

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 16, 2014**

**WHAT GOD WANTS:
(3) LOVING MERCY**

Luke 15:25-37

It was all over the local news just a few weeks ago. You probably saw it or heard about it. Medric “Cecil” Mills, Jr. and his daughter were returning to their vehicle in the parking lot of a shopping center across the street from a fire station in Northeast D. C. when Mr. Mills, 77, suffered a massive heart attack and collapsed to the pavement. Several people on the scene ran to the firehouse to get help for Mr. Mills. At least three times they banged on the door of the firehouse pleading for help, but each time the firefighters inside turned them away. The firefighters said they couldn’t respond unless someone first called 911. Help finally arrived on the scene some 15 or 20 minutes later – and then, only because a D. C. police officer flagged down an ambulance passing by. Emergency responders were dispatched from another location, but they were sent to the wrong quadrant of the District. Mr. Mills, a longtime employee of the District’s Parks and Recreation Department, was taken to Washington Hospital Center, where he died later that day.

The whole situation caused a great deal of bewilderment in the District and beyond. Not only the family and friends of Medric Mills, but any reasonable person with the tiniest trace of compassion would ask: Why couldn’t the emergency responders at the fire station across the street from Mr. Mills respond? Why didn’t they?

I don’t think we need to wonder what Jesus would say about this. He would point to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, don’t you think?

WHAT DOES GOD WANT?

Before we look in-depth at Jesus’ teaching on the Good Samaritan, listen again to the words of Micah 6:8:

(The Lord) has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God.

What does God want? He wants us to do justice – to act justly, to work for justice for all people, especially for those who are poor, vulnerable, or powerless. Doing justice matters. Why? Because God *is* just. Because God *loves* justice. Because it grieves the heart of God when anyone anywhere is treated unjustly. In the words of the prophet Amos, God wants us to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

God also calls us to love mercy. To love mercy is to make mercy and kindness to others a way of life. Mercy is a caring, compassionate response that moves a person to help someone in need (*Revell Bible Dictionary*). It is compassion for people in need (John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*). But it is more than a feeling of compassion. And it is more than words. *Hesed*, the Hebrew word variously translated “mercy,” or “kindness,” or “steadfast love,” is never just a warm emotional feeling of goodwill toward someone. It always involves practical action of some kind on behalf of another (Will Kynes, “God’s Grace in the Old Testament: Considering the *Hesed* of the Lord,” *Knowing & Doing*, Summer 2010). To love mercy the way God wants us to love mercy involves getting involved.

James, writing about the relationship between faith and works, says that if a brother or sister comes to you half-starved and wearing tattered clothing, and you say: “It’s great to see you, friend! I wish you well. Keep warm and well fed. Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” but you go on your way without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup, what good is that? What good do your cheery words do? (James 2:15-16, adapted from NIV and *The Message*).

1 John 3:17 makes the same point. In *The Message* it says: “If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.” If you have no compassion and show no mercy toward a person in need when it is in your power to help, how can the love of God be in you?

Mercy, like justice, requires action. Feelings aren’t enough. Neither are words. In real life, to love mercy involves loving one another. It involves loving our neighbor with acts of kindness and service. It involves making mercy and kindness a way of life. It involves not *random* acts, but *intentional* acts of kindness as a way of life. Jesus gets to the heart of what it means to love our neighbor and what it means to be a neighbor in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Most of you, maybe all of you, are familiar with the story. You probably know that this parable is found only in the Gospel of Luke. It is not in any of the other Gospels. You probably know that a *parable* is a story. But it is not just any story; it is a certain kind of story. A parable is a story with a point. It is meant not simply to entertain, but to teach some truth or illustrate a point. You can’t read the parable of the Good Samaritan without realizing that it has a point. A powerful point.

WHAT MUST I DO?

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan in response to a question – two questions, actually, one in verse 25 of our Scripture text and another in verse 29. This “expert in the Jewish law” (verse 25) had come with a question “to test Jesus.” Asking questions about how to attain eternal life was not unusual among the Jews in Jesus’ day, who longed for some assurance about what awaited them after death, just as people do today. This lawyer’s motives, however, were mixed at best. It wasn’t insight or assurance that he wanted so much as to put Jesus and His teaching on the hot seat. He wanted to see if he could trip Jesus up or

embarrass Jesus in some way, so that he – the expert in the Jewish law – would be in a position to show Jesus up. He was hoping to make Jesus look bad and to make himself look good.

That kind of thing, of course, never happens around here, says the preacher, tongue firmly planted in cheek. ☺ People here in Washington never do that, do they? Try to make others look bad and to make oneself, or one's interest group, or one's political party look good? Who does that? The better question is: Who doesn't?

Jesus wouldn't let Himself get caught in the lawyer's trap. In reply to the first question about how to inherit eternal life – the same question posed to Jesus by the rich young ruler on another occasion (Matthew 19:16; Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18) – Jesus sent the lawyer back to the law. Why would Jesus do this? Not because salvation can be found in the law (it cannot), but because the law shows us our need of salvation. The law shows us what God desires and requires of us, and how we fail – every last one of us – to attain God's standard of righteousness. There can be no true conversion without conviction of sin. And God uses the law to convict sinners like you and me.

