

“Trifling with God”
 Sermon for 19 April 2015
 Matthew 5:7, Luke 10:25-37

Our primary text (Matthew 5:7) says, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.**" Our secondary text, the parable of the Good Samaritan, demonstrates the shocking tendency men have to trifle with God. **And behold a certain lawyer stood up to put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"** His desire to trip Jesus up is what colors the text—he is not seeking truth, saving knowledge or any such thing. No, in his black heart, he wants to **put Jesus to the test**. He wanted to put Jesus in the position of saying something incriminating, something that would substantiate his prejudice that Jesus was a false teacher. Jesus' response is an offensive move in the war of truth versus falsehood. He asks the treacherous lawyer to answer from the Book. It is the same approach that Jesus took with our chief adversary in the wilderness temptations. **What is written in the law?** What do you know about the matter you raise? Is this a rhetorical question? Are you sincerely inquiring *or do you seriously want to trifle with Me?* The lawyer is too self-absorbed to see how the tables have been turned, or too proud. So, his pride kicking in, he proceeds to vaunt his knowledge. And out his own mouth he demonstrates not only that he is treacherous, but that he bears substantial ill-will against Jesus *if not downright contempt and hatred*. What Jesus does is to let the man be exposed for what he is and Jesus gives him nothing to work with: **You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.** However, what our lawyer friend alleges we should do, the same lawyer does not do. Indeed, he cannot¹. He does not **love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all you mind; and your neighbor as yourself**. The problem lies not with his knowledge but with his inveterate hatred of God. Such a heartless man, treacherous and dishonest, cannot possibly live according to the terms of the law **and this fundamental truth about his true condition is not apparent to him at all!** God doesn't save anyone on the basis of what we know; rather God saves through whom you love. God requires that love of the Son overshadow the native hatred of the

¹ The foolish lawyer's less than honest question, remember he intentionally was putting Jesus **to the test**; he was trying to trip Jesus up. Do we recognize the trap? First, the lawyer appears to be contrasting, or opposing Jesus and His gospel to the common understanding of the Law. **What must I do to inherit** (i.e. to earn, deserve or merit) **eternal life?** What a cheeky, insolent question! Surely, we would respond, "Nothing, sir. Eternal life is not earned as if it consisted of wages due. Nor it is an award at the honors banquet of human performance. No one merits what is the **free gift of God**. And, we might add, putting the icing on the cake, even the Law, properly taught and understood, says so! *The gospel, which completes, rather than contradicts the Law, agrees with the revelations contained in the Old Testament.* Jesus adroitly puts the burden back on the lawyer, almost as if saying, "Come, come, sir. Surely you know better than to trifle with God:" **"What is written in the law? How do you read?"** Jesus made him reveal to all his intent and his misreading of Jesus' teaching. It is best not to mess with the Lord who, in addition to everything else means business.

unconverted heart. *Those who love God do not trifle with His Word, or try to put the Son to a test! Friends do not set each other up. He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"*

"**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.**" Sounds fairly self-evident, doesn't it? But for those paying attention (people who far this side of putting God to the test by complicating His Word) this beatitude does raise a question: If salvation is by grace through faith, how do we square that up with the implication here that only the merciful will find mercy from God at the judgment day? Is this not salvation by works? No. We do not earn God's mercy. There is no way that we could. No, we can no more earn divine mercy by what we do than this foolish lawyer could earn eternal life by loving God with everything he is and has and ever could be. And the reason is not in the striving, no, the reason he falls short has to do with the unaddressed hatred for God that tethers his life to the work of Satan—he is, on the level of his heart motivation, a child of the Devil. (He is not a descendant of Abraham, but of a God-hating fallen angel. He is a slave to his lusts, of flesh and of spirit; his heart is very black indeed. His attempt to betray Jesus to God's enemies reeks in the nostrils of the Most High!

