

The Parable Of The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

I wonder if you have ever found yourself in a situation where someone asks you a question that catches you off guard? For me, I find that if someone asks me my opinion on a subject, and I don't have a pre decided and defined idea, I often begin to offer some kind of off the cuff remark. And it's not until afterwards that I wonder if I had said what I really thought. It can be challenging sometimes to attempt to give an answer when sometimes a simple "I don't know" would actually be the best response, or at least "Can I think about it and get back to you?"

Often as a way of protecting our pride, we want to offer something, anything, even if it's not what we really think, just so long as we appear to have an opinion.

We're looking today at the parable of the good samaritan. It's such a well known story that it can be quite a challenge sometimes to let it speak for itself. It's often used to illustrate the need to take care of the poor and outcast, as well as the problems of prejudice.

We often think of this parable when we walk past people and feel a pang of guilt that we haven't done anything to help. But this is not about random acts of kindness.

But if we are to get at all close to understanding what Jesus' true intentions were by teaching this story, we are going to have to look a bit deeper, and to do that we need to pay attention to the circumstances in which the story is being told.

"On one occasion an expert of the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

Here is one of those moments I was just talking about. A well educated lawyer asks Jesus a question to test him, to see what his response will be. He's maybe hoping for an off the cuff response that can be used against Jesus later on.

The question the lawyer asks is one that the experts in the law were often talking about; “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Good question. We do however need to clear up the matter of what this would have meant to a first century Jew. “Eternal life” isn’t about living for eternity after we die, it’s about how we live in harmony with God *right now*?

The religious leaders of the time had come up with 613 additions to the law in their attempts to live as holy as possible. doing everything in their power to live as harmoniously with God as they could.

And so, this lawyer’s question is very much coming from that perspective - what do I **do**?

As usual, Jesus responds to the question with another question: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?”

When someone seems to be trying to catch you out, often the best way to deal with them is to find out what their angle is. By responding to a difficult question with “Why do you ask?” it gives us better insight into how to reply.

But for Jesus, this isn’t difficult question. In fact, the lawyer knows it isn’t a difficult question. What’s happening here is Jesus is being forced to make a statement that will put him at odds with the varying theological views of the time. Some things never change.

The lawyer’s response is quick, as if delivered in parrot fashion: “Oh, I know this one! It’s ‘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 neighbour as yourself.’”

And Jesus responds by saying “You have answered correctly.” He was right. This is the first commandment, and all others hang on this. “Do this,” he says to the lawyer, “and you will live.”

That could have been a satisfactory answer. But let’s just pause for a moment. What exactly is Jesus up to here? Because if you look more closely at that first commandment, it’s pretty much an impossible task.

Love God with ALL your heart, soul, strength, and mind? How do we even begin to do that? And what happens if we fail? And doesn't most of what Jesus teach seem to speak of grace and mercy?

It's obvious that it's not possible to do this, and that's why Jesus is being asked the question.

And so, this lawyer doesn't seem satisfied with what he is given. On the one hand, he actually seems kind of ok with the 'doing' part. After all, as a strict religious Jew he's used to putting all kinds of systems in place to make sure he is being as zealous as possible.

The problem he has is in identifying who these words are talking about. Here in Luke's gospel we're told that "he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus 'and who is my neighbour?'"

Now, at this time, a neighbour was fairly easily defined. If you referred to someone as your neighbour, you were talking about someone from your own tribe, or country. You would certainly not be referring to non-jewish pagans or outsiders.

And so, to answer this question, "who is my neighbour", Jesus tells a story.

Let's just pause for a moment. Let's recognise that this story is so familiar to so many of us, and be ready and open for what God wants us to learn through it today.

So, a man is travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he happens to be attacked by robbers. He is beaten, stripped of his clothes, and left for dead.

The fact that this man has had his clothes stolen could be read simply as a way of shaming him, but there is a deeper meaning here. Without his clothes, this man becomes unidentifiable.

