

The Good Samaritan: Part 1  
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Every now and then we have moments in life where we are stripped bare of every excuse, of every rationale, and left totally exposed as the broken, sinful selves that we are. Let me tell you about one of those times for me from Junior high (so, Junior highers, here's a "don't be like your pastor" story). I had an English teacher who assigned a lot of poems, creative writings, and even jokes or puns. I usually got good grades on my assignments. With another poem assigned, I decided to take the sinful, easy way out and simply rip off a poem. I just copied the lyrics to one of the songs my brother listened to when he drove both of us to school (that's a big no-no... and I knew it). When I got my paper back, my English teacher had the most unpleasant words for me; he took me to the woodshed red-ink style. He never actually spoke to me about it and that left me exposed. I wasn't even given the opportunity to make excuses, to justify myself, to rationalize my sin. I just had to sit in it.

Today, we are going to begin a two week study on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Most of us, I'm guessing, have some familiarity with this story; a lot of people have heard about this story. It's a story from Jesus that is used to inspire acts of compassion and care. And it does those things; we will learn a deeper understanding of what it means to love your neighbor. But, as you'll see this week and next, Jesus actually told the story to strip us bare; he told this story to expose us. Most people read the parable of the Good Samaritan and are convicted to love their neighbor more than they do; and that's a good thing to happen. But Jesus told the story to correct our misguided desires or feelings to stand before God and proclaim, "But, I'm a really good person!" I hope that's made you even more interested in this story; let's begin by reading our passage today (READ Luke 10:25-37).

Somehow, this story fits with the information we've already studied. You may remember that Jesus just got done celebrating how people get into the Kingdom of God. They get in by God the Father graciously revealing Jesus to those humble in heart. God's gracious revelation is always required to receive eternal life, to enter into the Kingdom of God. That's what the lawyer asks; he says in vs. 25, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Good question. We should all care about that. Notice his question more closely; "What must I *do*?" Not, "What must I know?" or "What must I believe?" But, "What must I do?" Jesus doesn't correct that. Jesus doesn't say, "Well, you don't need to do anything." No, he says, "Love the Lord your God with everything and your neighbor as yourself." That's what you need to do; if you do that, you're in! Now, if that confuses you a tad, if you're thinking, "But Brian, you've been telling us we receive eternal life when we believe Jesus, when we have faith in him. What do you mean I need to do something?" We'll get there, just hang in there for a moment.

There are two clues that give us the impression that this lawyer did not have honest intentions. The first clue is in vs. 25 when we read, "a lawyer stood up to put him to the test." When you test someone, that doesn't usually mean you're a humbler learner; it sounds like he wanted to trick or trap Jesus. The second one is found in vs. 29 when it says, "But he, desiring to justify himself, said to

Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Ok, Jesus, I need to love God and neighbor; I'm pretty sure I'm doing that, but tell me anyway, who's my neighbor?"

Here's the problem with this: when we're like the lawyer, we're unteachable. It's not that Jesus is against people asking questions, even tough ones. Jesus can handle that stuff. I actually think God loves when we ask him questions. And both of these questions are good to ask, but not as a way of testing God. The lawyer wasn't looking for answers; he was looking to justify himself. He was looking to be affirmed in what he already wanted and believed. He didn't want to be corrected; he wanted Jesus say, "Yeah, it looks like you've got it."

If you're honest, you can feel that in you. There are so many times I don't want to be corrected; I don't want my course altered. I just want to be affirmed in what I already believe and the course in life I'm already walking. Do you feel it, too? I hope so, because if you don't that means you're blind to the schemes of the Evil One in your life. It will leave you open to deceit.

I was reminded this week of 2 Timothy 4:3-4; it says, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passion, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." False teachers are bad; they lead people astray. But don't miss what Paul is saying in this passage. False teachers are rounded up by people wanting to be deceived. False teachers only give people what they already want to hear. They only affirm the direction the people already want to take. They already have their minds made up; they're just looking for someone to give them permission.

Honest intentions say, "Whatever you say, Jesus, I will believe and I will obey." There's no desire to receive a rubber stamp of approval; quite the contrary, the desire is to be corrected and shaped if needed. This lawyer didn't want that. The reason that's important to remember is because Jesus' story is meant to rebuke and correct the lawyer. And in it, we will be rebuked and corrected, too.

I want to focus the rest of our time primarily on that phrase in vs. 29, "But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" He wanted to be justified. What does that mean? As I brought up at the opening of this sermon, it means he wanted to feel like he was doing a good job. It means he wanted to have a right standing before God on his own. Think what Jesus just told him to do: Love the Lord your God with everything and your neighbor as yourself." So, let's get real for a moment. If we stay abstract, almost every person can probably say they love the Lord. Do you know what I mean? Abstractly, meaning, my love for God remains simply an idea, simply a feeling I have. Almost everybody could say, "Sure, I do that, I think." When there's nothing earthly to evaluate, everybody can say they love God. It's only when you make the abstract concrete can you truly evaluate and assess if you do love God and that's why Jesus adds that second clause saying, "and your neighbor, too." Our belief here at FBC is that loving people is the greatest expression of our loves for God; or put another way, we only love God if we love the people he puts in our lives. That's the most principled way we know if we love God. Ok, well, think about that? Do you do that; do you love your neighbor? What might you need to know to evaluate, to assess, if you love your neighbor?

