

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Luke 10:25–37

Key Verses: 10:36–37

“Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise.’”

When you see someone in trouble, how do you respond? We might wonder, “How did this person get into this mess?” Or we might think, “I just don’t have time for this.” We may think our response to people’s troubles doesn’t matter. But does it? In today’s passage a tricky lawyer tests Jesus, and Jesus answers him with one of his most famous parables. It’s an unforgettable story. But what does Jesus mean? How can we really do what he’s saying? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Since 9:51, Jesus has been on his way to Jerusalem, teaching what it takes to follow him. It requires sacrifice, priority and wholehearted focus (9:57–62). It also requires training to become a kingdom laborer (10:1–25). It’s hard. But in this passage Jesus tempers these tough teachings with his compassion and mercy.

How does it start? Look at verse 25. “And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?’” He’s not the kind of lawyer we would imagine. He’s not a civil or criminal but a religious lawyer. His question seems sincere, but really it’s a “test.” How so? Among strict religious people, Jesus had already gained a reputation as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7:34). So probably this religious lawyer thinks Jesus will give some compromising answer. How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 26. “He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How do you read it?’” What a surprise! The man probably didn’t imagine Jesus would ask his opinion. He’s eager to give it and speaks up immediately. Look at verse 27. “And he answered, ‘You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself’” (cf. Dt6:5; Lev19:18). He rattles off the right answer like a rapid-fire machine gun. It’s the perfect answer: A+. His head knowledge is impeccable.

How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 28. “And he said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.’” Jesus doesn’t relax God’s laws; he wants

the man to consider not how well he *knows* it, but how well he *practices* it. If any of us could keep God's law perfectly, we could inherit eternal life with our efforts. But nobody can. We know what's right, but often we just don't do it. In fact, our sin makes us powerless. Head knowledge can't help. It's why we need Jesus.

Putting Jesus to the test, the man isn't really trying to learn. But he knows Jesus is right. So how does he respond? Look at verse 29. "But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" It's his comeback, to somehow win the debate. Maybe he's insinuating that Jesus has been hanging out with the wrong kind of "neighbors." In asking to define who a "neighbor" is, he's trying to limit his love to certain people only, the "good kind." In other words, he's looking for some loophole. Looking for loopholes to justify our sin is bad enough. But playing around with God's word to justify ourselves may be the worst sin of all.

In reply Jesus tells this sophisticated man a parable from ordinary life. Look at verse 30. "Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.'" Though it's a parable, this was a real road. It went from up high in the Jerusalem-area mountains down into the valley of the Jordan River. It was 17 miles long, with twists and turns, and caves along the way. So this road was famously dangerous. The traveler in the parable not only got robbed, but also stripped, beaten, and left nearly dead. If left alone, he would likely bleed to death.

Next, the story gets a bit uncomfortable. Look at verse 31. "Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side." We might wonder, why? Maybe this priest was too busy? But he was leaving Jerusalem, so he wasn't needed at the temple. Maybe he was scared that the robbers were still nearby? Whatever the reason, he carefully avoids the situation, going to the opposite side. Look at verse 32. "So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." Levites assisted the priests. But since he too was leaving Jerusalem, there was no hurry to get to his duties. He too did nothing. These two men knew the Law of God. They recited daily the same words this lawyer had quoted to Jesus. But what they knew and recited didn't affect what they did in the real world. They were like escape artists.

Then, the parable turns shocking. Look at verse 33. "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion." Samaritans were so despised by Jews. But Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of the story. In our time he's like the guy who never goes to church—pretty sketchy. But he's so much better than the priest and Levite (cf. Ro2:14:15a)! He's not afraid to get involved.

Instead of cleverly avoiding, he goes straight to where the man was, to check on him. And when he sees him, it says he has “compassion.”

This Greek word literally means “to be moved in one’s intestines.” It’s a visceral reaction to another person’s suffering. It’s an important word in the Bible. Earlier, it’s used for Jesus when he saw a widow grieving for her only son who had just died (7:13). Later, Jesus uses it in his parable of the prodigal son, when his father sees him coming home starving, dirty and totally humiliated (15:20). In other places in the Bible, the Greek word is translated as “tender” (Lk1:78), “affection” (2Co6:12; 7:15; Php1:8), or “heart” (Col3:12; Phm1:7,12,20; 1Jn3:17). Matthew, the former tax collector who used to squeeze people to get money out, uses this word the most to describe our Lord Jesus (Mt9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34). In our common parlance, it’s “compassion that cares so much, it hurts.”

