

The Good Samaritan

January 29, 2017

Luke 10:25-37

We come this morning to one of the most common, most familiar of parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In fact, that term has crept into our language. We have Good Samaritan laws, Good Samaritan funds, we know the term. It refers to people who happen upon a crisis situation and lend a hand. In a very real sense, this is a good thing: we as a society have recognized the point of a parable and have chosen to live by it. That is a good thing...I just wish we all FULLY understood the parable and chose to live by it. Our society would be different, we would be different, our devotional and spiritual lives would be different. Indeed, the parable of the Good Samaritan conveys important kingdom truths that we all would do well to learn, process, and apply. Yes, it is that important.

As we read through this parable, I ask you to pay attention to the setting at the beginning and the response at the end. This is perhaps the clearest example of how this whole process of study we have been using works. The setting is clear and important, the parable takes a twist on the precise question asked of Jesus, and the response shows why Jesus used a parable to make His point. Follow along as I read the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. READ.

Main point: A neighbor is something you ARE, not something you HAVE.

As ought to be abundantly clear at the outset, the intent of the man asking the question of Jesus was to define a lower limit to the expectations of God. "What is the minimum passing score on the exam?" And the answer Jesus gives turns the whole issue on the head. In essence, if you ask that question, you clearly do not understand who I am and what my tests are like. So, let's get going on the setting, and then the parable, and then the response. As we do, I hope you'll identify that your natural tendencies are precisely like the man questioning Jesus. In other words, just as this was a hard hitting encounter for him, so it is designed to be hard hitting for you.

I. Setting: people naturally want to know the minimum standard for living a life pleasing to God. vv.25-29

We all want to know if we have met the standard, and we all hope the standard is just below where we are at. Right? That is the setting. In other words, the man's question sounds good and important, but it also reveals the man's heart.

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The text says this man is an expert in the law, and that the question was intended to "test" Jesus. While this doesn't automatically mean the man was ill intended, it does mean he perceived himself as the expert and Jesus the One he was examining. In other words, though he used the title, "Teacher", it is clear he is the one who ought to be considered to be the teacher. Most likely the question to Jesus was designed to see if Jesus was teaching orthodoxy or heresy. If it was orthodoxy, then he was no threat and would embrace him as an expert in the law. If it was heresy, he could condemn Jesus with justification.

So, the question is the standard for eternal blessing from God. It might be shaded here with "what must I do?" but I don't necessarily think that. I see it as what is Jesus' understanding of the Jewish faith? Is He orthodox? Does He believe what the law teaches?

²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

Jesus turns it around, becoming the one asking the questions? He simply turns the man back to the Law. But then He adds, "How do you read it?" meaning He invited the man to give His understanding of the Law. Don't just quote the verse, but tell me what you think it means. So, His answer is to affirm the Law. So far, so good.

²⁷ He answered: " '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.'"

There you have it, the first and greatest commandment from Deuteronomy 6. This is the Law. This is the standard. He actually gives the second part with it, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which will become the issue of the parable. But let’s not gloss over the first part. If this is the standard, if this is what is required of man to “do” in order to inherit eternal life, then how confident ought we be about eternal life? It doesn’t just say “Love the Lord your God.” It doesn’t just say, “Love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, strength, and mind.” It says, “Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, and with ALL your soul, and with ALL your strength, and with ALL your mind!” In other words, Love this specific God with all of everything you have, with all of your being.

Let me ask you, is there anyone here who cares to assert that you have met that standard? How much does it take to disqualify you from “all?” So, if the man had an accurate view of himself, his follow-up question ought to have been, “Okay, so what kind of hope is there for people like me who have failed?” That is what he should have asked, “Is there any other way?” That would have taken this whole encounter in a totally different direction.

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

Jesus, in the role of teacher, grades his paper. Correct answer, smiley face, words of affirmation. If you do this, you will meet the standard. Notice He did not say, “Since you affirm this you are in.” Affirming the truth is not the same as doing the truth. “If you DO this you will live.” In other words, you have to live your life that way, not just affirm the truth. Can you see how this fits into the parable? As is so often true, Jesus’ words give answers before the questions come up, kind of like a similar teaching in Luke 20, “Why do you call me good, no one is good except God?” That becomes the answer to issue yet to be exposed. It is the same here, “Do this and you will live.” That is the answer. It ought to have stopped right there with the expert asking Jesus what to do if you’ve failed the test. But alas, he did not.

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

The man has fallen into the trap. The text makes sure we understand the nature of the question. He was wanting to justify, or declare himself acceptable. He wanted to make sure the bar was set just below where he was, ensuring that he had reached the standard. Notice he is the expert, the highest there was, and now he is simply trying to make sure he has reached the minimum, a barely passing score. Does that make sense? He is the professor, the one with the PhD, and he is asking Jesus what the standard is for simply passing the test. You have to love it!

And the question he poses is, “let’s define the word, ‘neighbor.’ ” If we can define it in a certain way, I think I can squeak through. If “neighbor” is limited to only those who actually reside within two houses of mine, I might be okay. And they have to have lived there for more than 2 years, and they have to have introduced themselves to me, and they have to have actually asked me for something, and they have to have asked for something I was able to give, and it had to be on a day when I was free. You get the point. The question, “Who is my neighbor?” is a loaded question. It is a question designed to limit responsibility, not define it.

Okay, this is the setting. An expert in the law is seeking to limit his responsibility in fulfilling the Law’s requirement that he “love His neighbor as himself.” Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

II. Parable: The test of neighborly love is seen in how you treat someone who needs you. vv. 30-35

How you handle a situation, any situation of a person in need will reveal your heart, your character. Or, said another way, to love someone, you WILL have to get your hands dirty.

