“The Least of These”

—Jesus

SERMON OUTLINES

40 DAY JOURNEY
WEEK 1

SERMON OUTLINE #1

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

LUKE 10.25-37

KEY THOUGHT

We must not only love God and our neighbors (Leviticus 19.18b; Mark 12.31), but we must also know who they are.

OVERVIEW

As a picture of the condition of our world, consider the necessity of passing “Good Samaritan” laws, which are designed to protect people who help strangers. Setting aside for a moment the fear of being punished or attacked for assisting a stranger, was Jesus reducing the inheritance of eternal life to our ability to love God and our neighbor? Or, is there a deeper lesson to be learned in the exchange between Jesus and the expert in the law? How did Jesus answer the expert’s question about the identity of our neighbors? We will neither love God fully nor treat our neighbors mercifully if we have not acknowledged that God has first loved us fully and treated us with mercy. The ultimate Samaritan is Jesus and each of us comes to spiritual awareness as the robbed and beaten travelers left to die by the road.

SERMON OUTLINE

1. The people in the parable provide us characters with whom we can identify:
   a. The “expert in the Law” who came to Jesus with two questions (verses 25b,29) and two statements (verses 27,37).
   b. The characters in the parable: the traveler, the thieves, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, and the innkeeper.
   c. With which of these people do you most identify?
2. Seeing the Neighbor and Being the Neighbor
   a. Apparently, the expert knew that loving God included loving his neighbor, but Jesus knew that he needed a broader view of who was his neighbor.
   b. Jesus’ story forced the expert in the Law to declare who the real neighbor was.
3. What Shall We Do for Our Neighbor?
   a. Mercy isn’t free. It cost the Samaritan to help his neighbor. Loving our neighbor will include a cost.
   b. Mercy received and applied is at the heart of what it means to love God.

CHALLENGE

While at one time or another we may be able to identify with every person in this parable, our challenge is to respond appropriately as the wounded traveler who receives the merciful ministry of the Good Samaritan (Jesus) and who then lives to love God and imitate the mercy that was shown to us, toward our neighbors.
SERMON OUTLINE #2

MY NEIGHBOR’S CHILDREN

KEY THOUGHT

It’s one thing to wrestle with our responsibilities toward our own children, but God expects us to enlarge our vision to include the children of our neighbors.

OVERVIEW

Children are easy to overlook and prone to be seen as a bother when they are noticed. Yet the desire to obtain the best for our children runs deep in parents. Young parents, who have drifted from church, often find a reason to return in the face of their newborn child. Mothers and fathers in Jesus’ day brought their children to him hoping for his blessing. What might happen if the teacher with mighty words and deeds spoke good into their children’s lives? Yet those wanting to shield Jesus from distractions discovered that he considered children important, highlighting them as good examples of citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven (see Matthew 18.1-6). The disciples obviously didn’t get the point the first time around.

SERMON OUTLINE

1. What does it mean to bless? To speak or deliver good into someone else’s life.
2. We want to be blessed by God and others; we want our children to be blessed by God, us, and others. Golden Rule: are we blessing others as we want to be blessed?
3. Our capacity to bless does not diminish as we bless others. In fact, it expands through generosity.
4. Instead of thinking about blessings as things we compete to receive from Christ (the disciples’ attitude), how can we be the deliverers of God’s blessings into the lives of others?

CHALLENGE

To respond each day to opportunities God gives us to bless others, particularly those who might be overlooked—the least of these.
WEEK 3

SERMON OUTLINE #3

FOOD THAT SATISFIES

MATTHEW 4.2-4

KEY THOUGHT

Jesus was right when he said, “It is written, man shall not live by bread alone” (Matthew 4.4, KJV), but he certainly didn't mean that people should live without food. Our continuous need is for “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” but often the immediate need is for food. Sometimes the immediate need must be met before the continuous need can be addressed.

OVERVIEW

Jesus wasn’t predictable. Here, at the end of forty days of fasting in the wilderness, he refused to make bread to relieve his own desperate hunger. Yet in Matthew 14.13-21 and the other Gospel accounts, he created enough bread for a multitude that had not eaten for a while. He puts the needs of others ahead of his own needs. This is why the Gospels describe his attitude as compassionate. When the devil tempted Jesus to prove his divinity by satisfying his own needs, Jesus rejected physical hunger as the highest need and demonstrated that he already had the kind of food that ultimately mattered. Yet he noticed and met the needs of others for daily as well as spiritual food.

