

"God be merciful to me a sinner"

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Preacher: Marc Steele

[0:00] As we've come before you today, we've heard your word read to us. We pray that as it is taught that we would comprehend Mark, inwardly digest it, and that in its preaching, in its reading, we would internalize it and live out the message it has for us today.

We pray this in the name of Christ. Amen. It is the privilege of a lifetime to be here amongst you this Sunday morning.

And I bring greetings, not just from Corleen and I, but also from Bishop Julian and Brenda. And I am so proud, in my mind, this is the lighthouse on Onondaga Hill, to not just continue to see it shining, but to see it shining brighter and brighter as it proclaims the excellencies of Christ.

This is my first season within Episcopal ministry. As a matter of fact, this is my first visit as a bishop. It is just such a joy to be here.

As I spoke to Marty, I remember coming here as a layman for the first time, nervously wondering if this would be a loving, Christ-honoring church.

[1:27] And Marty and I believe Kay rushed out to greet us the first Sunday we were here, and we knew we were home right away. One of the issues of the Episcopacy, as your rector reminded us, is that the bishops are on the front line of the war.

If, I'm not sure if you recognize how stressful it was hearing that when they start martyring members of the diocese, I'll be the first person they come for.

But recognizing that there's an increased stress on the job and on the rhythm of life, and one of the issues I've had is thinking, how do I balance out the ministry-family-life balance?

And they tell you to pursue new hobbies when you're trying to deal with the concept of stress in your life. So I've been trying out different things and trying to think through what I'm going to do to engage my mind and my body during times I try to decompress.

And the diocesan bishop has the desire, it's the same thing that your rector does. He goes out and deals with tens and thousands of angry, stinging insects and keeps bees.

[2:50] And that's not exactly what I count as a de-stressing, enjoyable activity. Are you finding it to be so, sir?

Surprisingly, yes. Ah, I can't come on. So I haven't, I also have this tendency to go whole hog into whatever I step into, so I'm trying, I haven't fully committed anything.

I think that should probably be proof that I stepped in here as a layman and now have returned as a bishop. It probably is proof of how I get extreme in my undertakings.

However, one thing that has kind of captivated my attention, and we have this wonderful world where no matter what hobby you choose, you can find people who devote their entire lives onto an online.

I am captivated, and please don't laugh because this isn't a joke, with the concept of terrarium keeping.

[3:59] You know, you take this bowl and you fill it with soil and with plants and with even tiny little creatures, and you seal it off from the world.

And I've been watching these terrarium builds over the past months, thinking how people spend weeks, months, sometimes even years, planning them out to seal them off for decades to come.

And I think part of the idea that appeals to me is this concept in the chaos, storm, and uncertainty of life that I have the potential to be the king over my own little kingdom, even if that little kingdom is just something I set on top of my desk.

The idea that no matter how chaotic the world is, that I have the ability to seal it off, the chaos of the world, and have my own little peaceful realm to rule over.

I'd invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me to Luke. And before we cause any stress to the rector, I want us to turn to Luke 10 first.

[5:34] We will get to our reading from Luke today, but I want us to go back to another parable from our Lord. It's always this fear, by the way, when you have a guest speaker and that he preaches from the wrong passage.

We'll get to our passage and our reading today, but I want us to look back at Luke chapter 10. Starting with 25, there's another parable.

We're very familiar with it, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke chapter 10, verses 25. We find Jesus teaching, and we find him intercepted by an individual.

And just reading here, starting at verse 25. And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

He said to him, What is written in the law? How do you read it? 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.

[6:53] And he said to him, You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.

This is a fascinating exchange. And the full nature of it is only seen within Luke's gospel. We have here the approach of the lawyer.

And we read this, and as Americans, we think we understand what is being conveyed here. But we really don't. This is not a lawyer as we understand it.

So, especially with Karen Martin here, we're not going to make lawyer jokes. Because this is not that kind of lawyer.

This is a very unique position that only happens during this time in Jewish history. The Greek here is *namakos*, the lawyer.

