

NO URGENCY

SERIES: BRIDGES & BARRIERS



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Luke 10:30–37

Third Message

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Two weeks ago, we began a series entitled “Bridges and Barriers”—a series aimed at exploring some of the opportunities and challenges involved in sharing the Gospel with people, especially people here in the Silicon Valley. What factors make it difficult for our unbelieving friends, neighbors, and colleagues to receive the Gospel, and, conversely, what factors make it difficult for us as Christians to share the Gospel? What barriers stand in the way, and what bridges can be built if those barriers are to be overcome?

Recently, in preparing for this series, the congregation at PBC was given a survey—a survey asking: what do you believe are the greatest barriers to receiving the Gospel, and what do you believe are the greatest barriers to sharing the Gospel? The results of the survey have helped to shape the series, and, hopefully, the sermons will address some of the top responses the survey identified.

Among those top responses was the subject of urgency—or, more accurately, the subject of lack of urgency. When it comes to sharing the Gospel, many Christians feel no urgency, no compelling need, no particular rush. Yes, on a theological or theoretical level, they know people need to be saved, but eternity seems far off while today seems bright and sunny, so why not wait for another day? Why not share the Good News some other time? This lack of urgency can be an incredible barrier to making Jesus known.

As we begin looking into this subject—the subject of lack of urgency—I would encourage each of us to remember times in our own lives, or in the lives of people we know, when there was a genuine sense of urgency, a time when there was a genuinely compelling need that required immediate action. It may have been a time when there was an emergency, like a fire or a medical crisis, or it may have been a time when there merely appeared to be an emergency.

For example, I remember my mother telling me about an incident when she was a girl. One night, while she was brushing her teeth in the bathroom and getting ready for bed, her sister snuck into my mother’s bedroom and hid under my mother’s bed. Her sister then began licking her own hand, covering it with spit.

A few minutes later, when my mother came into the bedroom and was about to climb into her bed, her sister reached out from under the bed and, with her spit-covered hand, grabbed my mother’s ankle. Needless to say, my mother felt (among other things) a great deal of urgency—an urgency that led her to take immediate action. She began screaming as loudly as possible and nearly jumped through the ceiling. Her sister, of course, thought it was the funniest practical joke ever, and my mother eventually laughed about it as well. However, for years afterward, my mother always took running leap to get into bed.

Whatever your own memory, it most likely involved extreme need, either real or imagined. In fact, extreme need would appear to be part of the definition of urgency. Urgency is an awareness of an extreme need that requires swift action.

Most of us feel an urgency about our own needs, especially if the needs seem extreme. We respond quickly if the needs are our own. However, this isn’t always the case when the needs are someone else’s. In fact, the truth is, when someone else is in need, even extreme need, we may or may not feel any urgency and may or may not get involved.

To illustrate this idea—the idea of feeling or not feeling an urgency about other people’s needs—I would like to look at one of the most famous of Jesus’ parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable is really about two kinds of people. One kind of person sees someone in extreme need, doesn’t feel any urgency, and doesn’t take any action. The other kind of person is just the opposite. The other kind of person sees someone in extreme need, feels tremendous urgency, and takes whatever action is necessary in order to provide help.

Hopefully, as we look at the parable of the Good Samaritan, we will discover what causes the difference. We will discover why some people feel an urgency about the needs of others and why some people don’t. We will discover why some people take action to help others and why some people don’t. Hopefully, too, we will also learn how this might apply to us and to our own feelings of urgency or lack of urgency when it comes to sharing the Gospel.

By way of summarizing the verses in Luke 10 leading up to the parable, one of the teachers of the law—the law of Moses—came to Jesus wanting to know what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. Most likely, the man wanted to know what he needed to do in order to go to heaven. Jesus responded with a question of his own asking, “What do you think?”, to which the man answered, “Love God and love your neighbor. Jesus then replied, “That’s right, now go and do that.”

The conversation might have ended there, except the man asked a follow-up question. He asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Apparently, he assumed some people were his neighbors and others were not. Some people were to be loved, and others were not. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus’ answer to this follow-up question. It is Jesus’ answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor? Who am I supposed to love?” The parable states:

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

In this parable, a contrast is clearly being drawn between the priest and the Levite on the one hand and the Samaritan on the other. Many wonderful sermons have of course been given about this parable. However, for our purposes today, we are primarily focusing on the subject of urgency. We are focusing on the subject of why some people feel a sense of urgency about the needs of others and why some people don’t. We are focusing on why some people feel compelled to take action and why some people don’t. Moreover, we’re focusing on how this might apply to us, especially when it comes to sharing the Gospel with those who have not yet come to faith.

In the parable, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan all see a man in desperate need. They all see a man beaten up and lying helpless by the side of the road. The only difference, or at least the only difference that is specifically noted, is that the Samaritan feels compassion while the priest and the Levite clearly do not.

The Greek word for compassion, *splanchnizomai*, comes from a root word meaning ‘intestines’. The Samaritan felt intestines for the man in extreme need—or, as we would say nowadays, he had a gut-level reaction to the suffering of another human being. He had profound empathy. In contrast, the priest and the Levite lacked that same gut-level, empathetic, compassionate reaction.

From this, I would suggest that urgency, particularly urgency related to the needs of others, arises from a combination of two things, two ‘ingredients’. It arises from extreme need combined with extreme compassion. When another person is in extreme need, and when we ourselves feel extreme compassion, then the inevitable outcome will be a sense of extreme urgency—an urgency that leads to a spare-no-expense, go-to-any-lengths form of action. It will lead to a level of urgency and action that will override any other factors. It will override whatever awkwardness, fear, insecurity, inadequacy, or other pressures we may be feeling.

Conversely, if we don’t feel urgency—an urgency that leads to action—I would suggest that we are either lacking an awareness of the extreme need and/or lacking feelings of extreme compassion. And yes, I believe this applies to sharing the Gospel with people here in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. If we don’t feel an urgency about sharing the Gospel, it is either a need problem and/or a compassion problem. Either we lack sufficient awareness of the need and/or we lack a sufficient level of compassion.

Assuming that you’re with me so far, I believe there are four basic scenarios that are possible. There are four basic ways in which need and compassion can combine. Furthermore, the specific way in which need and compassion combine will determine how much or how little urgency we will feel and how much or how little action we will take. Perhaps as we go through these scenarios, you will identify with one of the scenarios more than with the others.

The Good Samaritan pictures the first scenario—the first way in which need and compassion can combine. The Good Samaritan is the ideal. He is highly aware of the need—the need of the man by the side of the road—and he is highly compassionate. In turn, the combination of these two ‘ingredients’ produces a high level of urgency leading to a high level of action. When it comes

to sharing the Gospel, Good Samaritans understand that people are deeply in need Jesus and they deeply care. As a result, they feel a high level of urgency about sharing the Gospel and eagerly look for opportunities to make Jesus known.

The priest and the Levite picture the second scenario. The priest and the Levite are aware of the man's extreme need. They can't plead ignorance, can't pretend they didn't see the injured man. And yet, because they lacked sufficient compassion, they felt no urgency and failed to get involved. They simply passed by on the other side of the road.

At one point or another, I suspect each of us has been in this category—each of us has been like the priest or Levite. We see people in need, but, for whatever reason, our compassion isn't sufficient to override other factors in our lives. As I said, perhaps we feel fear, insecurity, inadequacy, or other things. Perhaps we simply want to get home to watch the football game or relax. Whatever the case, we end up without any compelling sense of urgency and don't bother to take any action.

In my own life, I've found three factors that often war against my having greater compassion. Three factors often seek to stifle my compassion and prevent me from feeling greater urgency about making Jesus known. The first factor is known as "compassion fatigue". Every time we turn on the television, we are bombarded with extreme needs from around the world. We see the crises of the entire planet unfolding, often live, before our eyes—victims of fires, tornados, and earthquakes, victims of war, famine, and crime. If only one person were beaten up and lying by the road, our level of compassion might be high. However, when we are continually and relentlessly exposed to one beaten up person and one heart-wrenching situation after another, after another. The cumulative effect can leave us overwhelmed and fatigued, unable to feel the level of compassion we might genuinely long for.

In the Recovery Ministry, I need to be on guard against compassion fatigue. If it were only one alcoholic or meth addict in extreme need, it would be easy to feel deeply compassionate. And yet, the reality is, it's one alcoholic after another, after another; one methamphetamine addict after another, after another; one homeless person after another, after another. On top of that, addiction and homelessness appear to be increasing rather than on the decline. The war on drugs does not appear to be going well, at least in terms of the overall statistics. That reality can make it difficult to remain compassionate. Indeed, apart from the Holy Spirit, I don't believe that sustained compassion is even a possibility.

A second factor that can work against having greater compassion is similar to compassion fatigue. It is often known as "the tyranny of the urgent". For many people, perhaps especially here in the Bay Area, there are non-stop pressures and demands—pressures and demands urgently insisting on our time, attention, and energy. Many of the pressures are economic, related to the challenges of surviving in one of the most expensive areas in the world. Other pressures, particularly for parents and children, are related to the challenges of living in a high-performance culture where children (apparently) need to be involved in a myriad of activities—soccer, dance, violin, chess club, karate class, etc.—all while maintaining outstanding grades at school. It can leave Silicon Valley residents feeling like the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, always running around frantically declaring, "I'm late. I'm late, for a very important date."

Perhaps some of you remember the old movie *Ben Hur*, a film about a Jewish man who was sold into slavery on a Roman galley. In the movie, there is a scene when Ben Hur and the other galley slaves are rowing, keeping tempo to an increasingly rapid drumbeat, as they try and get their ship up to ramming speed in a naval battle. Sometimes I think life in the Bay Area and no doubt other parts of the country is much like that. We all seem to be rowing like madmen and women, trying to get up to ramming speed. I'm just not sure what we're trying to ram. Whatever it is, it keeps us too exhausted and drained to feel a great deal of urgency about sharing the Gospel.

There are of course many other factors that might work against feelings of compassion and urgency, but the last one I would mention, often interwoven with compassion fatigue and the tyranny of the urgent, is simply coldness. In Matthew 24, where Jesus is talking about the times preceding his second coming—the signs of the end of the age—he says, "Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall grow cold" (Matthew 24:12 MEV). Whether or not we are currently in the times preceding the Lord's return, many believe that iniquity is on the rise—or at least our awareness of it through the media is increasing. Hardly a day seems to go by without some new mass shooting, some new instance of sexual abuse, some new accusations of political corruption, some new example of man's inhumanity to man. The cumulative effect can leave us wanting to withdraw and simply to insulate ourselves within some cold self-protective bubble.

There are four basic ways in which need and compassion can combine. The Good Samaritan had a high sense of need and a high sense of compassion,

leading to urgency and action. The priest and the Levite had a high sense of need but a low sense of compassion, leading to a lack of urgency and action.

A third possibility, a third scenario—a scenario that doesn't actually appear in the parable—might be called the Oblivious Samaritan. Like his brother the Good Samaritan, the Oblivious Samaritan is basically a very caring person. He's very compassionate. However, for whatever reason, he is oblivious to the man beaten by the side of the road. Perhaps he's incredibly near-sighted and doesn't see the man clear. Perhaps he's simply lost in a daydream and isn't paying attention to his surroundings. Whatever the case, because the Oblivious Samaritan isn't aware of any pressing need, he doesn't feel any urgency and inevitably doesn't feel any reason to get involved. Why feel any urgency if there isn't anything to feel urgent about?

This may sound like an absurd scenario. However, I believe many, or most of us have been Oblivious Samaritans at one time or another. We see ourselves as basically compassionate people. However, for whatever reason, we don't necessarily see our unbelieving friends, neighbors, and colleagues as being in extreme need, or at least in extreme need of Jesus. Yes, as I said earlier, we might know theologically and theoretically that everyone needs to be saved, but that doesn't mean actually experience people that way. We don't actually experience people as being analogous to the man lying by the side of the road.

Part of the problem, particularly here in our own area, is that many people don't appear to be in desperate need. Our area is one of the wealthiest places in the history of the world. Yes, there are those who are homeless and struggling, but a staggering number of people drive around in nice cars, live in nice homes, laugh, and, from all outward appearances, seem to be having a wonderful life. To our physical eyes, our friends and neighbors, many of whom are economically in the top 1% of people who have ever lived, appear to be thriving and doing just fine.

Moreover, to make matters worse, people in our area often don't view themselves as being in desperate need, especially in desperate need of Jesus. They not only look like they're doing fine, they actually believe they're doing fine. As a result, we can be deceived into arriving at the same false conclusion. We can end up only seeing our friends and neighbors through our physical senses and end up oblivious to their real spiritual condition. We can end up spiritually near-sighted and myopic, not seeing people in a larger spiritual context.

From a biblical standpoint—from an eternal standpoint—this world is the crossroads of eternity. Every person you and I will ever meet is an eternal being, and the central question being decided in this world is where each of those beings will spend eternity—with God or separated from God. As Jesus said, people are on one of two roads. Either they are on the broad road that leads to destruction, or they are on the narrow road that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14). As the Lord also said, "What does it profit a man [or woman] to gain the whole world and forfeit his [or her] soul?" (Mark 8:36).

As someone put it, people in this world are like passengers on a train—passengers happily having a party as the train rolls smoothly along. The trouble is, the bridge is out ahead. The passengers are all going to die. Yes, I know some technological futurists believe artificial intelligence will one day conquer death and allow us to live forever. Some futurists believe the party on the train will last forever without the train ever plummeting to its destruction. However, regardless of what people may say, the Bible declares, "...it is appointed to man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). The sober reality is: each person will die, and each person will be accountable to God.

