

Mercy, Only Mercy, Gets You Zoe!

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Luke 10:

[25] And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

[26] He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?"

[27] And he answered, "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."

[28] And he said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live."

[29] But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

[30] Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

[31] Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.

[32] So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

[33] But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion,

[34] 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.

[35] 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.'

[36] Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

[37] He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Grace to you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

This year I turned 72. So far, it's a pretty good year. We're enjoying living near our grandchildren and see them each week. Elsie has been very successful with her diet and fitness regimen. I am slowly being healed in my left shoulder and just learned I don't need more surgery on it. Just patience. The arthritis is much more under control. The pain is under control. I want to live to be 100, with all my faculties, and either be taken up in a chariot to heaven or be mistakenly shot as the wrong man by a jealous husband!

Maybe you also want to live a long and healthy life. If you do, then we have quite an opportunity before us in the Gospel for today.

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”, the lawyer asked. You know what Jesus said. The lawyer was looking well beyond his retirement plans and financial planning. He was interested in eternal life. Life that lives beyond this life.

In Koine Greek, the language the New Testament was written in, there are two words for life: bios and Zoe. Bios has to do with calories and cholesterol and heartburn and tears and laughter and cutting your toenails. It has to do with injuries and ultimately, a trip to the cemetery.

Zoe has to do with being in the presence of God and the angels forever. With Zoe, there are no tears. No death. No suffering. No wars. No counting of calories. Complete and total happiness. No need for sleep. (Sing) ***No need of stars or moon by night or sun to shine by day. It is the New Jerusalem that will not pass away.***

It is precisely what the lawyer wanted and what we want!

Jesus said that the prescription for Zoe is to go and show mercy like the Samaritan did to the guy beaten up and lying half-dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It’s one of the first stories we ever heard in Sunday School. We call it the story or parable of “The Good Samaritan”. Even though the word “good” is nowhere in the story. So, what else is new under the sun?

We’ve heard all this before. Isn’t it time for the mind to wander and thoughts to come into focus again about the fight I had with my wife this morning over those dirty dishes left in the living room last night or how steamed I am about my husband having a headache again this morning or about Uncle Bill who had the nerve to leave me out of the will or about that wonderful barbecue we’re planning for tonight.

Bios!

Zoe? I’d rather not think that far.

Bios is all I can handle right now.

Bills to pay. Kids to shuttle to the soccer game. That computer class tomorrow night. The watermelon to pick up on the way home from church. The repair work on the house. My dentist appointment on Wednesday.

The truth of the matter is we are not too interested in Zoe, right now, thank you very much! Everybody knows it’s dangerous to talk to strangers, much less stop to help someone beaten up and lying beside the road. My God, you could get Aids! You wouldn’t know what kind of trash you’d be dealing with.

And, as for picking up a hitch hiker, you’ve got to be kidding! No one in their right mind would do that in this day and age.

And, intervening in stopping a guy from beating and raping a woman in broad daylight. No way! So Kitty Genovese was beaten, raped and killed while 38 people watched out of their apartment windows.

We are a cautious people. We follow the examples of the priest and the Levite. They were very religious people. Many of them lived in Jericho when they weren't serving in the Temple. They were on their way to serving in the Temple. That meant they were traveling the very steep, winding, 28-mile road from Jericho to Jerusalem, which I traveled in 1983. They earned their living - supported their "bios" - by working in the Temple. They had a schedule to keep. Stopping would have made them late. And the Chief Priest would raise hell!

Besides, it was a known fact that bands of robbers hid on the road behind rocks. They often would put one of their number into the road, pour goat blood over him and create the image of someone beaten up. When some sucker stopped to help, they would pounce on him. So, be cautious. Don't get too carried away with all this stuff they taught you when you were in Sunday School or seminary:

Micah 6

[8] He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Once some very smart theological students at Harvard Divinity School took a course entitled "Christians and Society". At the end of the course, the professor gave a test that was three hours long. It was a tough test on "Being a Moral Christian in An Immoral Society." Halfway through the test, the professor arranged for a ten-minute break. The students were to leave the room for ten minutes, get fresh air, and then come back and take the last hour and a half of the test. The students were writing as fast and furiously as they could, writing down all their knowledge of morality, what does it mean to be a moral person in an immoral society. But now it was break time and so the students went out into the courtyard, where there was iced tea and cookies. Out there in the courtyard was another part of the test, although the students didn't recognize it. There was a man, literally all beaten up, lying there in the grass at the edge of the courtyard. He was there, and the students looked at him and drank their tea and ate their cookies and said to themselves, "What should we do? We have this test to finish." All the students went back into the classroom to finish the written part of the text. The professor flunked them all.

