Bad Samaritans

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Luke 10:25-37

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of Jesus’ best known stories. Even people with zero knowledge of the Bible know something of this story. There are Good Samaritan Hospitals and Good Samaritan Churches. There is a whole section of the American legal code called Good Samaritan Laws, which protect from liability anyone who comes to the aid of someone in distress.

I learned this parable in Sunday school. My Sunday school teacher tried valiantly to engage squirmy kids like me in Bible lessons by asking us to role-play Jesus’ parables. My friends and I loved to role-play this Good Samaritan parable. We eagerly raised our hands to play the part of the robbers in the story. We’d go a little overboard on the one who was cast in the role of the man who fell among thieves. He could receive a real beat-down.

Most of the sermons I’ve heard on this Good Samaritan parable strike me as overly sentimental. They remind me of the way Mister Rogers began his children’s TV show. Every day he would open the door and put on his Cardigan sweater and sneakers while singing, “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?” I’ve heard my share of Good Samaritan sermons that sound like Mister Rogers. Don’t be like the two men in our story who don’t do the right thing. Be like the third man and be nice to people.

No, this parable has a real bite to it. It’s downright scandalous about this matter of my neighbor, but we’ll take this up a few moments from now.

Our story centers on an unnamed lawyer. Matthew identifies him as a scribe; the equivalent of a Bible lawyer, you might say. This lawyer wants Jesus to define Biblical law. He asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25). He asks the question, Luke tells us, to test Jesus. His question doesn’t necessarily imply negative intent. I suspect he genuinely wants to know what he can do to inherit eternal life.

Jesus answers the man’s question with a question of his own, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” (10:26). It’s a classic rabbinic
move to respond to a question with a question. Woody Allen is asked in one of his movies, “Why does a rabbi always answer a question with a question?” Allen answers, “Why, wouldn’t a rabbi answer a question with a question?”

The lawyer answers with a composite of two Scripture passages. He couples a well-known verse from Deuteronomy, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind” with a reference from the Levitical code, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

Jesus commends this lawyer for his accuracy. “You have answered correctly. Do this and live” (10:28).

Our lawyer prevails upon Jesus to pose a follow-up question. Luke tells us that he asks this question to justify himself: “But wanting to justify himself, he asks Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (10:29). Circle this word justify. This Bible lawyer wants Jesus to define neighbor in such a way to justify his prejudice.

Jesus answers by telling a story about a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Since Jerusalem is 2,500 feet above sea level and Jericho is 800 feet in elevation, it’s downhill all the way. This 17-mile trek between these two cities is notoriously dangerous. For centuries, it was known as “the Bloody Way.”

Sure enough, thugs rob this unsuspecting man and leave him half dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite (who is comparable to a priest) see this man lying in the ditch. Both of them keep right on walking. Perhaps they’re late for temple worship or the man has already died. According to Jewish law, touching a corpse would render these priests ceremonially unclean.

Our lawyer must be thinking if the priest and the Levite don’t help, surely another Jew will come along to supply alms. That would be a fitting end to this story. Here’s where the story takes a wrong turn. A Samaritan stops to give him aid. A Samaritan is the last man this Jewish lawyer would have expected to come to this man’s rescue.

There was bad blood between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans intermarried with foreigners and picked a rival site for worship. Jews would go out of their way to avoid walking on Samaritan soil. They would never identify this story as the parable of the Good Samaritan. The only parable that could be told about such people would label them bad Samaritans. In truth, for many Jews the only Good Samaritan would be a dead Samaritan.

Yet, this Samaritan is precisely the one who dresses the man’s wounds, puts him on his donkey, accompanies him to the Jericho Inn and pays for his
lodging. This Samaritan ends up as the hero in Jesus’ story.

When Jesus asks, “Which of these three was a neighbor to his man?”, the lawyer gives the only possible answer. He can’t quite bring himself to say the word Samaritan, so he simply answers, “The one who showed the man mercy.”

