

And Handful of Parables for a Lifetime of Blessing:

2. Who is My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

Introduction – The Journey Home – Pastor Devin Hebeisen

Text – Luke 10:25-37 (With commentary)

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (vs. 25-26)

The lawyer in this passage would be quite different than the corporate and trial lawyers in our culture. In Jesus’ day, they were experts in the Jewish law. In one sense, they would be equivalent to our Christian theologians who teach in our universities and seminaries. And like many in academia, I suspect the lawyer thought it would be great sport to trip up Jesus, who had become quite popular, in an intellectual debate. Luke makes it very clear that his motives for questioning Jesus were not good.

Jesus’ reply, however, was brilliant. He turned the question back to the lawyer and, in so doing, affirmed the authority of the Jewish law. Jesus didn’t come to do away with the Law, but rather to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17) Most likely, knowing the false motives of the question, he turned it back on the lawyer.

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.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”(vs. 27-28)

Of course, the lawyer knew his stuff. The first and greatest commandment that he quoted is found in Deuteronomy 6:6 and the second command is from Leviticus 19:8. This is not the only time this question and answer are raised in the gospels. Certainly, every devout Jew understood his duty in love to both God and men. Jesus’ reply is quick and short and should have put an end to the debate.

But he, [the lawyer], desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (vs. 29)

With his arrogant question, the lawyer showed his true colors. And we all label him as the “bad guy” as we boo and hiss at his self-righteousness. Not so fast. Could we not be self-righteous as well? “We’re not like him – we’re not self-righteous!” See the irony? Perhaps we aren’t self-righteous. Nevertheless, humble people will keep an open mind and heart to hear what Jesus is about to say.

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. (vs. 30)

All parables are stories that people would readily understand. Jerusalem is located on one of the higher elevations of Israel. The road down to Jericho was frequently used by merchants as an important trade route. It was also a main route to Galilee for the Jews in order to avoid Samaria. But it was steep and treacherous. It would wind through the Judean wilderness, passing by many large rocks which were a perfect place for robbers and other criminals to stake out their victims. The crime in the parable was not unusual. In fact, it probably happened many times.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. (vs. 31-32)

Jesus’ parable takes a provocative turn at this point. The Old Testament requires God’s people to take care of the less fortunate. Of all people – a priest, whose job it was to present sacrifices to God in the Temple and a Levite, who was to assist in all worship matters at the Temple – would have been regarded as some of the most religious and devout people at that time. They, of all people should have known God’s command for justice and mercy before they supposed to approach Him worship.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,

I will not look upon them.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:22-24

Touching a dead body would have defiled the priest and Levite so that they would have needed to go through a cleansing ritual. Seeing what they thought was a corpse, they didn't want to be bothered with all the hassle. Surely someone else who didn't have the purity requirements that they had would come along and help the victim. Their aversion to the man is certainly understandable!

...Or so we think. Do we do the same thing? We're too busy to get involved. I can't help this person. I've got to get to church! It's entirely too messy. The person's too far gone for me to help anyway. Somebody else who doesn't have my issues will probably come along. I think this parable catches us all and asks tough questions we can't avoid.

An Unsuspected Hero

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. (vs. 33)

Many of Jesus' parables are shocking. The people of his day would not have expected a Samaritan to be the hero of the parable. They were "half-breeds" – half Jewish and half Gentile. They mixed their ancient Jewish religious faith with pagan practices. They were morally repulsive. How would many conservative Christians today feel if a practicing homosexual was made out to be the hero of the story? Don't get me wrong, here. I know that the Bible condemns homosexual behavior. I will stand stubbornly against the radical homosexual social agenda. I

will speak out and vigorously defend marriage as between a man and a woman. But most likely, the deep uneasiness that we would feel is exactly what Jesus' hearers felt when they heard about a "Good" Samaritan. In their mind, there was no such thing. Jesus' casting of a Samaritan in his parable would further challenge the self-righteousness of his audience.

The Samaritan's Care

He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil [for soothing] and wine [for disinfectant]. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' (vs. 34-35)

The kind of neighbor that God calls us to be to others will cost us. The Samaritan's care was over and above what might be expected. He didn't call 911 for someone else to care for the victim. He most likely had his own schedule, but he set it aside to help the battered stranger. He got involved in the mess. He bandaged up his wounds and he didn't even have latex gloves. He came in contact with the man's blood and sweat as he picked him up and put him on his donkey. Most likely, some of the load that was previously on the donkey he had to carry now on his own back. The Samaritan was truly a good man!