[8:05] And what this actually is, is during a time in development of rabbinic tradition and Jewish leadership. There comes up a class alongside the priests, alongside the scribes, alongside the kind of positions that we're used to.

And these were simply interpreters of the law. And this is a wild concept to me.

Because as I've looked into it, it seems like this class of leadership was self-appointed. They generally weren't paid by anybody.

So there generally wasn't a salary involved. Often they were bivocational ministers of a sort. But their entire job was going around and telling other people whether or not they were observing the Mosaic law in the correct way according to how they interpreted it.

Which is wild to me. Corleen and I have been in churches since we were in diapers. And we all know, and sometimes, by the way, I've been this guy, the self-appointed class that goes around and tells everybody whether or not they're following God's law and commandments the right way.

[9:49] But what also grasps my intention here is Luke says a certain lawyer.

We don't know exactly who this lawyer was, but he was well known as the *Namakos* to be somebody who everybody knew was exceptional for telling other people what their business was. Now, we're a little more familiar with this role now because after the destruction of the temple and destruction of Jerusalem, all these roles that we had in the Jewish world are now really condensed into the role of the rabbi.

The rabbi kind of holds all of these offices now and serves within the Jewish community these roles. But here they had enough time where they could break off the roles so this man's job becomes literally from Sabbath to Sabbath and all the points in between to stand outside of the synagogue to observe the men during their morning ritual cleanings and say, you have met my standards or you have not met my standards.

And this is a man whose role becomes engaging in debate with other people trying to follow God.

[11:34] He has set himself up as a gatekeeper to holiness. And for him, his service before the Lord is argumentation.

I believe it is Paul that will write warning against people addicted to controversy and foolish disagreement.

This man fills that role. So, knowing all that, going back to our text, think about how and think about why the lawyer is approaching Christ, approaching Jesus at this moment.

Jesus has made a name for himself as one of the greatest teachers of the age at this point.

He's not fully revealed who he is to the world around him. He's revealed it to his disciples and he chiefly reveals it at the cross and upon his resurrection.

[12:53] But in this lawyer's mind, what he's doing is approaching another great philosopher or another great teacher the same way he might have sought to approach Plato if Plato was alive at this time and operating within Judea.

He's approaching him purely as a teacher in what is he seeking here? He's seeking to engage in yet another debate and take yet another opportunity to make a name for himself as the greatest lawyer of his time.

And we don't even have to look to history to prove this. We see this right in the text because he comes to Christ with a problem. Christ hears it, addresses it, answers the question directly, and seeks to move on.

Teacher, what shall I do to inherit life? Jesus says to him, what is written in the law? Question answered, answer given.

You don't need me to give you the answer. I know, Jesus says, you are a certain lawyer. Where does he say that? Jesus responds to him and says, how do you read it?

[14:20] Jesus addresses him as the *namakos*. He uses the language that the lawyer would use. How do you read it? He's not trying to trick the lawyer.

He's not trying to throw him up. He has the exchange, and the lawyer answers truthfully the same words that I just charged you with at the beginning of this service.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. That's that simple. And Jesus says, yep, you got it right.

There's no debate here. This question has been answered. Moses answers it clearly. But, here's the problem.

This man, addicted to controversy, seeking for a debate, says, well, wait a second. It can't be that easy. If we've answered the question, what are we going to fight about here?

[15:31] How am I going to make a name for myself? Isn't this debate, this controversy, what we religious leaders do? I mean, this is the state of the religious leaders at the time.

Not to seek after an actual answer for the problem, but to continue to keep people in confusion and argumentation. Not to give an answer, but to continue with the questioning.

Verse 29, but he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, and who is my neighbor?

All right. If we're not going to argue about the central rule of the law, then we're going to argue about the application. We have to find something to argue about.

And why is this? What is this lawyer seeking to do? Guys, he's seeking to do the same thing I talked about at the start of this.

[16:48] He's speaking to build for himself a little terrarium that he can set upon his desk and that he himself can be a God over.

