

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: STORY TIME

Like a Good Neighbor

(Luke 10:25-37)

Study #2

Introduction: Ears to hear and more...

The parables we find in the Gospels can be tricky. Tricky to understand and tricky to apply.

Jesus packed them all with spiritual truth that will change our lives, but to understand them, we need to listen well. He even told us, [*Matthew 13:9*] **“He who has ears, let him hear.”**

So, listening is crucial. We have to do our part if we are going to “get” the parables. But more is needed than doing our part - and the first half of Luke 10 affirms that.

In this section, Luke tells us that Jesus sent out seventy of His followers on a preaching tour throughout the land of Israel. They carried out His assignment to the letter and the mission was outrageously successful.

When they returned, Jesus told them that He [*v. 18*] **“was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning”** due to their ministry of preaching the Gospel and healing the sick. And then Jesus prayed. Here is His prayer:

[21] “I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants...”

They would have never gotten it had God not opened their eyes to see. So, yes, we listen as best we can. We pay attention. But we also ask God to give us understanding.

And as God gave those first disciples insight into His ways, so we are asking today that He would open our eyes to see what we could not see without His help.

Immediately after that joyous scene with Jesus and His disciples, Luke takes us to another setting. Here, Jesus was teaching, speaking to a seated audience, perhaps in a synagogue.¹

At this gathering where Jesus was speaking, a man stood to speak to Jesus.

A Lawyer/Scribe Attempts to Put Jesus to the Test (10:25-29)

Questioning of Jesus (v. 25)

A lawyer

The speaker is a man who studied the Jewish law professionally. Sometimes called a scribe and here referred to as a lawyer, he was an expert in all things related to what we call the Old Testament.

The opinion of a scribe was held in high regard in Jesus’ day. The scribe was a community’s answer man when it came to Scripture. And this answer man has a question for Jesus.

Putting Jesus to the test

The Bible says that by this question he intended to **“put Jesus to the test.”** In fact, the word that is used to describe his question is a word that is sometimes translated *tempt*.

Some people actually think that this lawyer was trying to trip Jesus up, to trick Him, to tempt Him to misspeak.

¹ Marshall suggests that this exchange with the lawyer took place in or near Jerusalem, but there is really no way to know where this event occurred.

Maybe. I'm, personally, more of a mind that he was putting Jesus to the test like a college professor puts to the test an outspoken student.

This lawyer wanted to see what kind of an answer a young, upstart, non-credentialed teacher like Jesus would give to his own, mature, and challenging question.

Addressing Jesus as "**Teacher**" which, while not insulting, reduced Jesus from what He truly was,² he asked the question.

The question

[25] And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Evidently, Jesus got that question a lot.

One time, a rich young ruler asked, **[Matthew 19:16] "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"**³

And Jesus, wanting to bring this sincere young man to see His need for God's grace, told him to obey all the commands of God, sell all of his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Him!⁴

And yes, by that answer Jesus raised the bar impossibly high. And, yes, that was the point. Jesus was hoping to bring that young man to the end of himself and to see his need to depend on God, not on any "**good thing**" he might do.

² Both the way Luke introduces the lawyer (as putting Jesus to the test) and his address to Jesus ("**Teacher...**") tells us that he didn't hold Jesus in the highest esteem, even if it doesn't necessarily imply hostility.

³ See also Luke 18:18-23. Also, John 3 and Jesus' interview with Nicodemus, "**the teacher of Israel**" where Nicodemus asked (more sincerely than here) a similar question.

⁴ Some believe that since the questions of this scribe and the rich young ruler are so similar, the passages must be relating the same incident, but differently. I believe that it is much more likely that Jesus would have been asked this sort of a question repeatedly by different people in different settings.

Here, the lawyer asking Jesus a question speaks with less sincerity. Here, the scribe isn't desperately seeking an answer for himself.

Here, the lawyer just wants to hear what Jesus will say in response to the question of how a person is saved before God - and the question is "off" from the outset because he is thinking in terms of some sort of salvation by way of works.⁵

It is the most natural thing in the world to think in terms of being saved by works. We instinctively think that we can do something that will earn heaven.

