



"At the Heart of Mercy"

Dr. Robert Petterson

April 26, 2009

Covenant Presbyterian Church

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

www.covenantnaples.com

British philosopher and social observer Os Guinness recently wrote on the website of his *Trinity Forum*,

“There is a great conceit in the optimism of postmodern people. We think that, because of the innate goodness of humans, when the chips are down we will all pitch in and help each other. History teaches us that nothing could be farther from the truth.”

Langdon Gilkey would agree with Os Guinness. The professor of theology at the University of Chicago has written a shocking book entitled *Shantung Compound* about his imprisonment by the Japanese in World War 2.

Gilkey was the son of a Baptist missionary who taught English at the Yenching University in Peking. He was just finishing prep school in China, getting ready to go to Harvard University, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. After the United States declared war on the Empire of Japan, the Japanese retaliated by rounding up all the citizens of Allied nations and carting them off to concentration camps.

Gilkey’s family was sent to a former Presbyterian mission compound in the coastal province of Shantung. Some 1500 Europeans and North Americans were crammed into that pitifully-small space turned into a prison. Most of the inmates were pastors, priests, missionaries, and Christian educators.

As concentration camps go, Shantung Compound was relatively civilized. No prisoners were beaten or tortured. But there was never enough food. Young Langdon Gilkey lost almost 50 pounds, more than a third of his body weight. The biggest enemies were fear and boredom. Living space was at a premium. Privacy was almost non-existent. Chalk lines were carefully drawn in the dormitory floors, marking off each person’s personal space. For the next three years, people jealously guarded their few feet of real estate, ready to fight to the death if anyone crossed the chalk line and invaded their “space” without permission.

Shantung Compound is about young Gilkey’s dismay as he watched the moral meltdown in that prison camp. Even the most devout missionaries were not immune to gross selfishness. Clergymen squabbled with fellow prisoners over food and stole from communal supplies. Gilkey writes, “Forgetting sermons they had preached on the Good Samaritan, veteran missionaries refused to share any portion of their living space with new arrivals.” One preacher even argued that he needed his space “...so I can have quiet to think about my sermons.” Gilkey sums up their attitude with the poet Bertolt Brecht’s sardonic couplet:

“For even saintly folk will act like sinners.
unless they have their customary dinners.”

He says that hypocrisy became rampant. Fundamentalist ministers refused to share their meals with people who smoked cigarettes, treating them like the worst sort of sinners. Yet these same pious preachers grabbed all the cigarettes they could from the Red Cross to barter for extra tins of food.

In a camp full of missionaries, the only one who could be trusted to guard the communal food store was Dick Rogers, an alcoholic ex-soldier. Gilkey writes, "Many a pious preacher, whose ration of food depended on Dick's strength of character, still considered him immoral because he drank."

Young Langdon Gilkey's most disillusioned moment came when the American Red Cross succeeded in delivering 2100 food parcels to the compound. The Japanese guards decreed that, because the parcels came from the United States, each of the 300 American prisoners could get the first choice—each getting one food parcel. They ordered the remaining 1800 parcels to be shared with the rest of the prisoners.

But the Americans caucused and formally protested that the Japanese were grossly unfair. They demanded that, because the parcels came from the *American* Red Cross, each of the 300 Americans should receive seven packets while the remaining 1200 prisoners receive none!

Young Langdon Gilkey was bitterly disillusioned by the moral failures of Christians in the concentration camp. Some 60 years later he looks back at the Shantung Compound as a mature theologian and comes up with two conclusions: 1) the best of saints have sinful hearts. Gilkey writes, "Such is the condition of humanity, that people will sacrifice everything, including their neighbors, to meet their needs." 2) On the other hand, Gilkey saw moments of astounding heroism and self-sacrifice in the Shantung Compound and concluded that people with a true commitment to Christ will sacrifice everything to help fellow humans.

He saw the truth of 1 John 4:18 that "Perfect love has the power to cast out fear." He also saw that the reverse is true: Fear has the power to cast out love. We can become so afraid of our own needs going unmet that, like the priest and Levite in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, we walk right on by people half-dead on the side of the road.

