

Road Test

“There you are.”

Romans 5:6-11

Third in the series, Xtreme Love: lessons from the Methodist heart

Rev. John H. Hice
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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Lost

When our son, James, completed his drivers' ed. class he was turned over to us. For months, if ever he was to drive, it had to be with Laura or me. Whenever he got behind the wheel of the car, it was our turn to coach him. Whatever I thought was the best driving style, I pressed him to do it. Whatever I thought was the ideal attitude, I urged him to adopt it. For instance, I told him “If someone does something aggressive or stupid, don't honk the horn or worse, just let them go. People can be jerks without your help.” Somehow, I knew this might be my last chance at control, my last stab at influencing the kind of driver he'd turn out to be.

When he had his hours of supervised driving done and recorded, it was time to go for his road test, to see if he could meet the standards for a license to drive. We met the officer and she told me to get in the back seat. With my son behind the wheel, she got in the front passenger's seat, telling him what he was to do and how he would be graded. Then she turned around; I think that she shook her finger at me when she said, “And you can ride along, but *you'll* have to be quiet. Don't coach him or correct him. If you do, the test is over and he will not pass. No talking!” I think it was the hardest test of my life.

A lot of people treat their relationship with God like that. Like life is one big test. “Do well, get it all right, believe the right things in the right way, associate only with the right people (the good people), succeed, be fit and healthy, make something of your life...” then maybe you'll make the grade. You'll measure up. You get your license.

But mess up, and you lose. Have you ever been given the impression that God is demanding like that?

If life as a test: it's a hard way to live, and, when you think about it, it seems like no one could measure up.

Sought

It's true. The Bible has its standards. We talked about the heart of them a couple of weeks ago when Jesus was tested whether he could say which law was the most important and he said, "Love the Lord your God with everything you've got and love your neighbor as yourself."¹ Micah, one of the ancient prophets, said "God has shown you what is good. Love kindness, and do justice and walk humbly with your God."² Then there are the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule (Do unto others...), they all add up to the same thing. *Love God. Don't hurt others, have compassion.*

Yet, if it's a test, still most of us if not all of us sometimes mess up, flunk the test, and believe that we don't get the license.

The messing up has its way of separating us from God.

Sin is only one way people get separated from God. Someone told me that they'd been so hurt by someone that they couldn't believe God would permit something like that; so they shut God out of their life and now didn't know how to get God back. Another time I was talking to someone who had been seriously ill for some time and he said, "I can't even pray any more." Mistakes, rebellion, illness, or injury: there are lots of ways we get lost and wander.

It's kind of like once when I was at the zoo with my parents and I let go of my father's hand. I was still very short and didn't look up to see who I was standing next to and reached up to take the hand again and was burned by a stranger's cigarette.

When you're lost, you're vulnerable. You can get hurt worse.

So, the lesson Paul the Apostle wanted to get across in the passage we read this morning is that this isn't a road test. God knows when you turn the wrong way down the one-way street, without using the blinker. And though your explanation, "I was only going one way," won't work, your license is not taken away.

He says, while you were still weak, with insufficient practice, sinful, even pushing God away: *lost*, that's when you were sought. That's when Jesus cared so much for you that he stopped at nothing to find you and get you back into the arms of God. It's incredible.

A popular preacher persuaded John Wesley to break with the rather reserved 18th Century practice of preaching only in churches and take the Gospel to the people

outdoors. So Wesley went: out to the countryside where there were miners and laborers who had no education and probably had no church. But he couldn't bring himself to stop serving Communion whenever he preached, which presented a problem. Then, communion could only be served to baptized members of the Church of England after a proper confession and a formal request: a *closed table*. Outside, he couldn't know whether the rules had been followed. In fact, he was certain that many he served had never been baptized; so it was with misgivings that he served the Lord's Supper. That's when he saw it: proof of Paul's words. He watched un-baptized un-believers as they heard the word and received the bread and the cup only to fall to their knees with hearts given to God. Accepted. Reconciled to God.

Methodists ever since have served the Lord's Supper with an open table.

And Methodists ever since have been taken by God's hand into a world filled with people who are lost and sought...and found. A lesson from the Methodist heart is the same here as the lesson from the core of Christianity: God's grace is bent on finding you and restoring a world of lost children. We call it *justifying grace*.

As surely as my father took my recoiling little hand and soothed it and picked me up and held me at the zoo, God justifies you: takes your record and wipes it clean: and the Cross on which Jesus died is all about God getting you and me and the rest of the lost and burned children of the world...back, restored, beloved.

Found

Life is not a road test. You are not required to somehow earn your place with God. To be back in the embrace of God is a gift: a relationship restored that you may simply accept. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that save a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."³

Do you know why that song has a way of reaching into your heart and making it warm? It speaks of a God who loves you and would stop at nothing to have you back. You; and all the lost children of the world.

References

- [1] Mark 12:29-34.
- [2] Micah 6:8
- [3] John Newton, "Amazing Grace," 1779. Music: 19th cent. USA melody; harm. By Edwin O. Excell, 1900. *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House. © 1989. p 378.