But that's not the way it works. God gives salvation as a gift of grace when we accept that gift by faith. We come to the end of ourselves, see our desperate need for what only God can provide - forgiveness of our sin! - and trust Him for our salvation.

This lawyer hadn't quite come to the end of himself yet and was still thinking in terms of doing enough good stuff to earn his way into heaven.

And to this wrong-headed question, Jesus responded as He so often did. He turned the tables on the questioner and asked him a question back.

Answering to Jesus (vv. 26-27)

Jesus turns the tables (v. 26)

[26] And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?"

Both Jesus and the lawyer viewed the Law as authoritative. They both held Scripture in the highest regard and operated from the same playbook.

So Jesus chose to not answer the question outright, and instead challenged the lawyer, based on his understanding of the Law, to answer his own question.

⁵ So Leon Morris, I. Howard Marshall, A. T. Robertson in their commentaries.

Now the lawyer is the one on the spot and Jesus is no longer the one being examined. He is the Examiner.

Drawing from his encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture, the lawyer skillfully boiled down God's greatest commandments to two.

The lawyer answers from the Law (v. 27)

From Deuteronomy 6

[27] And he 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;

Those words are taken from Deuteronomy 6. The Jews call it the "Shema!" (Hebrew for "Hear!", because the verse starts out with, "Hear, O Israel" - which sounds like our July memory verse...)

God calls His people to unalloyed loyalty, faithfulness, and obedience. That's what is meant by this call to "love God."

But the lawyer's not finished. He moved smoothly from Deuteronomy 6 to Leviticus 19 for part two of his answer.

From Leviticus 19

[27] And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE... YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."⁶

One time, when Jesus was asked to name the greatest command God ever gave, He responded by saying exactly what this lawyer says here.⁷

So, clearly, the lawyer has gotten to the heart of what it means to live for God, even if he hasn't yet seen the necessity of faith and God's grace.

Watch now. Jesus' response is fascinating. It is short. It is brief. It is a commendation - but it's a commendation with a twist.

Commendation from Jesus - with a Twist... (v. 28)

[28] And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE."⁸

On the one hand, the lawyer has correctly identified the way to live. This - loving God and loving others - is life as God meant it to be lived.

On the other hand, with respect to eternal life, the lawyer's answer presents a problem.

If the way to inherit eternal life is on the basis of works, and if this is how to get there, then there can be no grading on the curve. What is required is **PERFECT love of God and PERFECT love of people.**⁹

But, again, that's not the way it works. It can't be. Works will never cut it with God because no one can ever perfectly fulfill the Law's requirement to love Him and to love others. We will all always fail to love God completely and we will also all always fail to love others perfectly.

This lawyer has neglected a glaring problem. He's not considered the problem created by his failure to love. He's forgotten that his sin and guilt means that he needs forgiveness. He needs the grace of God. He needs to come to God by faith, not by works.

Jesus was leading him to faith by His strong exhortation, [v. 28] **"Do this** (i.e. - perfectly, all the time, no exceptions) **and you will live."**

Now I think that Jesus was hoping that the lawyer would turn reflective and respond with, *"But I can't. Help me. I need grace."*

Sadly, he didn't say that.

⁶ One of the early rabbis (Hillel) taught, "What is hateful to you, that do not do to another."

⁷ Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-31

⁸ Notice that Jesus, likewise, says nothing about faith and grace. He's agreeing to play along with the lawyer as if salvation was by works.

⁹ So Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, vol. 2, p. 237.

But, by what he did say he made it crystal clear that he did have a sense of just how high the bar was if he was to inherit eternal life on the basis of love, especially that part about loving his “neighbor.”

The lawyer’s follow-up question to Jesus is exactly the kind of question someone asks who looking for a loophole.

Jesus Puts the Lawyer to the Test (10:30-37)

A Self-Justifying Question to Lower the Bar (v. 29)

[29] But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In the Jewish mind, a “neighbor” was someone with whom you had regular contact. It was someone like you.

Among first century Jews it was pointedly NOT applied to relationships with Gentiles or Samaritans.

Your “neighbor” was your fellow Jew, more specifically, your closest Jewish friends and your Jewish family.

You’ll remember the time that the Apostle Peter asked Jesus, “*How many times must I forgive my brother if he repents?*” He wanted to know the maximum number of times he would have to forgive.

