

“No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”

Luke 10:25-37

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We all know well the story of the Good Samaritan, but do you know, as Paul Harvey would say, “the rest of the story?” You see, he went on, saying:

“But a lawyer, seeing what had transpired, went to the room of the man after the Samaritan had left, and in his weakness said, ‘Listen, this fellow is just helping you so you will reward him. He probably even planned to have you beaten to make himself seem the hero. But come, let us go to the magistrate and swear out a warrant against him for negligence and you can claim the rest of his denarii. For see, he has left your neck worse than before.’ And lo, the man could barely move his head, neither to the left, nor to the right. And so they conspired against the Samaritan and went down to the magistrate to bring a suit against him.

“When the Samaritan came up, the guards took him into custody and brought him before the judge. ‘These two men have brought charges against you, claiming that by helping him you have injured this one. Do you deny it?’ The Samaritan replied, ‘It is as you say. Truly, I stopped to help this man who fell into the hands of robbers. I bound his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them, and then, carrying him on my own animal, left him with the inn-keeper. I see now that it would have been better for me to have left him for dead on the side of the road, for truly, no good deed goes unpunished; but as my Lord lives, I could not do it.’

“At that, the man tore his clothes and cursed the lawyer, saying, ‘You have brought shame on me and my household, for you have taken advantage of my infirmity and caused me to bring charges against this righteous man unjustly.’ Then the judge, seeing what had happened, also cursed the lawyer saying, ‘Fool! You have made a mockery of the Lord’s justice. From this day forward, you shall have enmity with all the world, and all the world will laugh at your expense. And as for this charge you have caused this man to bring, it is dismissed and none like it shall ever be brought again, for it shall not be known for all the ages that this court punishes good deeds.’ And so, to this very day, those who help others cannot be prosecuted for their good deeds, and lawyers are the butt of many jokes.

I hope you enjoyed that little addendum to our story, but did you know that it is not the only change that has been made to the story over the years? In fact, an addendum has been added against which even Jesus himself had something to say, namely, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.” Yet we, for who knows how many years, have called this Samaritan “good,” when only God is good, and the Samaritan was simply being merciful. Perhaps we should begin to refer to this story as the Parable of the Merciful Samaritan. The irony of course, besides the fact that Jesus specifically addressed this adjective, is that Jews could never consider the Samaritans “good enough,” much less “good.” You see, the Samaritans were, to purebred, if ethnically biased, Jewish eyes, halfbreeds, part Jewish and part something else. The Samaritans were those people who lived in

what used to be the northern kingdom of God's chosen people, that kingdom called Israel, whose capital was Samaria, but which had been cut off from the mainstream of Jewish life by its military defeat to the Assyrians and the subsequent resettlement of the area. Thus, those who remained in that area, now seven hundred years later, had earned the enmity of those who had a closer connection to the traditions handed down so many years before. You may remember just a couple of lessons ago when James and John wanted to call down the ultimate divine punishment of fire from heaven to consume the Samaritan village which would not receive Jesus nor the disciples who came to prepare a place for him there. And just as Nathanael could say in the Gospel of John about Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" so too was the sentiment about the Samaritans, only stronger. And so, that we have dubbed this Samaritan "good" is a testament both to our willingness to add to Scripture that which is not really there, but also that we have almost permanently redeemed the Samaritans by our application of the word "good" to this one. I suppose we must take the bad with the good.

It is, of course, not goodness, per se, with which Jesus is concerned, but the qualities of loving one's neighbors, and here, pointedly, mercy, that quality after God's own heart that we would do well to cultivate, or in the words of Jesus, "Go and do likewise." It is mercy which we have received, and mercy which we should share. Absent mercy, we would forever be bumping into one another, because, as Gandhi once famously said, "requiring an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind."

Absent mercy, we would forever be nursing grudges, remembering past hurts, and guarding against new ones. Absent mercy, we would be like the lawyer in the real story, the one who was a little too preoccupied with whether he made the grade. He seems to be the product of a system which held grace in lower esteem, and preferred to see itself as judge and jury rather than plaintiff. Rather than regard himself as the recipient of mercy, much less the dispenser of it, he chose to see himself as the gatekeeper for it, and mercy's credentials for getting in were usually a little thin. We usually talk about guilty people pleading for mercy; in the lawyer's environment, it was mercy itself pleading for mercy, pleading for a chance to be a part of the life of a people in tremendous need of it.

