

The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Luke 10:25-37

Paul Trebilco

This is a very familiar story. Let's dig into it a little.

The presentation of the lawyer is somewhat mixed. He stands before Jesus – which is a sign of esteem – as we would stand in the presence of a leader. He addresses Jesus as 'Teacher' – which is respectful. But we're told he wants to test Jesus, to challenge him.

But it's a good question isn't it: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

A really important matter – eternal life!

As he often does, Jesus answers a question with another question:

"What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The lawyer answers: "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."

What would he get for that legal opinion?

We'll he's quoting Deut 6:5 for loving God, and Lev 19:18 for the love of neighbour. He must be right! Full marks!

Loving God – loving neighbour. The two greatest commands! Fundamental!

The parable will go on to be about the love of neighbour. But this beginning reminds us that the love of God comes first – loving God with all we are is the first thing in our lives. It is a total, all encompassing, uncompromising allegiance to God.

And so Jesus commends him: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Notice what Jesus says: "Do this, and you will live." Its not about theory but practice.

But the lawyer wants some wriggle room. He wants a definition. He wants to know who to love – and more importantly perhaps, he wants to know who he does not need to love. How far should love reach?

Who would others have said the neighbour was at the time? It means 'the person next to oneself', near or close by. It means someone you have dealings with, or are associated with. Clearly, within the Jewish world, its another Jew.

So the lawyer asks for a definition of 'neighbour, and Jesus obliges with a parable:

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.

Going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Its 29 km. A traveller descended from Jerusalem, approximately 760 metres above sea level, to Jericho, some 260 metres below sea level. The Dead Sea is 430 metres below sea level. In that short geographical distance, the descent is approximately 1 kilometre. So ‘going down’! We’ll see that’s important in a minute.

This is wilderness – hilly, with lots of places for bandits to hide. It is a notoriously treacherous road – very dangerous territory if travelling alone. He’s been beaten up – by more than one robber. Who are they? Thugs! The two people with whom Jesus was crucified are called bandits, robbers – they are deserving of death. And to show how bad they are, they strip him – his clothes are worth something, beat him up, and leave him ‘half dead’. That is, near death and in desperate need of help.

³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

The priest is also going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. So he’s finished his duty in the Temple – and is going home. Hence ‘going down that road’. He’s not in a hurry to get to the Temple. He’s finished and has time on his hands. His excuses for not stopping don’t include time.

So what’s going on here?

Would listeners to the parable have thought that the priest was a bad guy?? A villain? No, he’s not. Virtually all Jews in the first century thought priests were good! They were important, and highly respected. They ran the Temple and the Temple was good – vital in fact. So, the hearers would expect the priest to do the right thing. Which was to help the guy.

Why doesn’t he?

He has two commandments to weigh up here:

Lev 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

Lev 21:1-3 The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother; likewise, for a virgin sister, close to him because she has had no husband, he may defile himself for her.

If you touched a corpse you became unclean. This is not being sinful – its being impure. If you are impure you cannot go into the Temple – you need to be purified first. The

Temple was where the Holy God lived – and so those who went there needed to be holy – pure. And touching a dead body made you impure, unholy.

BUT Lev 21 is a *perpetual* command. Priests were different from everyone else. They were never to touch a corpse apart from a nearest relative.

So why doesn't the priest go and help? Why does he go by on the other side? He has a debate with himself. Should he keep Lev 19 and love his neighbour? Or should he keep Lev 21 and not defile himself, make himself impure? Because the guy is half-dead – and if he helps the guy might just die on him! The priest has a dilemma.

So he decides he will break Lev 19 in order to keep Lev 21.

He decides that the purity laws are more important than the command to love.

And he goes by on the other side because impurity travels. If he gets too close he'll become impure. Later rabbis said you should stay at least six foot from a corpse. He's caught in a dilemma! I'm often like this. What will I do? There are two things – both important. How do I decide? Do I do something that would be good to do but has a personal cost, or takes me away from the family. A clash of priorities.

Moral dilemmas. Dilemmas about how to spend my time! Dilemmas about how to try and do things in a difficult world where there are never enough resources. So I really appreciate it that Jesus portrays this priest as in a moral dilemma! Weighing up two commands.

But is he right? In the light of the whole parable, as we'll see, he is wrong. It is the Samaritan who does the right thing.

So, the command to love takes precedence over, overrides, all other commands. Love God and love neighbour – these and these alone are the two great commands.

In particular, the command to love takes precedence over any command regarding purity. This doesn't mean so much to us, but this was revolutionary. This is the message Peter gets when he goes to Cornelius – that the impurity of Gentiles doesn't matter! That God's love and our love transcend all barriers. This is the first point of the parable – love takes precedence over all commands.

Then the Levite comes. He is in less of a dilemma, since the command in Lev 20 just applies to priests. He's just wrong! He simply does nothing! He is concerned for self-protection. He ministers in the Temple. He sings and he guards the temple. He is not bound by the same corpse code as the priests. He should help!

But these are the two high status people of the society and they've left the guy dying.

What happens next:

³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

A Samaritan What does the crowd think? Bad guy. In 721 the Assyrians conquered all of Israel and they deported a whole lot of people. They then brought in new settlers from elsewhere to the area that became known as Samaria – and these new settlers mixed with those who were left behind – and the Samaritans were the result. They worshipped on Mt Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem. As far as Jews were concerned they were outcasts, and they were hated.

