

## SERMON REVIEWS: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Samuel Davies preached a sermon, “An Enrolment of Our Names in Heaven the Noblest Source of Joy,” from this text at Hanover, in Virginia, on January 14, 1759. After noting that heaven is compared to a city or corporation in which a list is kept of all its citizens, Davies moves quickly to pose a question: “This naturally suggests a very important inquiry, the decision of which may hold us all in anxious suspense: ‘How may I know (may each of us ask) whether my unworthy name be written in heaven? who can open and read the records of heaven, and show me whether my name is registered there?’” He answers that signs of this secret may be found in the character, temper, and practice of hearers, and encourages them toward “vigorous, anxious, persevering desires” for heaven. Davies warns against an easy acquaintance with Christianity apart from personal involvement: “Do you rejoice that you enjoy the gospel and the means of salvation, and that these invaluable blessings are not likely to be torn from you by the hands of Indian savages and Popish idolaters? This indeed is cause of rejoicing; but how much more ought you to rejoice that the gospel and the means of salvation are made effectual by divine grace for your conversion and sanctification! Many enjoy them as well as you, to whom they are of no service, but an occasion of more aggravated guilt and ruin.” He contrasts various earthly blessings and difficulties with the true value of heaven, and presses the point upon his hearers: “What though the French and Indians are routed? alas! the devil and your sins are still lords over you!...Have you lost your friends, your relatives, your estate? That is sad; but oh! it is nothing to the loss of God, of heaven, and your souls.” Davies concludes with a powerful appeal to repentance and conversion: “Suffer a friend to your best interest to prevail upon you to return home this evening sadly pensive and sorrowful, and to resolve you will never indulge yourselves in one hour’s mirth and gaiety, till you have some reason to believe that your names are written in heaven. This is what your own interest requires; and if you refuse, you will unavoidably be sorry for it forever, when your sorrow can be of no service to you. Betake yourselves in serious sadness to the earnest use of all the means of salvation, and you have reason to hope God will have mercy upon you, and turn you to himself. Then you will have reason to rejoice, to rejoice in your temporal blessings, and especially because your names are written in heaven. And then God, and Christ, and angels will rejoice over you, and join in your joy.”<sup>1</sup>

J. Wilbur Chapman preached from this text near the turn of the last century. While Davies had called upon his hearers to be converted, Chapman urged them to be witnesses to others: “WE have practically the same commission as the seventy....And the text means that no one could come within the reach of our influence without having at least a suggestion made by ourselves to them that we are the followers of Christ and that we long to have them know him who means so much to us.”<sup>2</sup>

Joseph G. Donders, preaching “The Twelve Could Not Do It,” notes that the twelve disciples were unable to cast out an unclean spirit (Lk 9:40), but that the seventy-two (using a variant reading) in today’s text come back rejoicing that the demons are subject to them (Lk 10:17). He asserts that this is anticipation of different functions in the church, with the twelve representing the preaching ministry of the clergy and the seventy-two representing the mission of the laity in the world. “The chasing out of the devils that tear humankind apart is a work that cannot be done by the church leaders; even if they spoke out as they should. That work cannot be done by those twelve, but by the seventy-two....You, definitely, belong to the seventy-two. And that means you should be on your mission.”<sup>3</sup>

Walter J. Burghardt provides an interesting example of a very specific application of this

text in his sermon, “Medicine as Mission: Feast of St. Luke,” given at the Medical Center of Georgetown University in 1989. In it, he explores the question of the Christian vocation of medicine through these three questions: “(1) Is there anything particularly Christian about being a doctor? (2) Granted that there is, what demands does it lay on a Catholic institution like Georgetown? (3) That much settled, what do I see Jesus the healer asking of you individually?” He asserts that sickness is not an external reality but a part of the self, particularly of the self in the process of redemption. Thus, the Christian self that is sick seeks more than scientific competence at a Christian hospital; that self needs for the healers to be Christ to the patient, to communicate the love of God to the patient. Burghardt concludes, “What do I ask of you? That you bring to those you serve not only your life-giving technology, not only your Christian compassion, but a certain measure of joy....I want your face and your eyes, your lips and your hands to tell me that my life is precious to you.”<sup>4</sup>

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### **SERMON REVIEWS: Luke 10:25-37**

