

### **The Rev. Charlie Holt:**

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your word and for your gospel. We pray that we might not just be hearers of your word, but also doers of it. As Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." We want to be responsive to His word. May the preaching of your word be your word for His glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Sometimes church makes you cry. It's hard. I know some of you all cry when you're like, "Charlie, hold again."

Cry for a children's church, cry for adult church. We are going to look at the Good Samaritan passage. One of the interesting things about that is it never actually uses the word "good" in terms of a modifier for the Samaritan. He's just called a Samaritan. There are a lot of different characters in this, but I want to start with the lawyer. It's kind of ironic that we have a lawyer priest that read the gospel this morning. Alison DeFor is a former lawyer. I guess you're still a lawyer too, aren't you? Lawyer and a priest and a judge, and an Everglades czar, and all kinds of things. But Alison's got a story that is worth spending some time learning. I was teasing around with Alison before the service, and I said, "Well, back in that day, the lawyers actually were the theologians.

The lawyer in that case was actually an expert in the Word of God, and he would have been one of the teachers and preachers of the nation of Israel. So, whenever you have a finger pointing at somebody else, you always have three pointing back at yourself. I hope you know that, right?

So, what was the lawyer's posture, I should say, towards Jesus? Well, it was one of skepticism.

We learned that from right out of the gate from the text. Just then, a lawyer stood up to test Jesus, and he's going to test him with a couple of questions that he asked Jesus. He's trying to play the gotcha game, which we see more often in our day in the media, where the media will ask a politician or some other community leader these questions, and what they're trying to do is to solicit some kind of answer from the leader to get them on tape and on video, saying something that they can then turn into a sound bite and use against him. I would say that this is exactly what this guy is doing. He is playing a gotcha game with Jesus. He's testing him. He's trying to get him to say something that he can then later accuse him of saying the wrong thing. "I gotcha."

So, the first question he asked is a huge question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" One of Jesus's best strategies with gotcha questions is often to ask a question of the questioner. "Well, what is written in the law?"

Jesus asks him, "What do you read there?" So, the man has to answer now his own question, what he reads in the law. "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."

If you were a person who grew up under right one liturgies, the older liturgies of the Episcopal Church, you would have heard this every single Sunday, the summary of the law, the first and second great commandments. To love God is the first great commandment, and then to love neighbor as yourself. And these were deeply embedded in Jewish teaching and Christian teaching that we are first and foremost to love God and to love our neighbor.

So, the man kind of knew that this is where he was going, and so he asks his second question, which is really the gotcha question that he thinks. He says, "Now I got him. Now I got him. I've led him along." And he says to him, "But you," and Jesus says, "You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

And here's the tough question.

Now, what is the root of the lawyer's skepticism?

And here we see the interplay of the first and second great commandment. So, often if we're hard-hearted towards our neighbor or another people, that actually will translate into a hard-heartedness towards God. If we are hard-hearted and unreconciled with others,

more often than not, we will find ourselves out of a good, reconciled relationship with the Lord. And so, this man's hard-heartedness towards the Son of God and towards the Messiah really stems from something that he is actually sinking into the heart of his testing question, "Who is my neighbor?" And what has he done? Well, he's made a classic mistake, actually, that we all can fall prey to. He is trying to justify himself. That's what the text says, right? He says, "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

Now, why is that a mistake?

Well, what many of us do when it comes to the commands of the Lord is, and the philosophy of God, the theology of God, is we take whatever we think that is and we adjust it so that it fits my way of thinking and my lifestyle.

In other words, we don't conform our hearts and our minds, and our lives to God's way of thinking and God's call in life. Instead, what we do is we adjust God's rules and precepts and philosophies to fit the way that I think and the way that I want to live.

And so, if I want to justify myself, what I need to do is I need to take the commandments of God and make them simpler and easier to fit my way of life. And Jesus would not let any of us do that. If you remember the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel of Matthew in Matthew chapter 5 and following, the great Sermon on the Mount, one of the things that Jesus is challenging them is to not let one aspect of the law pass away, that all of it must be fulfilled. And he gives some examples. He says, "You've heard it said you shall not murder."

