

The Rev. Billy Cervený:

let's pray.

Father, thank you for the gift of your word.

Thank you that we get to tune our hearts to your grace.

I pray, Lord, that you would speak through me tonight using your scriptures, Lord. That you would turn our eyes to you, that we would understand what it means to love like you. And I pray this, Jesus, in your holy name, amen.

How we doing, everybody?

It's good to see you. We've been, the last few weeks, we've been doing this series that we've been going through Galatians. And it's been awesome, we've been talking about the fruit of the spirit, talking about what it means for us to grow and to walk according to the spirit, to walk by the spirit, what it means to love,

and how do we love? And tonight, we're looking at this passage we read in the gospel just a minute ago. It's one of the most famous passages in all of scripture. It's the story of the Good Samaritan. It's kind of like the story of David and Goliath, that you don't even need to be a Christian to know this story. It's been absorbed into popular culture, and everybody uses it as this sort of metaphor to use. But if you know Jesus and you look at it through the lens of the gospel, it goes a lot deeper for us. And that's what I hope we're gonna be able to do tonight. Looking at this story, what's happened to give it a little context, Jesus is in the last year of his ministry, which means that he's become pretty famous in the area, and he's become infamous in the area, which means that the ruling class, the religious class, are getting pretty upset with him. And we is on, what they say is he's on the journey towards Jerusalem, where he eventually is gonna end up on the cross, and as part of his journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus is making all these stops, he's engaging with these religious leaders, and he's kicking the ant pile. He's stirring the pot; that's what Jesus is so good at. And so here he comes, we don't know exactly where he is, but what we do know is that there's a crowd around.

And Jesus says in verse 25, it says, "And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, "saying, teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Anytime you hear the word behold in scripture, this is a biblical way of saying, you're not gonna believe what happened next. Like, hang on.

And what happens is, it says that this lawyer stands up, when it's talking about a lawyer, it's not talking about Alan Dershowitz or Harvey Specter from Suits, it's not that kind of lawyer. It's a temple lawyer.

So this is a guy who's an expert in Mosaic law.

Everything about his life and his job and his world is about studying scripture, about what makes someone clean and unclean. Who's in and who's out?

And the scripture says he puts him to the test.

The other time, it's the same verb, the Greek verb that's being used there for putting him to the test. It's the same verb that you read about in Luke four, when it's Satan putting Jesus to the test.

So it's already this set up, you see this lawyer that steps into the scene, and in the book of Luke, the lawyers are always the bad guys in this book. And then he starts, he puts Jesus, he's putting him on the hot seat. So you can feel the temperature rise, and it's kind of a showdown. And he asks, what do I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus says to him in verse 26,

he said, "What's written in the law?"

"How do you read it?"

Now, just to be clear, Jesus is not actually asking him what's in the scripture. Jesus knows what's in the scripture.

What Jesus is doing in that moment he's trying to find out what's in this guy's heart.

He said, "How do you read this?" He's trying to excavate that because that's what scripture does for us. Because when we read the word, it doesn't just reveal who God is, it reveals who we are. You may have heard me say this before, but we don't just study scripture.

Scripture studies us.

And if we're willing, it can reveal so much about who we are, how we think,

what we think about who God is and what we believe about ourselves.

So Jesus goes and he engages him and he asks him that question in the law, your answers. He says, "You shall love the Lord God with all your heart,

"with all your soul and with all your strength,

"and with all your mind and your love, "your neighbor as yourself." Simple enough.

And Jesus goes back and says to him, "You've answered correctly. "Do this and you will live."

Now this teacher, he's smarmy here, right?

He's trying to treat, he's testing Jesus, but also the scripture says he wants to justify himself. He wants to look good.

So he asked Jesus, he says, "Who is my neighbor?"

Now you remember who he is. He's a teacher of the Mosaic law. He's Israel's yardstick.

He's the guy that stands up and says, "This is right, this is wrong. "This is ceremonially clean. "This is ceremonially unclean.