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

The parable starts with a tragedy, a victim of a crime. The man is simply called “a man.” Since a later man is identified as a Samaritan, and others by their tribal identity, it is safe to assume that the man was a Jew. So, he is a generic Jewish

person simply living life. He is a traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho, about 15 miles or so. Along the way, bad guys robbed him, stripped him, beat him, and left him to die. I like the wording, “half dead.” Which half? Like “slightly pregnant?”

So there has been a crime, and a victim in rough shape.

³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

The first person who passes by the man is a priest, one who is in charge of all things spiritual. By the wording we also assume he is coming from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is going down. Jerusalem is always at the top. You go up to Jerusalem, and down away from it. This is important for Jewish law reasons. If he is coming down from Jerusalem, that means his priestly duties were completed, meaning he was free to help. It would be like saying coming home from work, rather than “on the way to work.” He was coming from work.

He encounters the man and goes out of his way to go around him. He moves to the other side of the road. Why? Is he giving space as we might do for emergency vehicles on the highway? No. He is going to the other side to avoid coming into contact with him. He is avoiding touching a dead man, or blood. He is going out of his way to avoid contacting the situation. And he probably feels justified in doing so. He probably thinks he is honoring his God by keeping himself pure. He probably thinks this qualifies with loving the Lord his God with ALL his heart and with ALL his soul and with ALL his strength and with ALL his mind. Right? Make sense to you? He was “keeping himself pure.”

³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

The Levites would have been the larger group, the tribe from which the priests were taken. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. And even though they were not the priests, they still were in charge of other duties in the temple. The Levites maintained and cleaned the temple. I think of them here as the “priest wanna be’s”. But the result was the same. This second class of holy person also went out of his way to avoid contact with the man.

³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

The third person to pass by was a Samaritan. We have come to know the Samaritans. They were the outcasts. The Jews would go WAY out of their way from northern Israel to Jerusalem to avoid going through the land of the Samaritans. They were hated by the Jews. And they did not particularly love the Jews either. Pause: to call this the parable of the GOOD Samaritan to a Jew would be like being from Wisconsin and having a parable called the GOOD Vikings fan. It would grate. There could not be a GOOD such person. They don't exist. Right? Resume.

When this person who was despised by Jews and perhaps despised Jews himself came upon the man, he did not avoid, he came toward. He assessed and took pity. His heart was soft, loving toward the afflicted.

³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

He personally took what he had and used them for the man. He personally tended to the wounds, walking so the man could ride, and paid two days wages for a place to stay for the man. It cost him to help. And he even left open the possibility of paying an even greater cost should the need arise. He told the innkeeper to bill him for any expenses.

Again pause: this week has been particularly stressful at work. And several times, I have been reminded of a principle which I have pondered in recent weeks: ministry is easy if you keep people at arm's length. Ministry is hard if you draw them close. It is messy, it is dirty, it costs. If you keep people out here, it is easy. "That's not my problem!" "Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed." But if you really want to help, you have to get close, get messy. It will cost you. Resume.

Okay, that is the parable. We see the application of the parable to the setting in the following verses.

III. Application: Fulfilling the requirement to love your neighbor is a measurement of your heart, not your neighbor's proximity. v.36-37

That sounds awkward, but the point I am making is that the standard of God is seen in you, your heart, your actions rather than some arbitrary line as to when someone qualifies as your neighbor or not. In other words, if you need to ask for the defining line, you don't understand the issue. A neighbor is something you are, not something you have.

³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

Jesus finishes the parable and then turns the question back on the questioner. Notice the direction of the question. It is not, does this particular victim meet the qualification as neighbor? Rather, it is, which one of the passers by was his neighbor? The issue is not the other person, but yourself. It is not, "Was this man my neighbor?" but rather, "Was I a neighbor to this man?" A neighbor is something you are, not something you have. In other words, everyone you meet is your neighbor. The only question is whether you will be neighborly or not. "What kind of neighbor am I?" That is the true question, not "Who is my neighbor?"

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Notice the man did not identify him as the Samaritan. He couldn't utter the words, the Samaritan did what is right. Instead, he is simply the one who showed mercy. He is correct, but it seems hard for him to admit it. The one who actually did it was it. He was the neighbor.

Then Jesus repeats the thought of v. 28. Do this and you will live. Do as this guy did, this Good Samaritan. If you live your life this way, you will inherit eternal life. And just like before, this ought to be followed by, "Is there a plan B?" "What about me? I have failed at that."

So, what do we do with this? First of all, we must see the larger issue of the purpose of the Law. It is meant to convict all of us. None of us measures up, no not one. No one loves the LORD his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his strength, and with all his mind. No one loves his neighbor as himself, when understood by God's standards. And in fact, if you find yourself asking the questions about definitions of terms and minimum scores on the exam, you have failed already. You have missed the point. All is all. Loving your neighbor "as yourself" does not lower the bar. As Paul points out in Ephesians 5, we all love ourselves. Even when we loathe aspects of our lives, we love the ideals we wish we were. So, loving your neighbor as yourself is a standard no one will reach and inherit eternal life. Right? Thank you Jesus for plan B!

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will never seek to justify ourselves by our own good actions.
- 2) We will see the standards of God as condemning us all.
- 3) We will cling to Jesus, the One who did what we could never do.
- 4) We will commit to living out our faith. (Faith-filled action, not good works to get God's attention.)
- 5) We will see anyone God puts in our path as our neighbor, and we will be neighborly to him.