

Salt + Light = MercyJanuary 11, 2009 - Luke 10:25-37

Once upon a time, Edmonton Oiler's fan Ed was on his way to an Oiler's game at Rexall place. He parked a fair distance from the arena to save parking charges. Since he was a little late, he decided to cut through a dark alley to try to get there quicker. But in the alley lurked a gang of robbers. They pounced on Ed, beating him to the ground. They took his wallet and ripped off most of his Edmonton Oiler's jersey. Then they ran off. Ed was badly beaten up. Though he was still conscious, he was too weak to cry out.

Thankfully, a pastor came along that same dark alley. He too was on his way to the game. But upon seeing Ed, the pastor quickly shuffled to the other side of the alleyway and kept going. He'd had a busy day at church after all and you never know who might need prayer in the arena. Ed continued to bleed. But a churchgoer happened to take the same dark alley. This was great fortune for Ed. Surely this person would stop to help him. But the churchgoer was on his way to a committee meeting. He'd already missed two meetings. He didn't want to be late for a third. So he too passed by on the other side of the alleyway.

Ed was about to lose consciousness when he saw another person coming down the alley. At first when Ed saw the person he was filled with fear. It was a Calgary Flame's fan. He could see the hated flaming C on the man's jersey. Ed wondered if the Flames fan would come over and finish him off.

Flames fan Freddy saw something strange at the side of the alley. He went over and discovered Ed badly beaten. He even saw the fragments of Ed's Oiler's jersey. But Freddie bent down and began to take care of Ed. Freddie knew he needed to stop the bleeding from Ed's head. Freddie had no extra cloth on him except his Flame's jersey. So he took his jersey off and began to rip it into strips. "At least some good has come out of this night," thought Ed. Freddie dabbed up some blood with the strips and tied other strips as bandages. Then Freddie helped Ed back to his car. He drove Ed to the Royal Alec. Ed was stabilized now. It would be a long wait in emergency. But Freddie stayed with Ed all night taking care of him. When Ed finally saw a doctor and was admitted to hospital, Freddie had to get going. But he promised to come back and visit in a day and see if there was anything more Ed needed.

Now you might recognize this story as an adaptation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's one of the most famous stories in the world. When someone stops to offer great help to a stranger, people will often label the helper a "Good Samaritan." But what was the Good Samaritan parable all about? When did it occur and what might it have to say to you and me today?

Well I need to warn you that considering this parable might seriously threaten our comfort zones. It might disrupt our lives and completely mess up our sacred schedules. But it also shows us a very tangible way to live out our calling as salt of the earth and light of the world.

Last week, we resumed our series on prayer. In the Fall we looked in at internal issues in prayer. Then we looked up to the one we pray to. Now we look out to learn about prayer for and ministry to others, those outside the church. Last week we discovered that Jesus asks each of His disciples for two pieces of ID to confirm their identity – salt and light. We talked about what it means to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

Today, our passage reveals a very significant way to embrace the salt and light calling by focusing on our neighbors. But we'll soon see that Jesus' understanding of the term neighbors is very different than its common understanding. We may know this story quite well or think we know it. But just like we discovered with the Christmas story, we might find some surprises along the way. So today we seek answers to these questions: What is the Good Samaritan parable? How does Jesus redefine the word "neighbor?" What might it look like to live out Jesus' call? How must we fight the temptations to ignore the neighbors in our lives?

Luke 10:25-37 (NIV)

### *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*

<sup>25</sup>On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

<sup>26</sup>"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

<sup>27</sup>He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'<sup>1</sup>; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>2</sup>"

<sup>28</sup>"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:27 Deut. 6:5

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:27 Lev. 19:18

<sup>29</sup>But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

<sup>30</sup>In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two silver coins<sup>3</sup> and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

<sup>36</sup>"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

<sup>37</sup>The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."  
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

### **What is the Good Samaritan parable?**

Jesus used parables to teach eternal truths. But parables taught in a very different way. They were kind of like jokes with a punch line. They penetrated hearts with a story. But then they often surprised the listener with the ending. The context and points of reference were clear to the listeners in the first century, so they could get the punch line. But we have to work hard to understand the background behind some of the parables so we too can grasp its penetrating insight.

We don't really know the setting for this account. It seems like Jesus was doing some public teaching. Then came time for some question and answer; a lawyer stands up. But he was not a lawyer in our modern day sense where you represented a client in a legal dispute. He was an "expert in the law." The Law is basically the first five books of the Old Testament; the Torah. So he knew God's law.

He stands to ask a question. But Luke reveals the motive for asking. "He stood up to test Jesus." So this was not a question to seek knowledge for further understanding. The lawyer intended to examine Jesus. This reveals to us that this legal expert did not believe Jesus was God the Son. An expert in the law would know Deuteronomy 6:16. "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." If this lawyer really knew Jesus' identity, he would not dare put him to the test.