Because the law and the call of Christ points followers of Christ into a world that they have no control over.

if you have to love your neighbor as yourself, we just talked about this. I didn't know what the topic of this morning's educational hour was going to be.

You have to put yourself, you have to sacrifice yourself, you have to take up your cross daily and die to yourself because you know what you don't have any control over?

your neighbor. You have no control over your neighbor. There's nothing you can do to fix the person next to you.

[18:06] And this idea of limiting who your neighbor is is a way of just trying to grasp control back from God and bring it back to yourself so that you can rule your own little kingdom and keep the chaos out.

And it's stupid when you place it like this. We all recognize, I hope you recognize, I recognize the insanity in my mind of thinking I could build something so perfectly in order that I could at least keep a little corner of control within my world because guess what?

Terrariums go crazy too. I've discovered they get infested and they have algae and you know what? You might have children in your house that might knock things off of tables and smash it.

but this is why the lawyer needs to enter into a system of continuing argument you mentation because any time a flaw is found in his understanding of the world then he just would reset and start a new line of philosophy in the conversation and think about what Jesus so masterfully does when

he gives this parable of the Good Samaritan we're all familiar with it it's not our main text it's not what we're going to be looking at but think of what he does points out the obscurity of the system we have the priest and the Levite come on their way from Jericho to Jerusalem and insanely hyper-focused on their own terrarium systems of law keeping ignore a fellow countryman laying beaten and bruised that the closest followers the Mosaic law present within that time actually can't even demonstrate the most basic compassion to a fallen compatriot in the time of need yet here comes along the same man that the namakos lawyer was dividing devoting his entire life to writing off and and this is what the rabbinical class did during this age they would go to the Samaritans and they would say this is why the Samaritans are unworthy this is why they're unclean this is why they're perverse this is why a Jew shouldn't even talk to them I mean this is the practice that still exists within orthodoxy in Israel when you find orthodox Jews walking past people and covering their faces and pretending that they don't even exist because in their system of law keeping they are so disgusting in their conception of the world Jesus asked him in verse 36 which of these three men the priest the Levite and the Samaritan do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers and the lawyer says having lost the debate to the creator of heaven and earth to the one who breathed the very life into humanity the lawyer finally has to admit he's lost this debate and he admits to

[22 : 22] Jesus the one who showed him mercy and Jesus said to him you go and do likewise it's the wonderful beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ that gives us the news that our neighbor is no longer defined by our own conception of the world Paul will say this later there's neither slave nor free male nor female scythian nor Greek but Jesus is the first herald that brings to us the proclamation that the neighbor is the one to whom we show the mercy and love of Christ considering today's reading from Luke 18 please turn there in your

Bibles this is a little bit of a minor theme for Luke Luke is the only place in the gospels where we see this lawyer class mentioned this kind of nitpick litigating of what the word of God actually means Luke is focused on this kind of hypocrisy and this is an eruption of the same kind of principles that we see within the Good Samaritan Luke is revisiting this theme and we see these clues here in two places remember what the lawyer is seeking to do in arguing seeking to justify himself seeking to declare himself righteous in the eyes of God by his own merit and by his own argumentation Jesus here gives this parable to a different audience but a different audience that has the exact same heart

Luke 18 verse 9 Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and see our belief always always leads to action look at this he told this parable to some who trusted themselves they were righteous there's the belief and here's the action they treated others with contempt the attitude of their hearts directed their way of life the same way that the lawyer's desire for self justification led him to be an argumentative divisive and condemning man here we discover that when we place our trust and confidence in ourselves when we try to build up for ourselves little systems that we can control and manage according to our own strength and ability what ends up happening in response is that we persecute and cast down others others who Christ has commanded us to love two men went up into the temple to pray this time not a lawyer but this time a Pharisee and the other tax collector the Pharisee standing by himself prayed thus God I thank you that I am not like other men extortioners unjust adulterers or even like this tax collector I fast twice a week I give tithes of all that I get don't miss the point I'm making here in my opening illustration it should be clear maybe I'm speaking in my own form of parables but it's clear I mentioned this Corleyn and I have been in church since we were in diapers we've seen it all we build for ourselves little terrariums right that's what we turn our parishes into little closed systems that we can control little places where we find that the outside of the world isn't breaking in and destroying and making a mess of but the

God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills did not call us to be placed in little terrariums He actually gave us the forests of Lebanon!

