to have someone pat you on the head and so he is not done arguing. In frustration, it says, “But he wanting to justify himself asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbor?’” People don’t give up easily.

“Jesus, I hear that you are telling me to give sacrificially and extravagantly to the cause of the kingdom of God, but it is so complicated.”

“I hear you telling me to love my neighbor, but who is my neighbor? Does that include the person at the dry cleaners who just ruined my brand new suit?”

“What about my teacher who just screwed me out of an A?”

“What about the guy down the street who lets his dog mess in my yard? Is that my neighbor?”

“Until we get this neighbor thing dissected and discussed, I don’t even know who I am supposed to love.”

Again, Jesus just won’t play this game. That is what is so frustrating about arguing with God. Pretending that everything is much more complicated than it really is so that we don’t actually have to do something or change anything or repent of anything or forgive anyone.

Jesus tells a little story. He often did that. He would lead people down a path through a story. There is something about hearing stories that just captures our imagination. We all open up and say, “This is an interesting story.” And then we find, at least with Jesus’ stories, that he turns the tables on us.

This story concerns how we look at other people. The issue of who is my neighbor, to whom shall I show mercy, turns on how you look at, what your perspective is of other people. Let's go through the various characters in this story and consider how they looked at the poor victim who Jesus says was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers.

I realize that the lawyer is not part of the story, but giving his debating, argumentative style, I think he would have seen the victim as an issue to be discussed. A lot of us see other people, particularly people who are in need, whose life has just trampled down, who have been shredded in the gears through their own stupidity or through victimization by the system or by family, a lot of us see other people as issues to be discussed. It is not Johnny, my son, who fell in with a bad crowd and began to take drugs. It is the more abstract problem of teen drug abuse. It is not Joanie, my daughter, who got pregnant as a teenager; it is the more abstract problem of teen pregnancy.

There is a problem with the perspective of the lawyer. The first problem, of course, is that you can't have mercy on an issue. You can only have mercy on a person. Issues don't call forth compassion. You don't feel anything toward an issue. One of the Greek words that is used for mercy is the word "splanchna". It is similar to the Hebrew word "racham". It literally means bowels of mercy, a feeling in your gut of pity, compassion that is awakened by your touch with someone who is in trouble or suffering. This splanchna, this racham, is often used of God. It is used of Jesus when he looked at the blind man. It says that he was moved with, from the bowels of, from the depth, the entrails, a place deeper than the heart, right down in there. He saw a widow crying over the death of her son and he felt splanchna bowels of mercy.

The problem with the debating style is that you can't feel that regarding an issue. You can only feel splanchna regarding a person.

And the second problem with discussion and debate is the fact that we almost always get deceived into thinking that we have done something because we have talked about it. "Let's do a study group on the poor." The poor in quotes. And let's talk about the sources of poverty and the statistics of homelessness and the comparisons of American poverty with global poverty and suggest that the American poor are really doing quite well on a global basis. Let's consider the affects of the welfare system and how we feel about people misusing food stamps and abusing Medicaid. And let's discuss and debate and argue until we all get hoarse from piling words upon words upon words, but let's not actually do anything. Let's not actually arrange our schedule so that one Saturday morning every month or two to go down with our kids, or if we have no kids, go down ourselves to the food pantry that we have here to pray for a couple of poor people and hand them some groceries.

Let's not actually befriend a single mom or reach into our pockets when we see some homeless guy walking down the street and offer to buy him a sandwich rather than giving him the money because you are afraid that he is going to spend it on alcohol. Let's not actually say, "Hey, can I buy you a sandwich" or "Can I buy you a cup of coffee in that McDonald's over there?" Let's talk, discuss and argue and feel like we have done something regarding the poor in all of that. Is this not a lot of the church in America? And a lot of us, definitely me included? I love to talk a lot of the time. Talking instead of doing. Discussing instead of caring. Maybe we can even have a Journal of

Urban Affairs. How about if we made a commitment that the next time we find ourselves talking about the poor in any way, talking about welfare or food stamps, the poor – that the moment we discover that, we make a commitment that we are going to put some extra money in the poor box or go down to the food pantry to actually do something for the poor, or that we match our level of activity one to one with our level of discussion. How about that? Do you want to sign on to that? Real change here. Real mercy?

