

Love Unconditionally

July 14, 2019 – PT

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ 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; and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor"?"

³⁰ Jesus 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. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 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."



Today we begin a new sermon series. It is called "Action Required". Over the course of the next four weeks we will look at the call we have as followers of Jesus Christ to live out our faith in our day to day lives in practical ways. Today we begin with the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. Let us pray...

Our passage today begins with a lawyer challenging or testing Jesus. As we begin to work through the text this morning, I invite you to turn to Luke 10 in your Bibles. We will be starting with verse 25. The lawyer appears to be well-versed in the Torah or Law. Scholars believe he was trying to embarrass Jesus, to show him up in this public setting. The lawyer begins by asking Jesus a basic question. It is a question that I hope we all could answer if someone asked us this question later today. In verse 25 the lawyer asks, "*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" It is a pretty straight forward question. But Jesus must sense that something is up here. Instead of answering with the standard Jewish reply, Jesus first seeks the lawyer's thoughts. The lawyer knows the scriptures well and, in verse 27, gives the pat answer: "*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*". The lawyer quotes the two great commands, one from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus. Jesus congratulates the man on his correct answer. The man knows the scriptures. He knows what the letter of the "law" says he should do, but he also knows the law is a guide. Loving God and loving neighbor can take many forms.

Today, when we read or hear the word "law", we think of the statutory laws of our day and age. When we hear the word "law" we tend to think in black and white terms. Either you broke the law, or you did not. But in Moses' day and in Jesus' day and in the Jewish religious system even of today, the law was and is much more like a moral guide than a black and white, strict code. The role of the rabbi was to read and interpret and apply the law. They did so both on a case by case basis and also in the general application sense as well. One situation or context might mean a different application of the principal or moral directive underlying a specific law. For thousands of years, Jewish rabbis have been doing this. The interpretation and application of the law is compiled in two writings known as the "Midrash" and the "Talmud". Because the world changes, how the law is understood and applied also changes. The underlying truths or ethics remain unchanged, but how they are understood and applied changes.

These scholarly, rabbinic writings evolved because it was often difficult to determine, simply from reading the biblical text, what Jewish law would be in current practice. The need for further explanation or understanding came because the text is often too general or is very ambiguous when presenting laws. Midrash halacha, therefore, attempts to clarify or extend a law beyond the conditions assumed in the Bible. It also tries to make connections between current practice and the biblical text. For example, through this rabbinic study and work, it made possible the creation and acceptance of new liturgies and rituals which replaced sacrificial worship. This was a necessity because of the destruction of the Second Temple. In the places where Jesus says, "*You have heard it said, but I say...*" he was practicing this rabbinic method of understanding and applying the law to the current situation. This method is

what has kept the Holy Scriptures a living document for the Jews. This concept or understanding is found in other places in the New Testament as well. In Hebrews 4:12 we read, *"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart"*. This gets at understanding what the meaning or intent or underlying moral code of the law is instead of knowing what the letter of the law simply says. The important question for the rabbis of his day and for Jesus himself was: how does said law or laws guide our daily living, decisions, and so forth?

The lawyer in our passage would have understood that the commands he quoted from Leviticus and Deuteronomy were not cut and dried, black and white, etched in stone laws. He would understand that loving God, for example, meant one thing in this context and another thing in that context. As a student of the law, he would have understood the myriad of ways that these two commands could be applied and understood and lived out. For example, we all love our children. Yet we do not let them do anything because we love them. At times we practice "tough love" because that is what truly loving them calls for. So, in our passage today, if the man did not have ulterior motives, the conversation would have ended in verse 28. But the man's smugness, his feeling of superiority, leads him to push the conversation. In verse 29 we read these words: *"But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor'?"*

The lawyer wants Jesus to quantify or limit the strong ethical demand understood in the law. He wants Jesus to precisely define who his neighbor really is and is not. In this way, he can limit who he has to love under the ideal or ethic of these two laws. As we will see in his answer, Jesus demonstrates that the real issue is not *whom* we should serve but *that* we seek to serve. The issue is not how we *see* others but how we are to *act* toward them. We are not to ask who our neighbor is, but we are to seek to be a neighbor. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, in essence, Jesus turns the onus to act back on the lawyer, saying, in effect, "Don't worry about the other guy, just focus on being a good neighbor yourself". Understand what it is to be a neighbor to the other. In doing so one will live out the commands to love God and to love neighbor.

Returning to our passage, beginning in verse 30, Jesus tells a familiar parable. You know the story – a man is traveling alone in the desolate area between Jerusalem and Jericho, falls into the hands of some robbers, is stripped and beaten, and is left for dead on the side of the road. Along comes a priest and then a Levite who both see the man and choose to pass by on the other side of the road. The man is left for dead. We think, how could they pass him by? That is our cultural understanding. Both the priest and Levite would have been ingrained with the idea of following the laws for ritual purity. Their natural inclination would have been to avoid the man's blood. It is what they have been taught their whole lives. They most likely felt compassion, but their ingrained understandings would have led them to pass by.

Then along comes a Samaritan. He is moved by pity. He has no built-in stops – nothing that says keep going. He stops and cares for the man’s injuries. He brings him to an inn, cares for him for a day, and then leaves money for any more expenses that the innkeeper might incur. And then he promises to come back and pay for any other expenses that the man might incur. What a guy, right?

This parable teaches about the practical love of God and of one’s neighbor. The star of the parable is the Samaritan. From the eyes of the typical Jew, Samaritans were ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, and religiously heretics. In other words, the Samaritan is the polar opposite of the lawyer and the priest and the Levite. The Samaritan is the last person the lawyer would have expected to be the hero who steps in to save the man beaten by robbers. The parable would have been shocking in a couple of ways to the lawyer and to the Jewish audience gathered there that day. The first shock would come from Jesus shattering their idea of who were and who were not the people of God. Clearly if this Samaritan can show compassion and love as God loves, then maybe they belong to God too. The second shock would come in Jesus’ assertion that as children of God, the call to love is a call to love without preference and without partiality, to love without expecting anything in return.

Just as it was when Jesus first spoke it, so it is today. It was and is a parable intended to provoke. The ones we most expect to help – the priest and the Levite - are the ones who pass by on the other side of the road. Concern for their own safety and maintaining their own ritual purity overrides the obvious call

to love unconditionally. The despised Samaritan, the one most at risk when he chooses to stop and care for the man in this dangerous no-man's land, is the one who takes the chance and helps the one in need. For the lawyer and the audience, it is the hated enemy who has a human heart. It is the outcast who puts his time and his money where his mouth is, so to speak.

Jesus closes the parable by asking the lawyer a simple question. In verse 36 we read, "*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers*"? The lawyer knows the right answer. Knowing that he was trying to justify himself, to limit the scope of who his neighbor was, giving the right answer must have been hard. Yes, he answers well, saying, "*The one who showed him mercy*". In response, Jesus says to him, "*Go and do likewise*". Go and be the good neighbor. Go and love unconditionally.

Jesus says the same thing to you and me. Go and be the good neighbor. Go and love unconditionally. We are not to consider who deserves our care or to help only those who we think can repay us. Jesus calls us to take action, to treat everyone we encounter – however different, frightening, alien, naked, or defenseless they may be – and treat them with compassion. To you and to me, Jesus says, "*Go and do likewise*". May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

GPS - Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. Think about who is your neighbor. In what area(s) do you need to grow in God's love?
- 2) Pray. When do you play the role of priest or Levite, passing by? Pray for God's compassion for all to fill you.
- 3) Serve. How can you be like the Samaritan this week?