He says, "But I say, if you so much as think murderous thoughts in your brain toward another person," another would say, "you think to yourself, that fool.

You are committing murder in your heart."

And he says, "You've heard it said, do not commit adultery.

If you so much lust after another person's spouse,

you are committing adultery with her in your heart."

In other words, what we tend to do with the commandments Jesus is teaching is we take them and we make them, "Well, I haven't murdered anybody. I haven't committed adultery. I haven't done any of these things."

And what Jesus wants us all to see is that every single one of us falls short of the glory of God, that there is none of us that are righteous, no, not one, that none of us have any grounds in and of ourselves to justify ourselves.

And so he takes the the the skeptics test and he turns this man's world on its head and turns it upside down, hopefully in a way. And this is a tactic that Jesus has to use with skeptics sometimes because they're hard-hearted, and if you come at them directly, they sometimes won't get the message. But when you tell a story and they have to put themselves into the story, sometimes you can get some movement in the way that people think, in the way that they relate to the Lord. Nathan did that with King David, but Jesus is here doing this with this lawyer. He's telling him a story that hopefully will undo him in his self-justification and self-righteousness. And so he tells a story that's a bit of a parable trap about a man who is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he falls into the hands of some robbers. Now this is a very typical scene. That is the main drag. That's I-95 from Jerusalem to Jericho. That's the main, main highway that anybody would have to travel, and everybody knows the road that ever goes to Jerusalem. It's the only way to really go up into the city. And so here's a typical scene of a man, and he's going down the road, and there's hills on both sides, and lots of nooks and crannies and places for people to

mug you and to attack you, and to rob you. And so that happens. And the man is beaten and left half dead on the side of the road. Now there are a couple of people that walk by. There's a Levite that walks by and a priest that walk by and they don't do anything. Now, those are two Jewish religious leaders who work in relationship to the temple complex. And we sometimes, I think we can, we can cursively say, well, they're just walking by because they're hard-hearted, but there's probably a little bit more to why they're walking by. The man is described as being half dead. Anybody see Princess Bride? You know the movie Princess Bride? There's a scene in there where the hero, Wesley, has become half dead. He's almost dead, and they take him to Miracle Max, and Miracle Max says, well, this guy I can deal with because he's only mostly dead. He's not all dead. If he's all dead, there's nothing we could do. But because he's only mostly dead, there's something that we can do. But here is a guy who is mostly dead, and so the priest and the Levi know what the commands of the Lord say that if you touch a dead body that you actually will become unclean. Now that wasn't the end of the world. Like if you were to become unclean ceremonially as a priest or a Levite, that is something that there were allowances for to deal with it, because you can't go through life without touching dead things and so on, and coming into contact with unclean things. But it was a hassle. It was something that would have required likely weeks of ritual purification for these religious temple leaders to have to deal with that. So for whatever reason, these two walk by and then there's a Samaritan that comes by and he helps the

man bandages his wounds and puts him on his horse and takes him to an inn and gives a couple a denier eye and says, hey, I'll pay the bills. Jesus, of course, says, who is the neighbor to the man? Now remember what the man asked,

who is my neighbor? And Jesus is intentionally making it in this story so that the man has to relate to a particular person in the story. Who's the person that he has to relate to?

Not the Levi, right? Not the priest, definitely not the Samaritan, because Jews don't associate with Samaritans. He's the man. He's the man that was left half dead, beaten by the side of the road. And this is what Jesus is trying to get this man to do, is to empathize and to put himself into not a position where he has the benefit to share mercy but to be the person who has to receive it. And see what that does to his question. I remember when I was a priest at one of the other churches and my son was very young, and I preached this same passage, and my son afterwards, we were riding in the car, and he says, dad, that was about you. Like what? He goes, that story about the priest who walked by and did nothing. You're a priest. And I said, well, yes, son, but I'm not like that priest.

And he goes, oh yes, you are. He goes, the other day I wanted to play Legos and I asked you to play Legos with me and you did nothing. Oh, how young children can convict you of your sins, right?