"This is what it means to live in a godly way. "This is what it means to live in an ungodly way." In his job, in his world, it was not just about him being right and clean. He was the one who told other people who were right and clean.

He was the guy that said, "You are in and you are out."

And Jesus to him was offensive

because he hung out with sinners.

So what he's doing in this moment when he asks him who his neighbor is, he's not asking Jesus really, "Who is it that I get to love?" Because he knows the answer to that. He knows who he's gonna love.

What he's asking here is, "Who can I not love?"

"Who do I get to not care for? "Who do I get to not call my neighbor?"

And again, he already knew the answer to this question in his mind.

Because the people that were in were the people that agreed with him.

The people that were in were the people that kept the law the way that he prescribed the law to be kept.

The people that were in, the people that were worthy to be called neighbor, that were worthy of compassion, that were worthy of care, were the people that cut with the grain of his perception of the world. And nobody else.

And for him, this is a really useful thing.

Because not only that, because God commanded him to be merciful.

And when he looks at it that way, it makes God's law not only manageable for him, because he could love those people, it made God's law palatable to him.

Because he could, like, "I actually like these people. "I can love that way."

So, like, when you read that, isn't that just smarmy?

And as I read that, I realize I do that all the time.

We all do this.

We want to love what we love.

One of the most seductive things of our flesh,

of my sin is that what I'll do is I,

my sin and my flesh will invite me to look, to see God through the lens of my own sensibilities.

That God is someone who agrees with me. He thinks like me.

His really preferred form of worship is the way that I like to worship.

That God has the same cultural accent as me.

That God, when I do that, that God, it make him not just more manageable, I make him more palatable.

And then when I step forward, it means that the people that I have to love are more palatable to me.

Because God is just as mad at the people that I'm mad at,

he's mad at the people that have the magma signs, or he's mad at the people that have the, I'm with her stickers on their car, or he's mad at whatever you got.

And if he's mad at him, I could be mad at him, and I don't have to love him.

What Jesus does in this moment,

as he takes this lawyer into the woodshed,

the same way he's gonna take us into the woodshed, if we're honest with him about this. And what he's saying is he challenges, not just his understanding of his neighbor, he does it he's challenging his understanding of how you love people.

and what it means to truly love, because when you love the way Jesus calls us to truly love, it will inherently challenge your notion of what it means, or who your neighbor is, and who is not your neighbor.

And so it begins to tell him a story.

He takes him in there, and the story that illustrates one thing, the first thing is this,

gospel love will always challenge your non-negotiables.

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So he takes this lawyer and he says to him, "Hey, there's a man, and he's traveling from Jerusalem. "We don't know much about him, "but we can assume by the fact that he's traveling from Jerusalem that he's a Jewish person. "And he's going down the road," as Charlie described this morning, he's leaving Jerusalem on the road that's the equivalent of I-95, and it's a dangerous road.

And what happens is he gets jumped by these robbers, he's beaten half to death, and he's left to die on the side of the road.

And it doesn't look good for him. And all of a sudden, there's these travelers that come by, and first there's a priest, and then there's a Levite, and these are the ruling class, these are the guys that are in the same category as this lawyer we've been talking to.

And what do we do? We all know the story: they come, they see him, and they cross over to the other side of the road, and they pass him by, and they leave him.

They see this half-dead man, this person that's one of their own, and they just keep going.

Now, if you're a Jewish person in that, and you're hearing that story, you kind of can, first you can think to yourself, you know, they actually probably had good reasons.

And the reason is that they were priests; they served in the temple.

And part of their job is they needed to be, to maintain a ceremonial cleanliness, which means that they couldn't touch blood,

and they certainly couldn't touch a dead thing, or a dead man, and they see this guy on the side of the road, and they see him, and if they realize that if they touch him, or they have anything to do with him, that they'll be ceremonially unclean. And that is unacceptable because they can't do their job, and they're really important, and that's a non-negotiable for them. So they said, "We're gonna let someone else do it. "My work's too important." So they're going down the road.

