

This morning is the 3rd in a 5-message series looking at what Jesus might say to some well-known people. Next Sunday we'll look at Taylor Swift, the uber-successful singer/songwriter and Kansas City Chiefs fan. ☺ In two weeks we will close with what Jesus might say to "you." I encourage you to invite a friend to either, as I've encouraged throughout this series. As for the last message, anyone who doesn't come to church because they think sermons are boring should be here that Sunday, because at least the first few minutes will not be boring. No guarantees after that the rest won't put them to sleep...but the first few minutes will be unlike anything that's ever happened in this sanctuary on a Sunday morning, I can just about guarantee.

Ok, as for today, we're looking at what Jesus might say to Bill Gates.¹ **(Picture Here)** Now, even though Bill Gates is local, and there is a good chance that someone I know knows him decently well, I've never met him and did not speak with him in preparation for this message.



Thankfully, however, we have this invention of the last 30 years or so that's called the Internet. I think Bill Gates might have even helped it along. And so through the web I was able to get a decent sense of who Bill Gates really is. And one thing I learned is that he has a pretty quick wit and a good sense of humor. For instance, watch this brief video clip of him at a product launch for Windows 98 (remember that?) 25 or years ago that didn't go quite right... **Clip Here.**²

All joking aside about the reliability of the Windows software, Microsoft is a force to be reckoned with. They changed the way we do business, the way we communicate, the way a computer works, and more, all because of his vision 40 years ago or more that every home in America should have a PC and it should be running Microsoft products.

Bill got his interest in computers at an early age, along with his childhood friend, Paul Allen. That early infatuation with computers grew into the most powerful computer software corporation in the world for a time, and perhaps still is though there certainly are rivals that didn't exist at first. They are huge and still incredibly influential and powerful. For example, in their annual report for the 2023 fiscal year, they state that their revenue was \$211 billion dollars; they employ approximately 221,000 people. About 50,000 of those are based at their Redmond headquarters for worldwide domination.

Gates, however, has spent the last several years in retirement, as you know. But he has not spent retirement on the golf course or the beach. One thing he's done is buy farmland. Did you know that Bill Gates is the largest private owner of American Farmland? He owns about 270,000 acres – though that's a small percent of the roughly 900 million acres of American farmland. He has also been very involved in the foundation that he and his wife – now ex-wife, unfortunately- started 24 years ago: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. For many years, if there was one thing for which Bill received public criticism that wasn't related to Microsoft, it was criticism about his lack of philanthropic involvement. Many people thought he should do more, given his financial stature and high profile in the public. And in the last couple decades or so, he has become highly involved in philanthropic efforts, including establishing the Giving Pledge along with Warren Buffet, which is a pledge to give at least 50% of his wealth to philanthropic efforts, and encouraging other people to do the same thing.

And it's this philanthropic work, particularly with his foundation, that I want to focus on in today's message...because when you combine that with his religious views I'm reminded of a famous teaching by Jesus that Luke records for us. It's a story that Jesus tells about a man who was also very generous and benevolent in his actions toward another human being. We're in **Luke 10:25-37** this morning. Follow along in your Bibles or on the screen as I read this passage...

The question is asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus affirms a two-part answer that comes right from the Old Testament: love God and love your neighbor. If all you do is love God, but ignore your neighbor, then you're not on the right road to eternal life. On the

flip side, if all we do is love our neighbor, but don't love God, then we're also mis-guided.