SERMON OUTLINE

1. Temptation and Need: Most of us understand why advertising and marketing work—they are messages that connect with real needs we have: physical, emotional, and psychological. An ad may be funny, informative, or deceptive, but its effectiveness depends on how we connect the message in the ad with a need we have. In Matthew 4.1-11, the devil approached Jesus on all three levels:
   a. Physical-hunger (verses 3, 4) – you deserve some bread now/today.
   b. Emotional-safety/security (verses 5-7) – you deserve an assurance of safety today/now.
   c. Psychological-control/achievement (verses 8-11) – you deserve the world any way you can get it!
2. Temptation behind Temptation: If we focus on the first temptation (verses 3, 4), we see that Jesus didn’t deny the reality of the need, but he refused to compromise his character to satisfy his hunger. Jesus knew who he was so he didn’t have to “prove” he was the Son of God by making bread.
3. Learning from Temptation: Hebrews 4.15 makes the point that Jesus was “tempted in every way that we are” (without sinning) so that he would understand from the inside the needs we have, and be able to sympathize and have compassion.
4. Beyond Temptation: Jesus overcame the temptation of the devil, and left being empowered to recognize hunger in others, as we see in Matthew 14.13-21. (He met the disciples’ need for security by calming the storm; and met the psychological needs of Martha/Mary by raising their brother from the dead)

CHALLENGE

Resist the temptation to be self-centered by making an effort to see the needs of others, as in this case for food, and move to meet those needs, even if it means setting aside our own needs for a time.
KEY THOUGHT
When we say we love God but we treat our neighbor with indifference or hatred, we love neither our neighbor nor God, clearly violating what Jesus called the most important rule of life.

OVERVIEW
The prophet Isaiah is often characterized in two ways – the thundering judgmental messenger of chapters 1-39 and the comforting voice of chapters 40-66. This passage from chapter 58 definitely challenges those assumptions. God confronts the casual religiosity of people who think they can impress God with shallow observances and rituals while neglecting genuine love for others.

   God has no time for fasting as an end in itself. Self-centered fasting is not “the fast that I choose,” says the Lord. The fasting that pleases God involves freeing ourselves from whatever prevents us from intervening on behalf of those we can help. We don’t fast now to gorge later; we fast in order to “share our bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into our house” (verses 6,7). The adventure of messy holiness isn’t an effort to impress God but a deliberate decision to obey God in the complicated circumstance of life.

SERMON OUTLINE
1. What makes fasting false?
   a. empty habits (verses 1,2)
   b. self-centered thoughts (verse 3)
   c. contradictory lives (verses 4,5)
2. What makes fasting true?
   a. freeing captives of various kinds (verse 6)
   b. feeding the hungry, clothing the naked (verse 7)
3. What happens after true fasting?
   a. you will benefit from helping others (verse 8)
   b. your relationship with God will blossom (verses 9,10)
   c. your circumstances will be blessed by God (verses 11,12)

CHALLENGE
Examine yourself to determine if you are simply going through the motions in any area of your spiritual life. Consider how you can obey God’s instructions to love and care for your neighbor.
SERMON OUTLINE #5

CHOOSING OUR MASTER

MATTHEW 6.24

KEY THOUGHT
Bob Dylan was right; we do have to serve somebody. And Jesus had already raised the bar on that observation by declaring that not only do we have to serve somebody, but also that no matter how hard we try, we can’t serve two masters.

OVERVIEW
The Sermon on the Mount that takes up chapters 5-7 of Matthew includes some of the most life-altering teaching Jesus gave to his followers. Matthew 6.24 rests like a warning between two explicit commands regarding riches (6.19-23) and worry (6.25-34). Neither riches nor worry should be our master. If we choose to serve them, we’ve chosen a life of misery and disappointment. If God is master of our money, then he directs the way we use it. God has instructed us to use a significant part of what he provides for us to meet the needs of others.

SERMON OUTLINE
1. What happens when we try to serve two masters?
2. What kind of a master is money?
3. What kind of a master is God?
4. Which master will you chose?