A text:

Ben Sirach 50:25-26: ‘Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who live in Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people that live in Shechem [=Samaritans].’

What does the Samaritan do? He was moved with pity.

The Greek word for compassion used in the New Testament is “*splagchnizomai*” and this verb means “to be moved from the guts or bowels” which is a Jewish idiom meaning “having deep compassion” since they believed the guts were the seat of emotions like love and pity. He has compassion and he *acts*.

³⁴ He 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. ³⁵ The 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.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

He went to him – did something practical. Stopped, despite the evident danger. Went to the inn and took care of him. Two denarii would have paid for room and board for two weeks. Gave of his own money, with no expectation of being paid back. – for a total stranger. He even enters into a risky open-ended financial relationship with the innkeeper – ‘I will repay you *whatever* more you spend’. The chance of extortion is high!

This is going *way beyond* obligation or expectation – it is exaggerated care based in great compassion!

And then Jesus asks the question – who acted as a neighbour – the Samaritan. Note the Lawyer can’t quite get himself to say this. He simply says, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Now let’s explore the Samaritan – Jew dynamic a little.

These were hated enemies. Yet it is the hated enemy who shows compassion – not the Priest or the Levite – the exemplars of the society. They were completely inert. He acts.

He is the lowest possible status – which throws into sharp relief the rightness of his response. His action condemns the failure to act by the Priest and the Levite.

Think of analogies!

The North Korean has mercy on the American.

The Jew has mercy on the Nazi!

The African American has mercy on the Klu Kluck Klan member!

The Muslim has mercy on the French person!

The ISIS fighter has mercy on the Syrian ...

The Good Taliban ...

So what is the answer to the question, ‘who is my neighbour?’ Everyone! It turns out to be a non-question. Its entirely the wrong question to ask. Everyone is.

And its not that Jesus is saying a Jew must have mercy on a Samaritan. That would be a challenge! But its even more than that. It’s that the Samaritan, the hated outsider, who has mercy on a Jew, an insider!! It’s the Samaritan who shows God’s faithful love and who models obedience to the command to love. This stands the world on its head! If the outsider, the Samaritan, knows how to love – Jesus says to the lawyer – how can *you* ask about the boundaries of who is ‘neighbour?’ The Samaritan shows what the command to love means!!! This completely undermines any thought of defining the concept of neighbour! Everyone is a neighbour.

Who is my neighbour? Even the person who hates me, and who I hate, is my neighbour! There are no limits. Mercy and neighbour love has no boundaries! Jesus will not allow boundaries to be set! As Snodgrass says “Love does not have a boundary where we can say we have loved enough, nor does it permit us to choose those we will love, those who are “our kind” ... The question “Who is my neighbour?” ought not be asked. No thought is allowed that a human can be a non-neighbour.’ There’s no point where I can say ‘I have loved my neighbour and done it!’ I could say that if ‘my neighbour’ was the five families on my side of the street and the five families on the other side. But my neighbour whom I am to love is the world!

The parable then puts together uncomfortable words: Samaritan and neighbour. North Korean and neighbour; Taliban and neighbour

Wow this is hard! I have enough trouble loving one neighbour! It challenges my passivity and self-interest.

But this is our mission - Each person finds their place in God’s world (Mission & vocation) (on PP)

This is something we do *together*. And ‘loving our neighbour’ will mean different things for each of us. The parable doesn’t prescribe what we must do in each occasion – it tells

us who we must be! It tells us what Christian character is.

But for all of us, it will mean never looking down on a person because of their race, or their gender, or how they look, or what they do. All people are our neighbours! Jesus subverts the world view that allows us to say this person is my neighbour and that person is not. This is how we are to live out our relationship with God.

How does the Lawyer respond? We are not told. The question hangs in the air. He has heard the challenge. Will he do it? *We* are to end the story, with our obedience.

BUT let's stop and think about this Good Samaritan figure a little more. He is a despised person, who has deep mercy on one in great need. At great personal cost, he restores one who has been beaten up and left for dead – and so is in great need. He does for the half-dead man what he cannot do for himself. Sound familiar?

Let me suggest that in light of the whole Gospel story, the true Good Samaritan is Jesus himself. He is the one with mercy, who pays the cost, who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

I preach this with Easter still in my mind. With the cost of the cross, with the pain and agony. He was despised, rejected, the outcast, who loved.

But I also have the resurrection in my heart – that Jesus has risen from the dead, conquering death – transforming despair, bringing the Spirit who makes us new!!!

Feel beaten up and half dead. Ravaged by life. Bruised and damaged. The Good Samaritan has deep mercy! And at great cost.

Jesus doesn't simply say to us – the whole world is your neighbour. Get to it! He doesn't lay an overwhelming demand on us. He dies for us and makes us new. He gives us resurrection life!

He first finds us half dead in the ditch, has deep and costly mercy, and makes us better! He transforms us.

We have been loved – by God in Christ – so we can love God and love our neighbour – the world.

We are loved first – then – and only then – can we be Good Samaritans to our own world.

That is our response to our Great Good Samaritan.

To God be the glory through our Lord Jesus Christ, our Good Samaritan who loves us to the end – that we might love others. Amen