

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now an expert in Jewish law wanted to test Jesus so he asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now, that’s a big question, and wouldn’t you like to have the short answer to that? First, I have a test for you, and I hope you don’t think it’s too silly, but it’s a test. The questions are not very difficult, and an Anderson consulting firm to find out if professional consultants are smarter than four-year-olds uses them. See how you do. Don’t answer if you know the answers. Just think.

First is how do you put a giraffe into a refrigerator? The correct answer is you open the refrigerator door, put in the giraffe, and close the door. Now this is a test to see if you overcomplicate simple questions. The second one is how do you put an elephant into the refrigerator? If you say, open the door and put in the elephant and close the door, that’s wrong. It is a test to see if you understand the repercussions of your previous actions. You must first open the door, take out the giraffe, then put in the elephant and close the door. The third question is the lion king is hosting an animal conference and all the animals attend except one. Which animal does not attend? This is to test your memory. It’s the elephant because he’s in the refrigerator. The fourth question is there is a river you must cross, but crocodiles use it, and you do not have a boat. How do you manage it? This is to test to see how quickly you learn. You just simply swim across. You remember that all the animals are at the lion king’s conference.

According to Anderson Consulting Worldwide, about 90% of professionals they tested got all the answers wrong, but many preschoolers got many of the answers right. Four-year-olds!

Now, back to the expert in the law, who sought to test Jesus. He asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus turned it back on the lawyer saying something like, “You have studied the law. You know as well as I do what the answer is.” The man answered properly. He said, “Love God completely and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Jesus said, “You have answered correctly. Now, if you do this, if you do this, you shall live.” The lawyer wasn’t finished. Luke tells us that he wanted to justify himself. He wanted to be absolutely certain that he did not love anybody that he didn’t have to love, so he said, now, just who is my neighbor? Let’s define that down. Who is my neighbor? That’s when Jesus answered, not with a simple short answer, but with the familiar story, which we call the Good Samaritan.

I’m going to move to our Old Testament reading for just a moment. It has much the same theme from the Prophet Amos. Amos is an amazing prophet. It’s a very short book, and you should read it. He spoke of God holding a plumb line to the earth and measuring the people of the earth by one standard. What was that standard? The same as it has always been, consistent from the Old to the New Testament. To love God with

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your whole being, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus told the lawyer do this and you shall live, but Amos came telling off country after country after country because they were not doing this. Amos began speaking to a Jewish audience about the sins of other nations, and his home crowd says, you tell ‘em Amos, you tell ‘em! The people of Damascus have sinned against God and each other, and they said, yes, they are sinners! Go get ‘em God! The people of Gaza and the people of Edom have sinned again and again, and they said, “Right on!” The people of Moab have sinned again and again, and the crowd yelled, “They stink!” Finally, Amos went around the map, and he then said, “And the people of Judah have sinned, and I will not forget,” and the crowd said, “What? Judah?” He went on to say, “And the people of Israel have sinned, and I will not forget,” and they said, “No, no, no, Amos! This is not what we want to hear.” Amos goes on, and I read from Amos, “They have perverted justice by selling honest people for silver and poor people for a pair of shoes. They trample helpless people in the dust, and deny justice to those who are oppressed.”

You see, Amos destroyed their superiority complex! One standard for friend and foe, all found lacking, falling short of the love of God, falling short of the love of neighbor. Apparently, Amos thinks that knowing about God and God’s will and even being God’s chosen people is not enough! The plumb line, the measure, the standard holds the same for all. Love God completely and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Now, back to the Good Samaritan. I was telling the Good Samaritan in the children’s sermon, and it reminds me of when I used to have to do it week after week after week, and I’m kind of glad that we share the duties here. It’s good. It’s refreshing for the kids and for me. Once I was telling the Good Samaritan story to a group of kids, and it’s always very dangerous to ask children anything, and I said, “Now, what would you do if you saw a person lying on the side of the road, wounded and bleeding?” One little girl looked up, sort of uneasily, and she said, “I think I’d throw up!” They answer if you ask.

In Jesus’ story, the priest saw, and he walked by wide on the other side. The Levite saw, and he walked by wide on the other side. They knew the standards all right. They knew the words, but they were not dancing to God’s tune. They did nothing about it. They did less than nothing.

Now, some history about Samaritans before we get to the hero of the story. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho, they were all traveling, runs along a river bed that’s flanked on either side by soaring cliffs, and it’s a very narrow track down among the cliffs, and the road descends over 3,000’ in just ten miles. It was a very dangerous road plagued by flash floods and by rockslides and by robbers, who could hide around every curve. There were ample places to hide and to ambush someone. The Jews and the Samaritans, you need to know also, had been in an conflict for over 800 years, and the cultural and the racial and the theological resentments ran deep. I want you to think of the rudest, and don’t shout them out, but the rudest, most politically incorrect terms that one group of humans can have for another group of humans, and you have what the Jews thought of the Samaritans.

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Jesus was not impressed by the knowledge and the theology and the ritual purity or even the common sense of the priest and the Levite, who passed by, maybe thinking, if you want to give them a break, that it was a trap. He made the hated Samaritan the hero of the story by simply asking who proved to be neighbor to the man in need. He had to answer, “The one who had mercy, the one who stopped and helped,” and Jesus said, “Go, and do likewise.”