The Master's Answer

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." (vs. 37)

Even with this convicting story, the lawyer still self-righteousness. He couldn't bring himself to say the word "Samaritan" but rather said, "the one who showed him mercy." He had set out to catch Jesus in a trap but, instead, Jesus revealed the lawyer's lack of compassion and his self-righteousness – the same self-righteousness that was condemned in the parable. Jesus didn't lessen the shock and conviction of the story by elaborating more. He simply let the parable speak for itself and said, "You go, and do likewise."

“...go, and do likewise.” Jesus was the master teacher. The parable and his words still speak powerfully today.

Jesus’ Simple Words

We must take the whole of biblical revelation together. We can never do enough good works to merit eternal life. “For by grace are you saved through faith, not of good works.” (Eph. 2:8) When Jesus affirmed the two greatest commandments he restated a standard that no one could meet. Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. Nevertheless, those who have been saved and known the free grace of God will do good works. With this parable Jesus makes it very clear that his followers are to be characterized by the mercy that they show to those who are in need.

Of course, there are some folks who make the rounds and work the system, living off the handouts of good people while refusing to work themselves. Scripture clearly teaches, “If a man is not willing to work, let him not eat.” (II Thess. 3:10) We’ve been burned by some of those folks and it will probably happen again in the future. We try to be discerning, but we leave them in God’s hand. There are people, however, who, like the man on the Jericho road, have run into a crisis not of their own making. We will continue to help those people – financially, to pray with them, and to share the gospel with them. Jesus, through this parable and elsewhere calls us to help them in practical ways. We can’t just share the gospel, pray with them and send them on their way. James, Jesus’ half-brother, surely understood true faith and the gospel in action when he wrote: “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:15-17) True faith demands action; not just words.

“You go, and do likewise.”

Jesus’ directive to the lawyer applies to all who would call themselves his disciples. We are to be a neighbor to those we encounter in our life who are in need. This has always been God’s expectation for his people. As far back as the Old Testament, God reproved his people for their hard hearts against other people: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” (Hosea 6:6) Your neighbor may

that kid who is bullied at school. Or she might be the co-worker in a great life-crisis with whom you have nothing in common and you really don't like. Or he might be the new person in town or at church that doesn't have a good friend. Or, like the parable, it may be someone unknown to you that you encounter in the course of your daily life.

There are many "good Samaritans" among us. Someone like Peggy Cruse who has written encouraging notes to probably half the people in this church. Or Pastor Knute who is always ready to help someone in need whether they are in the church or in the community. Or the many in our fellowship – some well-off – many who are not - who quietly, without fanfare or reciprocation, give a financial gift when a need arises.

All around us, people are in great need if we will but just open our eyes. It will be inconvenient. You're busy; I know. Jesus tells us, "go and do likewise." It's messy as you get involved in their crisis. You've got messes of your own; I know. Jesus tells us, "go and do likewise." It may be expensive. You've got expenses of your own; I know. Jesus tells us, "go and do likewise."

In this parable, Jesus' depiction of the priest and the Levite as uncaring self-righteous people should very disturbing for people of faith. Clearly, Jesus condemns their hard hearts. I don't believe we are like that, but it is very easy for us, in our spiritual pursuits, to ignore the hurt of people outside of our doors. Hymn-writer Fred Pratt Green wrote a text (included in our hymnal at #542) that opens our eyes to the needs all around us.

When the church of Jesus shuts its outer door,
lest the roar of traffic drown the voice of prayer,
may our prayers, Lord, make us ten times more aware
that the world we banish is our Christian care.

If our hearts are lifted where devotion soars
high above this hungry, suffering world of ours,
lest our hymns should drug us to forget its needs,

forge our Christian worship into Christian deeds.

(Unison)

Lest the gifts we offer—money, talents, time—
serve to salve our conscience, to our secret shame,
Lord, reprove, inspire us by the way you give;
teach us, risen Savior, how true Christians live.

Prayer

(Review your last week...did I “pass by” on “the other side of the road” when someone needed help?)