[27 : 44] He promised us this entire earth that he rules over and gives us and it is chaotic but it is being placed under the control and rule and reign of the Prince of Peace and the King of Kings the same Prince of Peace and King of Kings who by the way did not give us a spirit of cowardice to strength back but gave us the Holy Spirit and gave us boldness to go out into the world and proclaim the love of Christ and demonstrate mercy we are not given the spirit of cowardice to strength back the spirit of boldness to lay down our lives on behalf of our neighbor and if our

response is who is our neighbor we've missed the point our call is to show mercy to every single soul whose path we cross notice the things the Pharisee does are all good things there's nothing wrong with what he's doing

I would rejoice to hear from you all that your manner of life was to not extort people to demonstrate justice to remain faithful in your marriages that you're a fasting and praying congregation and that you give tithes of all that you make that would be a wonderful report to get from every member of Holy Trinity Syracuse this should be a goal the problem are not the things the Pharisee is doing the problem is that he thinks underneath his own rule of life he has somehow satisfied the commandment of God upon his life the problem is that he has limited himself and I get here's the thing if everybody in the world is your neighbor can you meet their needs so who needs to meet their needs if that's what you're called to do the Holy

Spirit of Jesus that is within you you are going to have to rely on a divine power that is not yours to demonstrate the love that you are required to execute on behalf of Christ and in the ironic flipping upside down in the world that the gospel brings into existence suddenly this wretched miserable tax collector is closer to the heart of God than the Pharisee who would dedicate his life to obeying the minute decrees of the Mosaic law God be merciful to me a sinner that's the heart attitude and belief that we need to internalize in order to externalize

God's call upon our life we can't love our neighbor until we recognize the mercy that falls down upon us from heaven it's impossible and we get this so messed up all the time we build up for ourselves little systems that we think demonstrates the likeness of Christ when what we need to be doing is recognizing the mercy that we have obtained from above and I also think that our goals often end up being incorrect I want you to notice here the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast we think that the end goal of our following of Christ is perfect peace in the here and now and I'm telling you the only way that we get this is by sealing ourselves off in little bubbles but these little bubbles actually separate us from the call of Christ upon our life we want peace tranquility serenity we don't want the troubles outside of our four walls to break in and disturb us where we are but the only content person I find within the parable of the publican and the tax collector the only content person I see in this whole story is who the Pharisee the Pharisee comes in says I'm okay everything's okay leaves feeling pretty good about himself the one who we see Jesus actually tells us comes down justified is the one who is disturbed and broken and admits his fallen condition before the

[34:22] Lord we come together week in and week out day in and day out as Anglicans in a rhythm of morning and evening prayer confessing our sins in every service but speaking about myself I will tell you this more often than not I come into my time of confession saying I'm okay everything's okay everything's peaceful and in order in my world but when I confess truly who I am before God I must confess myself not as the ruler of my realm but as a failing miserable wretch in order to actually receive the mercy of

God and this is the same same same way that we are to receive the grace and power needed to reach out to neighbors brothers and sisters of this place that I truly and I say this about many places but here I say this truly call home I just don't believe you are a lighthouse on a hill I know you are a lighthouse on a hill because it called us to drive up this hill through some very treacherous conditions for five winters of our life sliding up and down but the geography matches the calling of this parish the warning I would give you is the same warning that

Christ did don't put a bushel over the light don't close yourself out from the world that surrounds you don't seal yourself off no shine out this is not an invitation to let darkness in that's not what I'm saying because the light defeats the darkness you were set as a light upon a hill to proclaim the love and mercy of Jesus and the only way you can do that is to humble yourself before God and say God have mercy upon me a sinner in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit