

The Good Samaritan: Part 2

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Who doesn't like a good meme; I've got a few for you (PIC1, 2, 3 & 4). It can feel good, right, to say to someone, "Not my problem!" But is it always right to do? Imagine if God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit looked down on his creation and the big mess we got ourselves in and said, "not my problem?" Good thing he didn't, right? And what if he is calling us to be like him (I think I read that somewhere in the Bible)? That last pic really captures what we are going to be talking about today (aside from it's lack of artistic quality). Here are the borders of my concerns. Every person on the inside of my circle is my neighbor and everybody outside of my circle is not my neighbor. Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan blows this meme to smithereens. He demonstrates for us what true, authentic, neighborly relationships should look like. And in so doing, Jesus leaves every one of us stripped bare of all our self-righteousness where our only hope is asking for God's help to be the men and women he's calling us to be. So, let's read the story again (READ Luke 10:25-37).

Last week, we spent the entire morning talking about why Jesus was telling this story. The key to understanding that is found in vs. 29 where it says, "But he [the lawyer], desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Jesus just told him that the one thing he must do to receive eternal life is to love the Lord with everything and his neighbor as himself. So, the lawyer is doing some calculating; who is my neighbor? (PIC) How wide of a circle to do I have to draw? Is my neighbor my spouse? Is my neighbor my coworker? Is my neighbor the people in my community or county or state? Just how wide must my circle be? Where's the limit? Who are the people I can legitimately look at and say, "You're not my neighbor, not my problem," and still inherit eternal life? Do you see how he's trying to justify himself? Make sure you listen to last week's sermon because it is critical in understanding exactly why Jesus is telling this story.

So, let's look at it. Vs. 30 begins with Jesus simply saying, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." There's something genius in how Jesus begins this story. He doesn't say a Jewish man, or a rich man, or an important man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Just a man. A human being. The color of his skin isn't important; it could have been a woman just as easily. His status or wealth or religious beliefs are not important either; all the things about this man are unknown. He's a man, a human being, just like you and me with strengths and weaknesses. With skills and deficiencies. With triumphs and defeats. That's who we are talking about. Simply a human being made in the image of God.

This is so genius because we're so likely to paint an image of who we will help in our mind and anyone who doesn't fit that image, that description, isn't our neighbor. I told this story about a decade ago, so I'll tell it again. In my early years, I remember getting a call here at church from a woman needing a place to stay along with her dog. She experienced some really hard times and found herself without a home. She needed help. She sounded humble and

needy. She was respectful and appreciative. And I remember thinking, "Man, isn't there something we can do?" I looked up at our big parsonage at that time with several unused bedrooms (they're all used now!) I thought of others here in our church family, "Would they help this woman get back on her feet?" I told her to swing by and we could talk more; I really didn't know what we could do to help, but we'd think of something.

In my mind, I had a picture of this woman. My imagination had a pretty clean, attractive woman. She had a modest, but cute little car. Her dog - Oh, a one of those puppies you see on youtube videos. I went about my business at church as I waited; I prayed some. Friends, I swear, I felt a pure compassion for this woman... the one I had imagined in my mind. And about 20 minutes later she shows up and she doesn't look like the picture I made. She was as rough as a woman as I ever seen. She was very dirty; she was missing some teeth; she was wearing a beat up Led Zeppelin t-shirt. Her car was rusting through. And her dog... not a puppy, but the meanest junk yard dog I'd ever seen that just looking to bite a pretty boy like me. And friends, to my shame, my warm and compassionate intentions disappeared in a moment. I went from, "What can I do to help this woman?" to "What can I do to get her on her way?"

Why? What was different about the real woman in need to the imaginary woman from my mind? I had attached an aspect of dignity to superficial things. She was a woman created in the image of God and I didn't have much help for her because I was the priest. I was the Levite, and I'm embarrassed by that. Have you ever been like that, too? A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he needed help.

He fell among robbers. Traveling in 1st century Palestine was a dangerous thing. Josephus, a Jewish historian from the 1st century, wrote about the many dangers from robbers on this very road. This is real life. That's why it's worth wondering if Jesus is actually telling a true story; it never actually says, "And Jesus told them this parable." It adds to the intrigue a tad. So, here's this man, a person made in the image of God vs. 30 says, and he was stripped, beat, and left half dead. This man has a problem, right? Who's problem is it going to be?

Look how vs. 31 begins, "Now by chance a priest was traveling that same road." How ironic, right? I mean, I'm hoping you're getting what Jesus is saying a little. It's a way of saying, "And look what happened next." There is no pure chance with God. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." Everything happens for a reason. Jesus is being ironic to open vs. 31.

A priest is one who would take his turn in the administration of the sacrifices in the temple within Jerusalem. He was a leader and religious figure. You might think of him as a pastor in the 21st century (we have a few of those, don't we?). He went down that same road and he saw the man. Don't miss that; he saw him. He wasn't unaware; he wasn't blind to the need. He saw it. But he passed on by; he said, "not my problem."

Vs. 32 says, likewise, a Levite came to the place, too. Levites had priestly functions. There were administrative and musical needs for the temple. Someone had to collect and distribute the offerings; someone had to organize and plan the music. Levites had these kinds of responsibilities. Imagine this person being a Deacon or a Ministry Director in the 21st century church (we have some of those, too). And what does vs. 32 say? He came, he saw just like the priest, and he walked on the other side, too, and said, “not my problem.”

There’s a contrast presented in vs. 33; “But a Samaritan... came and saw.” The contrast lets us know that something is about to change. Something different is going to happen. Now, a Samaritan isn’t a priest or a Levite; he isn’t even a religious figure at all. Instead, he was a member of a despised class of people in the eyes of many Jews. You might remember me telling you that Jews made a point to avoid Samaritans; they thought they were inferior. And there’s also an ethnic component, too. So, if we try and put it in our modern context, imagine (possibly) it’s the early 1960s in rural Alabama or Mississippi with the tension of the Civil Rights era. And a man, a human being, fell among robbers and left half dead. And the white pastor and the white deacon came upon the man, saw the need, but walked on the other side of the road thinking, “not my problem.” But, a black man came, too, and saw the same situation and had a different response. The contrast is meant to be part of the shock of the story. Who would you think would be the most likely to help? Certainly the pastor or deacon would stop, right? The person who looks like us. But it was the Samaritan who stopped to help. The contrast is supposed to wake us up.

So, what do we see the Samaritan doing. It starts with the last phrase in vs. 33 (and these lessons we can apply directly to our daily lives), which reads, “when he saw him, he had compassion.” Why does the Samaritan have compassion when the other two did not? It doesn’t say, but let’s think of some possible reasons. Wouldn’t it be easy to find reasons to blame the man for his situation? Couldn’t we find mistakes he made along the way? Like, “Why was he traveling on this dangerous road by himself? What was he thinking? How could he be so foolish? And why didn’t he come better prepared? Did he even bring a sword? He should have known better.” We think things like that, don’t we? I’m actually challenged by that on a regular basis. People come to church here during tough times. They’re looking with help for rent; they need some food. It can be tempting to think, “Haven’t you learned your lesson yet? How come you didn’t prepare better? If you didn’t spend your money on this or that, you’d have enough to pay your bills.” Friends, the more you think that way, the more compassion will escape you.

Compassion rises when you focus on two things. 1) The need. Just look at the need. Who cares how he got on the side of the road? What does it matter how he got behind on the rent? Right now, in this moment, there is a need. It’s not that the reason for the trouble is irrelevant; in fact, you do need to eventually address those systemic issues to break the cycle of trouble; that’s oftentimes where the long term help is found - in applying God’s wisdom to our daily lives. But saying there’s a time to address those things also means that there’s a time where that stuff doesn’t matter. Right now, someone needs your help; focus on the need.

2) Focus on the humanity of the person. That's why Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Just put yourself in their shoes. Imagine you were the one who lost his job; imagine you're the one who's electricity got turned off. What could you use in that moment?

Following the Samaritan's example, which Jesus, of course, is suggesting, starts with having compassion. Friends, if you struggle having compassion, examine yourself in light of these things. First, focus on a person's need instead of how they came to be in need. Secondly, remember the humanity of others. They are just like you. And I can promise you, if it were not for the grace of God giving you your particular blessings you'd be in the exact same predicament. Have some compassion.