Good application, and he put himself in exactly the place that he was supposed to put himself in, the hearing of that story as a person who needed love and mercy and grace. Unfortunately, he applied it to his dad and my hard-heartedness. I remember, and this happened back in 1981,

Ronald Reagan was shot and John Hinckley, and he went to the George Washington hospital. Do you remember this? And when he got in there, there was a doctor, his name was Joseph Giordano, and this doctor actually died about 19 days ago, 84 years old. But the doctor greeted the president on the stretcher, and the president says to the doctor, I really hope that all of you are Republicans. Remember that? And what the doctor replied, Mr. President, today we're all Republicans.

You know, here's the very important principle, and it's the point of the parable.

When we are in need of help and mercy, we'll take mercy from anybody, right?

If you're left half dead on the side of the road, would you care if it was a Samaritan or a Levite or a priest or a Jewish person or what color their skin was or whatever, you know, make the list of all whether they were poor or rich or of this social status or that. You wouldn't give one iota

if you were left half dead on the side of the road because in that situation, you'll accept mercy from anybody. And here is somebody that was not of his social circle, somebody he would have not put in his categories of wanting to show mercy to

and he desperately needed it. Mr. President, today we're all Republicans.

I want to make one last point about this because part of what the Lord is doing here is not just answering the who is my neighbor question, but the larger question of what must I do to inherit eternal life. Remember, the fundamental problem that the lawyer had was he was justifying himself. And I've heard commentators say about this particular parable, often actually that

we are like the man on the side of the road, and Jesus is the Samaritan that comes and gives us help, and that's not necessarily a bad application. I mean, certainly Jesus does help us in our need, but I want to actually draw a contrast to that illustration a little bit, because we are not like the man on the side of the road when it comes to our sins and our trespasses. The way the scriptures describe it is we are not mostly dead in our sin; we are all dead. We are dead, we are in bondage, we are enslaved to the power of sin. There is nothing that we can do in and of ourselves to inherit eternal life. There is nothing that we can do to justify ourselves.

And what Jesus did is not like the Samaritan who paid his medical bills and probably inconvenienced himself for a few days, which was a generous act. I mean, I don't want to discount the Samaritan. Jesus said to us, "Go and do likewise." That's the kind of mercy and grace that we need to be showing to one another but when you think about what the Lord did for us, it wasn't just pay our medical bills and our lodging but he gave up his life on the cross to redeem us and deliver us from the power of death and the grave and the bondage of our sins so that we might not just be validated and affirmed in what we think and who we are and our current behavior but literally redeem us so that we can be transfigured and transformed in him. We are not merely to adjust the thinking and the ways of Christ to fit our life, but our life desperately needs to be regenerated and rejuvenated and revitalized, and reformed around his life and his way of thinking. Now, of course, that includes thinking about people like Samaritans in a

different way. It involves inconveniencing ourselves when somebody needs mercy and grace, of course, but the character of Christ that would be in us is one of total transformation and redemption. So I want to ask you, and I'll end with this,

where do you put yourself in that story? It's a challenging question because yes, we all are in need, desperate need, of the grace of God, and he has demonstrated that freely, and that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. And so I want to invite you to a time of prayer to just invite the Lord to come into your heart and to give your life to him as a redeemed person, and it's a very simple prayer, but Lord, thank you for saving me. Thank you for giving me your life, and then you know, maybe another prayer that I want to live my life according to your will and not my own. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, I thank you for giving us your only begotten son to the end that all who believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

We know that it's not by our own justification and self-justification that we come before you, but by the justification that you have given to us through the redemption that comes through the sacrifice of your son Jesus on the cross. So Lord, please forgive me for my sin.

Just pray that simple prayer. Lord, forgive me for my sin

and then fill me with your Holy Spirit and empower me to conform not to the will of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of my mind and my life for you. So, Lord, transform me to be the person that you're calling me to be. It's a simple prayer. Lord, transform me. It's in Jesus name we pray. Amen.