Given this two-part answer that Jesus gives (technically, the guy who asked the question gives the answer because Jesus asks him to answer his own question, but Jesus affirms the answer), I think he might say something along these lines to Bill Gates: **“Mr. Gates, you are giving generously in many ways that bless and help some of the poorest and most troubled people in the world. You 'love your neighbor' with abandon. But you've skipped first base: to love God first. Love me with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and then love your neighbor as yourself. Then you'll have eternal life.”**

Now the guy who fell prey to the robbers – remember this is a fictional story that Jesus crafted on the spot, or had told earlier perhaps...might have used it at other times afterwards, too – is presumably Jewish, as he's going from one Jewish city to another. And his own two religious leaders avoided him (a priest and a Levite). Then comes this guy from Samaria. Samaritans and Israelites didn't get along well. They're not supposed to be helping each other. Kind of like a Duck helping a Husky or a Husky footing for the Crimson Tide, which we can never ever, ever do now that Kalen DeBoer has left the UW become Alabama's head coach. Except, in Jesus' day it wasn't something that they poked fun at. It was real. There was genuine animosity between them. But the Samaritan man helps him out, and takes the man to a place where he can stay, cares for him, and lets him stay as long as needed to recover, and pays for all the expenses. I'm reminded of the State Farm commercials: “And like a good neighbor, the Samaritan is there.”

Jesus tells this story to illustrate who our neighbors are, because the lawyer wanted to know Jesus' definition of a neighbor. Leave it to a lawyer to ask Jesus how he defines “neighbor,” right? He's looking for a loophole. But you see, I think Bill Gates, through his foundation as well as through other benevolent acts over the years, gets this “love your neighbor as yourself” stuff right. He's got that down pretty well.

But what about loving God? Gates was raised Catholic, but in his adult years seems to have left his faith behind. For instance, in 1995 Bill Gates was interviewed on PBS by David Frost.³ I wasn't able to find the video on-line, but here's a transcript of part of it:

Frost: I sometimes say to people, 'Do you believe there is a God,' or 'Do you know there is a God?' And, you'd say you don't know?

Gates: In terms of doing things I take a fairly scientific approach to why things happen and how they happen. I don't know if there's a God or not, but I think religious principles are quite valid.

Then, even more narrowly focused on Jesus' teaching, we have this:

Frost: Do you believe in the Sermon on the Mount?

Gates: I don't. I'm not somebody who goes to church on a regular basis. The specific elements of Christianity are not something I'm a huge believer in. There's a lot of merit in the moral aspects of religion. I think it can have a very very positive impact. (It's a bit ironic that he doesn't "believe in the Sermon on the Mount" as so much of it is moral and ethical teaching, and is one part of Jesus teaching that a lot of non-Christians like and support.)

Later, in a 2014 interview with Rolling Stone Magazine⁴, the interview ended with this question and answer:

RS: Do you believe in God?

"I agree with people like Richard Dawkins that mankind felt the need for creation myths. Before we really began to understand disease and the weather and things like that, we sought false explanations for them. Now science has filled in some of the realm – not all – that religion used to fill." "But the mystery and the beauty of the world is overwhelmingly amazing, and there's no scientific explanation of how it came about. To say that it was generated by random numbers, that does seem, you know, sort of an uncharitable view [laughs]. I think it makes sense to believe in God, but exactly what decision in your life you make differently because of it, I don't know" (Bill Gates).

When he said in the first interview that religion has a “positive impact,” that “religious principles are quite valid” and there’s “merit in the moral aspect” of religion, I imagine that he means exactly what Jesus teaches us in the parable about with the Good Samaritan. I find it ironic that 20 years later he said that “what decision in your life you make differently because of religion, I don’t know.” I mean, aren’t the decisions we make in life hugely impacted by our morals and ethics that religion shapes? So, there’s inconsistency there. But, inconsistencies in his views aside – or maybe after 20 years of time his views have simply changed – the moral and ethics stuff of loving our neighbor is the part that Gates does so well.

We’ll also ignore his error in thinking that all religions have the same principles because I think the point he’s trying to make has some merit: Religion – Christianity specifically is mentioned – has had a positive impact on our world. That’s a more charitable view of Christianity than a lot of people have. And as a result of being a good neighbor: Bill Gates, Melinda, and their foundation, have absolutely blessed people and cared for them in unbelievable ways. They’re some of the leaders in today’s world at funding the fight against diseases such as Malaria and AIDS; through their foundation they help people with maternal, newborn, and child health; they help with agricultural issues, they promote education for kids, they offer financial services for the poor. Gates truly lives out the “love your neighbor” part of what Jesus says.

