

BaptistWay: Love without limits

December 1, 2013

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Dec. 15 focuses on Luke 10:25-37.*

No one likes failing to measure up. Regardless of whether you are high- or low-achieving, intelligent or dense, you want to believe you make the cut.

Most people are not good at everything, so we deal with our need to feel competent in different ways. Kids who struggle to do well academically can fall into skipping homework assignments and copying other people's work. On the other hand, those who lack athletic ability can learn to seek refuge in books and grades. We gravitate toward what makes us feel affirmed and worthwhile.

Testing Jesus (Luke 10:25-27)

Perhaps this has something to do with an expert's agenda in approaching Jesus. Would Jesus approve of his efforts or not? The word "test" (v. 25) does not necessarily mean he was hostile or trying to trap Jesus. Rather, it seems his concern has to do with his own sense of insecurity. His question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" as well as his answer to love God and his neighbor commonly were paired together. By inviting him to answer his own question, Jesus proves this man was not really looking for an answer, but hoping to justify the answer he already was convinced was true.

Approval is important, but if that is all we are approaching Jesus to receive, he will see right through it. Have you ever had someone ask you for advice, even though it was clear they already made up their mind? Close friends sometimes do this to those who mean the most to them when they want to have their ego stroked and be reassured they are correct. No one likes being on the receiving end of this vain kind of self-love. This is all the more

reason why we should exercise caution when approaching our Savior with an agenda. He might just turn it upside-down on us.

Justifying ourselves (Luke 10:28-29)

When Jesus tells the man what he wants to hear, it isn't enough. He wants to take it one step further, to be assured beyond a shadow of a doubt he is indeed special and worthwhile.

When my brother was about 6 years old, he went through a phase where he wanted people to refer to him by made-up names reflecting what he was wearing. If he was wearing a blue shirt, he insisted people call him "Blue Boy." After being stopped in mid-sentence and corrected by him, an adult usually would give in to his demand and say, "OK, Blue Boy." This worked until it became apparent people were just telling him what he wanted to hear. He had to take it a step further. Say, "Hi, Blue Boy," he began to demand.

The expert in the law didn't just want to be correct. He wanted to be justified. "And who is my neighbor?" he asked Jesus.

Jesus' challenge (Luke 10:30-37)

He had to ask. He had to take it one step further. The parable Jesus responds with is one of the most well-known stories of Scripture. The early church fathers allegorized it, finding symbolism behind each character and detail. Others have minimized it to a simple moral imperative. Neither extreme does justice to the parable or the context in which Jesus taught it. The priest and Levite would have been expected by the expert to be heroes in the story.

As it turns out, both fail miserably. The one who succeeds at being a neighbor is the one who would have been considered unrighteous by the law the expert lived his life by. When Jesus asks him which character he

thinks is righteous, he cannot even bring himself to utter the obvious answer. All he can muster is, “The one who had mercy on him” (v. 37).

If we do not turn this parable inward toward ourselves, we fail to allow it to do the work it is meant to do. It’s easy to stand back and look at the expert, desperately looking for approval, and shake our head tacitly at his struggle to affirm the goodness of a Samaritan. We have no stake in the story when we remain detached. Some of the more powerful ways I’ve heard this text preached have substituted contemporary characters for purposes of application. For instance, how might we receive the parable differently if the priest were a local pastor, the Levite a deacon and the Samaritan a homosexual?

Right action

Remember, the parable isn’t about right belief but about right action. This is not to say belief isn’t important, but to demonstrate the uselessness of belief alone. We like to use our beliefs to put limits and definitions on things, but the love of Christ does not respect boundaries.

When my little brother insisted I call him “Blue Boy,” I was not very mature. I purposely made him mad by pretending to forget what he wanted to be called, or by calling him random variations—Blue Kid, Blue Guy, Blue Dude, etc. Yes, he was self-centered and a little obnoxious, but so are our “neighbors” from time to time.