I realize this can be a potentially offensive idea to some people—the idea that everyone is either heading for an eternity with God or for an eternity separated from God, either heading on the narrow road to heaven or the broad road to hell. In fact, some people seem to believe that even mentioning hell at church would drive our unbelieving friends and neighbors away.

Well, it may certainly be possible to over-emphasize hell and to under-emphasize God's love and grace. However, personally, I believe that many Bay Area churches are not in any danger of that. They are not in any danger of becoming 'fire and brimstone' churches. In fact, I believe many Bay Area churches may be in danger of just the opposite. They may be in danger of so under-emphasizing the eternal destinies of men and women that it is actually causing believers to become oblivious to people's genuine spiritual need. It is causing believers to become spiritually near-sighted and myopic, one symptom of which is a lack of urgency about sharing the Gospel.

The great 19th-century preacher Charles Spurgeon, when contemplating the spiritual need of his own day and bemoaning the lack of revival, wrote a powerful sermon entitled "Travailing for Souls". In that sermon, he encouraged his congregation to begin by praying for those who don't yet know Christ. He encouraged people in his congregation to recognize the desperate

need of those who are perishing—to travail for them, to intercede for them in prayer earnestly. He said:

Usually, when God intends greatly to bless a church, it will begin in this way:--Two or three persons in it are distressed as to the low state of affairs and become troubled even to anguish. Perhaps they do not speak to one another or know of their common grief, but they begin to pray with flaming desire and untiring importunity. The passion for seeing the church revived rules them. They think of it when they go to rest, they dream of it on their bed, they muse on it in the streets. This one thing eats them up. They suffer great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart for perishing sinners; they travail in birth for souls. ¹

If we find ourselves lacking a sense of urgency about sharing our faith, it may be because we've become Oblivious Samaritans. We just aren't seeing things the way they really are. If that is, in fact, the case, I would suggest praying—praying and asking God to make us more like the people Spurgeon envisions--people who suffer great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart for perishing sinners; who travail in birth for souls.

A fourth scenario—the fourth type of attitude or outlook--might be called the Oblivious Priest or Levite. Like the priest or Levite in the parable, the Oblivious Priest or Levite doesn't feel enough compassion to override other factors in his life. Also, like the Oblivious Samaritan, he doesn't perceive people as being in extreme need. He is unaware of the extreme need and lacking in compassion, so he inevitably feels neither a sense of urgency nor any compulsion to act.

Again, from time to time, some of us may fall into this category as well. Our spiritual near-sightedness prevents us from seeing people's true eternal condition. Our compassion fatigue, the tyranny of the urgent, coldness, and other factors prevent us from feeling any depth of compassion. We perceive no extreme need and feel no extreme compassion, so we experience no urgency that might lead us to take action. Sharing the Gospel is low on the priority list and seems best left for some future day.

Hopefully, in looking at these four scenarios, each of us will identify more with one scenario than with the others. Hopefully, too, identifying with one of these scenarios will be helpful in understanding why we may or may not feel any urgency about sharing our faith.

No doubt, many will identify with the Good Samaritan. Good Samaritans have a deep awareness of people's need for Jesus, have deep compassion, and have a deep sense of urgency about making Jesus known. The Good Samaritan is clearly the one with whom we should be seeking to identify.

However, for each of us, there may be times when we identify more with one of the other three scenarios. There may be times when we may identify more with the Priest or Levite, the Oblivious Samaritan, or the Oblivious Priest or Levite. In those times, I suspect something is lacking; something is wrong. Specifically, I suspect we are either lacking a sufficient awareness of the desperate need of those who don't yet know Christ and/or we lack sufficient compassion.

No, I am not attempting to make people feel guilty. In fact, the last thing I want is for people to leave church feeling guilty. Rather, my hope is to encourage all of us to spend time in earnest reflection—to spend time earnestly asking God if something in our lives needs to change if something is lacking. As David says in the Psalms, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24). Earnest, prayerful reflection is, I believe, the first step in crossing the bridge to a better place. It is the first step in overcoming the barrier posed by a lack of urgency and lack of action.

May God help each of us to be “led in the way everlasting”. May he help each of us to have a greater and greater awareness of people's need for Jesus, and may he help each of us to have greater and greater compassion. May we truly become more like the Good Samaritan, urgently reaching out to a lost, broken, and hurting world filled with people whom God deeply loves.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “Travailing for Souls”. (sermon, Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington Butts, September 3, 1871).