Let me ask you a question today: what would you have done had you been in the Shantung Compound? None of us can know for sure what we will do when the chips are down and we face a choice between personal survival and helping others.

But character isn't discovered in a moment of crisis *after* you have been thrown into the Shantung Compound. It is developed over the years *before* you get there. It's developed in everyday decisions over a lifetime of dealing with the needs of others. How you treat the waiter at a restaurant, or

respond to a troubled co-worker, or an irritating relative, or a grieving widow, or a stranger, or a friend in financial trouble, or a down-and-outer begging for a handout. Those are the building blocks of a *Good Samaritan* character that will determine what you do when the chips are really down and you are called to sacrifice everything.

The thieves who waylaid the traveller on the Jericho road, the priest and Levite who later ignored the wounded man, and the Samaritan who stopped to help him, made their choices that day because of character that had been set by a lifetime of lesser choices. If you wait until you are thrown into the Shantung Compound to see whether or not you are a *Good Samaritan*, you have waited too long. Here's the second principle we need to learn in being people of mercy:

The heart of mercy is determined by what we treasure.

As we saw last week, this parable is provoked by a question from a lawyer in verse 25, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer knows the right answer. It's summed up in the two greatest commandments. The lawyer quotes them perfectly in verse 27: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and strength and with all your mind,' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Jesus gives him an A+ on his answer. But then he takes it a step further in verse 28, "...do this and you shall live." It's one thing to *know* the right answer, but quite another to go out and do it. St. Augustine used to joke, "Faith is so disturbing when we actually have to practice it." And the half-brother of Jesus writes in James 2:17, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Verse 25 says that the lawyer started out to "test" Jesus, but now the tables have been turned and he's the one on trial. The truth is, we will all be "tested" not on what we *know* or *say* in the church house, but what we *do* in the Shantung Compounds of life. So the lawyer tries to justify himself by doing what attorneys do best: he tries to find a loophole in the Law. He asks in verse 29, "And who is my neighbor?"

This lawyer's question had consumed and divided the rabbis in Judaism for 1500 years. The second great commandment came from Leviticus 19:18: "Do not seek revenge or hold a grudge against your brothers but love your neighbor as yourself..." In its grammatical structure this command uses "brothers" and "neighbors" as synonyms. The great rabbis of Judaism had argued that only our brothers are our neighbors. Therefore Jews only had to love other Jews. The more radical rabbis even interpreted the Ten Commandments this way:

You shall not steal (from another Jew).
You shall not kill (another Jew).
You shall not bear false witness (against another Jew).

The Pharisaical sect of Judaism even had this little rule: If a wall falls on a person on the Sabbath day, enough work can be done to clean away the rubble in order to identify the victim. If he is a Jew it is permissible to keep on working to get him out. But if he is a Gentile, you must cease working to dig him out until the Sabbath is over.

In Matthew 5:43 Jesus said, "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I tell you, 'Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.'" With one statement this Galilean rabbi turned 1500 years of Rabbinical teaching on its head: if your worst enemy is your neighbor, then so is everyone else. The lawyer asks Jesus to define his neighbor and Jesus replies, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers..." This man is indefinable; a nameless, faceless everyman. We don't know whether he's Jewish, Greek, Roman, Arab, or any one of a hundred other nationalities or religions. We don't know whether he is a godly person or a scoundrel.

Immediately Jesus wants us to know that none of that matters. Only one thing is critical: he has been beaten, stripped of everything, and left half dead. He is desperately in need of mercy. What does God want from us? In Hosea 6:6 he says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Jesus ends the story by asking the lawyer in verse 38, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The issue is never "Who is my neighbor?" but "Am I a good neighbor?" And what defines a good neighbor? The lawyer answers Jesus' question in verse 37, "The one who had mercy on him." Verse 37 ends with an inescapable command to the lawyer and all the rest of us: "Go and do likewise."

