

## “HELP THOSE WHO ARE EXPERIENCING YOUR SAME STRUGGLES”

by Rom A. Pegram (10/16/16)

During a sermon based on Matthew 19:19—on loving your neighbor as yourself, a pastor from Ohio asked three times—thus emphasizing his point, “Who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor?” ... And each time he asked the question, there was a little boy in the congregation that mimicked the pastor’s intensity as he answered him: “Mr. Rogers! Mr. Rogers! Mr. Rogers!”

Well, our neighbor may indeed be a Mr. Rogers ... or our neighbor may be someone as unlikely as a thief on a cross. That’s what Jesus found out on the very worst day of his life. And to add insult to injury, Jesus was not only made to suffer physically ... and to be humiliated at the hands of his accusers, but he was placed on his cross very strategically between known criminals, as if he were one himself. Jesus very bad day just kept getting worse...

In today’s scripture lesson, we learn from Jesus yet another step to getting through our bad days in this life we’ve been given. And it is truly a Christian—a Christ-like step—that can only be understood, I believe, by those who know Jesus intimately! Listen now to our scripture lesson for today (Luke 23:39-43, TEV)...

One of the criminals hanging there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup> The other one, however, rebuked him, saying, "Don't you fear God? You received the same sentence he did. <sup>41</sup> Ours, however, is only right, because we are getting what we deserve for what we did; but he has done no wrong." <sup>42</sup> And he said to Jesus, "Remember me, Jesus, when you come as King!" <sup>43</sup> Jesus said to him, "I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me."

At the beginning of this Good Friday conversation, Jesus was just an observer-listener. He was on the cross, but there were two other crosses—one on the right and one on the left, each holding a known criminal. By coincidence of Roman scheduling, the worst day in Jesus’ life happened to be the day of their destruction as well.

Both men who hung beside Jesus seemed to be aware of Jesus’ reputation. But their reactions to this *fellow sufferer* were quite different...

- *One* displayed cynicism and anger, swearing at Jesus and making a mocking reference to his power.
- *The other* criminal swiftly challenged his counterpart ...
  - “Don’t you have any respect?”
  - “*This* man doesn’t deserve that kind of treatment; he hasn’t done anything wrong!”
  - “We, however, are getting what we deserve!”

Did you hear what the second thief said? This, folks, was a *true and clear confession* of his sinfulness! Then, in the same repentant spirit, and with great respect for who Jesus

was, he made a request of the Messiah: “Remember me, Jesus, when you come as King!”

Now, we’re getting to the meat of what we want to talk about today. Jesus enters into the conversation for the first time. And *Jesus’ response is a study in divine mercy*, in grace’s readiness to give the gift of salvation at any time—never such a thing as *too late* to seek God while here on this earth. What did Jesus say? Basically this (greatly paraphrased): “Those who come to me, I’ll never turn away.”

*That’s the gospel truth wrapped up in this event, BUT THERE’S A DISCIPLING PRINCIPLE HERE AS WELL!* In Jesus’ response to this very bad day, we’re taught a *second lesson* in how to get through the bad days of our lives and it is this: ENCOURAGE OTHERS WHO ARE STRUGGLING OR UNCERTAIN. (“Help Those Who Are Experiencing Your Same Struggles”) So, how can we do that? How can we react the same way that Jesus did in the midst of *our* bad days? Here it is: 2 things...

**BEGIN TO NOTICE THOSE AROUND YOU WHO ARE STRUGGLING IN THE SAME WAY AS YOU.** Is it easy to notice those around you who are having struggles in their lives, when you’re going through some very real struggles yourself? The answer that most of us would give would probably be ‘NO!’ It’s hard to think of the needs of others when our needs are so great ... and yet, that’s exactly what Jesus did as he hung on the cross. So, how did this happen in Jesus’ life, on this very worst day of his life, and how can we follow his example in this and do the very same thing? How can we notice those around us who are going through some of the same struggles we are? Where do we begin? It’s kind of like this...

Lee Iacocca once asked legendary football coach Vince Lombardi what it took to make a winning team. Lombardi’s answer to Iacocca was this: “There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don’t win the game. Then you come to a third ingredient: if you’re going to play together as a team, you’ve got to care for one another. You’ve got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself: ‘If I don’t block that man, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his.’ “The difference between mediocrity and greatness,” Lombardi said that night, “is the feeling these guys have for each other.”

Well, we’re the Church! And what was Jesus’ command to his Church—us? We’re supposed to ‘love one another.’ That’s what Lombardi was talking about when speaking of a winning team. And those of us who know Jesus personally in our lives are supposed to be about building a winning team, too. We begin to notice what others are going through and begin to look out for them and support them ... *when we begin to care for one another like Jesus told us to!*

I heard a story a while back about a person who was in management at a local company—usually working daytime hours. Someone was trying to contact this individual

one day ... and found out that—for some odd reason—they were working 2<sup>nd</sup> shift for the week. Now, in their position, they didn't *have* to do this. So, what was going on?

