

LUKE 10:25–37. (EHV)

Just then, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus, saying, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “**What is written in the law?**” he asked him. “**What do you read there?**” He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself.” He said to him, “**You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.**” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “**A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. It just so happened that a priest was going down that way. But when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way, a Levite also happened to go there, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. A Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was. When he saw him, he felt sorry for the man. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He put him on his own animal, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, when he left, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him. Whatever extra you spend, I will repay you when I return.’ Which of these three do you think acted like a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?**” “**The one who showed mercy to him,**” he replied. Then Jesus told him, “**Go and do likewise.**”

Most if not all of you are familiar with the story of the good Samaritan. What is the point of this story? Even if people are completely unfamiliar with the Bible, they might still be familiar with the concept of a good Samaritan because of “Good Samaritan” health centers and hospitals and people describing others and themselves as “good Samaritans.” All of this easily leads us to think that the story of the good Samaritan is a story meant to instruct us about what kind of people we should be, a story meant to instruct us about the way to truly love others.

Well, it *is* a story meant to instruct us about what kind of people we should be. It *is* a story that teaches us about what Christian love truly is. But not at all in the way a great many people think it does.

1.

Jesus told the familiar story of the good Samaritan when “an expert in the law stood up to test [him]” with an all-important question. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the law?” [Jesus] asked him. “What do you read there?”

“He replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself.’

“[Jesus] said to him, ‘You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.’”

This man understood what the law of God was after—love. He understood that God wants people first and foremost to love him with all they are and have. You can’t truly love anyone else until you first truly love the true God. And the man also understood that God wants people to love their neighbor as themselves, to treat their neighbor in such a way as they themselves would want to be treated.

But when Jesus told him, “Do this, and you will live,” the man didn’t respond in the way I hope we would. He didn’t say, “Jesus, have mercy on me, but that’s impossible.” “He wanted to

justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Consider what this response betrays about this man. He must think that he’s actually done the first part, that he’s actually loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He’s attended the synagogue every Sabbath. He’s gone to the temple when he should and made the sacrifices he should. He’s fasted and prayed regularly. He’s paid his temple tax and probably given extra. And he thinks that’s it; he’s done it. But he’s not sure whether he’s loved his neighbor as himself, because he’s not sure who his neighbor is. If Jesus would limit the definition of “neighbor” to a certain group of people—family members, relatives, friends, fellow synagogue members, and actual next-door neighbors—then maybe the man would think he had kept all of God’s law and was going to heaven. But if Jesus’s definition were broader, then maybe he had reason to be concerned.

It is in answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and more importantly—and it is vital that we remember this—in answer to the man’s attempt to justify himself, that Jesus told him the story of the good Samaritan.

Here’s the story: A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, through the rough and rocky wilderness. Some robbers, who had probably been hiding in some caves or among the rocks, suddenly fell upon him before he knew what was happening. They brought their fists across his face, and once he was down, brought down their fists upon his body in an avalanche, beating him unconscious. They stripped him of all his clothes and belongings. Then they scampered away, leaving him half dead, covered in bruises and blood, lying on the side of the road in the dry, rocky wilderness.

His fate appeared to be sealed. But then good fortune smiled upon him. A priest, of all people, just so happened to be going down that same road! Now if you got beat up while taking a walk on the outskirts of Winner or out in the country, and as you were lying there half-conscious, the next person you saw approaching was me, your pastor, I would hope that you would think, “Oh, thank God! Help is on the way!” But the priest came; he saw him lying there; but there he went, giving him nothing more than perhaps a second glance. A priest, of all people.

But there still was hope. A Levite followed not too far behind the priest. Not all Levites were priests, but the Lord *had* set apart the entire tribe of Levi to assist the priests and to serve in the temple. They were the church janitors, maintenance crew, grounds crew, altar guild, and ushers of their day. If the next person you saw approaching was someone like Chuck Keiser, our treasurer, or Jeff Kaiser, our head usher this month, I would hope that you would think, “Wonderful! Help is on the way!” But the Levite also came; he too saw; and he too passed by. A Levite, of all people.

As the man’s life was ebbing away, someone else approached—a Samaritan. Not good.

If you remember back to Old Testament times, the nation of Israel eventually was divided into two kingdoms after King Solomon died, the Northern and the Southern. Both went into captivity, but the Northern Kingdom went into captivity first, to Assyria. The King of Assyria then brought some people from other lands he controlled to take care of the towns and fields in place of the Israelites he had taken captive. But the LORD sent lions to kill them since they worshipped false gods. So the king, thinking that perhaps different gods controlled different territories, sent back one of the priests of the Northern Kingdom to teach them how to worship the LORD. What they ended up with was a mish-mash religion—worshipping both the LORD and their own gods. They intermarried with the less prominent and poorer Israelites that had also

been left behind, and ended up as a people with no distinct ancestry and no distinct religion. The descendants of these people were still around in Jesus's day—the Samaritans—and they were so poorly regarded that someone was considered ceremonially unclean if he associated with a Samaritan. And in return for this prejudice, the Samaritans didn't think too highly of the Jews either.

