

“A Never-Ending Need for Reform Meets a Never-Ending Love” based on Luke 18:9-14, Jer. 31:27-34
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 19, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Up in Sperryville, Virginia, at the Before & After Café, for the last 10 years and some years before that at a different location, a man named Ted Pellegatta, who the Washington Post described as “the village eccentric,” would convene a daily “coffee klatch,” where people of every opinion stopped in. They came to have conversations, often about some of the most controversial topics of our time. Participants, mostly from their 40s to their 80s, would have disagreements, but they also have built friendships across the divide.

Pellegatta, who died in August at the age of 85, had a license plate that said, “RICHMEN.” It was on an old beat-up Honda Accord. According to the story, Ted had little financial wealth with \$1,000 a month in social security. But where he was rich, was in friendships, true human connections he had made. His widow said he had many people from these conversations show up at his bedside in his final months as he died of cancer.

The talks had one rule: “Show an interest in one another.” And so, they did show an interest, being there for Ted, even in their grief and as his life ended. In the end, he said, “I’ve had a great life.”

The Washington Post’s story about Ted highlights the human need for connection and includes anecdotes about people with opposite political viewpoints becoming close friends, even taking the time to console one another and be there for each other. The story’s headline, though, spoke of the “key to happiness” and tied it to science, but what seems more prevalent is not happiness, but love.

As one person said, “When you start to put facts on the table without animosity, without judgement, you start to find mutual ground.”

In our modern world, we are obsessed with happiness as the goal of life. But none of the participants talked about happiness bringing them meaning. They talked about relationships and being there for each other despite differences – differences that might make you unhappy. This is because they were putting the needs of one another before their own, and that, my friends, is love. The word comes up only once in the story, with a woman saying: “It sounds corny, but there is just so much love here.” She said there was an elemental sense of “belonging.”

The only thing remotely tied to faith in the story is the mention of one man being a deacon. And yet, it seems that in this diverse group of people – ideologically and ethnically – the law of God’s love was on their hearts in some way, shape, or form. There are rules, in a sense for these talks, but in these embodied relationships it is really just curiosity and concern about one another. That is what governs their discussions and their relationships.

Today is Reformation Sunday, and our reading from Jeremiah is a traditional reading for today. It was almost the reading last week on the regular schedule, but I pushed it to today at the last minute. Now, as you may know, a common summary of the Protestant Reformation is the push for the five ‘solas.’ This is a Latin word for “alone,” so it is “faith alone,” “scripture alone,” “grace alone,” “Christ alone,” and “the glory of God alone.”

In reforming the excesses and problems that existed at the time in the Roman Catholic church where the pope and his priesthood were exclusive mediators and the people were often locked

out. The Protestants went on to emphasize the priesthood of every believer and personal salvation. Largely, the reformers never set out to create a rival church, but to bring the church back to the foundations of the faith, one believer at a time.

And so, Jeremiah's emphasis on the individual became a favorite passage for many reformers. Yet if we're honest, the reformation wasn't perfect. It was not complete. Too often it emphasized winning and fell into some of the same traps that caused the very things they were pushing back against. While reformers like Luther rightly preached a theology of the cross in which God enters our suffering with us, the polemics that Luther and others preached only fostered more animosity and more judgement, all of which empowered fear and not love.

Faith became an intellectual exercise – a choice – to accept a teaching and believe. But what about what the Lord said to Jeremiah in our text today? “No more shall every person teach their neighbor, nor shall every person teach their sibling, saying, ‘know the Lord,’ because all of them shall know me from the least to the greatest, because I will forgive their iniquity and sin, I will remember it no more.” If this were fulfilled, why am I up here right now exhorting to you to know the Lord?

But at the same time, even from the early church they did believe it was fulfilled because they saw Jesus as establishing the “new covenant.” We call it the New Testament, which just means “new covenant.” So, perhaps the thing we should focus on here is the difference between teaching and learning. Anything can be taught, and all of us could intellectually agree on anything. But we do not learn until we put it into practice.

Theories, rules, and some observed experiences are good things, but learning requires a lived practice, encountering the ups and downs that go beyond the textbook and instruction.