He could be rich, poor, of high status, or of low status, he could be royalty, he could be a farmer... without his clothes to give some kind of indication of who he might be, it's impossible to make a judgement about him.

Now, let's be honest, we shouldn't be judging people based on their appearance anyway, but the point here is that this guy could be anybody.

So he's lying there left for dead on the road, and a priest comes along. Now the story isn't clear if the priest is going to Jerusalem to the temple, or just coming away, but for sake of argument let's assume he's just come off duty from the temple. He's most likely on a horse. And in Jesus' story we are told that when he sees the man, he passes by on the other side.

Now, from a Jewish law perspective, what else could he do? He was making a valid decision based on his attempts to live in harmony with God! If he touches this man, he will become unclean. He'll have to head back to the temple to go through all the rituals necessary to become right with God.

He's leaving someone in their own state of shame to avoid being shamed himself. I know when we read this we all too easily think "well, the shame is on him for not helping", but for the priest character in this parable he was doing the right thing as far as he knew.

His decision to walk past was based on the law, but it wasn't based on loving his neighbour as himself, because he didn't even know who he was. He couldn't tell, because his clothes had been taken.

Ultimately the thought process going on here is something along the lines of "is this person worth the shame of being made unclean?"

Next, a Levite comes along. Jesus' words are "when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side."

It's often very hard to do something when it goes against the status quo, isn't it. It's basic human psychology that in general, we want to do what everyone else does. This Levite is no different.

The priest that just went past was this Levite's boss. Let's assume that he knew that the priest had gone ahead of him, which means that the inaction of the priest was made apparent in the presence of this man in need.

Is that perhaps a part of why we feel so uncomfortable when we see so much need around us? It's not just that we know we could be doing something to help, but the continued existence of need and suffering is ongoing evidence of our inability as humans to reach out to each other to offer any kind of relief.

But I digress, as I said before, this isn't about feeling guilty about the lack of random acts of kindness in our lives, although it would be good for us to at least consider the issue.

Here's how I think this part of the story goes. In Jesus' own words "he came to the place and saw him." It's as if he almost walks on top of him, but stops himself just in time, like he's been horrified by a dead animal he's just stumbled across.

The Levite is faced with a decision to make. Firstly he needs to decide in the same way the priest decided - how is helping this man in need going to affect my own purity? But secondly he has to consider the fact that the priest went past before him, as his superior, and clearly just walked past. His leader has set a standard.

And more than that, if he does choose to stop and help, he will implicitly show up the priest for his inaction, even if it was out of considered religious motives.

So what can he do? He has no choice but to continue on his way.

Next in Jesus' story, he throws a curveball. Consider the expectations of this lawyer hearing the story for the first time. Priest, yes, fine. Levite, yes, someone further down the chain, fine. Who's next, then, an average Jewish layperson, we might suppose.

But no, next to come along the path is a Samaritan.

Very quickly, because I don't want to assume we all know the meanings and implications in this story, at the time this was being told, Samaritans were not well liked.

It's hard to put it into modern terms these days, especially as we have worked hard as a society to deal with prejudice and racism, but Samaritans were basically half-breeds.

They were caught up in whole argument about where and how they could and should worship. Jews would make extra effort to walk all the way around where they lived to avoid coming into contact with them.

So at this point in the story, Jesus is being religiously and politically offensive. A Samaritan as a character in a story being used for teaching a positive point is off the scale in terms of acceptability.

But that's what Jesus does. And more than that, this Samaritan "took pity on him." The greek for pity here is the fantastic word "SPLANGH NIDZOMAI" - it means to be moved as to one's bowels. It's compassion that rises up from deep within, and moves you to action.

The Samaritan extends his hand to this person in need, who could be anyone remember, because his clothes have been taken. He is willing to become unclean in order to bring this man healing and restoration. He bandages the wounds, he gets dirty, and he takes the man to an inn to be taken care of, where he says he will return to pay any excess that is owed.

The Samaritan rescues the man in need, he leaves him taken care of, and he promises to return. This is the gospel of Christ right here!