So it didn't look good for the beaten up Jew from Jerusalem lying half dead on the side of the road. Imagine if, as you were lying half-conscious on the ground on the outskirts of town or out in the country, you saw your worst enemy approaching, or someone of a different ethnicity who fit the popular stereotype in this area of someone up to no good. This Samaritan had nothing to gain by helping the man. He didn't know him from Adam. If the half dead man were alive and well, he would likely have treated the Samaritan with contempt, or just completely ignored him as if he were less than human. The man had been robbed, so the Samaritan couldn't expect to be repaid for any help. Both his fellow Samaritans and the Jews would frown upon any association. And let's not forget that the priest and the Levite probably had no farther to go than Jericho, since they were likely staying in Judea. But the Samaritan had to get back to Samaria. Once he reached Jericho, he had at least that much more to go to make it safely back to home territory! He had farther to go, and thus was in more of a hurry to get there.

Yet look! When the Samaritan saw him, he took pity on him! He dressed his wounds—pouring on oil and wine and bandaging them to aid the healing process and to prevent infection. He put the man on his own pack animal, slowing down his long journey through the wilderness considerably, thus putting himself more at risk of being robbed himself. He brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day, he gave the innkeeper two days' wages to take care of him while he was gone—anywhere from \$200 to \$400 today. Not only that, but he promised to reimburse him for any additional expenses when he returned. This is true love. From a Samaritan, of all people!

“Which of these three,” Jesus asked, “acted like a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?” Note the clever way Jesus implies that, in order to truly love your neighbor as yourself, you have to consider *yourself* a walking, moving neighbor. He doesn't ask, “Which of these three loved his neighbor as himself?”, but, “Which of these three acted like a neighbor [himself]?”

The expert in the law couldn't even bring himself to say, “The Samaritan,” which means Jesus is already exposing something in the man's heart, but the man did give the right answer at any rate: “The one who showed mercy to him.”

“Then Jesus told him, ‘You go and do likewise.’”

Remember the man's original question: “Who is my neighbor?” What was Jesus's answer? His neighbor wasn't just a predetermined group or class of people. His neighbor was *anyone* he encountered in need, even if it happened to be his worst enemy or someone no one else would expect him to help. He was to be the walking, moving neighbor, ready to help and be of service wherever he went.

But Jesus also answered a question the man didn't ask, but should have: “*How* do I love my neighbor?” Jesus answered that unasked question by saying, “You go and do likewise.”

“Go and *do*.” Earlier Jesus had said, “*Do* this and you will live.” There are different kinds of commands to do, aren't there? There's “Do and be done with it,” like, “Go pick up your clothes. Do it now.” And there's “Do and keep on doing it,” like, “Be nice to your sister. Don't

argue with me. Just do it.” This command to the expert in the law falls into the second category. He was to show *continuous* and *uninterrupted* love to his neighbor *throughout his life*.

“Go and do *likewise*.” That is, “Go and do like the Samaritan did.” Show love to your fellow humans in need without regard for appearance, intelligence, ability, reputation, social class, ethnicity, or nationality. Show love to your neighbor even if you won’t get anything for it, yes, even if you will lose something by it. Show love to your neighbor even when it’s not convenient. Show love purely for the sake of others and their need. If you do this, if you love like this, you expert in the law, you will inherit eternal life.

We aren’t told what the expert in the law did after this. But as he thought this over, he must have gone mad. How could he love everyone in need whom he encountered as the Samaritan did, and do so continuously? And if he could not do it, then what was the opposite of, “Do this, and you will live”? “Don’t do this, and you will die. Don’t do this, and you will not inherit eternal life. You will die eternally in hell.” The man could *not* justify himself.

That is exactly what Jesus wanted him to realize. That is exactly why this parable exists—to make all of us come to a sober realization.

About fifteen years ago a security camera in an apartment hallway in St. Paul, Minnesota, captured a tragic incident. It captured a man beating up and sexually assaulting a twenty-six-year-old woman for almost an hour and a half. But that’s not even the most tragic part. It also captured at least ten (!) eyewitnesses ignoring the woman as she desperately cried for help. One woman looked out of her door three times and did nothing. Another man walked up, saw what was going on, then turned and put the hood of his sweatshirt up over his head and walked away. Police were *shocked* by the behavior of the bystanders.

Are we shocked?

Perhaps we would have done differently in that situation. Perhaps. I certainly pray so. But let us please acknowledge that the sinful heart in all ten of those bystanders is the same sinful heart with which *we* were born. Let us please acknowledge that we understand perfectly well why those ten bystanders acted as they did, even if we know it was wrong.

