

Luke 10:25-37

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Good Samaritan

The Word of the Lord from Luke 10:36-37: Jesus said, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” [The lawyer] said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Two questions, one parable.

The lawyer asks two questions and Jesus tells one parable in response. So which question is Jesus answering?

The lawyer’s first question is, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” You sense the problem right away: the man thinks that eternal life is his to earn. For all we know, he’s totally sincere: he wants to make sure that he’s doing the right thing, and doing enough of it; and Jesus treats him quite respectfully. He doesn’t rebuke the man like he often does the Pharisees, but He quizzes him: All right, lawyer: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?”

The lawyer responds, “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.” Not bad: that’s a summary of the Ten Commandments, and Jesus even says that the man answers well. If you’re going to save yourself, then you need to keep the law of God.

The lawyer’s right. He’s also pretty smart, and he knows that you can keep the law a little or a lot. God’s law doesn’t say, “Love one neighbor as yourself,” or “Love your neighbors three houses to the left and right of your front door,” but “Love your neighbor,” *period*. The details are important, and the lawyer wants to get this right. As the text says, he wants to justify himself – he wants to be sure that he’s doing enough to keep the law of God. His second question, then, makes perfect sense: “And who is my neighbor?”

Here you get the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. The popular version that you’ve probably heard goes something like this: while traveling between Jericho and Jerusalem, a perfectly nice man is attacked by robbers and beaten nearly to death. As he lies in the ditch, bleeding and groaning, a priest comes along; and in the popular version, he comes across as the heartless church official who is too busy serving God to serve man, and so he doesn’t have the time or the compassion to care for the bloodied victim on the side of the road. He passes by on the other side.

He’s followed by a Levite, another member of the priestly tribe, and that man also comes across as one who would selfishly keep his hands clean rather than help the victim of a violent crime.

He’s followed by a Samaritan, a despised outsider; and the Samaritan is the one who has compassion on the man.

Jesus concludes by asking the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The lawyer responds, “The one who showed him mercy.” He’s right again.

I'm not sure I'm liking this parable anymore: the clergy come off as dirty rotten scoundrels, while the lawyer is scoring points left and right! But still ... there's something funny going on, because Jesus has turned the question around. The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor [who needs my love]?" In the parable, the neighbor is not the one who needs the love, but the one who shows love and binds up the wounds of the dying. Why does Jesus turn that around?

Maybe we should rethink the parable more. After all, we're tempted to interpret the Bible by our own experience, and we live in a time where social gospel is pretty big. In other words, I've often heard this parable interpreted along the lines of, "The heartless priest and Levite symbolize a disconnected church that doesn't care about real needs," or some such thing. But maybe we're selling them short.

Why would a priest or a Levite be on his way to Jerusalem? Because that's where the temple is, and priests and Levites work at the temple. If you're going to work at the temple, you have to be ceremonially clean; and if you're going around touching dead bodies, you're not clean anymore. Furthermore, when we say, "work at the temple," we're not talking about the souvenir shop. We're talking about sacrifices and the like, commanded by God. If the priests are unclean, they can't offer the sacrifices; if they do, they'll desecrate them.

If that's the case, then the priest on the road has this choice: there's a bloodied body lying by the road. He may look dead. If the priest touches him to find out, then he's unclean and can't work at the temple. If he can't work at the temple, there will be plenty of people who won't get their sacrifices performed, and so they won't be right with God. He can keep the law by remaining clean to go work at the temple, in which case he breaks the law by failing to care for the beaten man; or he can keep the commandments by caring for the beaten man, in which case he breaks the law by defiling himself so he can't fulfill his calling. The choice may seem clear to you, but you're not living in first-century Judea. The point is that, no matter what the priest and Levite do, they're going to break the law.

If you break the law, you're not going to inherit eternal life.

Now, you might jump right to the "God is reasonable" argument and say, "God is reasonable; so if you have to commit a little sin to avoid committing a bigger sin, He won't count the little sin against you. He understands that you did your best." I defy you to find proof of that in Scripture, because little sins make you just as unholy as big sins.

Look: this world is seriously messed up, and so you'll find yourselves in situations where your choices aren't right and wrong, but bad and worse. Sometimes, your choices will be the lesser of two evils, and the lesser evil is still evil – it doesn't become good because it's the best you can do.

All of a sudden, this parable of the Good Samaritan has some layers to it. You're certainly familiar with one: your neighbor is whoever is in need. You might not be so familiar with the other: this parable teaches that you can't inherit eternal life even when you're doing the right thing. In other words, before you help the one in need, you're the one in need. You're in need of the good Samaritan.

This is where the parable gets *really* interesting. Remember how Jesus flips the question, how the neighbor becomes the one who shows mercy rather than the one in need?

In the parable, the good Samaritan is the good neighbor. He's the outsider, a half-Jew/half-Gentile who wouldn't be warmly welcomed at the temple. On the road between Jericho and Jerusalem, he stops for the one who is beaten and dying. He risks the uncleanness and binds the man's wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he loads the man on his own beast of burden, while he walks to the inn. At the inn, he pays two denarii and says he'll be back to settle up and pay any more expenses when he returns. Now, two denarii are going to pay for a two-day stay, which means that the Samaritan is telling the innkeeper, "I have to go, but I'll be back on the third day."

Huh. This is Luke 10, which happens to come right after Luke 9; and it's in Luke 9:22 that Jesus tells His disciples for the first time, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on *the third day* be raised." In other words, "I'm leaving, but I'll be back on the third day."

Jesus is the good Samaritan. He's the outsider who comes to His own, and His own receive Him not. He is despised by the priests and the Levites. He's not half-Jew, half-Gentile. He's fully God and fully man, God become flesh to save.

Soon, in Luke 19, He'll be the priest – your high priest – on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. But unlike the priest and the Levite in the parable, everywhere He goes He cares for the sick, the diseased, the defiled – all who want His help and mercy. He interacts with them, speaks to them, touches them. He takes their sins and infirmities upon Himself. See, He's not just the holy priest who offers the sacrifice for their salvation; but He's also the sin offering that is sacrificed so that they might be forgiven.

He makes it to Jerusalem to waving palm branches, to cries of, "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." He's taken by His enemies, beaten until He's half dead, and falls among robbers; no, actually, He's raised up and crucified with them. He dies; but like the good Samaritan in the parable, He's already told His disciples, "I'll be back on the third day."

So He is. He is risen from the dead, and all of this is for you.

Risen from the dead, He rises with healing and deliverance, grace upon grace. He finds you, left for dead in your sin. He revives you in your baptism, He speaks life into you and binds up your wounds with bread and wine. He gathers you into His church, where you might find rest and food and healing; and He promises that He will return again. Until then, He has "paid forward" all the forgiveness you need to remain in His care, until He comes again in glory.

The lawyer asks two questions, and Jesus answers with one parable. Which question does He answer? Both. Who is your neighbor? The one who is in need, and you should certainly help those who are in need – faith cannot do otherwise! And what must you do to inherit eternal life? You cannot do it, for you are the one wounded and dead in sin. But since you can't do, inherit! Receive! Rejoice! Jesus is the good Samaritan. For His sake, God shows you great mercy.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.