

The Call To Mercy

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[0 : 00] When we get confronted with an impossible task, we have kind of three options with what we can do with it. We can just reject it, decide it is impossible, it's too hard, leave it behind, move on, find something else to do. We can, of course, take the reality check, recognise that this is something beyond us and maybe get the help that we need to get the task done. Or we can just somehow adjust the task, to lower the bar a little bit so that what's impossible can become something that's achievable for us. And I think if I'm honest, the third one is the one that I'm most likely to do. When I was in high school, I had a maths teacher who was actually a really good maths teacher in hindsight, I can now see that, but she had this style of teaching where she would spend the entire lesson teaching us how to do something without letting us actually start doing it.

And so then that meant that all the exercises that we had to cover for that particular thing had to be done as homework. So after 45 minutes of explanation, she would take the last few minutes just to let us know that for homework that night, we will be doing chapters 8, 9, 10, second half of 11 and 15. And I'm looking at the textbook, and the maths textbook is always the thickest textbook, and I'm looking at it, just looking at page after page of confusing X's and numbers and stuff like and just thinking, the amount of time it's going to take to do this is going to seriously clash with the amount of time that I've already committed to watching TV later this afternoon. It's potentially impossible for me to do all of this maths and all the things that I want to do. I mean, I've got to squeeze in dinner at some point. What if I have to ring somebody or update my Facebook status? There are things that need to happen tonight, and it is going to be impossible for me to do this maths work.

And so in that moment, I would entertain, you know, just rejecting that task, just not doing it, just kind of hoping that I didn't get found out. But, you know, let's be honest, I might have got away with it occasionally, but I wasn't going to make it through all of high school with that approach to maths homework. So I had to shelve that possible response. Second response was reality check, maybe I'm watching too much TV and I need to commit this time to maths. That wasn't going to happen either. Third response, and just to be clear, since some of you are in high school, some of you are probably maths teachers in here, I can't see properly, but just to be clear, this is not an endorsement or a recommendation. But the third response, and my response was, to adjust the task sufficiently that I could make it something achievable. So my philosophy with maths exercises was to do the first three questions in the first exercise, the last three questions in the last exercise, and if I got at least a couple of those right, I figured that I could in good conscience say that I'd covered the work that was required for homework, and so I wouldn't have to acknowledge in class the next day that I hadn't done it. I did survive maths in high school, if you're wondering.

When we're confronted by a task that feels impossible, by a standard that feels unattainable, we have these three potential responses. And sometimes when it comes to following Jesus, it can feel like he puts up requests of us, demands of us, commands that we read in scripture, like this one, and it can feel impossible. And so we're faced with these options. Do we just reject following Jesus and put it in the too hard basket, do something else with our time? Do we take the reality check that, yes, it is too hard? On one level, it is impossible for us to fully live up to the standards that God's putting in front of us, and maybe we need some help? Or do we lower the bar?

Do we take what God puts in front of us as what we're supposed to do and how we're supposed to live and rationalise it? Make the demand slightly more achievable. Now, not explicitly, no one is walking around going, I'm following Jesus, I'm a Christian, but I've just lowered the bar a bit to make it easier.

[4 : 04] But subtly, we like to reinterpret what God wants from us. We like to listen to the commands and just adjust so that it will fit a bit more neatly, so that it's something I can actually do, something I can tick the box for. And option three is where we find our expert in the law in Luke 10

that Deb just read out for us. He comes to Jesus with this question. Now, it's not a genuine question. We know it's not a genuine question because we're told that he's just trying to test Jesus, but he asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life? But the reason we know this is a test, apart from the fact that it says it, is that he knows the answer. Because Jesus flips it and goes, well, what does the law say? I'm not trying to trick you here, I'm not trying to make it difficult, I've told you exactly what is required if you want eternal life, if you want to go to heaven.

It's written there. And the expert in the law answers really correctly. He says, you've got to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and you've got to love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus is like, see, there it is. It's obvious, it's clear. Just love God with everything you've got all of the time, no exceptions, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's it. That sums up everything that God requires of you in all of his law, all of his rules. That's all you have to do to go to heaven. And so Jesus looks this guy in the eyes and says, do this and you will live. Just do that. Simple. But the problem for this guy was never that he didn't know the answer. The problem wasn't that he was ignorant of what was required.

The problem was he didn't like what he was hearing. The problem was what God was asking of him sounded too difficult. The problem was he looked at that standard, love God with everything, love your neighbor, and he correctly read that, I can't do that. I can't deliver. Even me, an expert in the law, cannot live up to that standard. And so he tries to lower the bar. It says there in verse 29, he wanted to justify himself. He wants to find a way to tick the box. So he asks Jesus, who is my neighbor?