CHALLENGE
Pursuing riches and fleeing from worry can render one helpless. Therefore, choose Jesus as Master of your life and imitate his actions, particularly by sharing what you have with others.
SERMON OUTLINE #6

PEACEMAKING

KEY THOUGHT
Peacemakers learn quickly that peacemaking is a long-haul proposition with few lasting results in a fallen world. Moments of peace are shattered by sin. Peacemakers endure by depending on the ultimate peacemaker.

OVERVIEW
Psalm 120 is the first of the Songs of Ascent, the journey music used by pilgrims on their way toward Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It was one of the songs in the background as Jesus made his triumphant entry into David's city a week before he was crucified. This psalm captures the struggles of someone who “is in favor of peace” (verse 7) but discovers that they live among people who “hate peace” (verse 6).

Part of the “trouble” (verse 1) that causes the peacemaker to cry out to God is the realization that the conflict continues between peace and war. The implication of verse 6 is that the traveler has lived among people who hate peace, but will now leave those “tents” (verse 5) behind. What better peacemaking pursuit can one undertake than to care for others who are on that journey away from those who hate peace.

SERMON OUTLINE
1. Peacemaking is a way of living even in the middle of war (verses 6,7) and involves compassion for those who are hurt by war.

2. Peacemakers recognize that there are some who “hate peace,”

3. Peacemakers know that in order to live as children of God (Matthew 5.9), they will have to endure the conflicts that rise because some use war to get their way.

CHALLENGE
Consider how God may be calling you to serve as a peacemaker. Recognize that true peace in this world flows out of the reality of peace with God, the sovereign and eternal peacemaker.
SERMON OUTLINE #7

PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

KEY THOUGHT

James reduced spiritual practice to its core component: the way we treat those most in need. Whatever spiritual growth or achievement we may claim is made null and void if it has not caused greater involvement with those most in need.

OVERVIEW

We who live in a society with multiple, overlapping social safety nets have a difficult time imagining life without a net. And yet for most of history, and for most of the world, immediate community and family have represented the most reliable support and help beyond one’s own means.

James tells us that God is pleased when we reach out to help orphans and widows. There are many ways that we can help. We can give the money God has entrusted to us to send resources to someone in need. We can also help by giving our time to provide care that is personal and immediate. Orphans and widows are certainly some of those whom Jesus had in mind by his phrase, “the least of these,” and his call to treat them with compassion cannot be ignored if we claim we follow Christ.

SERMON OUTLINE

1. The letter of James is one of the most down-to-earth, practical, and challenging books in the New Testament. It begins with joy in the hardships of life (1.2-4) and ends with our responsibility to other believers (5.19,20). In between, every aspect of life is examined.
2. In James’ view, practical spirituality is firstly about how we communicate (1.26). Are we truthful with others and ourselves?
3. Practical spirituality is secondly about who we “help” and why (1.27).
4. Practical spirituality is thirdly about living with integrity (1.27).

CHALLENGE

Ask God to show you a step you can take this week that will help an orphan or a widow. Let’s show the world that we are God’s children by helping others.
SERMON OUTLINE #8
WHAT’S IN YOUR BASKET? DEUTERONOMY 26.4-10

KEY THOUGHT
There are significant differences between saving and hoarding. Savers are the most effective givers when they understand that windfalls and wealth are opportunities to help others as much as they are ways to feel secure.

OVERVIEW
We often forget that much of the giving as well as most of business that was conducted during Old Testament times was “in kind.” Trading and bartering were far more common than exchanging goods and services for money. The tithe often consisted in the actual “best” of the crops that were harvested. These were presented to God and then shared with those in need.

SERMON OUTLINE
1. Praying for and appreciating “daily bread” (The Lord’s Prayer remains in part a manna prayer).
2. The privilege of having resources to share with others is also the privilege representing God’s answer to someone else’s prayer for daily bread. You’re the immediate giver, but you are also the channel through which God gives.
3. Remembering what God has done for us (verses 5-10) is the best motivation for gratitude and generosity.
4. Generosity is ultimately about trusting God for the unknown future because he has been so faithful up to this moment.

CHALLENGE
Don’t let uncertainty about tomorrow diminish your desire to be generous with what God has faithfully provided for you.
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