After further inquiry, it was discovered this person was switching hours with a co-worker for a week during the summertime ... so they could have some evening family time during the summer hours, too. And, it was also discovered that *this* wasn't the first time this had happened ... but was a regular part—an *agreed upon part*—of their summer schedules...

Now, folks, there's an example of someone in a management position—who had the privilege of position—coming alongside someone else to make their (family) life more bearable for them. And, I dare say, this wouldn't have happened unless this person genuinely cared for others around him! ... So, how are we doing with Jesus' command to 'love one another—to notice similar struggles that our brothers and sisters in this world are going through? *Next, we need to...*

**LEARN TO MEET FELLOW STRUGGLERS WHERE THEY ARE!** Jesus' attitude, while on the cross—in conversation with these thieves, is not what one might expect from royalty—the Son of God Almighty...

The truth is Jesus might have regarded himself as the thief's superior, but he chose to readily respond as one engaged in the same bad day struggle! *Some facts are these...*

- The thief was facing this bad day with far less resources than Jesus had ... but Jesus was suffering too; even the thief recognized that...
- Jesus had nails driven through his hands and feet ... and a crown of thorns crushed onto his head ... but he was still God's King...
- Yet, Jesus chose not to meet this man from either his *spiritually royal role* or as a *moral superior*...

He simply decided to meet the thief on common ground—their suffering together on that very bad day... Here, Jesus gives us direction—*specifically*—about how we're supposed to go about helping those who are experiencing our same struggles, whatever our bad days involve. He's calling us to meet fellow strugglers *where they are!* And, we shouldn't let anything—like position or resources—get in our way of doing that!

A friend of mine's dad—my senior year in high school—had a sudden heart attack—totally unexpected. He was a VP at Nekoosa-Edwards Papers—a well respected leader in the community. After the heart attack, however, he'd totally given up. He wouldn't do what the doctors told him to do; why bother? He was a goner anyway! Here was a man who in the prime of his life was shot down physically ... and he wasn't going to pull out it because his attitude was one of defeat!

His wife called a pastor and asked him if he wouldn't please go see her husband (unchurched) and see if he couldn't get his attitude back on track. The pastor called on him. He walked into the hospital room and met a very angry man. Just as his wife had

said, the Mr. didn't want to have anything to do with anyone ... especially a so-and-so preacher. Well, the preacher just walked right over to the man and said, "I know how you feel." "No, you don't!" was the reply that shot back, "You're healthy; you're active; I see you exercising everyday! What could you possibly know about what I'm going through?" The pastor answered calmly, "Yes, I do know what you're going through, because—you see—I've had 3 heart attacks myself." The man looked at him, surprised, and said, "You?" "Yes," the pastor retorted, "and you can bounce back, too!"

After that visit, the doctors couldn't believe this man's change of attitude. They called his wife and reported that he was now going to be O.K., because of his new attitude and his desire to bounce back and to be active again!

And, folks, *that's what Jesus does for us ... and what we can do for others in Jesus' name!* I think of areas where some of you have been through some struggles too and can help your pastor out in 'coming alongside others' for their benefit—for the strengthening of God's kingdom right here in the Lomira/Brownsville/Theresa area...

- Mother's who've lost children...
- Marriage problems...
- Those who have struggles with physical disciplines—like maintaining a healthy lifestyle and so forth...

We need to have the attitude, as we come alongside our fellow strugglers in this life, that *we are all in this together!* The attitude comes from Jesus' role model of leadership; *we are all in this thing called LIFE together...*

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, the Apostle Paul helps remind us of the things Jesus taught us from the Cross as he shares this: "Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father, the God from whom all help comes! He helps us in all our troubles, so that we are able to help others who have all kinds of troubles, using the same help that we ourselves have received from God."

This is a divine reminder to us that *we comfort others NOT from the foundation of our superior faith, but from the commonality of our mutual struggles.* And that grace of God is seen most grandly in the midst of the initial Good Friday—the one bad day beyond all bad days. As the Son of God assured another fellow sufferer in the middle of his own agony, he not only comforted him with a promise of eternal hope, but he met him in the "today" of his struggle with divine promise—the ultimate assurance. "I promise you that today you will be ... with me." Those are words that could get anyone through a bad day! *Share them with others who are going through what you are...*

So, who is our neighbor? Maybe God is trying to let us know. And, maybe it's not Mr. Rogers. Folks, what kind of troubles have you experienced in your life ... or what is it you're going through right now? There may be a bigger picture than just what you're seeing! Who can you identify with and 'come alongside' of to help strengthen their

faith—to help them get through a ‘bad day?’ In doing so, you’ll be helping yourself to do the same!