

Sermon Series: Set Free
Sermon Title: Kindness/Gentleness
Luke 10:25-37

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October 15, 2017

Kindness and gentleness. More and more our culture seems to lack real kindness and perhaps even more gentleness. We can all think of examples of individuals being kind and gentle, but these traits are often pushed to side for we prefer strength, bravado, a more brash, in your face, get things done attitude. Kindness and gentleness may be good for those in caring professions but in the real world, if you're going to succeed, you need a show of strength. And yet, there they are, in the list. Paul says, those who have been set free in Christ, those who are alive in Christ, in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells, will embody the fruit of kindness and gentleness. In other words, if you are in Christ, you will treat your neighbor the way Christ treated his – with kindness and gentleness – seeking first what's best for them before you are concerned with yourself.

It was a simple enough question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What is the bottom line, what does God require, when you cut to the chase? What is it that really matters? “The lawyer’s question about the key requirements for entering eternal life was a standard rabbinic question, to which there were standard answers available.”¹ Jesus responds directly and to the point not by answering the question but by asking a question of his own. He turns the tables, knowing that even a beginning student of the Law could answer this question, so certainly an expert like this young man should know how to respond.

So, Jesus says, “You’ve known the answer to this question since you were a boy. What is written in the Law? What do you read there?” Now the ball is in this young lawyer’s court and *he* is now on the spot to answer correctly, which he does by quoting two of the most significant and central passages from the Torah. One from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus – these were passages every good Jew had known practically since birth. They represent the heart of their faith and what it means to be Israel. In fact, Jesus himself refers to these very same passages at times. So, referencing these texts, would be a bit like us quoting the Lord’s Prayer or John 3:16. If you’ve been around the faith for any time at all it’s just a part of the air we breathe. So, the young lawyer responds with the most obvious and correct answer, “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.”

“You are right,” Jesus says. But, there is more to a life of faith than having right answers. Anyone can memorize correct responses to a few theological questions. What matters is that the

¹ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*. p. 128.

right answers lead to righteous and faithful living. What matters is the fruit of the Spirit born out of our belief and faith in God. And unfortunately, correct answers do not always lead to faithful living. Jesus knew this because he had seen it, people can appear to be righteous and faithful by saying all the right things. They can master all the finer points of scripture, they can get their theology all sorted out, their beliefs may be perfectly correct. And that is a good thing. Having right belief is important. What we believe matters. The answer to the question matters. But it matters not in the way we often think it matters. It matters not so that we can defeat our enemies and prove that we belong to God and they do not because we've checked all the right boxes.

What Jesus calls us to, what God expects from us, is that our right beliefs lead to righteous and faithful lives, to lives that reflect the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and gentleness of God. There that day in the midst of the crowd Jesus was surrounded by people who had all the right answers. They could quote the scriptures; they knew the teachings of the faith like the back of their own hand. They had been around the church awhile and they had impressive religious resumes. Sadly however, what they knew in their heads had not become a part of their heart and life. They knew the faith *but* they were not doing or living the faith. There was no fruit of the Spirit manifest in their lives. They had what Wesley called "dead orthodoxy" - being hearers of the word and not doers. Jesus knew they lacked one thing - they needed to live lives that were an embodiment of their well-rehearsed answers.

So, in response to this young man's correct answer, Jesus does not simply reply, "You are correct, you pass the test." No Jesus replies, "Well said. Do this, and you will live." "Do this, and you will live."

It sounds so simple. Do this. The good church folk who surrounded Jesus that day to put him to the test had lived with this teaching for centuries. They knew that the way for us to inherit abundant, eternal life, to live the life that God intended from the beginning, to experience the freedom of life that really is life, is to love God with all that we have and all that we are *and* to love our neighbors as ourselves. They knew this, could recite chapter and verse. What they lacked, what we sometimes lack is a willingness to live our belief each and every day. They weren't failing in the answers they were giving. They were coming up short in the lives they were living, saying one thing and then doing another.

Perhaps on one level this young man knew this. He knew that the belief in his head was not being translated into a faithful life. He knew at some level that he had neglected God, that he loved other things more than God and he probably knew that he did not always love his neighbor as he loved himself, that he often put his own needs and desires and preferences above the will of God and above the needs of others. He knew that he had too narrowly defined what constituted Israel or the people of God. That he and his friends had drawn the circle too small and in so doing had excluded many of the people Jesus called neighbor. If Jesus were to put him to the test

he would fail, he had missed the mark, sinned. And so, to justify himself, to try and get himself and the other religious leaders off the hook, to try and expose Jesus' supposedly heretical views about God's wider plans for the whole world,² he asked Jesus another question. "And who exactly is my neighbor?"

Now friends, that's a question you ask only when you realize you're failing at your own game. That's like being told that you must always tell the truth and then asking, "Well, what exactly counts as a lie?" So, rather than continue to play this game of question and answer, a game of splitting hairs, Jesus responds by telling a story about neighbors and about kindness and gentleness.

