

- 1) It happened a long time ago. I was just a teenager. I only did it once. At the time I was in no position to refuse. Nothing in my life had prepared me for what I was asked to do. Considering the circumstances, I thought I handled myself rather well. I have not thought about it too often over the years. Our children faced the same situation during their teen years. I see from the *North County News* that some of St. John’s high schoolers have gotten involved in this activity.
- 2) What I am talking about of course, as you probably have realized, is... the high jump. Yes, that field event which is part of track competitions from grade school through the Olympic Games. In the high jump athletes compete against one another to see how high they can jump from the ground and clear a cross bar without knocking the bar off its standards and onto the ground. There may be less than an inch of difference between the gold medal winner’s final attempt and that of the competitor who comes in second place.
- 3) When I was a freshman in high school, our PE teacher had us do the high jump as part of a unit on track and field events. I had never done it before. Thus, I did not have much of a clue as to how I should attempt this exercise. Despite my lack of experience, I was able to clear the bar at four feet, ten inches. Now, I realize that is nothing compared to Olympic records, but it was good enough for second place in my freshmen PE class.
- 4) While you may never have thought of it in these terms, the way we naturally approach our life with God is very similar to taking part in a high jump competition. The cross bar is that level of goodness we feel that we need to achieve in order to win God’s favor, to deserve His love, and to earn our entry into eternal life. We believe there are certain behaviors that we must avoid and still other types of acts that we must do in order to please God and win the right to be called one of His saved people. Whether we believe that our lives are driven by a purpose or simply a matter of aimless wandering each one of us, in our own minds, has set that cross bar of salvation at a height just high enough to be worthy of our efforts, but yet low enough that we still can clear it. We say, “Good for you, more power to you,” to those who live better than we do

and thus clear with ease the cross bar of salvation at the height we have set it. But to those who do not live up to the standard of salvation we have fixed for ourselves we say, “You need to be a better person, someone like I am.”

5) There is one major exception when it comes to likening our attempts at earning our salvation to competing in the high jump event. Instead of pushing ourselves to make the cross bar go higher and higher, we do all that we can to bring the cross bar of salvation down lower and lower to a level easy enough for us to clear. Jesus encounters this very type of thinking one day when an expert in the law challenges Him with the question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The law in which this man had his expertise was not the civil, criminal, or constitutional law that is debated in the courtrooms of our nation today. No, this man’s specialty was God’s law, the revelation of Himself to the people of Israel through the writings of Moses and the prophets in what we commonly know as the Old Testament. This man very likely was a scribe, that is, one whose job it was to make handwritten copies of these sacred scrolls. It was long before the days when moveable type, photocopiers and word processing equipment made the distribution of Holy Scripture much easier. The long hours of time he had spent both reading and writing the words of God’s special revelation made him an expert, that is, a teacher of God’s Word for the Jewish people of his day.

6) Jesus responds to this man’s question with questions of His own, “What is written in the law?” and “How do you read it?” Based upon his experience of reading and copying God’s Word the expert in the religious law quickly answers, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus congratulates him on his correct answer. “Just do this and you will live,” Jesus says.

7) This expert in God’s law knows the truth. He just can’t handle the truth. The demands of complete love for God and for neighbor that God has placed upon this man in order for him to inherit eternal life have set the cross bar of salvation at a level far too high for this expert in the law to clear. Therefore, he has one more question for Jesus in an effort to see how low that bar could go. Perhaps he could get Jesus to lower that standard to a more manageable level. “And who is my neighbor?” is a question which was debated in the Jewish religion of that day. The answer typically given then was, “only

fellow Jews are our neighbors.” By asking Jesus whom we have to love as our neighbors, we really are wondering who those people are that we don’t need to love. If we can identify some people as being outside of the love that we are to show to our neighbors, we can bring that cross bar of salvation down a little lower and thus make it easier for us to jump over and enter eternal life by our own works.

8) The story that Jesus tells in response to this last question from the expert in the law is well-known as “The Parable of the Good Samaritan.” The steep and crooked road that went down from the heights of Jerusalem to the depths of Jericho was notoriously dangerous. The curves, hills and ridges provided many hiding places for thieves who suddenly could appear, attack, and rob defenseless travelers. In Jesus’ story the bandits leave a man they had beaten lying on the roadside near death. Help soon would arrive, it would seem to Jesus’ listeners, as both a priest and then a Levite come upon the scene. These were religious men who served in God’s temple in Jerusalem. They certainly would show compassion to the injured man. But for them to come into contact with a dead body would make these men ritually unclean and disqualify them from serving in the temple for a period of time. So as not to risk such ceremonial contamination, both men steer clear of the motionless body and pass by on the other side without offering any type of assistance. These servants of a loving God could not be bothered to show God’s love to one who is in such obvious need of help.

9) Hope is fading fast in the view of Jesus’ listeners as the next person to enter the picture is a Samaritan. The Samaritans and the Jews were shirttail relatives, but they had been embroiled in a nasty family feud for a number of centuries. Those who were hearing Jesus’ story for the first time would have expected the Samaritan to be the bad guy, but instead he turns out to be the hero. He takes pity on the unknown victim. Here is one creature of God looking with compassion upon another creature of God in his time of need. The Samaritan administers first aid to the wounded man. Then he transports him to an inn where he pays, in advance, the equivalent of two day’s salary for the innkeeper to provide care for the injured man’s recovery. If the costs were to go higher, the Samaritan gentleman promises to cover the excess expense on his return trip. He does so with no thought of getting repaid, rewarded or celebrated.