But the parable is only part of Jesus’ answer to the man’s question about how to inherit eternal life. **The other half the answer that Jesus initially gives/affirms is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.** And although Gates said in 2014 that believing in God makes sense on one hand, he clearly sides with those who see God as a myth to fill in knowledge gaps, and he probably believes science will eventually fill those gaps. His earlier comments about not knowing whether or not God exists, and not going to church regularly, and not believing in the “specific elements of Christianity” clearly indicates that the Biblical command to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind is lost on Bill Gates. (There is some indication online that in 2014 he was attending a local catholic church some,

though it was hard to tell how regularly, how long, and how much that is really reflective of a genuine faith.)

But Jesus says that loving God – which in order to love God you have to first acknowledge his existence – is exactly the first, foundational step in inheriting eternal life. So, when we love God, and when we then love our neighbor, we are living as God desires and will know and experience eternal life.

One last “window” ☺ into Gates' view of loving God: In an interview with Time Magazine in 1996, Gates made this comment about attending worship services: **"Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning"** (Time Magazine, January 13, 1996). If you aren't already aware, Bill Gates is famous for his efficiency. It's been reported that he prefers taking baths to showers, because he can read a book or do other work while he's in the tub, and that's hard to do in the shower. And being efficient is fine...it's an admirable trait.

But loving God is not about efficiency. It's also not just about Sunday morning, which he confines it to in that statement. Jesus tells us to love God with everything we've got, without letting up. You don't put that in a 60- or 70-minute time frame on Sundays. Loving God isn't a matter of following a formula. You can't put a relationship with God or with another human for that matter, into a box or a formula and expect to find eternal life. Eternal life begins with God first loving us, and us responding in love back toward God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind. There's nothing about efficiency in it. “Loving God” means acknowledging his presence in our lives, and responding with reverent affection back to God. That's how a relationship of love works: both parties must have love toward one another, or there's no relationship of love at all. Real love isn't all that concerned with efficiency. God probably could have shown his love of us in much more efficient ways than through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But it wouldn't have been as effective.

Maybe you're here this morning and you can resonate with Bill Gates. Maybe not the part about being a billionaire or starting a company that has grown to over 200,000 employees...but maybe you love helping other people and seeing people's lives improve. Or maybe you resonate with the part about not being sure if God exists, or not loving him. If that's you, then God invites you to recognize his handiwork in the intricacy and detailed interaction of creation – from the scope of the universe to your neurological system that allows you to hear a message like this – and to recognize the love God has for you expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it is that resurrected Jesus who might say to Bill Gates, and also to you, **“You are giving generously in many ways that bless some of the poorest and most troubled people in the world. You 'love your neighbor' with abandon. But you've skipped first base: to love God first. Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and then love your neighbor as yourself. Then you'll have eternal life.”**

Sometimes it's easy to get caught up in being a good neighbor. Sometimes we even love our neighbors so much that maybe we forget to allow ourselves to be loved. That can be a danger, too. But the main point being made here is that we love God as well as our neighbor. Maybe you enjoy helping people with your time, or with your money or some other way. That's great. But don't skip the first step: Loving Jesus. Give him your heart. Give him your mind. Give him your strength. Give him your soul. Give him everything you've got. After all, Jesus gave you everything he's got, because you are a child of his, and loved deeply by him. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ Most of the biographical information in here is well-documented and easy to find (though Bill Gates is pretty famous for maintaining his privacy as best he can).

² See the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeUyxjLhAxU>

³ This quote can be found in a few different places on the web.

⁴ <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/bill-gates-the-rolling-stone-interview-111915/>