Martin Luther begins his sermon on this well known and loved passage by noting that the lawyer “does not ask: Who is my God? As though he would say: ‘I owe God nothing, with God I am in good standing.’” Instead, the lawyer more subtly inquires, “Who is my neighbor?” Of course, Luther notes that the parable redefines neighbor as one who does another a kindness, instead of the one who receives the kindness. Then he launches into a typical, and yet distinctively Protestant and Evangelical, allegorical interpretation of the parable. “The Samaritan of course is our Lord Jesus Christ.” The man who is robbed and beaten is Adam and all mankind. “The murderers [Luther has intensified this beyond the text] are the devils who robbed and wounded us.” The priest signifies the dear sainted fathers before Moses, and the Levite signifies the priesthood of the Old Testament. The oil is grace: “He pours in oil when grace is preached, as when one says: Behold poor man, here is your unbelief, here is your condemnation, here you are wounded and sore. Wait! All this I will cure with the Gospel. Behold, here cling firmly to this Samaritan, to Christ the Savior, He will help you, and nothing else in heaven or on earth will. You know very well that oil softens, thus also the sweet, loving preaching of the Gospel gives me a soft, mild heart toward God and my neighbor, so that I risk my bodily life for the sake of Christ my Lord and his Gospel, if God and necessity require it.” The wine, which stings, signifies the cross. And as for the Samaritan’s beast, on which he placed the poor man: “This beast is Christ the Lord himself, He carries us, we lie upon His shoulders, neck, and body.” How interesting, now, that not only the Samaritan portrays Christ, but the beast does, also. The inn where the man is cared for is, of course, Christianity. “Now here we have the substance of the gospel. The kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of mercy and grace, in which there is nothing but a continual

carrying of the lost.” Luther concludes: “Ministers in this kingdom are to comfort the consciences, deal gently with them and feed them with the Gospel, carry the weak, heal the sick, and know how to divide the Word rightly, and administer the same to every-one according to his needs.”<sup>5</sup>

John Calvin comes out blasting the typical allegorical interpretation, particularly as formulated and contrived by the advocates of free will. It should be said that most of the particulars of Calvin’s criticisms seem not to apply to Luther. Instead, Calvin reacts against those medieval interpreters who subtly suggest that since the man robbed and beaten in the parable was only half dead, he signifies that fallen humans still have some capability to exercise their free will and so contribute to their own salvation. “I acknowledge that I have no liking for any of these interpretations; but we ought to have a deeper reverence for scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning. And, indeed, any one may see that the curiosity of certain men has led them to contrive the speculations, contrary to the intention of Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

John Keble begins his sermon by noting that the story is about five persons: the poor man, the two passers-by, the Samaritan, and the innkeeper. It is interesting to note which different characters do and do not get counted in various sermons on this text. Here we immediately want to ask, What about the robbers? They appear in the sermon soon enough, allegorically interpreted as evil spirits. What is interesting about Keble’s sermon is that the Samaritan is both identified with, and contrasted with, Jesus Christ. For instance, the Samaritan found the man by chance, whereas the Savior took the journey into this world to find us on purpose. The Samaritan found and used an inn others had built and prepared, but our Savior himself prepared the church for us. Again, this stretches the allegory, for on the one hand we sinners are the poor man needing to be saved, and on the other hand we church members are the innkeeper. This latter places special responsibilities upon the pastors: “Who then is the master of the inn? Those to whom He hath given the care of his church, all Christians in their measure and place, but most especially Christian ministers.” Keble concludes by applying the point of the parable to his hearers: “Take care then what you say in your hearts, when your Lord comes to you with any of his poor and needy. Do not mistrust Jesus Christ, do not affront him. Whoever they are that want your aid, they resemble that wounded traveller in this respect, they too were once lying helpless, spiritually lost, stript and wounded and half dead; and now He asks your aid; some kindness or other there is which He would have you do for them, either for their bodies or for their souls.”<sup>7</sup>

Joseph G. Donders, preaching “Who Is My Neighbor?” deals with only four characters in the story—the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, and the victim—omitting consideration of the innkeeper and the robbers, and asking with which of the four we should identify. It seems, of course, that we should be like the ethical hero of this story, the Samaritan. But Donders notes that when Jesus asks the question, Who is my neighbor?, he is not asking, Whom am I going to help? That was the lawyer’s question, or perhaps the point of it was, Whom can I legitimately avoid helping? But Donders suggests that the way Jesus tells the story turns the question into, Who is my neighbor, who is going to help me? In conclusion, “The man along the road needed the Samaritan to save his life, but the Samaritan needed the man alongside the road to fill his life.”<sup>8</sup>

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**SERMON REVIEWS: Luke 10:38-42**