So when Jesus is telling this story, he makes these guys look silly.

I mean, just in the narrative, you can just feel the tension of it. They look silly.

And what he's saying as he's telling this story is that these purity laws that he were given, these are actually good things.

They were good things to produce reverence and worship.

But what you're doing, and what they're doing, is they're weaponizing these things, to use them as an excuse to avoid loving someone, and to avoid showing mercy, to limit their responsibility,

so that they won't be inconvenienced.

Weaponizing what God has given us as a gift,

and using it as a way to defend ourselves against things we don't wanna do, or people we don't wanna love.

We do this all the time.

I think about people that I've been saddled with in my life for over the years,

and how it can be inconvenient sometimes when they brush up against my non-negotiables to love them and care for them. I mean, here's a good example of this. Years ago, or not yet, many years ago, I've done a lot of marriage counseling. When I was living in Nashville a couple years back, I would get these couples that would come to me. And generally, couples that have been married for a long time, it's this narrative arc. You get married in the very beginning. If you've been married for a long time, you know how this goes.

You fall in love, you got the cartoon birds swimming around your head. You're loving each other, everything's great. Your differences are kinda quirky, and it's all of a sudden. But then these people get married for a lot of years,

and real life starts crashing in.

And what seemed quirky and fun at once becomes something that's really different, and you begin to rub against each other. And I had this one couple, and this has happened so many, I'm not divulging any confidence here, because this story I'm gonna tell you has happened so many times. It's not an individual, but it's a theme that I get. And there's a couple that came in, and they'd been married for a long time, and they were really at each other.

And they had, this husband was this very linear guy,

that he was very black and white. He was $A + B = C$ if A , then C , and he saw the world in a very binary way. And the wife came in, and she was this kind of emotional yard sale, just telling, you know, oh, just she was all feelings, and just everything all the way. And they'd been married, and they were really unhappy with each other.

And they were really rubbing against each other.

And what she was saying is, he doesn't listen to me. I just wanna be heard. I wanna know that he feels what I feel. I want him to climb in the well with me and understand the emotional realities. But all he does is he wants to fix me. He wants to tell me why what I'm feeling is, I don't have a right to feel that, because it's wrong. Or he wants to just explain, he treat me like a math problem, and all of a sudden tell me how I can move things around, and all of a sudden I won't feel this way anymore.

And his complaint is, she's not very reasonable.

Feelings are not facts, and facts are not feelings. And just because she feels that way doesn't make something true, and I just don't know how to even engage that. So one of my favorite things to do is to give them a personality test.

Now, I'll go in, I'm gonna say, I wanna learn how you guys are wired. And inevitably, in that situation, when I find with that man, it's, you know what, brother, you actually have a lens for the world that you think this way. You are very binary.

You're not trying to be difficult.

It is a strength of yours that you see, you know, one plus one equals two, et cetera, et cetera. You are very linear, and that is a strength of yours. And the strength of hers is the way God has made her temperament, is that she is this emotional, just profound well of feelings.

And the way that she feels known and loved is for someone to climb into that well, and like two graham crackers smashing together, they become this one thing, and she's, oh yes, you feel what I feel, and all this thing. And the way he feels loved is he that he has the linear logic of what he's feeling echoed back to them. And doing that to them, guess what it felt like? Them having, like someone was reading their mail. Like someone was turning the lights on.

Oh my gosh, yes, that is me. And they couldn't see themselves.

They couldn't see themselves until it was disrupted. Just couldn't see it.

And then this would happen.

All of a sudden, the man, and I remember this,

he began to draw a ring of fire around himself.

He says, well, that's just the way I am.

And if you wanna love me, you gotta become more linear.

You gotta stop being that way and be more like me.

And I remember saying, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, stop, stop, stop. That's not what this is about.

You see, we did this because, yeah, you are, God did design you that way, and God did design her that way, and those are two profound gifts, but they're not gifts to weaponize.