Well, how did the thieves see the victim? It says, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes and beat him and went away leaving him half dead.” How did the thieves view him? He was viewed obviously as an object to be exploited.

“Look, there is a walking wallet. There is bag of money walking on this dark road. He is a traveling jewelry box. He is an object to exploit. A thing to use.”

Exploitation. This is what is so tragic about the current lionization of Larry Flynt in the new Oliver Stone movie. Larry Flynt is an exploiter of women, an exploiter of children, and a user. He is not a First Amendment hero. He is a user. Women are objects. Children are objects.

The unfortunate thing is that so many of our own interactions have that exploitative element where we treat another person as an object, as a thing to use. A salesman can fall into this trap, right?

“Hi, how you doing? Good to meet you. Need insurance? My company has a product that I think you would love. Can we get together?”

I remember when Marlene and I first were married. We were two 20-year olds. We were babies. We had almost no money. We were attending this church that was filled with people who were mostly older than us by a lot. This one young couple approached us for what we thought was friendship. We were excited about it. We wanted to get involved in the church. We were involved in our college campus, but we thought we ought to be involved in the church we were going to, to some degree. So we were excited that this one young couple approached us. They asked if we could get together, so we invited them over to our little apartment. We cleaned up and Marlene made something. To make a long story short, he was a life insurance salesman whose entire interest in meeting with us was to sell me a policy that I didn’t need or could afford and that was a terrible financial move for me as a broke 20-year old.

Before you start writing me letters about life insurance salesmen, I know that you are not like that. I am not picking on a profession. There are great, honest insurance sales people and great honest sales people of every kind. I am just talking about our experience, which is universal, as being treated as objects. It is like a friendship being offered as bait for some multi-level distribution presentation.

We Christians can do this. Pretending to offer friendship so that we can really solicit people for our brand of Christianity. How many folks have been turned off to Christianity because someone befriended them and then when there was no immediate response, they were dropped like a hot potato? Let me suggest something to you. No one wants to be your project, especially not this oversold, over hyped, constantly manipulated TV generation. No one wants to be our projects.

I think that one of the things that mercy calls for is for us to say that with God's help, I will try to offer friendship to people, no strings attached. And, if they don't buy our church or our viewpoint or our whatever, it is okay. I can still be their friend.

I am not in any way telling you, those of you who are committed Christians, to go underground with you faith and to stop sharing. You always keep sharing. But you need to offer love and friendship with no strings attached. One of the most freeing things that could happen in your life is for you to approach people no strings attached. I am not coming toward you to get anything or to use you. I am not making any demands on you. I am just going to love you and offer you friendship, no strings attached. I am telling you that will just release you and revolutionize your relationships. Keep sharing, keep talking, keep inviting, keep including, no strings attached. Do this because I think this is the best thing in the world and I love you enough to tell you the way to eternal life, but I will still love you anyway.

What about the Priest and Levite? What was their viewpoint of the victim? Verses 31-32, "A priest happened to be going down the same road. When he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So, too, Levite. When he came to the place and saw him, he passed by on the other side."

How did the priest and Levite see this victim? They saw him the way many of us see other people—as problems to be avoided.

"Uh-oh, here she comes. She has that needy look in her eye. I had better jump in my car and pretend that I didn't hear her calling my name."

"Here he comes. He is probably going to talk with me again about his divorce and about how unfairly his ex has been treating him."

"I had better keep my head down in the office and look like I am really busy."

A problem to be avoided. Why do we see other people that way?

Well, busyness, maybe even for God. I like to imagine that the priest was on his way to the temple to worship. He didn't want to be late. I am going to meet with God. Maybe the Levite was just coming home from delivering a lecture that he gave on loving the stranger in our midst. That lecture was really well received and he was bursting to tell his wife about things that people had said to him about the lecture. Why don't we stop, listen and look? Maybe we are busy for God. I am on a mission from God, like the Blues Brothers.

Or maybe it is not for God but you have your agenda for the day. You have a to-do list that runs for 34 pages. That is why we are problem avoidant. Let me make this personal.