I can tell you right now that to know the Lord is to love one another as he loves you, with self-giving love. Great. But we will not know the Lord, even if we intellectually believe the good news of Jesus, until we put self-giving love into practice, experiencing it deeply within our lives. I can teach theology and expound on the rules that God has for you, and we can do missions as a church. But unless we live our faith, by loving anyone that God puts in our life, even our opponents, then we may be tempted to chew the sour grape, and find our teeth are too blunt for food that nourishes.

The Pharisee in our story today is chewing a sour grape in his disdain for the tax collector. The tax collector though is his oppressor, choosing to aid the Roman empire against his people. The tax collector in this system is tasked by Rome to collect a certain levy or amount, and he is given the power of Roman soldiers to demand people pay. Let's say the tax collector would agree to collect 10,000 denarii from the people in a region. But do you know what he'd do? He'd collect 20,000 to cover expenses and give kickbacks to the soldiers and give himself a life of luxury at the expense of the people.

On the other hand, the Pharisee is observant of the law, its teaching, and trying to live righteously. He thanks God that he is not a robber. He is not unjust. He is not unfaithful. He even tithes.

He does not believe he takes anything that is not owed to him or belong to him. This is why he says he is not a robber, or a thief, or a taker as it might be translated, as he prays in his prayer. He does not believe that he is unjust, unrighteous, or as the NRSV translates it, “a rogue,” because he tries

to observe the law as best he can. Neither is he unfaithful, nor an adulterer. It's a Hebrew word carried into the Greek and it's a word for adultery that often means unfaithfulness to God. But, you see, the Pharisee has not been unfaithful to God, nor unfaithful to his wife.

Yet he looks over at the tax collector, and he feels a hatred toward this man. The tax collector makes the Pharisee's life harder. He makes it harder than Rome itself and all of its evil because the tax collector compounds Roman oppression. This is why Rome hired natives in their territories for this job. If Rome could get the people to hate each other they would lose focus on Rome, who is their common enemy. That way Rome's power goes unchecked.

So then, the Pharisee chews the sour grape that is given to him. It's a hatred, maybe even jealousy. He may feel that he has given up so much to be faithful to the Lord and the law. Perhaps he fears God's judgement on him and on his nation if he was not pious enough.

This sour grape blunts his teeth, and he is unable to chew the law's real food, which is to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love his neighbor as himself – even the tax collector. Grace toward this tax collector feels like it costs way too much. If he were to love this man who doesn't deserve it, would that mean God loves him too. If so, then what is the point? Why even be pious or faithful?

Clinging to his own righteousness, he thanks God that he is not like the tax collector. But then, in Jesus's parable, the tax collector comes to the temple in repentance. He beats his chest and acknowledges that he is everything the Pharisee thinks he is. He says, "O God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" He is no hero here. He has taken what does not belong to him. He has been unjust. He has been unfaithful to God. He's been unfaithful to his people, his neighbors. He has chosen to do something wrong – to look at something that is wrong all around him in the system of oppression that Rome has in place – and he looked the other way justifying it because it worked for him.

Yet now he seeks mercy. He seeks atonement or "at-one-ment." The word translated mercy here is '*hilaskomai*,' which is akin to '*hilasmos*.' So what does that mean for you? This was the word that Greek speaking Jews used to translate the word '*caphar*' in Hebrew. In Greek, '*hilasmos*' means propitiation or appeasement, but in the Torah, '*caphar*' doesn't mean that. It means to cover our sins, making us acceptable, or at one with God. That's why the first English translators of the bible invented this word "atonement," which is a compound of three words – "at one ment." He is saying, "O God, be at one with me, the sinner." He will not even look up to heaven. That is the depth of his internal shame.

Beloved, like the story of the Prodigal Son, this story is exclusive to Luke's gospel. And like that story, we have an older brother figure in the Pharisee, and a younger brother figure in the tax collector, both of which reveal God's love. Jesus says, "I say to you this one went down to his house, himself justified." And then comes the scandal that translators, who themselves are usually pious people, often mistranslate, even though plenty of scholars keep telling them its not the right translation.