One should have more respect than to put Jesus to the test—yet the same disrespect is done regularly in the media and the press. Those who misquote and misrepresent Jesus by referring to Him as a mere man, or who teach falsely that He somehow *became the Christ* (when the truth is the opposite: the Eternal One, even Christ, took on flesh, becoming the man Jesus within the bounds of a particular time, place and person) shows both an unfamiliarity with the truth as well as an absence of wholesome fear and/or love of God. One of the two thieves crucified with Jesus had it right. He said, **Have you no fear of God, since you are under the same sentence** (of death)? **We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.**" (Luke 23:40-41) So much for the superficial notion that Jesus was merely "a good person." Those who fear God know the meaning of doing *nothing wrong*—the moral perfections of Jesus, testified to by even His enemies (and validated out of His own mouth: **Why do you call Me good? Only One is good and He is God.**) Jesus was no one to trifle with and, to this day, is still not. Interesting point, but the more pressing one is addressed to us: do we, are we unwittingly perhaps, trifling with God? We should know, so that we can instantly repent.

Unaware that he has been bested with **You have answered correctly, do this, and you shall live.** Out of your own mouth, you have admitted that **You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.** Yes, yes. It is all very clear and desperately unattainable. We can do it to some extent, but nothing reaching near the "all-ness" demanded by God's perfect law. There's the rub. It is not that we are unaware of what we ought to do; we are aware. We simply stated, cannot

do it apart from faith, grace and the power of God. **What is impossible with man, is possible with God.** (Luke 18:27 and Matthew 19:26) The lawyer is either desperately on the ropes, or more terrified of losing face before his colleagues than of lacking the fear of God, plunges off the cliff, so to speak, with a derisive sneering question: **And who is my neighbor?**

Who do you think heads the list of those under God's wrath? Is it the band of thieves who stripped, beat and left for dead a certain Jewish man? Or, how about the two religious professionals who played it safe and, rather than risk involvement, passed by on the other side? Or how about the insolent lawyer who sought **to put Jesus to the test** with his treacherous questions . . . and followed that up with attempting to justify himself with the saucy question, **"And who is my neighbor?"** And how about the college crowd on Spring Break in Panama City Beach? Who proved to be a neighbor to the incapacitated girl who was gang raped in plain view? Was there no one there to intervene, and show mercy? What about the drunken debauchery, or the pundits who express approval by mocking the shock or horror of others? Could it be the reporters whose best shot was *wow! This is really dangerous. Not depraved, disgusting, reprobate and wickedly sinful?* Or, would it be the three depraved men who perpetrated the act? Or, the murderous Islamic terrorists who daily add to their blood-guiltiness. The answer is: all of the above. As it is written, **¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ESV (Romans 1: 18-19)** All who trifle with God come under His wrath and God is committed to avenging Himself upon all rebels, all His enemies.

Jesus responds with our main text, the parable of "The Good Samaritan." Robberies on, or along the Jericho Road were so frequent as to be unremarkable. The road was infested with violent robbers. That fact will make my next contention more feasible. I think that this parable was an appropriation of current events, something out of the daily news. Everyone knew about the incident, totally familiar only the names of the hapless were changed as time went on. I mean to suggest that the popular outrage was rather ho hum and philosophical: "The darn fool shouldn't have traveled at that time of day . . . or without an armed escort." Everyone was secretly relieved that they were not the victim. Here's the rest of the story:

Jesus replied, "A (certain—in the Greek) man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho [and so he was probably a Jew and thus hated by the Samaritans], and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his

wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of the three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" [The lawyer] said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Now comes the shocking part. The news reported that a Samaritan was the hero of the incident and that a priest and a Levite had walk by leaving their beaten fellow Jew (a certain as in specific, perhaps even known individual) to die of his wounds, stripped, beaten and robbed. A natural question at this point is this: who reported the incident? Was it the innkeeper? Did the victim of this crime relate his plight to his sympathetic ears? Was the innkeeper so outraged by the lack of mercy by religious professional that he went off to Jerusalem and “out-ed” them? Was it the victim, left for dead, when he recovered returned to relate his abuse and miraculous deliverance by a despised and hated Samaritan. Maybe there were intrepid reporters back then who would spread the news that mattered to the local authorities, synagogue leaders, saying, “Hey, guys, we can do better than this. Let’s help the authorities apprehend these villains. (Perhaps this law and order movement was what led to the two robbers who died alongside Jesus that fateful day—for them!) Please remember, all this framing is somewhat speculative but the inferences drawn from Luke 10 are reasonable. The designation of the man harmed, as “a certain man,” provides a possible link, or tag to current events that should, perhaps, not be overlooked.