In just the same way, this lawyer wants to know, “*Who must I love?*” His question sets up a distinction between “neighbor” and “not a neighbor”, between “someone I must love” and “those I need not love.”

And this is the set-up for Jesus’ story. He tells it to answer the lawyer’s question, “*And who is my neighbor?*”¹⁰

¹⁰ NOT, as Leon Morris point out, to answer, “*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*”

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (vv. 30-35)

A man falls victim to violent crime (v. 30)

[30] Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead.

The road that Jesus references here was a well-known road and a very dangerous road. It was - and is to this day - a desolate, wild, winding, twenty one mile stretch that dropped well over three thousand feet in elevation from Jerusalem to Jericho.

It snaked through largely uninhabited country and was a favorite haunt of robbers who would attack innocent travelers.

The man in Jesus’ story was viciously attacked by a band of these thugs. After stripping him of everything valuable - clothing, money - they left him beaten to within an inch of his life.

That’s Act One in this drama. As Act Two opens, a second man walks the same road.

He is ignored by Jewish religious figures (vv. 31-32)

A priest passed by (v. 31)

[31] “And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

We believe that nearly half of the priests alive in the first century made their homes in Jericho and would regularly travel the road to Jerusalem when they had priestly duties.¹¹

A priest is “**going down**” (that is, toward Jericho). That means that he was heading back home, probably just having finished his service at the temple.

¹¹ So, Edersheim.

Well, as luck would have it (“*by chance*”), he just happened to be walking this dangerous road as the recently beaten traveler lay wounded and bloody, lying in the ditch.

We would hope that a priest, someone in one of the helping professions, would have stopped to render aid. Really, common decency would have required it of anyone. But the priest didn’t stop. He kept walking and didn’t help at all.

Jesus says nothing about his motives or what he was or wasn’t thinking by not stopping. All we know is that he didn’t do anything to help the poor guy who was bleeding out on the side of the road.

Clearly, he didn’t view the suffering man as his neighbor. No need to show love here.

Another man also passed by, a Levite.

A Levite passed by (v. 32)

[32] “Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

The Levite did exactly what the priest had done.

In the Jewish hierarchy of the day, a priest was a more highly placed spiritual leader than a Levite. A Levite was simply a descendant of Levi, one of the sons of Jacob. A priest was descended from the priestly line from within Levi’s tribe.

So the Levite, who served the priest, would have been less likely (and less expected) to have rendered aid than the priest. And this Levite lived down to our expectations, walking right on by without lifting a finger to help. No neighbor here. No show of love necessary.

Now, we aren’t told anything about the man in the ditch, but we can safely assume that he was a Jew. The story is Jewish through and through.

And it is likely that Jesus’ Jewish audience was thoroughly enjoying the story as Jesus trashed the religious leaders of the day for being the villains who didn’t help.

But His audience would have been deeply offended, scandalized, when the story turns on the heroism of a GOOD Samaritan.

In the ears of a first century Jew, the term “Good Samaritan” would have been an oxymoron along the lines of deafening silence, civil war, pretty ugly, and working vacation.

To the ancient Jew, there was no such thing as a *good* Samaritan.

A Samaritan DOESN’T pass by (vv. 33-35)

He felt compassion (v. 33)

It is well documented that Jews and Samaritans of the first century hated each other. And if anything, there was more hatred coming from the Jewish side.

The Jews viewed the Samaritans as an unclean, mongrel race of Jew and heathen, formed when the Assyrians overran the northern part of Israel in the 8th century BC and intermarried with Jews.

So despised were the Samaritans that a Jew journeying from Galilee to Judea would travel around the land of Samaria to avoid defiling himself by stepping on Samaritan soil.

It’s an ugly picture of racial prejudice and bigotry.

Jesus tells us that this Samaritan was traveling the same road that the injured Jew and the priest and the Levite had all traveled. So, while a Jew would have avoided Samaria, this Samaritan didn’t go out of his way to avoid Israel.

We don’t know if he was going to Jericho or to Jerusalem, whether he was going up or down. We do know that when he got to the place where the attacked man lay, he was overcome with compassion.

