

## “The Parables of Jesus—The Good Samaritan ”

[VIDEO OPENER] Jesus told this story to get us thinking. Who would you be? The priest? The Levite? The Samaritan? Over the last few weeks we've been learning about the parables of Jesus. We've learned that a parable is a story, or an analogy from everyday life that points to a deeper spiritual truth. Jesus tells the parables about everyday life things in order to help people get an insight, a glimpse into a deeper spiritual or theological truth. The challenge for us, of course, is that what was everyday and ordinary 2,000 years ago is not necessarily everyday and ordinary to us today. So sometimes we have to understand Jesus' analogy first so that then we can get the deeper point Jesus is trying to make. The parable of the good Samaritan is pretty clear, you can read it and get the main point, but when we go deeper we can see other aspects of this story.

We've also learned that when we look at one of Jesus' parables it's important to look at the context—what prompted Jesus to say what he said? In this story the context is a conversation Jesus is having with a lawyer. This was not a secular lawyer, he was a religious lawyer—he was an expert in the law of Moses and as an expert in the law of Moses he hears Jesus' teachings and wonders, “Where is this guy coming from? What's his angle?”

The scripture says this lawyer went to test Jesus. Later on the Pharisees, the religious leaders, will try to trap Jesus, but this lawyer is not trying to trap Jesus he's just trying to see where Jesus is coming from; he wants to know if Jesus is legitimate, and if he is, what's his theological perspective? So he asks Jesus a question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That's a big question and Jesus' answer will help this guy know Jesus' school of thought.

But Jesus, being a good teacher, doesn't give an immediate answer to the question. Instead he says, “What do you think?” The lawyer says, “I think that to inherit eternal life we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves.”

Jesus says to the lawyer, “You have answered correctly. Do these things and you will live.” Jesus understands this is what the life of a Christ-follower should look like. But let's take a minute and wonder, and explore, was that lawyer asking the right question to begin with? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It's the question lots of people, lots of us are interested in: “How do I get to heaven? What do I have to do?” Lots of people wonder, “Am I going to heaven or hell when I die?” And we want to do whatever it takes to go to heaven. The way the lawyer asked the question sounds like he's really asking, “Jesus, what's the bare minimum I have to do to escape hell and get to heaven? What do I have to do to make sure my fire insurance policy is in effect? What do I have to do to save my eternal assets; to have paradise, Jesus?” But again, is that the right question? Should the man maybe have asked a question like this: “Teacher, what do I have to do to please God? How would I have to live my life to honor God and to live as a fully authentic human being?”

The two questions, “What do I have to do to inherit eternal life” and “What do I have to do to please God?” the two are similar, but they're different in this one very important way...their motivation.

Parents you know what I'm talking about. There are times when your kids come up to you, to me, and say, “Daddy, you're the best daddy in the world, I love you so much...” and you know what's coming. They want something! They're all lovey so they can get something. “Daddy can I have some money, Daddy can I stay out late tonight; Daddy can I have the keys to the car?” You can see them coming a mile away. The sweetness and love has a catch. That's so much different than the times when they're sweet, and loving and want to sit in your lap, just because. Zoe and I were playing Monday night and she just looked up at me and said, “I love you Daddy, you're the best daddy.” Didn't want a thing. There's a big difference isn't there because on the one had you feel used and on the other hand you feel blessed.

Sometimes in our religiosity we can use God, we can use our religion to get what we want, and it's all about us. Actually, when we first come to Christ, for a lot of us, it really is all about us. We want the blessings of being a Christian: the joy that is full and abundant, the peace that goes beyond understanding, we want eternal life. So we're willing to do whatever it takes to get those things because it's all about us. But at some point, as we grow and mature in faith, we realize that it's not about us and that we're going to love God and love people not because we want something, but because that love just flows from us. Early on in our faith walk it's about what I can get from God, from the church, but as we mature and grow, it becomes about what I can give.

So the lawyer answers Jesus' question correctly and Jesus tells him, “Well done.” But it's pretty clear from the next question the lawyer asks that maybe he understood with his head, but not with his heart. Because the next question he asks is, “OK Jesus I know I'm supposed to love God with all of who I am and I'm supposed to love my neighbor as I love myself, but Jesus, tell me, who is my neighbor?” In other words, “Who are the people I absolutely have to love and who are the people I don't have to love?” That's something that the religious leaders of that day debated. They would debate, “Is our neighbor everybody,

or is it just our Jewish brothers and sisters? Is our neighbor all our Jewish brothers and sisters or is it just the faithful Jewish brothers and sisters?' They debated these things often.