10) Having finished His story, Jesus then questions the expert in the law whose own question was the occasion for this story. “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The answer, of course, is obvious to anyone who had heard Jesus’ story. Yet, the expert in the law cannot even bring himself to speak the hated word “Samaritan.” Instead, he answers, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus’ instruction to His first audience as well as for us today is, “Go and do likewise.” We learn from Jesus’ story that anyone and everyone who is in need of our assistance is the neighbor whom we are to love.

11) This brings us back to the high jump and the cross bar of our salvation. Instead of giving us an answer that lowers the height of that cross bar and makes it easier for us to earn our way into eternal life, Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan raises the level of that cross bar and shows us how difficult, even impossible, it is for us to win God’s favor and to deserve our salvation by our own efforts. Are we looking for those who may be in need of our assistance? Having come across someone we can help, are we adequate in our aid? When we do provide help for those in need, are we hoping for some recognition, reward or congratulations? Is our care for others in their need an act of love motivated by God’s love for us or do we deep down feel that we are earning points with God? If life with God depends on us not doing those things that God tells us are wrong to do and instead doing all those things that God rightly expects us to do, then the cross bar of our salvation is set at a height so high that not only can we not jump over it, we also cannot even see it because its height is so far beyond our reach and view.

12) The good news for us is this: that which is beyond our ability is the very thing which is in God’s hands. He has removed the cross bar of salvation that we have to clear by our own works. He has replaced it with the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ who has done all the work of our salvation for us. The expert in God’s law was convicted by God’s law because he saw the focus of his salvation as being upon himself. Yet standing right there before him in the person of the One he rightly called “Teacher” is where the certainty of his salvation is to be placed. We are freed from the condemnation

of God's law because the sure and certain hope of our forgiveness, new life and eternal salvation is not in who we are or in what we do, but in who Jesus is and in all that He has done for us.

13) Some think that Jesus is important for their life because He is the One who begins the journey of salvation that we then must complete by our good works. Others think that Jesus is the One who recognizes our natural goodness and then claims us as His own, thus giving us that last nudge we need to get into eternal life. But both of these views of Jesus fall far short of what He means for our lives. Jesus does much more than simply give us the boost that helps us to clear the cross bar of salvation. No, Jesus has done the full and complete job of that rescue from sin, death and the power of the devil for us. The eternal Son of God took upon Himself our human flesh and lived our life. He did so perfectly fulfilling the will of God that we reject every day of our lives. Jesus was obedient in each and every way to the law of God that we disobey in oh so many ways.

14) When it comes to clearing the cross bar of salvation by following the righteous requirements of our holy God, Jesus has made the leap that wins the championship for us. But before He could display the thrill of victory, Jesus had to suffer the agony of defeat. Jesus went to His death on the cross, suffering and dying there not in punishment for His own breaking of God's law because He had kept that law perfectly. On the contrary, Jesus died as our sacrifice, bearing in our place the guilt we had earned by our sins and enduring the death we had deserved by our disobedience.

15) By His own death on the cross Jesus has removed for us the cross bar of good works that we must clear in order to earn our own salvation. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the promise He gives us of our own new life in His name and visible life in His heavenly presence. The empty tomb of Jesus is the open door for us to enter into eternal life. Jesus has risen from the dead. The Holy Spirit uses this message to work faith in us to believe in Jesus as our Savior from sin. Only then do we see that our physical death is not God's punishment for our sins. Instead, it is God's call for us to enter into eternal life with Him.

16) The athlete who competes in the high jump event not only has to jump and clear the cross bar, that person also has to land safely. This landing would be the worst part of the exercise except for the large, cushioned pad that covers the ground on the other side of the cross bar. But if the competitor misses that padding and falls directly onto the ground, it makes for a hard landing that most likely causes pain and injury.

17) Without faith in Jesus as the Lord of our lives and our Savior from sin, being placed into the grave at the time of our physical death makes for a very hard and painful landing. It means being separated from the love, the blessings and the goodness of our God for eternity. In contrast, when we die in the Christian faith with confidence that the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has been shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins and that He has risen from the dead as the Champion over sin, death and the power of the devil for us, then our landing in the grave is soft, even softer than that of the athlete finishing off an attempt in the high jump event. Through that physical death our heavenly Father welcomes us into the eternal home that our risen and ascended Lord Jesus even now is preparing for us. This home is where we as the people of God will enjoy the full glory, majesty and love of our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is where our voices will unite with the angels in praising our God for His greatness. It is where we will be free from our sin and its effects upon our lives. It is where we will live without the threat of death hanging over us ever again.

18) When we recognize that we are holy, precious and pure in God's sight through the person and work of His Son Jesus we will see that the hurdle, the cross bar, of earning our salvation by our good works has been removed by the cross of Christ. Yet, by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the soft landing of eternal life in the presence of our God is both our present and future possession. We look to serve others in their needs not because we are trying to earn the favor of a judging God but because in Jesus we know that we already live in the love of our forgiving God and even now have His promise of salvation. It is our privilege as the forgiven and saved people of Jesus to share this love with all those around us who need us to be their neighbor. To God alone be all the glory. Amen.