The first principle is simple: if our neighbor is defined as the one in need, then we must meet the need. God will be satisfied with nothing less. I believe that a key is found in the first words of the Great Commandment in verse 27: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart..." At the heart of everything is our heart. If you go back to Leviticus 19:18 you will read, "...but love your neighbor as yourself, for I am the Lord." God connects his very self to our loving our neighbors. It's as if he is saying, "I am love. I am mercy personified. If you bear my image and my heart, you will also show love and mercy. You cannot love me without loving your neighbor."

But Jesus exposes the great issue with our heart in Matthew 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In other words, if you want to know what the condition of your heart is, look at what you treasure. Our treasures are the things we value most in life. Maybe it's life itself, and we'll do anything to hold on to it. Perhaps it's reputation or prestige, and we will devote our lives to impressing others. Or it's our family, or material possessions, or time, or talent. Jesus is saying that where you find your treasure, that's where you'll find your heart. And many of us love the treasures of this earth with more heart than we love God or our neighbors.

The Apostle wrote in 1 John 3:17, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" Here's a person whose heart is with his treasures more than his neighbor. St. John's logic is devastating:

Our heavenly Father is a God of infinite love and mercy who gives away his precious Son to redeem those who are most desperate for mercy. Jesus Christ has the fullness of God in him. Therefore, if Jesus is in us, so is our heavenly Father. Conversely, if we love our material treasures more than our neighbor, God isn't in us. And if God isn't in us, we have no hope of eternal life.

That's why this second principle from the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is the key to everything: **The heart of mercy is determined by what we treasure.** In this parable we see four responses to treasure.

1. The Thieves: "What is yours is mine, and I'm going to take it."

These thieves are only in the story for a brief moment, but their impact on the life of the man is devastating. Verse 30 says of the faceless traveler, "...he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away leaving him half-dead." The Jericho Road is the most dangerous road in the world; a narrow cobblestone trail built by the ancient Romans through hellish ravines and harrowing drop-offs where one misstep can cause a traveler to plunge hundreds of feet to his death. Temperatures soar to 120° Fahrenheit during the day and below freezing at night. It is a maze of fearsome shadows in which hide poisonous snakes, wild predators, and gangs of bandits. Though it is only 17 miles long, the Jericho Road drops more than 3500 feet from the mountain city of Jerusalem to the lowest spot on planet Earth. It takes three days to pick one's way through that treacherous wasteland called "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" in the Old Testament. Even today, some 2,000 years later, this road is still a haunt of robbers and cutthroats who lie in wait for unsuspecting travelers.

For all of us, life is a journey along the Jericho Road. All around us are people who say, "What is yours is mine, and I'm going to take it." They see people as suckers, pigeons to be plucked clean, human cash registers to be emptied of all they possess: some, like Bernie Madoff, concoct pyramid schemes to bilk people out of their life's savings; others are CEOs who treat companies like their own private piggy banks; still others are politicians who, for personal gain, rob the nation of its future. And there are the hoards who line up at the public trough to grab their government entitlements. There are pedophile priests who strip children of their innocence, and preachers who fleece their flocks. There are professors who lie in wait in classrooms to steal faith from their students, and Hollywood moviemakers who will bankrupt a culture if they can make billions. There are children who grab everything they can from their folks, and parents who abuse and

abandon their children. There are the self-absorbed, emotional needy who suck all the emotional life out of other people. Do you get the picture? The world is full of takers who see others only as useful commodities to supply their needs. Their mantra is monotonously simple: "What is yours is mine and I'm going to take it." Gilkey saw that spirit even among the clergy who stole from the communal stores at the Shantung Compound. We see it everyday in America. No wonder there is so little mercy to be found.