[33] “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion

We don’t know what moved the priest and the Levite to NOT help. We do know that the Samaritan’s compassion overcame whatever distaste he might have had for the Jews. And his compassion moved him to give material aid.

He gave “hands-on” care (v. 34)

[34] and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

Wound care of the first century required oil and wine. The oil would have soothed the pain and the wine would have served to disinfect the open wounds.

Then, having bandaged him, the Samaritan didn’t just leave him there on the side of the road.

He loaded the injured man on to his own donkey (which would have meant that he himself walked!) and hauled him to the nearest hostel (of which there were a few on this road that served travelers).

And the story doesn’t end with him dropping the man off at the inn.

He provided sacrificially (v. 35)

[35] “On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’

The Samaritan has already seriously inconvenienced himself for this man. In addition to time and energy, he now puts his money on the line.

He had to leave the wounded man at the inn, but promised he would come back to pay for any expenses incurred in his absence. And he left two denarii with the innkeeper to take care of him until he returned.

I’ve read in various places that two denarii would have paid for expenses for this man’s care for anywhere from a few days to up to two or three weeks.

Regardless of the specifics of how much time and care his money would have bought, he clearly went above and beyond to help this man - someone he’d never even met!

And THAT is The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

With the story over, Jesus turned to the lawyer whose testing question had prompted the story. Jesus now has a question to pose to him.

A Question Designed to Bring Conviction (vv. 37-38)

Jesus asked a question of the lawyer (v. 36)

[36] “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?”

Notice. Jesus reversed the lawyer’s question. The original question was, “*Who is the neighbor to whom I have to show love?*”

Jesus’ story answers the question, “*What does a ‘neighbor’ do when faced with a needy person?*”

So, who was the “neighbor” in the story? The lawyer knows.

Jesus gives an assignment (v. 37)

[37a] And he said, “The one¹² who showed mercy toward him.”

He got it. And Jesus hit right back with, **[37b]...“Go and do the same.”**

Be a neighbor to everyone who comes across your path. Love extravagantly and sacrificially. Let compassion flow freely.

¹² It has been suggested that the lawyer avoided using the word “Samaritan” out of disgust for the term.

Now, as we prepare to wrap up our time together I want to explore a couple of possible responses we might have to this parable. We'll start off with the response Jesus might have hoped for from the lawyer.

Conclusion:

To the lawyer...

The Jewish scribe had been working under the assumption that eternal life was available for those who worked hard for it. And no doubt, he had been working hard.

But there is a problem with the way of works when it comes to seeking to gain eternal life. The problem with throwing works at the problem of gaining eternal life is that there's never an end. It's never enough.

You are always aware of not having done quite enough, of failing. And so you always have to keep on adding more and more works in the hopes of finally doing enough good works to get you over the top - but you never get there. Like a gerbil stuck in a wheel, you never get there. Never.

This past week, Kathy's brother, Don, had a couple more setbacks following his most recent stroke back in June.

One day Don got really agitated, as can happen with stroke victims.

To treat his agitation, the staff at his rehab facility gave him medication to help reduce the agitation. Unfortunately, one of the listed possible side effects of this particular medication is, you guessed it, increased agitation. And yes, Don got more agitated.

So what do you do, take even more of the agitation-inducing anti-agitation medicine? No, that's just crazy-making. It's probably better to try some other treatment.

When the lawyer asked Jesus, **[10:25] "Teacher, what shall I DO to inherit eternal life?"**, Jesus decided to get this gerbil off the wheel of works.

He had to get the man to see where dependence on works would take him; that it only led to more and more obsession with doing enough good works - and that it would never be enough.

So, He told the man, **[10:37] "Go and do the same."** (the same sorts of things that the Samaritan had done)

But now that he has heard the story of the Good Samaritan from Jesus, the lawyer knows that **"Go and do the same"** and this whole **"love your neighbor"** thing raises the bar waaaay higher than he ever would have thought. Too high, in fact.¹³

He knows that he could never PERFECTLY show the kind of love that the Samaritan showed to the wounded man to all people at all times. And we hope that he finally saw that he didn't have it in him to be the kind of neighbor Scripture called him to be.

The story is the end of the way of works for anyone seeking salvation by works. It is time for a new treatment. It's time for grace.

