

“A Traveler, A Priest, and A Levite Walk Down a Road”

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Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He 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.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”



Sermon: “A Traveler, A Priest, and A Levite Walk Down a Road”

Most everybody knows the story of the Good Samaritan. Even if you didn’t grow up hearing about it in church, the story is so familiar it has become part of our cultural lexicon. Strangers who stop to help someone in need are called “Good Samaritans.” There’s a travel club called “The Good Sam Club” that was started to help make family road trips safer.¹ And one of the most popular charities in the world is called Samaritan’s Purse.

The image of the Samaritan looms large in our culture, even if many people don’t realize it comes from the Bible. It is a story that challenges us to “go and do likewise,” while at the same time reminding us that no matter how difficult our situation, and no matter whether our circumstances are thrust upon us or of our own making, God still loves and cares for us. It’s a wonderful story with villains and a hero. And it’s a story that seems straightforward, but also invites us to think. An unnamed lawyer asks Jesus a question: “Who is my neighbor?” And so, Jesus tells a story.

There’s this traveler you see, a wounded traveler, and he’s in a dangerous place on a dangerous road; a place he probably shouldn’t have been. And there’s two people who pass him by on that road; people who really should have stopped to help but didn’t. Both were religious leaders. One was a priest and the other was a Levite. Now, as religious leaders you’d think they would have stopped to help a stranger in distress. But they didn’t. Why? Well maybe they’re just cold, unfeeling people. Or maybe it’s because they were on the way to Jerusalem for their respective duties in the temple. If so, stopping to investigate a body by the side of the road might have interfered with that duty. Because if the person turned out to be dead, touching them would have made the priest and the Levite ritually unclean and thus unfit to do their appointed temple duties.

But then a Samaritan comes along, and he doesn’t seem to care about matters of ritual; of what is clean and unclean. He sees only human need. So, he stops to help. While the priest and the Levite may have had good excuses, Jesus suggests here that the greatest service to God is not found in religious rituals but in compassion and loving-kindness shown to our neighbors.

Remember, Jesus is telling this story in answer to the question “Who is my neighbor?” But that lawyer started by asking how he could inherit eternal life. The answer was “Love God and Neighbor” but that appears to have been too much for him. So, he’s looking for something easier, more manageable. He’s looking for loopholes: “Okay, love your neighbor. Got it. But surely not those guys, right?” It’s a question that echoes down through the ages and reverberates in our own time: Do we have to love people we don’t like? People who scare us? How about people who hate us? How do we love people

who are different from us? How do we behave in a loving way toward people we find detestable? When given a rule some people are always going to look for exceptions to that rule. But Jesus doesn't allow for that.

Rather than answering the question, "Who is my neighbor," Jesus describes what a good neighbor *does*. For Jesus, the lawyer's question has no meaning because *everyone* is your neighbor. It is pointless trying to delineate the boundaries between the insiders and outsiders, worthy and unworthy, because *those* distinctions don't exist. *Everyone* has value. *Everyone* is your neighbor. God's command to love isn't about *who* you're supposed to love. It's about *how* your supposed to love.

Now when we read this, we tend to focus on what the Samaritan does and the wounded traveler is usually an afterthought. He's just there to receive the Samaritan's help. But is he really a sympathetic character? What was he doing in that particular part of the country? How had he come to be beaten and left for dead? He had been set upon by highway robbers, a hazard for which the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious. So, could he have been at least partly at fault for his predicament?

In the Daily Study Bible Series, William Barclay writes

*"[The traveler] was obviously a reckless and foolhardy character. People seldom attempted the Jerusalem to Jericho road alone if they were carrying goods or valuables. Seeking safety in numbers, they travelled in convoys or caravans. This man had no one but himself to blame for the plight in which he found himself."*²

Ouch! That's pretty harsh, but when you think about it, it's no more harsh than the way many people today are condemned for the predicaments in which they find themselves. People who are poor must not work hard enough. People who are jobless could find work if they really wanted it. Single-parent families, people buried under debt, people who struggle with drugs and alcohol, they're all victims of their own poor choices. Right? Blanket statements like that simple aren't true. But even if they were, Jesus is here telling us, that doesn't give us a pass on our responsibility to show compassion and to be understanding and to grant mercy.

We have always seen the traveler as merely an object to receive the Samaritan's mercy. But what if Jesus sets his story along the Jericho Road on purpose? To show that the traveler suffered, at least in part, from the results of his own choice; to show that love and mercy are extended even to those who have made bad choices or for whom good choices had bad results. Hopefully, that's comforting for all of us.

Because how many times have you found yourself in a tight spot, at least in part, of your own making? How many times have you tried to do the right thing, but under the circumstances the right thing turned out disastrously? How many times have you been straight up careless and paid a dear price? Sometimes our troubles are the result of our poor judgement, but sometimes decisions made with the best of intentions come back to bite us. People struggle with credit card debt, broken relationships, legal troubles, and you don't have to go far to find someone who is hungry or homeless or very close to it, often because of circumstances beyond their control, but sometimes because of poor choices or good choices gone poorly.

In this country we're real big on individual freedom and personal responsibility. But God made us for community. God made us to love and care for one another. The Good Samaritan shows us that loving our neighbors means caring for them in their need regardless of where that need comes from. Notice that the Samaritan never asks the traveler, "How did you get this way? Why were you traveling this dangerous road alone?" The circumstances that put the traveler in need are unimportant to the Samaritan. It is only the need that matters. Which is consistently how Jesus rolls. The 5000 who gather to hear Jesus teach, should have known to make provision for themselves. If they are hungry, it is their own fault. Yet Jesus commands the disciples "You give them something to eat." The two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus are there for a reason. And yet Jesus tells the one who cried out to him for mercy "Today you will be with me in paradise." When Jesus heals, when he forgives, when he invites, he never asks for a resume and he never checks for a rap sheet.

Jim Richardson was the senior pastor that we worked for when we lived in Clemson and I will always remember the two things he would tell his children every time they left the house, even now as adults he still tells them: "Remember that I love you. And don't do anything dumb." And it has always been understood that failing to abide by the second, does not

negate the first. It is the same with God. There is nothing we can do, no choice we can make, no mistake we can face, that will separate us from the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God.

And that should challenge us when we are in the shoes of the Samaritan and the Priest and the Levite, and it should comfort us when we find ourselves in the shoes of the traveler.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Good Sam Club." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 7 July 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Sam_Club.

² "Who Is My Neighbor?" *The Gospel of Luke*, by William Barclay, Westminster Press, 1975, p. 139. The Daily Study Bible Series, Revised Edition.