The word Luke uses here is "para" or "alongside." Think of the word parallel, as parallel lines which are lines that run alongside each other. But only twice in nearly 200 times this word is there, translators use "rather than." And in both, I believe both do so wrongly, as a lot of scholars contend.

I think it's merely because they don't want to struggle with the implication of what it would mean to translate it as "alongside."

The other spot is in Romans, where Paul says that the pagan gentiles, "worshipped the created things *'para'* the creator." To use "alongside" here implies the pagans may have had knowledge of God and maybe worshiped the many gods alongside the true God. It's not such a strange concept, as Paul says so in his speech at the Areopagus in Acts. So why do we take that out when we translate Romans? I won't go down that rabbit hole right now.

But I mention it only to say it only to say that I join the scholars who disagree. The *para* should be translated here as "alongside," leaving us to wrestle with the text. The Pharisee is not the "bad guy" here. He is the older brother. He is us.

It is hard to look out on the world and see sin and death everywhere, and then not feel contempt or jealousy when you are doing what is right, but the wicked prosper. "Why O Lord? We are all tempted to pray as the Pharisee did – Thank you God that I am not...(insert opponent here).

You probably don't use these words, but we think like this about the people we disagree with. We say this when we judge another as beyond the pale, unworthy of God's love. We pray like this when we use words to belittle and judge other people, perhaps to discredit them and establish ourselves as the righteous ones. We do this because we have a tendency to see God's love as a limited resource, whether we will admit that or not. This is because too often, we try to justify ourselves at the expense of others.

The truth is that God's love is not a limited resource – God so loved the world – all of it, that the eternal Son, the Word of God, which is God, entered into our humanity to live in our flesh, to die for us, and to rise for us, and then he ascended for us, enthroned as king of all creation and bearing our flesh in God's presence. As Paul says, he became sin – flesh – to reconcile us, or make us at one with God. Jesus is the answer to the tax collector's prayer: "O God, be at one with me, the sinner."

Beloved, I do not know if Ted Pellegata had an intellectual understanding of the gospel. I do not know if I would have agreed with him about his views on the world, politics, or faith and religion. The story doesn't get into it, but I believe we have a lot to learn from stories like his and the coffee klatch. I think that in the practice of these "conversations" is important. It's not corny to say that indeed there was and is so much love in those relationships.

I believe this is the love of God at work through practice. Even if no one has been taught to "know the Lord," I know the Lord when I see the Lord at work, embodied in self-giving love with humility, especially in the hardest parts of our lives.

Therefore, I say we need never-ending reform. We need a never-ending reform movement that is rooted in God's word of never-ending love. Also, we must acknowledge the Reformation 500 years ago was incomplete – imperfect. We need to be thankful for our lives and rejoice for all that God has given us – Absolutely. But we also need to be the embodiment of God's love for a broken world.

God loves both the pious Pharisee and the oppressive tax collector. God loves the ones you think have the right kind of faith, and God loves the ones you think are your opponents. We must resist the temptation to eat sour grapes in our own lives, and instead, we must seek the nourishment of

God's love for all people. This does not come from just hearing me talk today and going, "I intellectually accept that. Absolutely." No, I am just one person wrestling with God's word and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Rather, learning will come when you and I practice love in our everyday lives together. Learning will come when we embody love in the hardest parts of our life. It will not come in unending searches for happiness, but in moments of consolation during the deepest sorrows which are inevitable.

This practice only begins with knowing and trusting God's never-ending love for us first, as we humble ourselves by both believing that God's love is for everyone, and by recognizing that we are also, at the same time, sinners unworthy of that same love. That's why it's grace. We didn't earn it.

This is how we open ourselves up to true reform in the Holy Spirit: to practice the self-giving love of God in Jesus Christ. At times it will hurt, and always it will be difficult. I preach to myself as much as I preach to any of you, but we must do the work.

Helping people to know the Lord does not come by us teaching, but it comes by us doing the practice of learning – learning to be like Christ in our lives, especially in those times when it is most difficult. Amen.