Jesus describes it further. Let’s review verses 34–35. Why does Jesus go into so much detail here? This is not a complex discussion of the intricacies of God’s word; he’s describing real-life compassion, in vivid action. The Samaritan stops the man’s bleeding by binding up his wounds, maybe ripping up his own clothes as bandages. He disinfects and soothes them with the wine and oil he happens to have on him. He puts this unconscious man on his own animal and walks him to an inn. He doesn’t just drop him off and get out of there; he stays overnight to take care of him. And if that isn’t enough, he makes sure the owner of the inn will take care of him, too, until he can get back to check on him. He pays for everything, because the man’s been robbed. He’s not doing just the bare minimum; he’s thorough. He’s all in. Though this wounded man is a total stranger, he stops everything for him and truly loves him as he loves himself. It’s stunning.

This moving parable shows us what the real test is. It’s not how we play with words to win arguments, but how we respond to real people who are suffering. The Samaritan exemplifies what true love is. It’s not just emotional. It’s taking a risk to get involved. It’s having the courage to touch others’ wounds. It’s taking the time to care. It involves spending our own money. Basically, it’s unselfish. 1 John 3:17–18 says, “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” Have we received God’s love in Jesus, but find ourselves always trying to keep things safe? Are we knowing and saying all the right things, but avoiding doing anything for those in need? Jesus’ parable confronts us with a fundamental question: Do we even care? We may hear about, or even witness firsthand, people’s sufferings, but remain unmoved and do nothing. Why? Over time, we become numb. We develop what’s called “compassion fatigue.” It happens to the people who are always serving others.

How can we keep on caring? Paul wrote in Philippians 2:1, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy...” These words show us the source of caring. It’s encouragement in Christ, being comforted by his love, and participating in the Spirit. Without Christ, his love, and the Spirit within us, we can’t care. Then there’s that word “affection.” In Greek it’s the same word for “compassion” in verse 33. So much giving, plus *affection*? No matter how tired we are, if we come to Christ and receive his love and his Spirit, his compassion—his affection—comes alive in us, over and over again.

There’s one final point here. The parable isn’t just about reacting to extreme cases. Often, people’s pain isn’t so dramatic or obvious, but that doesn’t make it any less real. Somebody may be inwardly hurting, but we hardly notice. Their souls may be wounded, bleeding and confused. We expect them to be normal, to toughen up, to move on. But Jesus calls us to learn his compassion. Recently we thought about the pandemic of estrangement in American families that leaves people so wounded and lonely. We may know about this, but do we even care? To show that we do, we have to stop and really listen. It’s been called “active listening.” It’s a practical way to show people Christ’s compassion. To really do it, we can’t be worrying about what I’m supposed to say, or hear only what I want to hear, or quickly start giving advice. First, we do our best to comprehend. Then, we seek to retain what the person just said. Finally, we summarize it back to them. Such careful, active listening shows we actually care. And why take the time just to listen and care? Again, it’s about Jesus’ compassion. It’s because Jesus cares.

Finally, after finishing the parable, Jesus addresses the lawyer directly. Look at verse 36. “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” Jesus is so interesting. The man had asked, “And *who* is my neighbor?” (29b) But Jesus asks, “Who proved to *be* a neighbor?” [emphasis added] Jesus reversed what we should be thinking about. Instead of thinking who is worthy of my care, I should be thinking what kind of person I am. Am I *being* a real neighbor, a real *friend* to the people around me?

How does the man respond? Look at verse 37a. “He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’” In his pride he couldn’t even bring himself to say “the Samaritan.” But he got the point. Look at verse 37b. “And Jesus said, ‘You go, and do likewise.’” It all ends with this powerful word: “mercy.” Luke has been known as the Gospel of Mercy. He repeats the word “mercy” 13 times. In 6:35–36 Jesus teaches, “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

Today we learned that Jesus wants his disciples to learn his mercy. He's telling each of us, "You go, and do likewise." May God help us get close to Jesus, so he can fill us with his compassion and mercy. May we learn practically how to care for hurting and wounded people, as Jesus cares. May God help us not just know about his love and mercy, but get active in practicing them.