The lawyer seemed to understand that the essence of the Jewish law is contained in the twin commands to love God with your whole being – heart, mind, soul, and strength – and to love your neighbor as yourself. On a different occasion, Jesus Himself identified these two as the greatest and most important commandments of all (Matthew 23:34-40; Mark 12:28-34). Here, in response to the lawyer's answer, Jesus said: "You're right. Do this – fulfill these two commandments – and you will live" (verse 28). In other words, to inherit eternal life, all you have to do is to obey these two commands perfectly.

At this point, the lawyer should have admitted the obvious, which is that neither he nor any of his devoutly religious friends nor any other person who has ever lived – except Jesus – can ever live a life of complete and total obedience to God's commands. It is an impossibly high standard. I hope this is intuitively obvious to you. It should have been intuitively obvious to the lawyer. If he really thought he could attain eternal life by being good enough, he was living in a fantasy world. Performance-based salvation is possible only in theory. It is possible if you can do it. But none of us can do it. Salvation, thank God, comes to us by grace, which is given free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will – like me and you. It is only by the grace of God, as a gift undeserved, that we can inherit eternal life. Jesus wanted the lawyer to recognize his need of grace.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

The lawyer, however, was not yet ready to give up on his self-justification program. Looking for a way "to justify himself" (verse 29, NIV), "looking for a loophole" (*The Message*) in order to prove his moral and spiritual virtue, he asked Jesus: "So, just who is my neighbor? How do you define 'neighbor,' anyway?"

As Tim Keller writes in his book *Generous Justice*, "the law expert wanted to whittle down this command to make it more achievable, and to keep his works-righteousness approach to

life intact” (Keller, 66). He wanted a manageable set of rules he could keep. But this could be accomplished only by limiting the scope or dumbing down of the requirement to love one’s neighbor.

Instead of engaging the lawyer in an abstract theological discussion, Jesus proceeded to tell him a story – the story (parable) of the Good Samaritan. You know how it goes. A Jewish man is on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a desolate, hazardous, treacherous road known as a haven for robbers, when he is ambushed by a bunch of thugs, beaten, robbed, stripped, and left half dead in a ditch. Fortunately for the wounded man, along comes first a priest and then a Levite, one of the temple assistants, one after the other. Surely one of them will stop to help. Unfortunately for the man in the ditch, however, when they see him lying there, both priest and Levite go out of their way to avoid getting involved. Each of them sees him lying there in great need and passes by on the other side of the road.

We don’t know why each one did what he did. Maybe they were in a hurry because they each had an important appointment to keep, and they couldn’t afford to be late. Maybe they were like so many of us, who always have things to do, places to go, and people to see. Besides, maybe the man in the ditch was already dead, and they didn’t want to take a chance on violating the ceremonial purity laws by coming into contact with a dead body. Or, maybe they were afraid it was a trick. Maybe the man in the ditch wasn’t really injured at all. Maybe he was faking it in order to lure some unsuspecting do-gooder into a trap, and then his co-conspirators in crime would jump out from behind the rocks and beat, rob, and leave the priest or the Levite half-dead by the side of the road. The priest and the Levite may each have considered this possibility and decided the risk was too great. So, they each choose to pass by on the other side. For whatever reason(s), each of them refuses to get involved. They both fail to live up to their vocations as servants of God. They both fail to show mercy to someone in great need, even though it is in their power to help.

Then, Jesus said, a Samaritan comes along the road and sees the man in the ditch. As you probably know, Samaritans and Jews despised each other. Jews looked down on Samaritans with contempt and vitriol going back more than 700 years before the coming of Christ. To the Jews, Samaritans were racially inferior half-breeds and religious heretics. They referred to Samaritans as “dogs.” As far as the Jews were concerned, Samaritans were scumbags. The bottom line was that Jews did not associate with Samaritans (John 4:9).

The Samaritans, as you can imagine, didn’t care much for the Jews either. They despised the Jews for despising them. They hated the Jews for their attitude of racial superiority, their pride and prejudice against the Samaritans.

To the Jewish way of thinking, there was no such thing as a “good Samaritan.” It was a contradiction in terms. Yet a Samaritan is the hero in Jesus’ story. Verse 33 says that the Samaritan, as he travels along the road, comes upon the man in the ditch. When he sees the man’s condition, his heart goes out to him. He takes pity on him. In the Greek, the word for pity (*esplanchnisthe*) means a deep feeling of sympathy or compassion. Which spurs the Samaritan into action. What does he do to show compassion, mercy, and kindness to the man in the ditch?

- He risks his own life to attend to the wounded man's needs.
- He administers first aid, using his own wine as a disinfectant and his own olive oil as a lotion.
- He tears pieces of his own clothing into strips to make bandages for the injured man's wounds.
- He puts the man on his own donkey and takes him to an inn where he cares for him.
- Before going on his way, he pays the innkeeper out of his own pocket to care for the wounded man until he has fully recuperated, promising to come back and pay more, if needed. The two silver coins (denarii) he gives the innkeeper would be enough to cover the cost of the man's lodging and care for up to two months.