Samuel Davies preached a powerful, evangelistic sermon on this text, “The One Thing Needful.” He began with a question which immediately involves the hearers: “For what are we placed in this world?” Then he lifts them to a higher plane: “We are placed here to prepare us for the grand business of immortality.” After commending Mary for listening to Christ and chastising Martha for being more concerned about hospitality than divine knowledge, Davies returns to the questions: “What does Christ mean by this *one thing* which alone is needful?...the one thing needful must mean the salvation of the soul, and an earnest application to the means necessary to obtain this end above all other things in this world....May I not how you have come here with a desire to receive some advantage?” We must note Davies’ integrity in twice giving credit for part of what we was saying to Mr. Baxter, “that flaming and successful preacher” from the parish of Kidderminster; would that preachers today would give credit to their sources! Davies continues to press his hearers with the importance of repentance: “The proper notion of time is, that it is a space for repentance. Time is given to us to prepare for eternity. If this is done, we have lived long enough, and the great end of time and life is answered, whatever else be undone....Do you believe this, or do you not?” Finally, he rises to the conclusion: “Awake, you sluggish, careless souls!...Before your friends will have time enough to wrap up your pale corpse in your winding-sheet, you will see and fell that which I tell you to the quick, that one thing was necessary....O that you would consider what I say! and the Lord give you understanding in all things.”<sup>9</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson preached at some length on this passage in 1829, to tell his congregation little more than, “It becomes a Christian to despise trifles.”<sup>10</sup>

Martin Niemöller’s sermon on this passage, “Martha and Mary,” begins by criticizing as faulty the fairly typical interpretation of this passage that the two women embody two different natures, such as active and contemplative. That would lead to undue self-pity or self-congratulation. Instead, each temperament has both its blessings and its dangers, and there is plenty of emphasis on the importance of activity throughout the rest of scripture. Niemöller acknowledges that we can understand Martha and that the moral right is on her side. Still, he is interested in presenting that which does not depend upon activity or contemplation, but on the grace of God. “When Jesus speaks of this ‘one thing’ He does not mean anything which lies in our nature, in our mind, or in our conduct; He does not mean anything which we could of ourselves strive after and seek and find, if only we were given a hint as to how we should proceed. This ‘one thing’ is to be found only in Him; nay more, we can say: He Himself is this ‘one thing,’ because He is the one person who is needful to us.” This he elaborates upon: “Thus this gospel becomes an allegory, which is not meant to represent Mary’s quiet listening as being better than Martha’s restless activity, but to make it plain to all who hear it--not only to Martha, but also to Mary, who in all likelihood was amazed at Jesus’ words--that in this Jesus there is something which most assuredly decides our fate; in Him there is to be found the one thing needful in our relation to God; and in His presence we cannot and we must not do anything different from what Mary did, perhaps unconsciously: we must listen and pay heed without any argument. For what is to be found in Christ is grace, that is, a work of God--to which we can add nothing--and as

Christ's message this work of God created faith, and brings about the peace of the sinner with the gracious God." Now he drives this Protestant point home: "And so the story of Martha and Mary leads us to the fundamental belief of the Reformation, and we can express Jesus' words: 'one thing is needful' in Luther's interpretation: 'No man becomes a Christian through the doing of work, but through listening to the word of God!' To hold fast to that and to pay heed to that means choosing the good part, which 'will not be taken away!'" Finally: "But 'one thing is needful'! And without this one thing we are pouring water into a bottomless cask, without this one thing we are building a tower without a foundation. We are a 'Confessional Church' only if we listen and pay heed to the fact that the eternal God has made Himself known to us in the one person, Jesus Christ; that this 'one thing' obliges us again and again to let ourselves be gripped and upheld by this message; and that all that we are ready to do in His service can be carried out only through this one message.--'It is better to neglect anything rather than the word, and nothing is more worth cultivating than the word!' This one thing is needful!"<sup>11</sup>

Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., preached "Choose the Word for Life" from this text, with three points: the choice has to be made; the choice has to be made under difficulties; and even under difficulties the choice has to be made continually.<sup>12</sup>

Joseph G. Donders, preaching "Martha, Martha," remarks that this is one of the most misused texts in the Bible, in that it is used to condemn those who are busy. But this text condemns us condemning each other! Martha was indignant toward Mary, but Jesus refused to condemn Mary. "A person who prays CANNOT use this text to judge and condemn those who work; and those who work CANNOT use this text to judge and condemn those who pray."<sup>13</sup>

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### SERMON REVIEWS: Luke 11:1-13