The lawyer states his question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In other words, what must I do to secure my place in God's future kingdom? What must I do to get to heaven?" But Jesus will not give the man a simple answer. Jesus sees an

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:35 Greek two denarii

opportunity. So He quickly turns the table by answering a question with a question.

“What is written in the Law? How do you perceive it?”

You’re an expert in the law. It gives you the answer. So let’s hear it.

The lawyer replies by citing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

“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 “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus would answer the same way when asked “what is the greatest commandment?”

The Love your God commandment summarized Jesus’ own life and love for His Father. Love God with your “heart” means to respond to God from the innermost center of your being. Love God with your soul or life means to use all your life energy to love him. Love Him with all your strength means to love with our physical self honoring Him with our bodies. Love with all our mind means to love God in our thoughts and planning. When we get this greatest commandment right, the second will follow. Love your neighbor as yourself. This doesn’t mean love your neighbor as much as you love

yourself but more love your neighbor in the way you would love yourself.

Jesus then responds, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.” Remember the lawyer asked “what must I DO to inherit eternal life?” If the lawyer really thought about this, he would have realized there was no way he could live out these commands in his own strength, perfectly, all the time.

Yet the text tells us “he wanted to justify himself,” in verse 29. We’re not sure what he wanted to justify. Maybe he wanted to justify his current lifestyle. Maybe he wanted to justify his level of goodness, maybe he wanted to prove that his current level of involvement in the religious community was enough. Maybe he wanted to justify the importance of his question. After all, he has lost the initiative. Jesus turned the tables on him. So he asks another question.

“And who is my neighbor?” Now in its Old Testament context in Leviticus 19:18, the neighbor is one’s fellow Israelite. In Leviticus 19:34, it is extended to cover resident aliens in the community, non-Jews who converted to Judaism. But in asking the question, it seems the lawyer tries to restrict the scope of the word “neighbor.” Can I get

a clear picture of who my neighbor is so I know who I have to love and who I don't have to love?" He probably looks out for his Israelite neighbors. He may look out for resident aliens in the community. But he certainly wouldn't look out for Romans or non-Jews.

Jesus answers with a parable. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; "Going down" was no throw away phrase to fill space. You literally had to go down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is about 2600 feet or 750 m above sea level. Jericho sits at 800 feet 250 m below sea level. So traveling the Jericho Road meant you went down 3300 feet or 1000 meters in only 17 miles or about 30 kilometers. A steep and dangerous road, it gained the nickname "the bloody way." The road goes down sharply through mountainous territory full of crags and caves. Thieves could easily hide, strike and escape. Traveling the Jericho Road in those days was much like walking down a dark alley in a rough part of town late at night.

Robbers attack this traveler. They strip him of his clothes and any money he carried. They also beat him so he is "half-dead" or in serious need of medical attention. We wonder what will happen to the man. The first few words of verse 31 give us hope. "A priest" – a

member of that community that supposed to care for people's spiritual and physical needs – happened to be going down the same road and saw the man." He probably lived in Jericho. He fulfilled his duties at the temple in Jerusalem and is now heading home. Here's the potential for help. But he passes by on the other side of the road. He does a little detour to avoid the man.

That's bad. The victim's situation has just gotten worse. But then in verse 32, some hope is restored. A Levite comes along. True, he was not a priest. But he was a priestly aide. We wouldn't expect as much from the Levite. But he would know much of the compassion expected of priests. Maybe he would stop. But he too sees the man and passes by on the other side.

We might be quick to condemn these two. Tim Keller, in his book *Ministries of Mercy* writes, "We should not be too quick to scorn these men or we may discover we convict ourselves. Consider how you might react if you were anxiously taking a short cut through a dark alley. Imagine you see a groaning man on the ground, evidence that a gang of thugs may be watching you around the corner! Surely, the

wisest thing to do is to hurry to safety and send some official to look after the poor victim. So you run.”

Keller also points out there may have been a very religious reason why the priest and Levite avoided the man. The law declared that anyone touching a dead body was “ceremonially unclean.” (Num. 19:11-16). That meant a priest or Levite could not participate in worship ceremonies for 7 days. What if this man were already dead or about to die anyway? How easy it would have been for these religious professionals to think “this will get in the way of discharging my higher calling!”

But in passing by the man, they also passed by the clear teaching of Leviticus 19:34 – “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” These guys were the very ones charged by God to help the needy. Yet they elevated their schedule of ceremonies and religious duties over their purpose from God.

Things look pretty hopeless now. Then comes verse 33. “But a Samaritan as he journeyed came to where he was.” To Jewish

listeners, things just got worse. Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Jews considered Samaritans half breed Jews who intermarried with foreigners. So they looked down on Samaritans as inferior. Samaritans looked at Jews as arrogant and pompous- Luke 9:51-56. Jewish listeners might well conclude the Samaritan would stomp on the wounded man’s neck to finish him off.