Why do I detour around people? One of the major mercy killers in my life is just an unwillingness to be interrupted, to refuse to open up in the moment and say, "okay, God, you knew that I had other plans. You knew that I had another agenda, but if this person is part of your will for this moment..." I don't think every person who comes to you is sent by God, but I do think that it is appropriate for us to ask God and say, "Is this something you want me to do now, Lord? I am available."

Now, it is okay to recognize that what this person really needs is not you, but they need God or to help point them in the direction of resource. We are not everyone's answer. They may think you are, but you aren't. You know that. You are not everyone's banker or everyone's intercessor or healer. You are not. So it is okay to

point people to other resources. But it is also appropriate to say to the Lord, “Do you want me to help? I am here for you, to do your bidding.”

Of course, it is not only busyness that causes us to avoid problems and kill mercy. There is also the exacting mentality that destroys mercy. You know, the Levite and the priest may have been guilty of weighing everything out to the penny and to the pound, making sure that everything is rightly divided and correctly allocated. “I have \$400 set aside for the year for giving to mercy and the moment I get to \$400, that’s it.”

“I have x-amount of time in my schedule for helping others.” Sometimes there is a rigidity, an exactness that destroys mercy.

Of course, there can be an over-analysis, a reasoning process that kills mercy and causes us to skirt other people’s problems. You see someone in need and you say, “God, do you want me to be available” and you have this faint twinge inside that you ought to do something and that you ought to offer to pray, that you ought to look the person in the eye for a moment and listen. But then you suppress that by reasoning, by thinking, “Wait a minute, I am responsible to my family, my small group and to my clients, my colleagues and my parents, the shareholders in my company.” You start thinking about the fact that this person is in this predicament because of his or her own fault. The priest and the Levite may have said to themselves, “Goodness gracious, if he wasn’t so stupid to have walked along a dark road at night when there are signs posted everywhere saying, ‘Beware of thieves’”—there really weren’t, but you know that is the feeling. This person got himself in this predicament and he is not owed any mercy. The person doesn’t deserve it. They are in this predicament because of their own foolishness.

You know the answer to that: This person doesn’t deserve mercy? The answer is, of course, they don’t deserve mercy. That is why it is called mercy and not justice. No one ever deserves mercy. That is why it is called mercy. Get it? Mercy is kindness shown to people who don’t deserve it. Mercy is going beyond what people have merited.

And let me let you in on a little secret. If you think about whether you should give a tithe or help or serve or spend a little time listening, or spend time tearing down chairs here, or do anything, if you spend any time thinking about it, you will always be able to manufacture a reason why you shouldn’t. The fact is that people whom hyper analyze their giving do not give. The people who hyper analyze their time do not share their time. They don’t, because there is something in the human heart that can always manufacture another reason not to. There is a brokenness in us, a selfishness in us, a greediness, a stinginess in the fiber of our being; something about the human heart that can always manufacture a reason not to.

I am not telling you to be reckless. I am not telling you to not think at all. I am only saying that you and I are made of the same stuff. And that stuff is problem avoidance and insulation from other people’s pain. And we can always manufacture a reason not to. We can. It is not hard, because I do it all the time.

Finally, of course, we have the perspective of the Samaritan. And he is the only one who looked at the victim as a person to be helped. “As he traveled, he came to where the man was and when he saw him he took pity on him, bandaged his wounds, poured on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to the inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the

innkeeper. Look after him, he said. When I return, I will reimburse you for any expense you may have.”

Of course, the mention of the Samaritan sends an electric shock through the lawyer and through the crowd greater than me saying that the person who helped was someone from the Gay Men’s Glee Club or the National Abortion Rights Action League. Samaritans were biracial. They were theologically off. There were lots of errors in their system, lots of crazy views regarding God. They didn’t keep the laws the way the orthodox Jews knew the laws should be kept.

I want to remind you that the Samaritan wasn’t a professional helper. Sometimes we put the Samaritan in this category—he had a tag on his chest that read, “Good Samaritan”, that was his job. He wasn’t the Good Samaritan until he did good. This guy wasn’t a medic or a policeman or the innkeeper, someone who helps people in need. Mercy wasn’t his job. Mercy wasn’t his professional role. Some people deceive themselves into thinking they are merciful because their job is to help people. But mercy is never part of a job description. It is all the things that come at you apart from your job description. It is all the people that come to you with needs that don’t fit in anywhere.