Now, all of this was an answer to that question, the big question, what must I do to inherit eternal life? It is surprisingly untheological. Isn't it? Surprisingly untheological. Maybe we do make things more complicated than we should.

You know, Israel was called to be the standard bearer for the world. They were called to be a light unto the nations. The nations means the Gentile world. That means to everyone. Israel was called to live out God's law of love of God and love of neighbor, even love of stranger. That, when you look at the Ten Commandments, is essentially what the Ten Commandments are about – loving God and loving neighbor.

Picture Amos, who stood there talking about all the other countries, and then picture them. The audience was supposed to understand that they were alike to these other countries and supposed to live differently than the other countries. Amos was saying, this country does not, and they said, boo, they do not, and that country does not, boo they do not, and finally, Israel does not! Israel does not!

As for ritual and theological purity, the Samaritans definitely did not. They had it wrong as they could possibly have it in the estimation of the religious leaders of that day. They had wrong Scripture. They violated the rule of marrying outside of the 12 tribes. They built a temple outside of Jerusalem. They sacrificed to God on foreign soil. They were just wrong. They were considered a joke, miscreants, deviants, an insult, unclean, and hopelessly wrong! They were thought of in those terms, a perversion of what Israel thought it was called to be. Yet, Jesus made the Samaritan the hero for the simple act of proving to be neighbor to the man in need. The Samaritan, he had no understanding of covenant theology or substitutionary atonement or election or free will or messianic eschatology, all those things we learned in seminary. We don't know if he would have felt more at home with John Calvin or John Wesley or Pope John Paul. How can we feel good about Jesus' simple, simple answer?

The same with Amos, who pointed out to the people of Israel and Judah, that's the northern and the southern tribes, that their theology and perfect rituals did not matter so much when they acted like and behaved no differently than any other nation around them, who claimed no special relationship with God! Amos pointed fingers at others, and said sinner, and the people said yes, they are sinners. When he finally got around, around the map to Israel and said sinner, they said, now, wait a minute! Now wait a minute! We are the chosen of God, how can we be sinners, and Amos turns that upside down, and says,

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you are sinners, how then can you be the chosen of God? How can you fulfill your task to be a light to the nations if you live no differently than the nations around you?

Jesus, as prophet, as teacher, and as Savior answers this big question, what must I do to inherit eternal life? He answers it by telling this simple story about a man beaten and broken and bleeding in a ditch, and points out that all the Scripture knowledge of the priest, and you know he could not be a priest if he didn't have a perfect blood line and genealogy and perfect knowledge of ritual and sacrifice and temple worship, and the Levite, who studied the law, and the Levite assisted the priest, all of this amounted to nothing because they failed to have compassion and pity on the man in the ditch. In Jesus' story, the keepers of the law kept the dotted i's and crossed the t's, but they ignored the needs of the man in the ditch! Who behaved well? The despised, corrupt, distorted, laughing stock, outsider, the Samaritan! Who proved to be neighbor to the man in need? Why, it was the Samaritan! Jesus said go, and do likewise.

Jesus was not waiting for John Calvin or Martin Luther or John Wesley or any other modern theologian to fill in the blanks. This story deeply, simply, profoundly is calling us to be, if we are the children of God, the standard bearers of His love and light. Not arguing! You cannot argue truth into existence, but instead living out the truth. Living it out loud when the need arises, not passing by on the other side. Noticing instead of ignoring. Getting involved in the world instead of rationalizing reasons not to.

The Samaritan simply stopped and helped. Could it be, it may be that we overvalue theology. When Jesus keeps simplifying it, simplifying it down to all the law and all the prophets boil down to this. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. If that is the standard God wants from His people then we must ask ourselves, what are we doing? What are we doing?

Also from the Gospel of Luke, the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, listen and hear in the same vein these words where Jesus says love your enemies and do good and lend expecting nothing in return and your reward will be great and you will be children of the most High for He is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful even as your Father is merciful. Judge not and you will not be judged. Condemn not and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you, good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over into your lap – for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

Bottom line – how you live matters to God. How you love matters to God, and if you think that is too simple, then you will have to take it up with Jesus. It's His story, not mine.

Finally, a short illustration. I can see by my watch that I have time for a long illustration, but I have only a short one. There was a pastor in East London many years ago named W. H. Lax, and he used to call time after time in his work on an unchurched man, who was gravely ill. The man saw his clerical collar and he turned away. He said, “You

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know, I've had experience with you, you types.” He wouldn't talk with him. The pastor noted the poverty of the room, and he brought him back some firewood, and on another visit, he brought him some lamb chops, and he found that the man liked those so each visit; he would bring some lamb chops. Finally, he did speak to the minister. He let him pray. He read some Scripture. When the man died, the pastor was out of town, and he left a note. He left a note instructing his caregiver to tell the pastor, it said, “Tell him that I am going to God, but be sure to tell him it was not the preaching. It was not the prayer. It was the lamb chops!”

Sometimes the theology we do is more important than the theology we say. Consider this passage again, sometimes too familiar to really hit home. Consider it again. Amen.