There was a man who had been horribly beaten, robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. They all knew the road Jesus was describing was a dangerous one. To avoid traveling through Samaria, the Jews hated the Samaritans, Jews would often travel down the Jordan valley to Jericho and then turn west and head up to Jerusalem. And the road had many twists and turns, so it wasn't surprising that this had happened. But it was sad nonetheless and they probably even felt some pity for the man and listened in to hear how things turned out for him, so Jesus had their attention.

As the story unfolds a priest comes upon the man but he passes by on the other side of the road. A little later a Levite, another leader in the religious community, he comes upon the injured man but he too passes by. You see they couldn't risk being made ritually unclean by touching a body, "it was better that they remain aloof, preserving their purity at the cost of their obedience to God's law of love."³ Now Jesus really has their attention because the priest and the Levite were the friends and colleagues of those in the crowd that day who had been putting Jesus to the test and Jesus was not painting them in a very favorable light. How could they not be the hero of the story? Why did they not stop? They knew what the Law required? They could answer correctly and pass the test.

Finally, a Samaritan, a member of a despised group of religious outcasts. A minority, a group who were not even considered "real" Jews, who most were certain didn't have any of the right answers and were therefore not truly a part of Israel. A Samaritan came upon the man, had compassion for him, treated him with kindness and gentleness, took care of his wounds, found him a room in an inn and paid all his bills with the promise when he returned to pay for any additional care he might need.

² Ibid. p. 129.

³ Ibid. p. 127.

As he concluded his story, Jesus asked one final question, “Which of these three, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” They all knew the right answer. No one missed this question. It was the one who showed mercy. It was the one who many believed was not a real Jew who actually fulfilled Israel’s vocation by living the right answer, by embodying the spiritual fruit of kindness and gentleness. And he offered it to one who likely didn’t even consider him to be worthy of God’s love.

The young lawyer had begun by trying to justify his own lack of faithfulness and his narrow understanding of who are counted as the people of God by asking, “Why is my neighbor?” That’s a question we sometimes ask because there are some people we just don’t believe deserve our mercy, or our attention, or our kindness, to whom we would rather not be gentle. Those listening to Jesus that day were certain that God is the God of Israel and neighbors (those worthy of gentleness and kindness) are Jews. Neighbors can’t be Samaritans, or Romans, or Gentiles, or the sinners and outcasts that Jesus hung around with. And so, like that very religious crowd, we withhold kindness and gentleness from them in the name of protecting the integrity of the faith and then seek to justify our lack of faithfulness by thinking surely Jesus didn’t mean everyone is my neighbor.

Jesus turns this kind of narrow thinking on its head, and reminds us that being his disciples, being counted among God’s people means much more than being able to answer a few religious questions correctly, it means following his example and recognizing that everyone is our neighbor and all deserve the kindness and gentleness of God.

“Who is my neighbor?” is the wrong question because when God gave his only Son for the life of the whole world (for God so loved the world) that question was answered once and for all. The question that matters now, Jesus says, is, “Can you recognize the hated Samaritan as your neighbor, and treat him accordingly?” To bring it a little closer, can you recognize the Muslim, the gay or transgendered person, the refugee, the black man, the police officer, the Trump supporter, the Bernie fanatic, the kneeling football player, the flag waving, gun toting good ole’ boy, can we see them as our neighbor? “Because if we can’t we might find ourselves on the side of the road left for dead.”

Now I know this is hard. This is, after all, a cross-shaped way of life. It is not easy always being a neighbor to everyone we meet and it is not easy seeing everyone as our neighbor. Some are easier to offer kindness and gentleness to than others. In fact, it is impossible to live this way apart from the grace of God. Remember this is the fruit of the work of the Spirit in us. This is not something we accomplish by our own effort and will. Only if we have been set free in Christ, is it possible for us to live this way, but, because we have been set free we must offer our neighbors the same kindness and gentleness that we’ve received from God.

“What is at stake, then and now, is the question of whether we will use the God-given revelation of love and grace, of how God has been kind and gentle towards us, as a way of boosting our own sense of isolated security and purity, or whether we will see it as a call and challenge to extend that love and grace, and kindness and gentleness to the whole world. No church, no Christian, no one who is free in Christ and filled with the fruit of the Spirit, can remain content with easy definitions that all us to watch most of the world lying half dead in the road.”⁴

The truth is, the good news is, we are all the one lying in the ditch, left for dead, unable to save ourselves. But thanks be to God, we love and serve a God who saw our need, even when we didn't deserve it, and was willing to walk across the road to pick us up, heal our wounds, and make us new and whole. When we were hopeless and helpless, had made a mess out of our lives and needed a neighbor, God sent his only Son, the embodiment of kindness and gentleness, to offer us freedom and life.

So, Jesus simply asked a question, “Which of these do you think was a neighbor?” And they answered, “The one who showed compassion, who offered kindness and gentleness.” “Good,” Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.”

⁴ Ibid. p. 129.