This means that people would be talking about Joe being back. Remember, a couples weeks ago Joe wanted to take a last minute business trip in Jericho . . . he owns a shop there, don’t you. Well, he was robbed and pretty near beaten to death. Yeah, anyway, he was befriended by a stranger, a Samaritan even. Well, image that, a Samaritan no less. Who would have thought? Yes, the man bound up his wounds, take the time to take to the local inn. Been back a couple of times to check on old Joe. Put it all on his bill, too. How kind. Yes, God is merciful. Wasn’t there anyone else who saw him? Rumor has it a local priest and even a temple priest passed by—Joe is struggling with paying his temple tax these days. Says, we support the priesthood . . . you might think they’d be more compassionate. Well, folks can’t be too careful these days. A man could get hurt helping others. Wait a minute! What do you mean, too careful? Is God alone to be merciful and we get off scot free? Well, the priests had their own affairs, their own business to attend to. What could be more important than saving a man’s life? Well, now that you mention it, it sound pretty petty, trivial. Really? How about ungodly and unmerciful and unjust? You know, just for starters. There was a lot of reflecting going on . . . and who knows, maybe even some repenting.

What we have here is “sanctified current events.” Jesus took an event in the news and used it to explain mercy, to explain how we are to respond to the pain,

misery and misfortune of others. It does no one any good to evade the call to love our neighbor . . . God has promised us reward, not safety and long life. We, too, can sanctify the news. We can turn it to good, illustrative use; we could build up each others faith by thinking, "Wow, what does this tell us about God . . . about people . . . about our own hearts." And here, in part, is what the parable tells us about our own lives. The reason the priests passed by the man could signify fear, fear of involvement and fear of danger. But the charge of playing religion cannot be lifted—their walk of faith was lacking in spiritual participation. It is as if they were religious formalists, caught up in the rituals, the minutia of religious observances, but far from the love, far from the love of God and neighbor.

God wants a full-throated, full-throttled, red-blooded, full-bodied and radical love from us— passionate love that is complete and deep, not wide and shallow! He wants the same intensity of love for one another. And we, we are so easily distracted, so easily satisfied with stuff, fluff and nonsense. We tend to expend ourselves on the ephemera². **You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.**

"The lesson we learn from the words of Jesus when he says, "I desire mercy not sacrifice," and when he says, "You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel," is that a great obstacle and enemy to mercy is the preoccupation with trifles in life. *The bondage to triviality is the curse of the unmerciful.* [Picky, Picky, Picky] When Jesus says, "Don't neglect the weightier matters of the law," he means, "Beware of going through the day doing only trivial things, thinking only trivial thoughts, feeling only trivial feelings. The Lord wants us to pinch ourselves again and again lest we be found swooning in front of the television, making no plans for the weighty matter of mercy.

[Some of the things that press us toward the trivial are philosophical notions, ideologies: materialists are, necessarily, trivial. Their world-view is superficial. Hedonists, pleasure seekers, also manifest an obsessions with the transient and trivial—alcoholics and drug addicts fritter away their lives in trivial pursuits (the

² noun, plural ephemera

[ih-fem-er-uh] (Show IPA), ephemerons.

1. anything short-lived or ephemeral.

2. ephemera, items designed to be useful or important for only a short time, especially pamphlets, notices, tickets, etc.

Origin Expand

1570-80; < Greek ephéméron short-lived insect, noun use of neuter of ephémēros; see ephemeral (BibTeX Bibliography Style (BibTeX) @article {Dictionary.com2015, title = {Dictionary.com Unabridged}, month = {Apr}, day = {13}, year = {2015}, url = {http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ephemera}),

pursuit of what does not satisfy, or last, offer significant, nor ultimately matter). Some are defined by triviality: climate change/global warming—our gravest danger comes from those who think they know what our gravest threats are. Their godless environmentalism is very troublesome and trivial. So are the would-be global change makers; hung up on wealth redistribution, the politics of distraction and sedation, meditation and mood management. Sports and horse racing.]

Blessed are the merciful. Therefore, if you want to be blessed, you must make war against the bondage of religious and secular trifles, and devote your life to the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, faith. Mercy is no trifle. It is one of the weightiest matters in all of life.

-John Piper, Desiring God

Amen.