Do you understand? Do you understand the real test? So often the church of Jesus Christ flunks the real tests in real life, because we are so busy with our activities inside the four walls of the church. The real tests are on the Jericho Road which runs in many directions here in Pasadena.

You see, this parable is essentially a parable about people not wanting to get involved with people who are suffering because of safety, because of money, because of time, because of

inconvenience, because of busyness with this or that activity. I don't have time to be involved with people on the Jericho Road because I am so busy at church, at school, at work. Jesus condemned that attitude. Jesus expects that all Christians are good Samaritans. You cannot be a Christian and not be involved with people on the Jericho Road. In fact, Christians are people who are always cruising on the Jericho Road.

If you're interested in Zoe, Eternal Life, Jesus counsels:

Don't be cautious! Forget schedules. Take risks! Show mercy. If you see someone hurting, stop and help. Invest your time and resources in helping hurting people. And one day you will have Zoe. No sleep. No arthritis medicines. No sadness. No mortgage payments. No alimony payments. No worries over anything. Complete happiness. The greatest music you ever wanted to hear. No conflicts. No taxes. No yards to mow.

But you have to understand, Jesus was saying more.

The lawyer was a very devout Jew. Jesus was a Jew. Yet, the Samaritan was not a Jew. When Jesus made the Samaritan the hero of the parable, the lawyer was as astonished and outraged as you would be right now if I made an Isis bomber the hero of the story. Or a pedophile or a member of the Mexican drug cartel.

Jews despised Samaritans. No good Jew would be caught dead talking to or having any dealings with a Samaritan.

Interested in Zoe? Get rid of your prejudices! Stop looking down your noses on people who are black or Asian or poor or gay or addicted to drugs or in prison or living in trailers. Or if you are from North Carolina, as I am, stop looking down your nose on all those people from South Carolina, as I was taught to do, even if those hot heads were the ones who started the Civil War!

God doesn't care about how much money you have or whether you live in a mansion or in an inner-city slum house. Whether you're from the North or the South. God could care less whether you went to Harvard or Texas A & M. or Ohio State or USC. Gucci doesn't matter. Jaguars? Mere animals in the jungle.

What counts - the only thing that counts - is mercy. If you're interested in Zoe.

If you're not interested in Zoe, you're in the wrong place and wasting God's time - which, by the way is Kairos - or Zoe time - eternal time.

Mercy will get you Zoe.

And, furthermore, you might just show a little mercy to those closest to you every now and then. It's a good way to get ready for the bigger stuff of guys or gals beaten up and lying in a ditch somewhere in Pasadena.

A true story:

Forty-five years ago, one very cold snowy Sunday afternoon I was working in my study at my first parish when I heard a rumbling noise outside near the trash cans. I peeked through the blinds to see a white homeless guy in the blowing snow trying to find something to eat by rummaging through the trash. I was not happy. The nerve of this guy! Interrupting my urgent work that I had to get done before leaving town the next morning for an important pastors' seminar in the mountains. I was a Pastor and quite ready to pass by on the other side. Before it was over, thanks to Jesus, not me, the guy was in the church, thawing out and eating some of Elsie's hot soup and getting ready to bed down for the night by the gas heater in the fellowship hall under some homemade quilts my grandma made. He had been recently released from a mental hospital in Florida and was hitch hiking home to Maine. It was a good thing he refused our invitation to sleep in our spare bedroom that night. He could have murdered us in our beds!

Then, I remember the night before our daughter Anne was born. She would be born by Caesarean section and the time would be 8 a.m. August 29. But this was August 28, 1974 around 9 pm. Another true story. My best friend and I had been to the hospital in Greensboro to see Elsie and were driving back to Liberty, N.C., twenty miles away, when suddenly we saw in the headlights a car stranded beside the road, with four sailors waving their arms. My friend, also a Lutheran Pastor, said, "Let's pull over and see if we can help." I was not too crazy about the idea, but didn't want to be caught as a bonafide priest or Levite. So, I pulled over. To make a long story short, we drove the sailors back into Greensboro and found an all-night garage. We got a guy to follow us in a wrecker and drove back to the sailors' car. We stayed with them until they all got going back to the garage. We gave them my home phone number in case they had any problem at the all-night garage. Then we drove home and got in bed around midnight.

Our daughter Anne was born the next morning at 7:58 a.m. When years later she went to the Divinity School at the University of Chicago to work on her master's in religion, she studied about Zoe. And learned, most probably outside the seminary, that mercy, only mercy, gets you Zoe.

It's one of the hardest things we Christians ever have to learn. Mercy, only mercy, gets you Zoe.

For all of you who already have learned it and who do such wonderful things to do mercy, I thank you from the bottom of God's heart.

For those of you who haven't learned it yet, God gives you time. (Pause) Learn about mercy. Mercy, only mercy, gets you Zoe!

Amen!