We will gladly show love to those to whom we have already determined to do so—family members who share our blood and even our bed; friends who return our love; coworkers who would make work unbearable if we didn’t get along with them; members of the community from whom we might one day need a return favor. But even these people we don’t love perfectly as ourselves, do we? Often we love them *for* ourselves, to benefit ourselves.

And when it comes to others in need whom we encounter, too often we’d rather pass by, and we do. Maybe we make the excuse that we’re in a hurry and don’t have time, or that it wouldn’t be safe—forgetting the powerful angels the Lord sends to guard us in all of our ways each day. Maybe we take note of the kind of people they are—the mentally handicapped, the depressed, the distressed, the poor, the lame, the elderly, the bruised and beaten, and the unbelieving—and conclude that it would simply involve too much effort, too much work, too much sacrifice.

So yes, this *is* a story about true love, but by being that kind of story, it’s really a story about the love we fallen humans do not have and cannot show. It’s a story meant to get us to cease every effort to defend and justify ourselves along with this expert in the law. It is meant to get us to acknowledge that we cannot love our neighbor as ourselves, that the *good* Samaritan is

really the *impossibly* good Samaritan, that the command to “go and do likewise” is a command to “go and realize that you deserve to die eternally.” It is a story meant to lead us to crave the true love of another, the mercy and pity of another.

2.

And there is such another person—Jesus. Jesus *never* wants, “Go and do likewise,” to be the last command he gives, the last story that is told. Just because we’re not told what became of the expert in the law doesn’t mean that we need to be unsure about our own outcome.

You see, the worst sin of the expert in the law wasn’t that he was trying to justify himself. His worst sin was his reason for trying to justify himself. He didn’t believe that *God* had true love, that God loved him *freely*. He didn’t believe that God would justify him *out of grace*, even though that’s precisely what he had planned to do from eternity, precisely what he had prophesied that he would do in the Old Testament, and precisely what he was about to do through his Son, the man standing right in front of him, Jesus the Christ.

The expert in the law didn’t believe that, but by God’s grace, we do. For we know the stories that come after the story of the good Samaritan, the stories of Jesus loving us in a way very similar to the Samaritan’s love.

The Samaritan loved the beaten-up Jew, even though it was not convenient for him. Jesus loved us, even though it involved him leaving the glory of heaven, taking on human flesh with its weaknesses and limitations, not making use of the divine power and the angel armies at his disposal, and suffering punishment and death.

The Samaritan took pity on his enemy. On Good Friday Jesus reconciled us to God even though we were his enemies.

The Samaritan dressed the wounds inflicted by the robbers. Jesus healed the wounds of our sins and our guilt, inflicted by the devil and our own sinful self, by his own wounds. Instead of anointing us with oil, he anointed us with the Holy Spirit in our baptismal waters, the Spirit who told our heart what Jesus had done for us and planted faith there to believe it. Instead of pouring out wine, he offers us his blood which he poured out for us on Good Friday together with the wine in the Lord’s Supper to forgive our sins of selfish “love” and to strengthen our faith in his selfless love.

Instead of entrusting us to an innkeeper, he has entrusted us to God-fearing pastors and teachers, parents and family, friends and acquaintances who provide us with spiritual comfort and care in our moments of need.

Yes, Jesus’s love is similar to the Samaritan’s, but it is so much better. It is not just a parable; it is reality. He has not saved us from those who rob us of money or health; he has saved us from those who would rob our souls of eternal life. He is not the good Samaritan who helps us for a few days; he is the good and gracious God who saves us eternally.

Knowing that God has satisfied all the demands of his law in Christ, we need not see in the tale of the good Samaritan *only* the tale of our failures. Saved by Christ from that foul robber, the devil, we can also see in this story something to which to aspire. For while the expert in the law had to wrack his brain trying to figure out how to show this kind of love, we do not. We know that that kind of true love can be shown only by one who has first been truly loved by God in that way. We have been, and so we can. While our sinful nature looks upon the needy and

says, “A waste of my time!”), the Spirit has enabled us, according to our new man, to look upon our neighbor in need and see what we ourselves once were spiritually and are no longer. We can look upon our neighbor in need and see not an inconvenience, but another soul for whom Christ died. We can stop and take pity as we have been pitied. And if absolutely necessary, we can do so even in dangerous situations, knowing that we have a protector stronger than any potential criminal or weapon.

And friends, just as the Samaritan rewarded the innkeeper for his care, so Christ will reward us for our love when he returns, not because our love has earned anything from him. Without Christ we would never know what true love is in the first place. But he will reward us because that is who he is—the God of true love, the God who rewards those who have no reward coming, who loves the unlovable, who loves you, with all of his heart and with all of his soul and with all of his strength and with all of his mind.

We cannot inherit eternal life through our love, but we *will* inherit it through Christ’s love. So let us show true love. Let us love God above all, with all we are and have, and let us love our neighbor as ourself. Amen.