John A. Redhead preached "Faith in Prayer" from this text. He poses the questions of whether it makes any sense to pray and to think that God will hear and answer. He answers in three points, first that the fatherliness of God encourages prayer. Redhead acknowledges that the imperfection of earthly fathers might discourage prayer, but adds that "which art in heaven," overcomes this. "Not until I can shut the door in the face of my own children...Not until I can demand that they never climb upon my knee and put their arms around my neck and tell me that they love me. Not until then can I believe that prayer is an impertinence. Here, then, in this word 'Father' I have a charter which guarantees a benevolence which bids me come before his throne to make my wants and wishes known." Second, God not only wants to answer prayer but can do so. The observation that the world is governed by natural laws creates an impediment for prayer, but Redhead says that God uses the laws to serve God's purposes. Third, we are to trust in God for the right answer. Not all of our prayers are correct. Redhead tells that his two year old son picked

up a razor, and he took it away from him. The son was disappointed, but the father knew better for the son that the razor was not a toy. Sometimes God protects us from our own prayers!<sup>14</sup>

This sermon and text raise the question of appropriate language for addressing God. Some are reluctant to say, "Father." Do they not run the risk of rejecting the explicit teaching of Jesus on how to pray, and of thinking that they know better than Christ how to address God?

Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a powerful, prophetic sermon, "A Knock at Midnight," on this text in the early sixties. He observes that it is midnight in the parable and midnight in our world. First, it is midnight in the social order (nuclear arms race), midnight in the psychological order (distress), and midnight in the moral order (relativism). Second, millions of people are knocking on the door of the church (note the massive church growth of the fifties!) seeking the bread of faith, hope, and love. Third, there is great disappointment when knocking at the door of the church. Hungry Africans are ignored, American Negroes are greeted with indifference, and the war weary are disappointed by a church that supports the military ambitions of the state. King insists that the church be neither the master nor the slave of the state, but instead its conscience. He criticizes the Negro churches for disappointing those who come to their doors, by either an emotionalism without substance (their faith is more in their hands and feet than in their heads and hearts) or a classism (a cold intellectualism that denies their heritage and will not even allow the singing of a spiritual). But fourth, and with the parable, King insists that with persistence the door will be opened. The church today is challenged to proclaim Jesus Christ to be the hope of humanity in all of our complex problems. To the guilty the church is to offer forgiveness, and to the dying the hope of immortality. Even at midnight, we are to have faith in the dawn, that God is good and just. King tells of a time near the end of the bus boycott, when the city was suing to end the churches' provision of free rides, and the judge was preparing to rule against them; at that moment, a ruling came from the Supreme Court, delivered to King at the defendant's desk in the courtroom, that racial segregation on the buses was unconstitutional. Someone cried out from the back of the courtroom, God has spoken from Washington, D.C.!<sup>15</sup>

Helmut Thielicke preached "How We Learn to Speak with God" from this text. "Even the Christian must always be surprised, hardly able to grasp the fact that God allows his own to influence him."<sup>16</sup>

David H. C. Read preached "New Life in Our Prayers" from this text. Read realizes that the disciples knew how to pray, but insists that they properly requested instruction from the master. We can benefit from the same teacher. "I would rather learn about prayer from Jesus than from the modern comforters who assure us it will bring material success. For his prayer life culminated in a crucifixion, a crucifixion that he payer with sweat and blood might not happen. And he won through." He then explores the Lord's Prayer as both a set prayer and as a model for other prayers.<sup>17</sup>

Joseph G. Donders preached "The Prayer Problem" from this text. He notes that we still ask, How should we pray? When should we pray? What should we pray? "When they asked Jesus, he did not give them a method. He did not give them a rule. He did not indicate any exercise. He did not say anything about a posture. He did not give them a string of beads or something like that. He indicated an ATTITUDE. He simply said: 'You should say to God: *Father!*'"<sup>18</sup>

Ben Lacy Rose preached "Lord, Teach Us to Pray" from this text. He begins by observing that the restless searching of youth into sex, drugs, and eastern religions can well be understood as an implicit cry, Teach us to pray. He develops four points, first that the disciples, well schooled in prayer themselves, discerned that Jesus' prayer was the source of his power and joy, so they

sought his instruction. Second, prayer is the vocation of a disciple. “For any mortal to persist in prayer, determination is required.” Prayer is not an activity from which we are restricted by advancing age, as with other activities. Rose tells of the effect of the prayers of a bed-ridden friend in North Carolina on the officers of a military unit which Rose served as chaplain during World War II. Third, prayer is a striving with God. Fourth, prayer is the natural longing of the human heart for God, as recognized by Augustine: Our hearts, O Lord, are restless, until they find their rest in you.<sup>19</sup>

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