

Beware of Rules That Separate

Matthew 23:23-26

February 19, 2017

Each week as I begin studying the scripture for my sermon, I immediately wonder what Dr. Tupper might say about it. Then I turn to my lecture notes from Dr. Tupper's Systematic Theology, the one file folder from my seminary classes that I've kept out of storage, to gain deeper insight, a different perspective on the scripture. Systematic Theology was Dr. Tupper's class for more than 40 years. First at Southern Seminary and then at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. I didn't know it, until the end of my 1st year, but I was one of the students in the last Systematic Theology Course he taught, and while I take great pride in that, I am also a bit sad for those seminarians coming after me who did not have the chance to witness his beauty.

Special does not begin to describe who Dr. E. Frank Tupper is to me. Without a shadow of a doubt, I know I am a better person for having the privilege to call Dr. Tupper my professor and my friend. I think back to my 1st month in seminary sitting in his class at 9:30 AM and marveling at the depth of his knowledge, but there was something else I noticed in him that I had only experienced in 2 other professors I had encountered. Now remember, by this time I had experienced quite a few professors: 4 years of undergrad, 3 years of law school and now seminary. Not to mentioned, I had 8 years of experience as an Adjunct Professor prior to entering seminary.

Dr. Tupper was special and I knew it from the very first class. He scared some and in fact, a minister friend of mine who studied at Southern Seminary couldn't believe I had chosen to take Dr. Tupper's class because he made it a point to schedule his classes so he could avoid the high expectations and rigorous requirements. I don't know if Dr. Tupper had lightened up over the years, but what others might have called rigorous or demanding I saw a bit differently, I saw it as an expression of love, and I made it a point to let Dr. Tupper know that.

The first time we met 1 on 1 happened because I accepted his invitation for a "Get Acquainted Interview." To some, this offer would not appear attractive, but I leapt at the opportunity to meet 1 on 1. So one afternoon we

sat together in his office allowing our 10-15 minute interview to last more than an hour.

Our time together was meaningful in the very same way friends recall meeting each other for the 1st time. He genuinely wanted to know all about me. Tell me about your family, he started. How old are your children, what are they passionate about?... How about your wife, how is she handling this?... I'm sure this must be tough... Make sure you do everything you can to let them know you love them. You need them more than you can even realize and they need you too.

And then I began asking similar questions of him, which initially caught him off-guard. This is my opportunity to get to know more about you, he said, but then as quickly as he said that he realized I genuinely wanted to discover these same things about him. I do believe we both knew that our 1 on 1 time was not Professor Student or Teacher Pupil time, rather it was 2 members of God's creation, previously unknown to each other, embracing the small amount of time to get to know more about the other and more about God.

We opened up to each other and shared as much as we could in the time we had. Then toward the end, I asked him if I could share some things I had observed about him in the handful of lectures I had witnessed. I wanted him to know how special I found his passion for passing along his knowledge. I wanted to share some of the characteristics that seemed to permeate through him and bless us students.

He was reluctant, probably because we had only been around each other for less than 10 hours at this point, but he finally said I could. I proceeded to tell him that I pictured him late at night in his home (he lived alone) pacing back and forth for hours trying to figure out if earlier in the day he had lectured in a way that gave us students the best possible chance of learning. Not for test taking or paper writing purposes, but genuinely learning. I said that I bet he sees each student's face while pacing and wonders if he could have shared his knowledge in some better way. I told him that each time he stood before us in the classroom I could feel how deeply he cared. I ended by telling him I was honored to be his student, and that I knew, even after just a few weeks, that his impact on my life would last until my last days and I hoped my ministry would serve to honor the parts of himself that he so freely gave to me.

When I finished, Dr. Tupper had tears streaming down his face and with a broken voice he asked how I knew all of that about him. I told him I wasn't exactly sure, and we both seemed to be ok with that.

As I stood to leave, he thanked me and I thanked him and we hugged. Then he said, you know they tell me I should not meet with students like this anymore. Would you believe they even created some type of rules to discourage it. They think that we should just lecture, research, write and publish. That way my time with students would be limited to classroom lectures. You know something though, spending this time with you today has been more rewarding than any lecture I have given these past few weeks and I cannot thank you enough. And as I turned to exit his office I said, even more proof of how deeply you care about relationships and value a person's humanity.

I share this with you for a couple of reasons. First, Dr. Tupper fell earlier this week, broke his neck and is currently in a Louisville, Kentucky hospital being fed through a tube. Needless to say, he has been on my mind. But there is another reason, Dr. Tupper never allowed the rules created to separate people determine his actions toward others. He was in a position of power, renowned in his field of study, encouraged not to waste time with those students of the lower class, and yet everyday he lived as though he had been called by God, through Jesus the Christ, to befriend them. He lived every day seeking authentic relationships with the very people he had been told not to waste his valuable time on. Dr. Tupper knew life was lived by resisting the rules meant to separate people, no matter if those rules were handed down by those with authority, or simply a product of the culture. He taught me that Gospel living happened by choosing to travel paths that lead to connections with others, not neglecting others.

Gospel living never neglects others, and yet this is exactly what the scribes and Pharisees were doing. They justified their neglect of others because they chose to interpret the law in a way that erected barriers between them and the others. And Jesus called them on it because their interpretation of the law perpetuated the neglect of people they deemed less than them.