Because what it is, you have this non-negotiable way of looking at the world, and so does she, but guess what? Gospel growth, to love someone in the gospel means that I am gonna step beyond the walls of what's comfortable to me. That I'm gonna love you, not the way that I think that you should be loved, but I'm gonna love you the way that you need to be loved.

I'm gonna communicate to you the way you need to be communicated.

And so for him, that meant learning how these things called feelings and trying to express them to her, and for her, it meant learning to maybe take the feelings out sometimes and try to speak in some linear ways and to reflect back what it meant.

But guess what happened?

When you love that way, your heart will begin to follow.

And over time, this man and this wife they came together and they were profoundly different.

But the gospel love it always challenges our non-negotiables.

See what's happening in our parable, and what happened in that marriage, and what happens in our lives so often, what Jesus is doing here is he's frustrating this guy's non-negotiables, because he can't see them.

You can't see your own perspective. It's like sitting in a bathtub so long, you can't feel the temperature of the water, you know what I'm talking about?

And he couldn't see it, and he's trying to teach them we have to love beyond the walls of that comfort zone.

I'm gonna ask you this today, where is that for you?

What's that place?

Where are those non-negotiables? are those tense situations in your life right now that maybe God's using to show you where those non-negotiables are in your life, and God's saying to you, hey, maybe it's time for you to step beyond that, to love in a new way,

to love them in the way that they need to be loved, not in the way that you think they need to be loved.

So the gospel it challenges our non-negotiables,

but it also demands grace, not agreement.

So Jesus continues with the parable.

And the priest and the Levite pass by, and here comes the good guy in our story, the Samaritan. And just to make sure we're all on the same page, I think we all know this, but the Jewish people and the Samaritans they did not like each other very much. They couldn't stand each other, in fact. And there's a reason for this.

In about 722 BC, there was this nation called Assyria,

and the Assyrians came and they invaded Israel and they conquered Israel. And they were really, really bad people. They were really cruel; they were really war-like people. They would make giant pyramids out of human skulls in front of the conquered cities. That's how bad they were. And when they conquered a city, they would kidnap the young people and take them back to Assyria, and they'd take the older people and move them into the conquered land, in this case, Israel, and they would begin to intermarry. And they would have children with the Israelites. And the children that the Assyrians had with the Israelites, with whom they intermarried, those were the Samaritans.

So there's a lot of cultural baggage with these people. When they looked at these, I said, the Samaritans.

And they didn't like them. But not only that, the Samaritans they practiced a form of Judaism that the Jews found incredibly offensive. They used part of their scripture, but they didn't acknowledge the prophets. They worshiped up in the north and not in Jerusalem. They didn't believe in their temple. They believed that they had the rightful temple.

So their disdain for each other was mutual, and it had gone on for hundreds of years.

So they hated each other, and they were routinely awful with each other.

And then he's the protagonist for a reason of this story, because Jesus knew the lawyer would not like this guy.

So what happens? The Samaritan traveler comes in, he sees this half-dead guy on the side of the road. He climbs off his animal, he says, he approaches him, he has oil and wine, and he leans over, and he says, I wanna help you. But first, I just need you to see it my way. I need you to agree with me. Do you agree that my temple is as valid as yours?

No, we didn't do that.

He didn't do that at all.

He leans over, he pours oil and wine on this man.

He blows him onto his animal, and he saves his life.

And there is nothing in this passage to imply that the Samaritan didn't have an issue with the Jewish people.

In fact, there's more in this passage to imply that he probably did. That's why Jesus chose him as an example.

And he's trying to demonstrate that gospel love demands grace, not agreement.

Man, do we live a time in our life where our world rails against that.

It rails against that. We have so many cultural divides about our human sexuality, or what is marriage, or what is gender, or what is my view on immigration, that if I disagree with you, if you disagree with me,

somehow, I'm just this wall of hate.

That if I disagree with you, I am incapable of loving you.

And I gotta tell you, that's a lie.

That's a lie; we can disagree.

I can disagree with people passionately.

But the love of the gospel, true love, it's fueled by grace, not agreement.