He's trying to clarify. He's like, Jesus, clearly that's impossible. Sounds nice. But let's narrow it down to something that, you know, I can have a real red hot go at. To which Jesus responds with what is a really well-known story, the Good Samaritan. Now before we jump into this story and what you think you know about this story, we need to remember the first question that the expert in the law asked. We've got to remember that he's interested in eternal life. That's what he wants.

That's what matters to him. He wants heaven. He wants to be with God forever. And so as we go through the story now, you need to keep asking yourself this question, what does this story have to do with getting eternal life? You ready? It's been read. Let's give you a recap. You've got that question in your head. What does this story have to do with eternal life? Now I'll give you the very fast recap. A man is walking down the road. All we know about him is he's a man. He's heading towards Jericho. He's on a road called the Jericho Road. He gets attacked. He gets beaten. He gets robbed. He gets left for dead. One man, a priest, comes along, sees him, looks the other way, keeps walking.

[7 : 46] Another man, a Levite, walks down the road, sees him bloodied, beaten, laying there, needing help, looks the other way, keeps going. Now they're supposed to be the holy people. Now when Jesus is telling this story, everyone there would have expected one of them to be the hero in this story.

Like he was going to lift them up and say, be like the Levite, be like the priest. But they just keep going and leave the guy lying in the ditch. And then you get to your third guy, a Samaritan who takes pity on him. A Samaritan who bandages his wounds, who puts him on his donkey. So now the Samaritan has to walk the rest of the way. The Samaritan who takes him to the inn, who looks after him, who pays for him to continue getting care from the innkeeper, who then plans to return just to make sure that he can pay any extra costs, to make sure that this guy is actually getting looked after.

Now you've got to understand that Jews who were hearing this story and Samaritans who lived kind of next to them, hated each other. And not like just a, I don't like you hatred. It was this ingrained sense of we're better than you. And not like better at sports, we're better people than you.

It was absolutely inconceivable for a Jew to imagine that a Samaritan could have been, let alone would have been, more compassionate than a Jew. It just did not enter their frame of thinking. And yet Jesus tells this story where a Samaritan endangers himself. I mean, just think about this for a second.

It's like there's a dark alleyway and there's a bloody beaten person and you notice it. Just a little bit of thinking tells you that somebody beat them up. And so to walk into that alleyway is to put yourself in danger. There's a small part of us that's got to have a little bit of grace for the Levite and the priest who kept walking. We might even call that worldly wisdom, avoiding a dangerous situation. But yet the Samaritan endangers himself, puts himself in harm's way, helps the man physically,

pays for his accommodation, comes back to check on the man, goes above and beyond, bears the financial cost, follows it through to the end. I mean, the Samaritan could have dropped the guy off at the inn, never come back, and he still would have looked golden in this story. The other two guys ignored him simply by stopping, giving him a bottle of water. He would have looked like the hero, but he goes above and beyond. He does what is needed and more. He commits to loving his neighbour no matter how costly it's going to be. It's kind of like the difference between being friendly and being a friend here at church. We're a church that has guests come in here every week. People who are sitting in these seats for the very first time, every single time we gather. God is really good to us. And sometimes we think, I'll be really friendly, and so we smile and we wave. And maybe if there's that moment where we have to talk to one another, we'll kind of say, hi, how are you? Nice to see you. And then we'll quickly make our way back to our seat. And we kind of walk away going, we're friendly. I'm friendly. But a friend is the person who actually wants to get to know that person, who doesn't just say hello and run back to safety, but introduces themselves, sits with them, checks out how they found church, maybe invites them to dinner afterwards, spends some time with them, gets to know them, goes above and beyond because the person matters, not the task. It's not about, I've got to tick friendliness. It's, I need to care for this person, this individual. The Samaritan goes above and beyond because he's not trying to just be merciful.

[11 : 40] He's having compassion and pity on this individual that he sees. And so the story ends with Jesus' words, go and do likewise, which should sound familiar.

Jesus is clearly echoing the thing that he said after the first question, do this and you will live. The point being that this story is supposed to illustrate the commandments that came before.

This call to be a neighbor like the Samaritan, to love your neighbor like the Samaritan, has to do with inheriting eternal life, has to do with getting to heaven, with being saved.

Loving your neighbor is not a secondary, subsequent point after loving God. Mercy to people and worship to God stay connected.

Our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with one another can't be separated. They're connected. Mercy or love for your neighbor is part of what it looks like to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength.

[12 : 55] We get a definition for what mercy and love for neighbor looks like in this Samaritan story. At the end, the expert in the law, the one who's kind of set himself up to look stupid in this story, describes what the Samaritan did as mercy, which means mercy includes caring for his physical needs, includes paying his financial costs, includes giving up his own time, putting himself in danger.

That's mercy. That's the kind of love for people that has to go with love for God. Because Jesus never separates them.