If you have ever felt like you've been doing the best you can to measure up to what God requires, and you've been trying really hard, and you keep on failing, you are probably right where God wants you to be.

It's time to stop trying to measure up. It's time to accept the free gift of the grace of God, given to you or me or to anyone who believes in Jesus.

The good news is that gaining eternal life is not about how good you are or how hard you try. It's about receiving what God wants to give you.

You are the one lying on the side of the road. You've been beaten to a bloody pulp and you are helpless to do anything for yourself. Jesus is the Good Samaritan and He has stopped to save you. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin and He rose again from the dead to give you life.

¹³ Thomas Constable: He gave the lawyer a humanly impossible assignment.

We don't know if the lawyer whose question prompted Jesus to tell today's story saw his need and turned to God in faith to receive grace.

But if you have been chasing the way of works, you've seen today where it will get you. Nowhere! So, for the sake of your eternal soul, abandon that futile path and receive the free gift of eternal salvation from God by placing your trust in Jesus. Today.

Then, what does the parable of the Good Samaritan say to those of us here today who have already found eternal life in Jesus?

To us...

It dawned on me this week that today is the first time I've ever brought a message on this particular parable in all the years that I've been a pastor.

That's surprising, actually, as I grew up with the story, learning it as a child. However, in the church in which I was raised the lesson of the story always devolved into something really benign, like, "*Be nice.*"

For years (decades!) I've studiously avoided this parable, thinking it was something it was not. I saw it through kid-colored glasses. Then I grew up, but I never allowed the story to grow up with me. Well, this week, I grew up by letting Jesus' story mature.

It is certainly true that loving God and loving people as best as you possibly can isn't the way to find grace from God. It's not the key to eternal life. It is, however, absolutely the way to live for those who have received grace from God.

The parable we've just heard is nothing other than a story about what the second greatest commandment is all about and the challenges associated with obeying it.

It's about profligate love poured out to help people in need. As one author I read this week put it, "*The parable of the Good Samaritan has built the world's hospitals, and, if understood and applied, would eradicate racial prejudice, war, and class jealousy.*"

It's about the shame of racial prejudice and about how love overcomes bigotry.

It's about motives. True, Jesus didn't identify motives as to why the priest and the Levite didn't stop to help, but that need not stop us from wondering...

- Was it the problem of inconvenience and messing up a schedule?¹⁴
- Was it fear of entanglement with someone else's messy life?
- Was the issue safety, fearing that the robbers were still around looking for other prey?
- Did they fear defilement and contamination from the victim?

Possibly "Yes" to any or all of these. And if we identify with any of those reasons, we have to admit that those will be, sometimes, *legitimate* reasons to not stop and help.

But love will, at times, mean interrupting my schedule, spending my money, risking my reputation, expending my energies, ruining my property even for a stranger, so that I can do what is best for him.

When you and I come to apply this story to our lives we have to wrestle with and balance out the messy realities of *sacrifice* and *boundaries* (Exactly what boundaries did the Samaritan have in place that protected him against enabling...?), *responsible living* and *extravagant giving*. And it's not easy.

For most of us most of the time there won't be easy answers or simple formulas telling us when to stop and help and when it would be best not to stop and help.

Applying this parable will require an "in the moment" sensitivity and wisdom from God. And... it will require an openness to compassion.

The parable highlights the beauty of compassion and challenges us to cultivate a Samaritan-like compassion for people who have fallen on hard times. It may be that with increased compassion there will be less calculation. More extravagant living and giving.

¹⁴ Was the priest on his way to a compassion seminar in Jericho? ☺

The Good Samaritan story calls us to allow ourselves to be trashed, to be wrecked and overwhelmed by the plight of the person lying in the ditch, living in a car, suffering disease, who has lost a job, whose marriage is a mess.

Then, recognize something central about your friend who doesn't know your Jesus. This is the family member or the neighbor or the really nice guy at work who is still depending on what he can do to get right with God.

You've got him in your mind's eye? You can see him?

That's him on the side of the road. He has been waylaid, robbed and beaten to within an inch of his life by the one who hates him the most. She's lying in a ditch on the side of the road. She can't help herself - and there you stand.

What will you do?

Will you stop and help? Will you be neighborly? Will you tell her about your Jesus?