You see mercy spelled out really plainly here. Mercy begins, of course, with the Samaritan being willing to look at the man. It says that a Samaritan came to where the man was and when he saw him...he looked at the man not as an issue to be discussed, not as a problem to be avoided, not as an object to be exploited. He looked at a person and he allowed himself to feel for the person. Mercy starts with looking and with compassion.

And it goes on to say that he bandaged his wounds and poured oil and wine. Those were used for medicine in that day. He bandaged him up and took care of him. Mercy involves contact with people. You can’t show mercy without some degree of contact. It is not enough to write a check. It is part of it. We will see that in just a second. But that is not enough. You actually have to interact with real people.

So there is compassion. There is contact. And there is a cost to mercy. There always is. There is no such thing as cost free mercy. This man takes him to the inn. He took money out of his own pocket. Mercy is not something that you show from someone else’s pocket. It is not just encouraging your company to give to United Way. It is from your own pocket. It costs. Mercy is not encouraging the church to give out of a church fund. It is you giving out of your own pocket. It costs.

In answer to the question that is my neighbor, Jesus asked which of these men was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? In other words, whose neighbor are you?

Let me draw some bottom line conclusions and then I am going to finish with a story. There are people who are looking to you specifically to be their neighbor. There are folks who are approaching you as their hope, their provider, and their need-meeter. They may not be people that you would have picked. They may be people who have gotten into their predicament because of their own foolishness, their own error. They find themselves bruised and battered. I would suggest that everyone of us has a few people in our lives, it could be family members – a sister who messed up, a brother in law who is continually out of work, a neighbor who always needs assistance fixing something in their house, a co-worker going through her third divorce – there is

someone in your life who is looking at you as their neighbor. Those folks are good places to start in showing mercy.

You say, "Rich, why should I show mercy?"

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy." The reason that you show mercy is the reason that we orient our hearts in all these Beatitudes, because this is the way that we make ourselves capable of receiving grace.

Henri Nouwen was a priest who used to teach at Harvard University. At the height of his career at Harvard, after he had written a number of immensely successful books, he moved to a community called Day-Break near Toronto in order to take on the chore of caring for a mentally retarded man named Adam. Adam was a 25-year old man who cannot speak, cannot dress or undress himself, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without help. He doesn't cry or laugh. His back is distorted. His arm and leg movements are twisted. He suffers from severe epilepsy and despite heavy medication have very few days without major grand mal seizures. Sometimes he utters a howling groan. On a few occasions, he will cry. Nouwen says that it takes him about an hour and a half to wake Adam up and give him his medication, carry him to his bath, wash him and shave him and clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, put him in a wheel chair and bring him to the place where he spends most of his day with therapeutic exercise.

An author once asked Nouwen, "Why did you give up your place at Harvard to help this guy?"

Nouwen said, "You don't get it. Adam is not the one benefiting from our relationship. I am the winner." He said, "Getting to know Adam has put me in touch with how obsessive, how competitive, how much every relationship of mine was marked with rivalry. How I was driven to succeed at school. How I constantly advertised my accomplishments. I have received so much more in my relationship with Adam than he has received."

Henri Nouwen is basically saying that every time you show mercy, you are the winner. There is something that happens to your heart when you do.

You know, the church throughout history has seen in the story of the Good Samaritan a picture of what Jesus Christ has done for each one of us. Christ found us as lost sinners, broken and half dead, going nowhere with no one to care. Religion doesn't help us. Other people don't assist us. And Jesus Christ comes along to meet our needs. He comes to where we are, took on human flesh. He had compassion. He is willing to pay the cost of loving us, in fact, the full cost by dying on the cross. There was nothing in us that merited the price that he paid. It was all pure mercy.

Today, there are some of you who really need to receive the mercy of Jesus Christ by accepting the full forgiveness that he offers to you. God wants a relationship with you. And you need a relationship with him. Jesus came to pay the price, to open the door for relationship. If that is your heart's desire, to have a personal relationship with God, to really get to know him, I want you to join with me in this prayer.