Jesus never says they're two different things. His mission on earth was to bring people back into a relationship with God. That was his agenda. He came to fix what was wrong. But clearly, high priority for him, part of what it looked like to show God's love to the world, was to spend time with and care for those in need.

For the poor, for the lonely, for the outcast, for the widow, for the sick. That's who he spent his time with. Because they mattered to him. Jesus' very first sermon, in Luke chapter 4, he gets up and he reads out of the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament.

And he reads this. He says, Jesus comes to undo what is wrong with the world, to undo the effects of sin, to declare that God cares for the needy, and that his love for them is not just a sentiment.

[14 : 42] It's not just an idea. It's an action that he embodies by spending time with them. The Bible makes it clear that loving God is loving your neighbour.

Jesus shows us what it looks like. James 2 makes it explicit. Deborah read it out for us in James 2.15. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

If one of you says to them, Go in peace. Keep warm and well fed. But does nothing about their physical needs. What good is it? In the same way, Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Love is more than words. Love demands concrete, practical action and care. The action of loving God is the action of loving your neighbour.

There's a passage in Matthew 25, which is a really scary passage of scripture. It's Jesus describing the final day, when those who are genuinely his, genuine followers of God, genuine lovers of God, will be shown as genuine.

[15 : 54] And those who speak the words that they love God, but don't actually love him, don't live it out, will be shown to be not genuine. And do you know what the measure will be?

To separate them out? Let me read to you from Matthew 25. It'll be on the screen as well. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right, and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, come you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat.

I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I needed clothes, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you looked after me. I was in prison, and you came to visit me.

[16 : 58] Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or needing clothes, and clothe you?

When did we see you sick, or in prison, and go to visit you? The king will reply, truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

And then the scary warning. To those on his left, depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in. I needed clothes, and you did not clothe me.

I was sick, and in prison, and you did not look after me. They also will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or needing clothes, or sick, or in prison, and did not help you?

[18 : 06] And he will reply, truly I tell you, whatever you did not do, for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.

To love God, is to love your neighbor. Because loving God, includes loving what he loves, caring about what matters to him, and he loves those he has made.

Rich or poor, he cares for his creation, even the ones that our culture, and our society, has long since given up on. The call to follow God, is a call to care practically, for those in need.

Whatever their need is. So where is our problem? Because this isn't a news flash.

We're not ignorant. We've all heard this before. We know we're supposed to love our neighbor.

Could it be, that the issue is not ignorance, but like the expert, it's that it just seems too hard?

[19 : 19] It's the difficulty. We look at this, and it's just intimidating, and we think, how could I ever do that? Do we think it's just too big a task, so why bother trying? I mean, even for us, we live in one of the most affluent parts, of one of the most affluent cities, in one of the most affluent countries, in the world.

And yet, you don't have to look far, if you walk through the mall in Chatswood, to see homelessness, poverty, people struggling, mental health issues.

I mean, just, does it feel, too difficult? Just in the past week, in the space of a couple of hours, I was engaged by two different people, who were both doing it tough.

One man, and one woman, in need of friendship, money, someone to listen, somewhere to stay, someone to care. And if I'm honest, in both situations, I felt horribly inadequate.

I knew I was supposed to care for them, I even kind of did care for them, I was in the middle of preparing this sermon. So I fumbled out some words, I tried to listen, I gave a few dollars, I prayed for them, and I walked away fairly confident that I hadn't really done a whole lot to actually love them.

[20 : 40] I hadn't really made much of a difference for them. It can just kind of feel overwhelming, can't it? We know we're supposed to do it, but do you ever feel like you can't make any difference anyway?

And so, faced by an impossible task, the temptation is to just lower the bar. To make the call to love your neighbour a little bit more palatable.

Maybe you lower the bar by focusing on the first commandment. Just love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Focus on worship, that's what really matters.

And let's be honest, that's harder to fail at. It's harder to tell if you're failing anyway. It's harder to pin down whether or not you're getting it right. It's spiritual. It's ethereal. Or maybe you lower the bar by kind of narrowing loving your neighbour down to evangelising or just telling people about Jesus. That's what love is, we say. I've just got to tell them about Jesus. And the best bit is it's not our problem how they respond. Just tell them. Then I've ticked the box of loving them.

[21 : 59] Again, it's harder to fail if all you've got to do is just say some words. And so we make the commandment more palatable, more realistic. Churches and individuals tend to focus on one or the other.

Either the words of speaking about Jesus or the actions of physically meeting needs. Providing clothing, friendship, mercy.

You tend to get one or the other and both sides tend to look down on the other one as if they're better at loving. They're more holy. But the reality is both sides of those are a convenient delusion. Both of them are missing a huge part of who God is, how God loves, what God's done. We as an Anglican church live in the end that has traditionally focused on speaking rather than acting. We're caring for the soul, we like to say. But the God that we follow cares for whole people. Spiritual, physical.