So to answer this question, Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan. I want you to listen carefully to this parable because it's meant to speak to you today.

Jesus begins by saying that there was a man who was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was mugged by bandits. He was beaten until he was nearly dead. The bandits stole everything he had including the clothes off his back. The man was left there at the side of the road to die.

The people listening to Jesus tell this would have been nodding their heads because they knew that road well. Everybody knew that it was a dangerous road. In the 20 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho the road drops 3,600 feet. It winds through rough territory. On the road sometimes you'd have steep rock hills on either side, pocked with caves. The road also has lots of sharp turns and all this is perfect for bandits to hide in, jump out from, rob and steal and then disappear into the landscape. Even into the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was still a dangerous road.

This traveler is beaten, robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. A while later a priest is making his way down the road, and as he's making his way down the road he sees the beaten man and crosses to the other side of the road and keeps on going.

Then a Levite comes down the road. A Levite was an assistant to a priest and a teacher of the law. He sees the man beaten and laying there, he also crosses over to the other side and walks on by.

These are the two people we would expect to do something for the man that was injured. They were people who had given their lives to serving God. They're the ones who should be the heroes in the story. But the priests and Levites did not like this story very much. Later on we see that the priests and Levites grew to hate Jesus and it was partly because he told stories like this. When Jesus pointed out their hypocrisy and embarrassed them.

Here's the thing about the priest and the Levite. They were not necessarily bad people. They loved God and they wanted to do the right thing. Maybe they just had a temporary lapse in judgment. Some interpreters say that they may have thought the man was dead and if they would have touched him they would have been unclean for 7 days and not able to do their jobs. Maybe they were in a hurry to get somewhere and do something. Maybe they assumed that the next person walking by would be better able to help the guy. Have you ever thought that? Seen a situation and said to yourself, "Somebody else will take care of that." You didn't feel like you had the time or the ability to do anything.

A study was done at Princeton University years ago. A group of seminary students at Princeton Seminary was asked to prepare a lesson on the parable of the Good Samaritan... and then they were set up. Actors were hired to pretend like they were people in distress in obvious places on campus. These seminary students were told after they'd prepared their lesson on the Good Samaritan that they needed to hurry because they had just a few minutes to get across campus to teach their lesson. Get this: 90% of the seminary students walked right past the people who were obviously in trouble because they were in a hurry to go teach a lesson on the parable of the Good Samaritan! There were a handful of the students that actually stepped over people that appeared to be passed out to go teach the parable of the Good Samaritan! We get in a hurry sometimes, we think somebody else will take care of the problem.

But maybe that's not the reason for the priest and the Levite. Maybe they were just afraid. Maybe they were scared that this might be a trap and that the person laying there might be bait to get them to stop while others jumped out. Maybe they were just scared.

A few years ago I was out running. I'm by myself. It's early morning and the sun is just starting to come up so it's still kind of gray outside. I run from the house west and then turn south on Iron Gates. I'm about a mile and a half from the house almost to 32<sup>nd</sup> Street. I'm going down this hill on Iron Gates and in the distance I see a person lying on the road, probably about 300 yards away. I begin to wonder all the typical things. Did somebody get hit by a car? Pass out? Get thrown out of a car? Are they dead? Alive? Hurt? If they're not dead or hurt, will they hurt me? If they are hurt, what can I do to help? I don't have a cell phone. I don't have any money. I don't have anything on me. I come upon this person and they're wearing thick coveralls, just lying there almost in the road. As I run up I can't tell if it's a man or a woman. The person props up on their elbow and looks at me. I stop and say, "Are you OK?" They speak and say, "I'm fine, how are you?" I realize then that it's a woman. I say, "I'm fine, but do you need anything?" I'm starting to feel uncomfortable. She was very dirty and just kind of smiled and said, "Nope. I'm fine." It was so strange. I didn't know what to do so I just said, "Well, take care of yourself." And I ran off. As I did, I prayed for her. On my way back home she was gone. That really shook me up. To this day I don't if I did the right thing. But I sure feel like I, your pastor, was the Levite.

