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The Lost Reprieve

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Have you ever noticed how most of us use superficial questions to divert attention away from the serious concerns of life? Some professed Christians are unwilling to openly confront the real issues of life and faith. Think for a moment about all of your recent conversations with friends, at religious services, in Bible study groups, and other places. Did you contribute to a meaningful discussion about life’s meaning?

Jesus dealt with people, many of them His alleged followers, who continually asked superficial questions. Oh, yes, they sounded deeply religious. Pious tones and words were often employed. But somehow most of the questions people asked were irrelevant to real life and meaningless with regard to life’s true purpose. An incident in Luke’s Gospel provides an example of what I mean. A Jewish lawyer “stood up and made trial of him, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Later, in the same tenth chapter of Luke, after Jesus had answered that question, the lawyer again attempted to weaken the conversation’s seriousness. Listen as Luke describes the lawyer’s reaction, “But, he, desiring to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29).

Notice that both questions come from a religious leader among the Jews trained in the intricacies of Moses’ Law. But also observe, like so many of us today, the lawyer’s motives for asking these questions were less than the best. He “made trial of Jesus” and desired “to justify himself.” These questions were not the concern of his heart. He actually wanted no genuine answers to what otherwise were vital questions.

Helmut Thielicke, the renowned German preacher, has remarked about this very incident, “As long as a man has some pious questions to ask he doesn’t need to act. He still has a reprieve. And a very nice reprieve, too, because then many people consider him a seeker for God, a man who thinks seriously” (p. 163, The Waiting Father. New York: Harper and Row, 1959. Trs. J. W. Doberstein). We have all utilized this very same method in gaining reprieves from serious, eternal considerations of the soul. We, too, have asked the “pious question” without really wanting a personal answer. But the lawyer’s attempt at a reprieve was manifestly unsuccessful. He did gain what appeared to be a reprieve, only to have Jesus so forcefully answer and so thoroughly penetrate his defensiveness that he could not help but face the true answers to his questions. Before the penetrating truth of Jesus the lawyer lost his reprieve.

The lawyer’s first question cannot be dismissed as unimportant. Man’s universal quest is bound up in that query. “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and made trial of him, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Jesus answered this question by pointing to the Old Testament scriptures, the Bible of His day. His answer reveals Jesus’ attitude toward the Scriptures, as well as God’s view of how to obtain eternal life. “And he (Jesus) said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?” (Luke 10:26). Jesus pointed the lawyer to God’s revelation for that day, the Old Testament.

He taught in His Sermon on the Mount, “Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). He countered the early charges made against Him by the religious establishment of His day in the following words: “Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). Jesus respected the Old Testa-
ment law and came to complete its purposes (Romans 10:4). Paul teaches in Galatians, chapter three, that the Law of Moses "was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come" (Galatians 3:19). Earlier, in the same chapter, the Apostle identified "the seed" as Christ (Galatians 3:16). The Old Testament system, he explains, was "our tutor to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). Even though its major purpose was fulfilled with the coming of Christ, he realized the Old Testament would remain God's authority until the cross (Hebrews 9:15-17).

Jesus pointed the lawyer to Biblical revelation because He not only knew the power of Scripture but also because He respected its authority for men living in the Old Testament era. He talked with His Jewish antagonists on one occasion and said, "the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). He carefully taught His apostles "the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms," showing them how He was the fulfillment of all they foretold. On the last day of His earthly existence, Jesus "opened" the apostles' minds "that they might understand the scriptures" which detailed His death, burial and resurrection (Luke 24:44-49).

Contrary to the practices of most self-acclaimed religious leaders, Jesus respected the authority, knew the power, and pointed men to the inspired Old Testament. God's revelation for His day.

But also notice that Jesus emphasized the lawyer's personal responsibility to study and understand the Word of God for himself. He asked the lawyer two questions, both of which are important: "What is written in the law?" and also, "How readest thou?"