I do not think that Jesus was necessarily making mercy the measure of neighborliness. Indeed, it is the *lawyer's* choice of words which introduces mercy into the conversation. He could have characterized the Samaritan's actions as compassion or charity or common sense or pity, the word Jesus used. But the choice of the word "mercy" is telling coming from the lawyer's lips, for he has viewed Jesus' parable through the eyes with which he himself most needed to see, that great virtue of parables. Ask a carpenter the same question, "which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers," and maybe you get a different answer. But in the context of an absence of mercy, it is mercy which is evident in the hearing of the parable. That alone seems enough to assure

us that the lawyer gets it, and the eternal life about which he inquired in the first place.

That being said, what is the characteristic, which we, were we to hear the parable today, for the first time and without the punchline, would supply? Is mercy the absence we feel in our hearts and lives? Or is it compassion, or charity, or common sense or generosity, or something else? I suspect that each of us would offer something different, though we would find similarities in all the answers. I would suggest that it would be spiritually profitable during the next week to spend some time filling in the blank of Jesus' question, "which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" and then, armed with the adjective you have supplied, to go and do likewise. That should be enough to keep you spiritually occupied for quite a while, as we may hope it did for the lawyer.

The story of the so-called "good" Samaritan is one of the most famous of all Biblical stories, but although its punchline is among the most compelling, the power of the story which makes it so famous also makes the punchline that much easier to forget. We may remember the Samaritan and his good (and merciful) deeds, and think it a wonderful way to be, but we are not so good at following up on Jesus' rather pointed advice to his friend the lawyer to "go and do likewise." The doing is always the challenging part, especially because it usually means undoing some part of ourselves we'd rather leave alone. In the lawyer's case, it

was his relationship with mercy, and mercy's place in his relationship with God, and with his neighbors.

The doing is also challenging because it is the kind of work which meets with little in the way of the rewards we are accustomed to receive for doing important and valuable work. Internal, spiritual work, even if it is the practice of something like mercy amongst one's neighbors, rarely results in traditionally positive rewards, tangible or otherwise. Coming to terms with those great spiritual themes like grace and mercy has its rewards, but they are neither the kind you hang on the wall, nor put in the bank. Indeed, if the truth be told, "going and doing likewise" usually earns you what it earned the Samaritan in "the rest of the story," namely a date with someone who either does not appreciate your deeds or wishes to take advantage of them. That old truism that "no good deed goes unpunished" is not a truism for nothing; there is nothing quite so threatening as a person authentically practicing the finer and more difficult points of their faith. We can count on resistance to loving both God and neighbor because when we do that, when we *really* do that, we challenge really touchy stuff like emotions, like family rules, like political positions, like profit margins. These are things that provoke the spiritual and moral dimensions of Newton's second law, the one that states that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. If the truth be told, the reaction is often far more powerful than the original action, for there are systems and networks and interconnected psyches on the line, each reacting, and often in

partnership, to the changes being wrought by even one person's courage to "go and do likewise." No good deed goes unpunished because no good deed touches no one.

We all know how a certain story ended, the one about the guy who really did love God and love his neighbor as himself, the one in which that good deed was punished in the harshest way possible. But the good news of the Gospel is that there is a judge who decrees that "it shall not be known for all the ages that this court punishes good deeds," but rather that those good deeds that do get punished in less merciful courts are redeemed by the "supreme" court in a way that defies both imagination and the most powerful forces arrayed against us. The timing of the experience of that redemption may not always meet with our expectations, but we may be sure that it will happen, just as it did three days after they laid Jesus in a tomb, three days later than his disciples expected. You and I can expect that same redemption of our good deeds, if not in our lifetimes, than perhaps in the lifetimes of those whose lives we impact, and certainly in the eternity we've been promised with the one who went and did likewise for our sakes. May God bless us as we love God and neighbor as Jesus did. Amen.