2. The Priest and Levite: "What is mine is mine, and I'm going to keep it."

Verses 31&32 speak of a priest and Levite. Though they both came upon the naked and beaten traveler at different times, each had the same response: "...when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side..." Both of these men were part of the Jewish clergy, coming back from working at the temple. Both of these men *saw* the need, but hurried on. Jesus doesn't tell us *why* they didn't stop. Maybe they were afraid that he was playing possum, and if they got close he would rise up and rob them. Perhaps they were on their way to do the "Lord's work" and if they stopped they would throw everything off schedule. Or maybe he was already dead. And if they touched a corpse, according to Levitical Law they would be unclean for seven more days. Having already been away from their homes while doing their stint in the temple, these two would have to wait another week before they could hug their children or sleep with their wives. And they treasured those things more than this man's life. Or maybe they were just too tired, or broke, or emotionally spent from meeting everyone else's needs at the temple.

I'm sure they had some good rationalizations for "passing by" the faceless, nameless victim beside the road. The most dangerous people in the world are religious people (especially the clergy), because they can come up with such pious-sounding "god-talk" reasons like "I don't want to enable her," or "My first responsibility is to take care of my family," or "God surely wants me to get my rest," or a thousand other solid reasons not to give our time, talents, or material resources. I think my favorite from *Shantung Compound* is the preacher who refused to give up some of his personal space for new arrivals because he needed quiet to think about his sermon; (maybe he was preparing a talk on *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*). There's a reason Jesus doesn't tell us why they "passed by on the other side." There are no reasons good enough and no excuses or rationalizations that could justify their behavior. If you looked beneath their pious exterior, you would see the dirty little secret in their hearts: "What is mine is mine, and I'm going to keep it." No one can love God or their neighbor if that is the cry of their heart.

3. The Samaritan: "What is mine is yours, and I will share it."

Verse 33 says, "But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was..." Now the story gets juicy for those listening to Jesus. Jews and

Samaritans hated each other, as much as Palestinian terrorists and Zionists hate each other today. But Jesus turns the Samaritan into the hero. He does so for a purpose. To the lawyer who thinks that only your brother is your neighbor, he says that a person cannot even pass by a centuries-old enemy who is in desperate need. Mercy knows no boundaries or distinctions. After all, we were enemies of God when Jesus came to die for us. The first thing this Samaritan had to do was to let go of centuries of prejudice and hate. Verse 30 goes on, "...and when he saw him, he took pity on him..." He then had to give away his very heart to this wretched man. Verse 34 goes on: "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him." He went over to that man, even though he was putting his life in danger of other robbers. "Perfect love casts out fear."

He "poured" out his oil and wine. That word has the sense of emptying his flask. He held nothing back. He gave his energy, time, and resources. He was on a business trip, but it didn't matter if he had to go out of his way and mess up his schedule. He took him to the inn and spent the night with him. He delayed his trip another day. I wonder if he lost a business deal with that delay. Verse 36 goes on to say, "The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" This is the cry of the Samaritan's heart: "What is mine is yours, and I'll share it." This is the cry of Christ's heart when he emptied himself of his glory and came down to earth--exchanging royalty for servant hood, wealth for poverty; heaven's love for earth's rejection; a throne for a cross; heaven's joy for hell's sorrow--until he paid all of the debts for all of God's fallen children on the Jericho Road. It is fitting that a hated Samaritan should picture a rejected Savior. And it is fitting that, as we travel down the Jericho Road, we who bear our Savior's name on our way to eternal life should be a neighbor like that to all who are in need of mercy.

4. Jesus and Us: "What is mine is his, and I will not misuse it."

There are others in this parable. The lawyer stands there listening. His eternal life hangs on his response. Those in the crowd are listening, too. You and I are in that crowd. When he says his final words to that lawyer, "Go and do likewise," he is also issuing a command to us. Until we get to heaven, we will never know if that lawyer did what Jesus told him to do. But we can know whether we will. The test will come in little ways every day, or there will come that day when we are thrown into our Shantung Compound. We can say, "What is yours is mine, and I'll take it." Or, "What is mine is mine, and I'll keep it." Or, "What is mine is yours, and I'll give it." But if we belong to Jesus, we have no other choice than to say, "What is mine is his, and I will not misuse it, for my heart treasures him more than anything in this world."