What the Samaritan does, he does at a substantial personal cost to himself.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr spoke about the parable of the Good Samaritan in the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech he gave the night before he was assassinated in April 1968. In that speech, as he spoke about the man who had been beaten and robbed and just left there by the side of the road, and about the priest and Levite who came along and saw the man lying there, Dr. King said: "The first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'"

That sounds a lot like a lot of us, doesn't it? Too often, our main concern is with how any potential course of action will affect *us*.

"But then," King continued, "the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

That puts a different light on it, doesn't it? And isn't that the light in which Jesus wants us to see it?

Tim Keller writes: "We instinctively tend to limit for whom we exert ourselves. We do it for people like us, and for people whom we like. Jesus," he says, "will have none of that. By depicting a Samaritan helping a Jew, Jesus could not have found a more forceful way to say that anyone at all in need – regardless of race, politics, class, and religion – is your neighbor. Not everyone is your brother or sister in the faith, but everyone is your neighbor, and you must love your neighbor" (Keller, *Generous Justice*, 67-68).

Your neighbor, Jesus is saying, is anyone in need. The neighbor to whom we are to show mercy, compassion, kindness, and generosity is anyone in need whom we have the ability to help. Anyone.

If the story of the Good Samaritan were recast in a more contemporary context, I wonder what kinds of people or groups of people Jesus would put in it. Instead of a despised Samaritan coming to the aid of a Jew who has been ignored by fellow Jews, imagine, say, a Tea Party conservative rescuing the leader of the most left-leaning political action group in America, or vice versa. Imagine an African-American in the South during the era of segregation saving the life of a white racist police chief or the head of the Ku Klux Klan. Imagine a Muslim

jihadist, a member of Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, coming to the aid of an Israeli Jew, or vice versa. Or, imagine a socially conservative, evangelical Christian (someone like me, perhaps) being ignored by fellow Christians “who pass by on the other side,” only to be rescued and cared for by an avowedly atheist radical activist for the pro-homosexual agenda, who advocates “same-sex marriage” and societal penalties against those who oppose it. What do you think?

The lawyer had asked Jesus: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered his question but, in doing so, He drove home the call to be a good neighbor. “What do you think?” Jesus asked the legal expert. “Which of the three (priest, Levite, or Samaritan) became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?” (verse 36, *The Message*).

The answer was so obvious the lawyer could not miss it. “The one who had mercy on him,” he said (verse 37, NIV); “the one who treated him kindly” (*The Message*).

WHAT IS THE POINT?

So then, if a parable is a story with a point, what is the point of the story? Perhaps there is more than one. The point, as we have already seen, is that the neighbor whom we are to love, the neighbor to whom we are to show mercy and kindness in practical ways, is anyone in need whom we have the ability and opportunity to help. Anyone. The point is also that Jesus is calling us to *be* a neighbor to whomever the Lord puts in our path who is in need. Jesus is calling us to be a good neighbor by showing mercy and kindness, by acts of love and service, to anyone we have the ability and opportunity to help. Not just people we like or people who like us. Not just those we are comfortable helping. And not just when it doesn’t cost us anything, but even when there is a significant cost, as was the case for the Good Samaritan. This is the kind of life God intends for us when He calls us, in Micah 6:8, to do justice and to love mercy.

To love our neighbor in this way requires a radical commitment – a radical commitment to God, first of all, and a radical commitment to others. Our motivation for doing it is *not* to attain salvation and eternal life by our good works. Rather, we devote ourselves to loving God with everything we have and loving our neighbors with a Christ-like love *because* of the undeserved mercy, love, and favor God has showered on us. “We love,” as the apostle John says, “because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

THE GREAT SAMARITAN

There is one more thing I want you to see in connection with the story of the Good Samaritan. The Bible says that, in a way, we are like the man left dying at the side of the road. In fact, the Bible says that we were all not merely wounded, but spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). But Jesus came into our dangerous world and traveled down our road. And though we were His enemies and our hearts were far from Him, Jesus was moved with compassion by our plight. As Tim Keller says so well, “Jesus came to us and saved us, not merely at the risk of His life, as in the case of the Samaritan, but at the cost of His life. On the

cross He paid a debt we could never have paid ourselves. Jesus is the Great Samaritan to whom the Good Samaritan points” (Keller, *Generous Justice*, 77).

Friends, you and I are to be like the Good Samaritan, who showed mercy and kindness to a neighbor in great need. Remember the directive Jesus gave to “go and do likewise” (verse 37). Don’t say “No” when it is in your power to help. Be like the Good Samaritan.

But also praise God for the Great Samaritan, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of His life has fully paid for all your sins. Praise God for Jesus, the Great Samaritan, who bore your sins and mine in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). Thank God for the Great Samaritan, the Suffering Servant, who was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5).

If you have never done so, open your heart to Him today to receive His gracious, redeeming love for you. He will enable you to make showing mercy, kindness, and love to others a way of life.

Soli Deo Gloria. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name, today and always. Amen.