It's kind of hard to figure out how to help people. I've stopped and helped people in need, given people rides, jumped-started cars and that sort of thing, but I don't want my daughters to do that when they old enough to drive. I'll tell them, "You see somebody stranded on the side of the road, call somebody, call 911, call me, but don't you dare stop or you could get hurt." What kind of example is that for them? Janet has helped people and given them rides and that freaks me out.

You encounter somebody who's asking for money. Are they going to take your \$10 and buy food or go buy some booze? You don't know. It's hard to know how best to help people. Over the years here at the church we get lots of people who need help. Sometimes as we check them out we find out they're scamming all the churches and agencies in town. Other people come in for help and we know that without our help it's the end of the line for them. But sometimes we can't give them as much help as we want because we know that then there won't be anything left to help anybody else. It's always hard to know how to help people.

Maybe what Jesus is teaching us in the parable is not specific so much as it's a general rule of thumb: your neighbor is anybody who needs your help and you help them however you can.

Let's see what the Samaritan did. The twist here is that Samaritans were hated by the Jews. The wounded man in the story is a Jew. And he probably would never have even given the Samaritan the time of day. The Samaritan knows that this man despises him and that he's his enemy. And yet notice what happens. "But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 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. 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.'"

One definition of Christian discipleship is when we routinely, easily and naturally begin to do the things that God would want us to do (Dallas Willard). It doesn't come naturally to want to do these things until you find yourself changed by the power of the Holy Spirit and over time you find yourself easily and naturally doing the things God wants you to do. And that's where this Samaritan was. He was the most unexpected hero and yet he is the example for us. And again we ask the question, "Which will you be, the Levite or the Samaritan?"

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on this passage. It was the very last sermon he would ever preach before he was assassinated. He said this, "In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan and the Levite were asking two very different questions. The Levite was asking, 'What will happen to me if I stop and help this man?' But the Samaritan asked, 'What will happen to this man if I don't stop and help him?'" It's the difference between it all being about me and it being about pursuing God's purposes in our lives. This is just one parable of many that Jesus tells about this issue because it was so important to him.

There's another thing Martin Luther King said about this passage in a different sermon. He said that "On one hand we're called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will only be an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring."

This is where Dr. King got himself in trouble on a regular basis. It's not hard to tell people to give food in the food drive, or socks and gloves on the sock tree. To help somebody when they're stranded or down on their luck. But when you start asking questions like, "Why are there poor people in our society and what can we do to change that and what do we need to change about ourselves in order to address those issues," that's where people start getting mad.

Listen carefully: the Levites today say, "You know what, those are big questions and I don't think I can figure out the answers, and I can't really be involved, and those are political things and social issues, and ethical issues, and I'm just going to keep my nose out of it all and take care of me."

But the Samaritans of today ask, "How can I be a part of changing the world? How can I address these really big issues and change them?" One answer is by exercising your right to vote, every time you get the chance. I've never told you how to vote and never will. But here's what I will tell you to do, vote in such a way that you are making informed decisions. Do your research before you vote rather than just show up and make a random pick that you don't really know anything about. Be thinking, be asking, "Which of these candidates or choices represents the position I think might change the world the best?" When it comes to big, important issues, we've got to pray and discern and constantly be asking, "How can we change our world, even through our political process." And if you don't take that seriously, in that realm, you've been the Levite and not the Samaritan. We're called to address the issues and change things that cause pain in our world and in the lives of people.

You see, this is the challenge of living out faith with substance. Way too many of us settle for faith that's like cotton candy. It looks like it's really big but when you bite into it it's only so much sugar and air.

I want to challenge you as Christians at Saint Paul's...don't have a Christianity that looks like cotton candy. Have a Christianity of substance where you engage your mind, and your heart, and where you're serving God with your hands. And it becomes simple, routine obedience for you to see people who are in need and for you to be the hands of Christ for people.

I love the story of the Good Samaritan, because every time I read it, it means I get a second chance to do it right. This is not about feeling guilty, it means I can get clearer in my head about what I can do when I encounter somebody in need. Today, in hearing this story, you get a second chance, especially if you know you've blown it in the past in your neighborhood or at work. That coworker who was obviously distraught, maybe been crying, and you didn't take the time to stop and ask because you were in a hurry to go your next meeting, or afraid, or whatever.

John Lennon once said life is what happens when you're busy making other plans. It's those interruptions where life really happens, where ministry to others really happens. Your road to Jericho is on your way to work, on your way to school, on your way to that meeting, on your way across the office and the question is tomorrow, will you be the Levite or the Samaritan. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources for this message.