[23 : 13] He created them with dignity. And he carries a burden for those who are needy. We need to be people who, as well as speaking about Jesus, which is invaluable and important, also seek to know also seek to know what their needs are and then seek to meet those needs with our God-given resources.

Yeah, the task is massive. It is intimidating. But it's not supposed to be hopeless. It's not supposed to be crippling.

It's not supposed to make us not do anything. Jesus is not trying to make this guy who's asking him a question, even though he's trying to trick Jesus, Jesus is not trying to turn him away and make him give up.

Jesus is trying to humble him. He's trying to show him that he can't do it himself, but that God will offer him help. Whenever we come to law in the Bible, like love thy neighbor, like love God with everything that you've got, there's always two functions of a law like that.

It is always impossible for us to do in our own strength. We're seeing it right if we recognize that it's impossible. That's a good starting point, but it's actually there to do something for us.

[24 : 28] Two things specifically. Firstly, it's revealing God to us. It's trying to show us who he is and what he's like. And these commandments that we're looking at right now show us that God is worthy of absolute, single-minded, exclusive devotion and worship.

Loving with everything, all the time. That's the God that we're dealing with. But also it shows us that God cares for his creation and the people in his creation. Us loving one another was significant enough to get a specific mention in the two laws that encapsulate everything that God commands. So these impossible laws are showing us a big bit of what God is like. But the second thing that the law does, the second thing that impossible commands do, is they point us to Jesus.

They humble us because we look at them and go, I can't do that. And God's like, that's right. But I can do it for you. Jesus comes to perfectly live out every one of those commands, to perfectly love God at every step and every decision, to perfectly and sacrificially and in costly ways love his neighbor.

Jesus comes to take the punishment that we deserve for not meeting these standards. He pays the price. He makes it possible for us to have the relationship with this incredible God who cares for us.

[26 : 02] The law points us to Jesus who has been the good neighbor to us, who does not turn and look away, who does not blame us for our situation, but who stops and not only risks his life but gives his life so that we might be restored.

Because of Jesus, the command to love God and to love your neighbor is fulfilled. Because of Jesus, we have the approval that we crave.

We have the welcome. We have the guarantee of heaven. We have the eternal life that the expert in the law is desiring. We have that given to us as a gift. That's the grace that Jared was telling us about.

It is handed over unconditionally, free of charge and so now these laws are transformed. They become an invitation to us, to those of us who are already securely loved by God, irreversibly, unconditionally, to love like we've been loved.

To love because we've been loved. to love with words and action. To point people to Jesus with our words and with our actions because there's no distinction here.

[27 : 28] They're one and the same. You can't dodge these. You can't separate these. To love God rightly is to love your neighbor practically, concretely, by speaking of the one who saves you and by embodying his love by caring for people, feeding them, befriending them, helping them by fighting for their dignity because it matters to the one who made you, the one who made them.

we need both. We need words and we need actions because God demands it. We need both because our vision as a church calls for both.

We're desperate as a church for the world around us to encounter Jesus, for people to encounter Jesus, not to just hear about him but for them to encounter him, for them to experience his free, unconditional love as we pay a bill for them, as we provide groceries for them, for them to experience his grace as we teach them English and make it easier for them to function in the community that they live in.

We want them to encounter Jesus in such a way that they beg us to introduce them to the one who could enable us to love like this. That's why we've got a ministry dedicated to loving those who work in the brothels in Chatswood.

Because God loves them. And we want them to know his love. We're dropping off cakes to them.

[29 : 11] We're praying for opportunities to befriend them. It's why we welcome anyone in our gatherings. Whether they're a Christian or not doesn't matter. Anyone is welcome here because people matter to God.

This is not a holy club. God. This is a space where anyone can discover the love that God has for them in Jesus.

The love that we have received. The love that means that impossible laws are not oppressive anymore. but they're gifts to remind us of the God who loves us, the God who sent his son for us, and the God who is marking out a path of what it looks like to live in that love.

Love is costly. It's not easy. It's not compartmentalised into a section of our life or a task that we do. It comes from the core, from your heart.

You can't just switch it on or off. What's required is a heart change. And what God does in sending Jesus is give us the pass mark that we can't get ourselves, give us the approval that says he loves us no matter what, and then begins the process of changing our hearts so that we can actually live out this kind of love.

[30 : 32] I mean, costly love for other people, costly love for our neighbours is only possible because we have the security of first being loved unconditionally, irreversibly, and abundantly by God in Jesus.

It's only possible because of that. But because of that, it is possible. So rest in that security.

Rest in the fact that Jesus has done everything that needs to be done. That God loves you unconditionally, and then hear God's call again.

Love your neighbour. Ciasta. Let's tell him about the