The lawyer’s initial question, “What can I do to inherit eternal life?”, implies there is something he can do to inherit this kind of life. It’s the first clue in the story that something is scrambled in this man’s mind. Our lawyer friend wants a set of rules to follow so he can merit eternal life. But Jesus is emphatic at this point. Eternal life is not a matter of keeping rules.

The other matter that strikes me odd about this man’s question is his presumption that he can do something “to inherit eternal life.” Inheritance is entirely at the discretion of the giver, not the receiver. Look at it this way. There is nothing I can do to inherit some of Bill Gates’s fortune. I have no claim on his assets, so there’s nothing I can do to inherit what belongs to him. It’s entirely Bill Gates’s prerogative to do whatever he wants with his fortune.

Jesus says to this lawyer there’s nothing you can do, mister, to inherit eternal life. Inheritance is always at the discretion of the giver, not the receiver.

There are two ways of going about religion. You can try to earn God’s favor or you can accept the fact that you can’t earn God’s favor and receive it.

If grace is given only to the deserving, then God’s favor can be earned. This approach treats good behavior much as a scout receives merit badges. The young man in your picture, Shawn Goldsmith, recently earned all 121 Boy Scout merit badges. Merit badges work well in scouting, but it doesn’t pass muster when it comes to inheriting eternal life. Salvation is not earned by human merit.

But if grace originates in God’s heart and is entirely God’s doing, then grace is for the undeserving. In Dallas Willard’s words, “Grace is God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.”

One of the things we cannot do is save ourselves. Salvation is entirely God’s doing.

I’m reminded of one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes: “Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you will stay out and your dog would go in.” Dogs are trustworthy and loyal; people not so much.

Salvation is what God does for us in Jesus Christ. God, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, offers us forgiveness for our sins. We cannot atone for our own sins; salvation is something God does for us. We can receive or reject the gift, but we can’t earn the gift.

There is a built-in danger with this Biblical doctrine of
Good Samaritan living will disrupt our well-ordered lives.

grace. If grace is entirely God’s doing and there is nothing I can do to earn it, then I might be tempted to play fast and loose with God’s favor. If it doesn’t ultimately matter what I say or do, then grace becomes my get-out-of-heaven-free card. I can lead a reckless life, knowing that God will ultimately forgive me.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined a phrase to caution against such complacency. He called it “cheap grace.” He wrote in Cost of Discipleship, “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church. It is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” Grace is what initiates us into a life of discipleship.

Jesus answers this lawyer’s follow-up question about who is my neighbor with this Good Samaritan parable. God’s grace makes a claim on every sinner saved by grace. Jesus obligates us to expand the definition of our neighbor. Our neighbor can no longer be confined just to my kind of people. My neighbor is anyone lying in the ditch who needs my help.

Good Samaritan living will disrupt our well-ordered lives. Helping people will sometimes inconvenience us. Talk about life is messy! Getting involved in helping other people’s lives is messy business.

Let me bring this passage down to real church life.

Sooner or later, someone is going to hurt your feelings in this church. You can pretty much count on it. I say this not because this church is full of mean-spirited people, but because this church is full of sinners, people who are deeply flawed. We will sometimes say and do things that will hurt each other.

One way to avoid this from happening is to keep a safe distance. That way, nobody will be able to hurt us. The philosopher Schopenhauer likened human community to porcupines who huddle together on a cold, winter night to stay warm. The closer these porcupines move toward one another, the more they poke each other with their sharp quills. This causes them to separate until they become cold again, so they move back in closer proximity only to prick each other and separate again.

Human community involves the dance of moving close to one another for connection and separating so we won’t get hurt.

Schopenhauer, who was something of a pessimist, concluded that the only way to avoid getting hurt was to keep a safe distance. Jesus offers another way. It’s the way of grace. I receive this grace as a gift. I can’t possibly pay back the gift, so I pay it forward. I seek to express gratitude through grace-filled, Good Samaritan living.