We just saw that in this parable. If I move in love towards someone with whom I disagree, it does not undermine my act of love. It underscores it, doesn't it?

It becomes a more profound act of love because I am having to swallow deep.

I mean, you look at the apostles themselves. Look at Jesus, who he chose to have follow him. He had Simon the Zealot, who was this guy that was a militant against the occupation of Rome, and he had Matthew, a tax collector, who was someone who partnered with the occupying army of Rome against his own people, and he yet called them together to walk as the apostles.

There's nothing to say that they ever became into political alignment,

but there's everything you read in the gospel that said they loved each other well.

After all is said and done, do you think that the good Samaritan had to do some heart work before he went down and picked that man up off the road, 100%?

The conflicted human flesh is this dark backdrop against which grace-fueled love shines the brightest, period. Let me ask you this: where is that for you?

I know where it is for me,

but where is that place where people, oh man, you got those people that are really easy to love,

and then you've got those people that, man, they are just, and it's these non-negotiable places.

They represent things like, where is that for you?

And are you willing to open your hand a little bit

and perhaps move in that direction?

Maybe it's political, maybe it's a cultural issue, I don't know. The issues are obvious, but we all have that stuff.

Because Jesus is showing us the gospel love that comes from our non-negotiables. It's about grace, not agreement, and the last thing I'll say is this.

The love we give is a picture of the love we have received.

See, one of my favorite writers, this guy named Chad Bird,

and Chad always talks about the parables, and one of the things he says about the parables, he says oftentimes we read parables as these ladders that we climb into heaven, when Jesus is actually using them as a stretcher to carry us into heaven.

And what he's saying in this moment, and certainly with this parable of the Good Samaritan,

is yes, this is a parable that is to recalibrate our mortal compass.

It is a parable that tells us what we need to do.

But before it can be a moral compass, it has to be a mirror.

That we have to look into it, and we have to see ourselves, and the truth of the matter is, where do we see ourselves in this gospel story? Before I can be the moral agent that climbs off the donkey, I have to understand that I was first the dead man on the side of the road.

That I was the man left to die.

And that Jesus, the rejected outsider who was despised, he came to love me despite his non-negotiables.

That he chose grace when I didn't agree with him. Because that's what makes it grace.

And why did he do this?

What does it say in Romans two?

That it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance.

And to be sure, when you read this passage, it teaches us how we move forward, and it calls us to move forward. And it calls us and tells us how to love.

But when we first see it through the ways that we have been saved from the roadside,

that I've had the oil of the Holy Spirit poured into my wounds in the new wine of the new covenant and salvation that I've drank, and that we will drink together, and I realize, and I begin to heal, and I begin to grow, and I begin to restore.

And I begin to understand the scandal of the way that I have been loved. And I really look at that.

The more I read Scripture, the more it explores my heart.

What happens is as I move forward, I begin to see I'll start loving in that way.

Now, don't get me wrong, it's not an easy thing to do. Especially when people are rubbing up against your non-negotiables.

But you will catch yourself.

You will. And you'll go to war with yourself. And probably like that Samaritan, who probably had to ask himself some hard questions, you will climb off your animal, and you will move towards these people.

And you will offer them love when they are lost.

And you'll extend the hand of friendship when it had been so easy to turn away and no one would whatever fault you for it. That's the journey of the gospel. And that's what Jesus is trying to illustrate in this parable. It's one that I pray that today, when we leave here, we leave with the new gospel ends.

We can love like that because we've been loved like that. Amen?

Amen. Let me pray, and then we'll move on. Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit. Thank you that we have been loved like that.

Lord, thank you that when we

railed against the non-negotiables of the law,

Lord, when we did not agree with you, Lord, you still, in grace, moved in love towards us. I thank you, that is true.

I pray that you tune our hearts to that truth, that we would walk in the newness of life, that we would love like you, and that we would see this world as a community of our neighbors,

that we are to whom we are called to love well

and to nurture back to health. I thank you, Jesus, we pray this in your name. Amen.