When Peter says that the Old Testament scriptures did not originate from "private interpretation," he is not suggesting that each of us must not personally study God's Word. The next verse of that reading clarifies what Peter means by "private interpretation." "For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from the Spirit ever came by the will of man: but men spake from the Spirit" (II Peter 1:20, 21). God speaks to us in His Word. We read, study, ponder, examine, and accept its truths for our lives. Jesus taught His disciples, "If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). The truth of God, revealed in the Bible, belongs only to those who will search for themselves, and who will honestly accept what it clearly teaches. God never withholds His way from the earnest seeker (Matthew 7:7, 8). So Jesus asks the lawyer, "How readest thou?" May I ask you who listen to this program, "How do you read the Bible?" "What does it teach you about life's purpose and God's plan?"

Another very significant observation from this incident is that the lawyer properly interpreted the law. His answer to Jesus' two questions just considered was, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thine mind; and thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:27). Jesus promptly replied, "Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live" (Luke 10:28). The Jewish scholar had the right answers all right, but they resided solely in his mind rather than in his heart. "You answer like a good student but you live a bad man," expresses the essence of Jesus' reply. Jesus taught that loving God with all one's being was the "great commandment" in the Law (Matthew 22:37, 38). The love of one's neighbor was the second great commandment, according to His teaching (Matthew 22:39). "The law and the prophets" were summarized by Him in the following words, "All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

But we must not overlook the lawyer's second attempt at a reprove from the serious concerns of life. Luke 10:29 reads, "But he, desiring to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor?" Again Jesus leads the questioner to answer his own question, as He did with the first query. In order to accomplish this purpose and to bring the lawyer to the point where Jesus could ask him, "Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbor unto him that fell among the robbers?" He tells the unforgettable story about the Samaritan. Our time will allow only that we read this magnificent illustration of neighborliness. "Jesus made answer (to the question about whom the lawyer should consider a neighbor, je) and said, A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his clothing, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And in like manner a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed where he was: and when he saw him, he was moved to pity. And he went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow he took out two shillings, and gave them to the host, and said, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, I, when I come again, will repay thee." (Luke 10:30-35).

By the conclusion of this brilliant illustration Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbor unto him that fell among the robbers?" (Luke 10:36). To this question the stunned man could only reply, "He that showed mercy on him" (Luke 10:37).

Our Lord had a way of asking provocative questions that immediately turned a man's superficial interest in others' conduct into a profound realization of his own needs. The apostles, on one occasion, lamented that many of Jesus' professed disciples had left the group following the various answers, they were asked by Him, "But who say ye that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). The comfortable, secure feeling vanished. The shallow disregard of others' opinions disappeared. In a blinding "moment of truth," each man had to answer for himself, "What do I really think of Jesus?" And now, Jesus has done that with the lawyer in our text. A not-too-serious dispute has suddenly turned into a personal confrontation with reality, "Which of these three thinnest thou, proved neighbor unto him that fell among the robbers?" (Luke 10:36).

The lawyer's reply, "He that showed mercy on him," gave our Lord all He needed to effectively instruct this uncovering "unite thou likewise" (Luke 10:37). With this instruction as the conclusion to the story of the Samaritan we are brought to the proper meaning of neighborliness. Neighborliness is action — "Go, and do . . . Neighborliness is involvement — "he came to him, and bound up his wounds, . . . set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, . . . Neighborliness is personal — "he took care of him." Neighborliness is understanding — even the lawyer knew that the neighbor was "he that showed mercy on him." Neighborliness calls for meaningful aid — "Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, I, when I come back again, will repay thee."

Jesus Christ was the greatest embodiment of the principles of this story that ever lived. He came to personally involve Himself in man's needs. Paul reminds us
that while we were “weak,” “sinners,” and “enemies,” God sent Christ to redeem and reconcile us (Romans 5:6-10). We can find no peace, know no joy, receive no forgiveness, have no friendship with God outside His Son, Jesus Christ (John 14:6; II Corinthians 5:17-21).

You can know Him fully and can be assured of your relationship with Him and with His Father, if you conscientiously and obediently respond to Biblical instructions. Christ “learned obedience by the things which he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:8,9). He says, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Our Lord commands, “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish” (Luke 13:3). He promises, “Every one therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32). When you so obey Christ, thus making Him the Lord of your life, you come to a freshness of living that involves you, like the Samaritan in Luke 10:25-27, in the needy lives of others. Listen, and heed, the Savior’s words, “Go, and do thou likewise.”

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