Now tithing to God they could do, but even in their tithing they weren't really offering much of themselves because mint, dill and cumin were the smallest of herbs. To understand Jesus' message as anything less than offering yourself to others in need, anything less than making room for

anyone and everyone choosing to come to the table, is to miss the point altogether. Clearly the scribes and Pharisees understood tithing and while there was nothing wrong with that, tithing the smallest of their spices didn't require interaction with, or relationship with other people, and Jesus was teaching them as much. Pursuing Justice, Mercy and Faith always require this, but they are oftentimes impossible to measure.

Seeking justice for all persons. Granting mercy to those who have hurt us. Living in faith so others might see. All of that is tough...and virtually impossible to measure. Partly because none of them is ever fully achieved.

I can give a tithe and know it and feel good about it. I can come to worship and mark that off the to do list and feel good about it. I can even read the Bible and feel good about it, but on that very issue Francis Chan warns "... if we are not careful, a dangerous habit could form: we could learn to read the bible and do nothing in response... study to the neglect of action becomes easier and easier with each occurrence... and we should be terrified if we have mastered the art of becoming convicted and doing nothing in response."

I don't know about you, but I believe this is why Jesus was so frustrated, even angry at the scribes and Pharisees. Can't you hear it, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites..." You have mastered reading the law, yet you fail to seek Justice, Mercy and Faith and because of that you neglect others in need. You read, yet you are not changed.

Tithing one's possessions is a good thing, and it is actually achievable. Pursuing justice may be something we do till the day we die and we may never see it. It always involves other people and it is messy and costly and hard. We may never arrive at our goal...because injustice and condemnation and pride will fight all our attempts.

I wonder if the fact that it is hard work is the reason we fall back to doing what we can control. We fall back on that which we can accomplish and measure and get credit for! Getting credit oftentimes seems to be the goal, doesn't it? If you are like me, though, you may ask yourself from time to time whose credit you seek, or why credit is a goal in the first place.

Many of us have gone on mission trips to serve those less fortunate than ourselves. Those trips have been "mountain top" experiences as Amy likes

to say. We all come back from those places “changed” in some way, but the reason we are changed is never the work we do or the route we take or the food we eat or the places we stay. The change is always because and always will be because of the people we meet. We are amazed at how they live and still have smiles on their faces. We are blown away by their faith in and dependence upon God. They teach us what faith and dependence actually look like and while we are there we seem to get it.

Dr. Chuck Poole calls this a “theology of extremity.” He tells the story of a day when he became “undone” over some change taking place in his church of which he did not approve. He fretted and worried and wrung his hands over the matter. Later that day, he encountered a family who had no money to buy food for their children for the rest of the month. He compared his anguish over a change in the liturgy of his church with the anguish of parents unable to feed their children. He did not like what he saw. He concluded that as much as God cared about the worship liturgy of his church, God cared more about God’s children living in “extreme” poverty, hunger, deprivation, injustice...or whatever. This led to his “theology of extremity.” While I cannot be certain this was the cause, it was not long before Dr. Poole resigned from the prestigious church he served to launch a ministry dedicated to the homeless and hungry and marginalized souls of Jackson, Mississippi.

What I think happened to Dr. Poole, and also to those of us who journey on mission trips, is that our priorities get rearranged. Things we once thought “important” lose importance fairly quickly. I saw it this past summer with Joshua when he returned from his summer mission trip to Philadelphia. My son, 15 at the time, was so moved by the children he was serving. These children have never experienced the material wealth he has, or a place of privilege like Joshua, yet these children taught him a most valuable lesson. They showed him the rewards of a life that seeks friendship. I recall him telling me & his Mom that we couldn’t possibly understand because these children “had nothing” but their happiness was infectious. Luckily Amy & I knew exactly what Joshua was talking about because when we were teenagers we experienced the same thing. Hopefully some of you have too. Hopefully you know what it is like to head off to serve those less fortunate only to return home knowing full well that it was you who had been served by them.

So perhaps what we need is a new way to measure our lives...a way that refuses to make mountains out of molehills... a way that has nothing to do with most of the stuff over which we lose sleep. Perhaps we need to learn from people like Dr. Tupper who teach us about taking time to get to know the people who cross our paths, no matter what the rule makers or rules themselves say we should do. And as harsh as it may sound, maybe we need to hear Jesus calling us hypocrites.

Could it be that all this time we have read the Bible and done nothing in response? If this is the case in your life, it may actually be time for you to start asking what your life might look like if you opened yourself up so the Bible actually worked on you. These stories we read, these stories that some of us know by heart, what if we took seriously what these stories said? What if we read them in such a way that we began responding to their call. Maybe we would begin to experience the very transformation we all claim to want. Maybe, just maybe we would stop neglecting others and actually pursue Justice, Mercy and Faith.

No matter what anyone says, this is the transformed life Jesus modeled. This is the transformed life to which God is calling all of us. It is my prayer that we begin reading the Bible and actually responding in ways that seek Justice, Mercy and Faith. May we stop making mountains out of molehills and may we be convicted to always offer something of ourselves to others in need.

Dear God, please let it be.

AMEN!