Look what the Samaritan does next (READ vs. 34). Let's summarize this by saying the Samaritan actually did something. He didn't just have an emotional response; he completed his compassion by providing help. Sometimes, we feel good about feeling bad. But our emotional response of compassion is actually a mechanism, a tool, from God to provoke us to action. Think of that; remember that. When you feel compassion, ask yourself another question: what can I do? Feeling compassion is actually quite normal; we might even call it instinctual. So, in reality, feeling compassion doesn't mean anything and it's nothing to feel good about.

The third lesson is found in vs. 35 (READ). There's a remarkable act of sacrifice assumed by the Samaritan. First of all, the Samaritan pays for the man's need out of his own pocket. That's a gift. But he went beyond that, right? He said, "I'm coming back and I will pay off any other expenses that he might have." That's bordering on the crazy, am I right? Suppose you get a knock on your door on a Thursday evening. You answer the door and there's a man standing there with his car in your driveway. He says, "I don't have any money to buy gas for my car. I'm trying to find a job, but I'm having a hard time. Every job interview requires me to drive more. Will you help me?" I'm guessing a lot of you would give the guy \$20. I know that many of you want to help someone in need. But would you also say, "And come back when you need more! I really want you to find a job so when you're out of gas again, stop by and I'll give you another \$20." Why might you not want to do that? Well, maybe he's not very employable. Maybe his resume is terrible or the economy is bad and nobody is finding a job very easily. Maybe it's going to take him 6 months of him looking for a job; are you going to keep giving him \$20? Or maybe he's just going to rip you off. Maybe he stops by for more gas money on a weekly basis, but he never drives to any job interviews.

Here's what I'm thinking: the help the Samaritan is willing to keep giving. He doesn't know how much longer the man is going to be injured; he doesn't know if the innkeeper is going to rip him off and take advantage of the situation. But that doesn't stop him from saying, "I'll keep helping until... until he gets better; until he's no longer in jeopardy."

Consider these two phrases. Here's the first one: Love has no limits. The essence of God's law is love God and love neighbor. But God helpfully provided us a picture of what that meant. That's why there are a total of 613 OT laws. All those laws are meant to help us know

what loving God and loving neighbors looks like. But there's a temptation to look at those laws as limits. There are many rabbinical writings where you can read about the fights between rabbis about what the laws required; what was the limit? So, for example, Ex. 22:6 says, "If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution." So, here's the situation: you start a fire. That fire grows out of control where your neighbor's grain, his property burns up. If you love your neighbor as yourself you'll pay him back for the loss. But what if it was an accident? Then do I need to pay him back? And what if he put his stack of grain super close to the property line; if he just would have put it on the other side of the field it never would have caught on fire so it's really partly his fault. And what if it wasn't my immediate neighbor; some sparks got caught in the wind and burned my neighbors grain a mile down the road; surely, I can't be held responsible for that! Do you see the desire to find a limit? Through this story Jesus is telling us that neighborly love has no limits.

Also (and I got this from Paul Miller), love has no exit strategy. That means, love isn't looking for a way out; love isn't looking for an excuse to leave. The Samaritan is a wonderful picture of this. He didn't pick up the man, take him to the inn, pay for one night's stay and then say, "Well, I did my part; I'm outta here." No, he stuck it out and wasn't trying to figure out a way to pass the burden to someone else."

Jesus' question in vs. 36 is obvious; who proved to be the man's neighbor? The Samaritan. Look at Jesus' command. "You go, and do likewise." "Go do it!" Jesus says. Do it. Can you do this? Really, can you love others like this? Is there anyone among us who does this? Friends, what I have learned from studying the Good Samaritan is that I don't love like this at all. I draw boundaries and find people's problems outside my circle of concern. Sometimes, I don't want to make sacrifices for my own family let alone a man, a human, who fell among robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. I have limits and I plan exit strategies.

This story wrecks me. The lawyer may have thought he could justify himself, but after hearing the story he was stripped bare and exposed as the needy, sinful man that he is. And you and I are just like him. But there is good news. That's why Jesus has come. To help us become the men and women God is calling us to be. So that we would no longer be people who say "not my problem," but say, "how can I help?" You have one piece of homework this week: Go home and ask God to help you. Admit your failure to be what God is calling you to be and ask him to change you. Ask him to forgive you. Plead with him to show you mercy and transform you.

Key vs. ~ Luke 10:37

Questions for the week

- What was most encouraging for you to hear this morning?
- What was most challenging for you to hear this morning?
- Make a short list of prayers you have for God for your own transformation.