You might need to know who your neighbor is.

And if my neighbor is my best friend, well, I think I do that. Or maybe my children or my spouse; I really love them. Or people who look like me and act like me, those are pretty easy people to love, too, for the most part. So, are those my neighbor, Jesus? And if so, I'm doing pretty good.

This desire to justify ourselves goes to the very heart of our sinfulness. Because if we can say, "I'm doing it, God! All by myself I'm obeying the commands that get me eternal life." What happens? No need for a Savior; no need for Jesus; no need for grace.

This isn't the only place we see this in the Gospel of Luke. Let me show you two others; flip to Luke 16:15 (READ). So, notice: our desire to be justified also includes a human component. And that makes sense, right? That's how we feel justified. Others are telling us, "Oh, you're doing great, don't worry about it." That's why false teachers are so diabolically influential; they soothe the guilty conscience.

Go a few more chapters to 18:9 (READ). Here's the same situation: some people trust in themselves that they are good enough, that they've checked off enough of the boxes to be acceptable to God and man.

Friends, we have to come to terms with our attempts of being self-righteous. That simply means, whether we know it or not, that we try to be good enough on our own. I know most of us can recognize and acknowledge that we make mistakes, that we fall short of what we should think, say, and do. But when our self-righteousness kicks in we think, "But there are good reasons why I said those things. And I've also done a lot of good things that cover my mistakes. And I'm not as bad as him."

I think God wants to lead us to the place that he led the Apostle Paul in Romans 7; turn with me to that chapter. The first thing I want to show you is how he ends this section with joy; look at vs. 25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The reason I highlight Paul's joy is because there's a temptation to think about, to read about, our inability to be righteous on our own, to be honest about our brokenness and sinfulness, and feel depressed and discouraged. This self-esteem culture has such a powerful influence on us that we actually think the worst sin in the world is to be honest about our weaknesses and failures before God and others. So, the Christian faith as I preach it (as, I believe, the Bible presents it) is a buzzkill.

But Paul had joy! Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! He's happy. He's filled with joy and gratitude. Why? For God. For his grace. For his mercy. For his power to save. For his unfailing love. My inadequacies, my sins, my weaknesses, my complete inability to do anything good on my own doesn't stop the God of the universe from loving me, from saving me, from empowering me, from giving me a purpose, from giving me life. Do you see, my good friends? Being honest about our need for God in every aspect of our lives doesn't leave me depressed; it's the first step towards finding joy in God.

The key verse from Romans 7 is vs. 18, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” When Paul says, “in my flesh” he means, “on my own without God’s help or grace.” Nothing good dwells in me apart from God. To know God and rejoice in his love, we have to get to that point where we can say that with Paul. It’s humbling. And the prevailing mood in our time teaches and encourages the exact opposite. I pray for you who educate our children in our schools. You have such an important task of encouraging and challenging our young people, helping them to realize the potential they have because they are made in his image and created to do great things, but not offering encouragement to promote self-righteousness in an environment that swims in self-esteem. It’s so challenging to rightly affirm. Because we must affirm; it’s wrong not to do that. But there’s a way to affirm that’s honest and true that makes God the hero and then there’s another way to affirm that perpetuates the narrative that we are the hero and really don’t need much from God.

So, I have the desire to do good, but not the ability. Let’s put that in the context of the lawyer. He’s been given the charge from Jesus to love God and neighbor, but not the ability to carry it out. The lawyer wants to find a loophole. Tell me who my neighbor is and I bet I do that. So, Jesus tells him who is his neighbor and he realizes, “Nope, I can’t do that.” That’s a good thing to realize, FBC. Have you? Have you realized, “God, I can’t love you and my neighbor like I should?” Do you know why that’s such a great place to be? Because when you admit that, you’re also ready to ask for God’s help.

Did you know that’s what God is looking for you to do? He knows you don’t love him or your neighbor like you should. He knows you can’t remain pure of mind and body on your own. He knows you lie. He knows you cheat. He knows the evil thoughts you have about others. He knows all that stuff. He’s just waiting for you to say, “God, will you help me? Nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh... will you help me? Will you forgive me? Will you save me from myself?” And he will. That’s why he sent Jesus to die on that cross, that’s why Jesus was raised from the dead. To help you, to forgive you, and to save you. God will. And that’s why Paul has joy. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! And when he does, when he comes with grace based on your call of faith, he brings his help. He brings his grace that forgives, that saves, that empowers you to do the very thing you can’t do, love God and love your neighbor. That’s how you can do it. Do you remember the question? What must I do to receive eternal life? Love God and neighbor. Well, there’s a way you can’t do that and there’s a way you can. The way you can is by admitting that you can’t, humbling receiving his grace through faith where God’s Holy Spirit then empowers you to do the very thing you realized you couldn’t. And there’s not self-righteousness in that love because it’s empowered by God and not by you. No wonder Paul celebrates with joy and says, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

#### Questions for the week

1. Why is it so important to be honest about our sins and failures?
2. What’s the most important thing you heard today?
3. What’s one thing you want to do differently because of what you heard?