And so, as Jesus concludes his story, he asks the lawyer a question: "which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man?"

The lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan". Instead he replies, "the one who had mercy on him."

What Jesus does by using this story is offer a new definition of who we understand to be our neighbour. We don't get to define who our neighbours are, and using the example that Jesus offers in this parable, our neighbours (who we are to love as ourselves) include our enemies.

Now you might be thinking, “well, I don’t have any enemies.” But consider this: what sort of place would you be least likely to be comfortable in? What types of people do you find, despite your best intentions, cause all sorts of judgements to bubble up inside you?

Our lives, as followers of Christ, will make a difference in this world by upsetting and offending others *through grace displayed*.

When the lawyer identified the Samaritan as the one who was a true neighbour, Jesus tells him to “Go, and do likewise.”

The gospel of grace is always counter intuitive. Where this lawyer wanted to know what to do, the answer he ultimately got was that while the first commandment is of fundamental importance, the outworking of it is frankly impossible, and so we show our commitment to God through taking care of those around us no matter who they are.

We will need to constantly ask ourselves the question “is it worth helping this person even if it hurts me?”

As we were clearing some things out recently, we uncovered a piece of paper with some writing on it. It had been written by my grandmother, Milly, who many of you will have known, and it told the story of an encounter she had once had. As I read it, I couldn’t help but think that it could be good for us to hear today:

“After an absence of nearly a decade he stood like a prodigal son on the doorstep of our home of 3 1/2 years were told to forgive and forget.

The first part is easier.

My mind raced with one big question is this friend had deceived but not harmed us when we last had contact. As I was entertaining an elderly neighbour I invited him in, and soon it became apparent that this man was searching, as he brought up the subject of religion.

It is always a shock when someone declares that he doesn't believe in God that Jesus was just a man and the Bible a load of rubbish. That was fact in his mind what wasn't so easily dismissed was soon apparent.

On his retirement he had settled far away between two elderly doctors. One regularly attended church and recently a faith healer there asked people with problems to come forward, but the doctor who had been wall-eyed since birth didn't move. However the healer encouraged those who prefer to remain anonymous to just shut their eyes and concentrate.

After the service this doctor returned in a somewhat confused state to his car. His eyes were now straight, and he hadn't realised it. Our friend however who had spent a lifetime dealing with criminals and classifying facts into either accidents or coincidences was completely flabbergasted.

Here was something intangible, and for the first time he began to wonder if something was eluding his intellect. He was sufficiently disturbed to admit inviting indoors some Jehovah's Witnesses who came calling.

Now I realised the reason for this belated visit, as his father had been a Christian. As it happened, my bible was on the settee beside me, and I sent up a silent prayer for help.

All I could say was that some people believe in a supreme being that this wasn't necessarily God.

I also pointed out that the Faith healers who don't charge are usually the genuine ones, there was a spirit world, but not all spirits were good ones.

The Bible tells us 'freely you have received freely give'.

Hebrews 11 six it states that 'without faith it is impossible to please him, for who ever would draw near to him must believe that he exists'.

Not finding all his answers, this man soon left after a cup of tea without offering any address.

Looking back I can well imagine that his quest will go on for quite some time. All I can do is pray that he will finally find his answers and become a Christian believer. The longer the struggle the more deeply it may penetrate. God must have a wonderful sense of humour as he understands each one of us perfectly. He also knows that we can unlock his mighty power by prayer, but in this case I must accept that we may not know the end result."

I wonder what excuses we are carrying with us today. Excuses like that lawyer, the priest, and the levite, in the name of religion or otherwise, that prevent us from being a neighbour who offers grace and mercy?

I wonder what it would look like, if we could drop all the religious paraphernalia and jargon and rules that often we have made up ourselves, and be willing to show grace and mercy at the risk of others judging us.

Very often I find that when people say “that’s not very Christian” I’m not sure that’s what they mean to say at all. If we are to follow Christ, we are always led to the cross, which is a place of suffering and shame, but it’s also a place of goodness, grace, restoration, and transformation.

Amen.

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