But the Samaritan “took pity on him” or “had compassion.” He felt sympathy for the man. But he didn’t only feel sympathy.

Verse 34. “He went to him.” He risked his own life by going over to the man. The robbers may still be near, but he went to him. He bandaged his wounds. He poured oil and wine on him. Oil softened the wound. Wine served as an antiseptic to kill infection. Then he put the man on his own donkey. He took him to an inn and cared for the man’s needs all night! Then in verse 35, he takes out two silver coins which would buy several days lodging and gives them to the innkeeper. “Take care of the man.” He then promises to return and pay further debts. Keller writes, the Samaritan “risked his safety, destroyed his schedule, and became dirty and bloody through personal involvement with a needy person of another race and social class.”

Jesus then gets the lawyer to answer a revised question.

Remember, he asked “who is my neighbor?” Jesus has refocused the question to be “who proved to be a neighbor to the victim?” A) The priest who walked by? B) The Levite who walked by? C) The Samaritan who stopped showed mercy? The lawyer replies “the one who had mercy on him.” Perhaps he cannot bring himself to say the word Samaritan. But he’s got the point. Then Jesus concludes “Go and do likewise.”

### **How does Jesus redefine the word “neighbor?”**

The dictionary defines neighbor as those who live beside you. Jesus redefines neighbor as “Anyone in need of mercy along your life’s path.” The lawyer might limit the definition of neighbor to his fellow Jew and resident alien. Jesus lived and taught us to ignore boundaries to love our neighbor. By Jesus’ concluding words, He calls us to “go and do likewise.” Go and show mercy to those along your life’s path.

### **What might it look like to live out Jesus’ call?**

You see someone stuck on the side of the road. You stop and ask if they need help or somewhere to warm up. You see someone

looking lost in a mall. You stop them and ask “can I help you?” You see someone crying in a hallway. You stop and say “is there something I could do for you?” You hear your coworker’s loneliness as they describe their boring weekend. You invite them to a movie or to go out for coffee. We hear about someone’s unemployment. We check out our contacts for potential openings. Students, you see a classmate really struggling in a subject you’re good at. So discreetly you ask them if they would like to meet in the library to study that subject together.

We must ask God to open our eyes to people in need around us and ask for His strength and wisdom to discern how to help. He gives us the power and strength to live out a Good Samaritan heart to others.

### **How must we fight the temptations to ignore the neighbors in our lives?**

But then objections begin to arise in our minds.

- Oh come on, now, Lord, let’s be reasonable. We know we are to help out the unfortunate, but just how far do we have to go?
- You don’t mean we should pour ourselves out for (just) anyone! Doesn’t charity begin at home?

- You don't mean every Christian must get deeply involved with hurting and needy people. I am not very good at that kind of work; it's not my gift.
- I have a busy schedule and I am extremely active in my evangelical church. Isn't this sort of thing the government's job anyway?
- I barely have enough money for myself?
- But isn't it unrealistic?
- Aren't the needs of the poor overwhelming?
- Aren't many of the poor simply irresponsible

But instead of looking for excuses to ignore people around us, we might prayerfully look for ways to embrace them. Instead of adopting a critical and suspicious spirit, maybe we need to pray for God's heart. We need to pray for wisdom for sure. But we must also battle the temptation to immediately say no just because we're afraid or don't want to be bothered.

“What about needy people who abuse those who try to help them?” That is a reality. Some people are too proud, too sick or too self-centered to receive help with grace. In some cases, it is important to

find a team of Good Samaritans. Prayer needs to be part of the solution to change the heart of the person in need. Sometimes it needs to be confronted. Jesus did suffer unjust abuse during his arrest and crucifixion. But he also recognized this abuse was wrong and even confronted one of his abusers. John 18:19-23

But we must guard against immediately dismissing the call to Good Samaritan living. Because we're the only ones in the world that have the ultimate answers for people in need. Tim Keller writes – *Only the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ and the millions of mini churches (Christian homes) throughout the country can attack the roots of social problems. Only the church can minister to the whole person. Only the gospel understands that sin has ruined us both individually and socially. We cannot be viewed individualistically (as the capitalists do) or collectivistically (as the Communists do) but as related to God. Only Christians, armed with the Word and Spirit, planning and working to spread the kingdom and righteousness of Christ, can transform a nation as well as a neighborhood as well as a broken heart.*” Tim Keller – *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 26.

Some of you are not Christians here today. Yet you agree with the call to reach out to people in need. You may wonder why you can't just skip the Christian part and engage in good social help projects. Well, the greatest social problem is sin. It causes all the other ones. And on top of that, the principalities and powers of evil work over time to worsen social problems. If your own sin isn't dealt with, you still struggle with the deepest social problem in you. And you have no spiritual resources to engage in the fight against the spiritual forces of evil. God has dealt with it for you through sending His Son. All you have to do is throw all your trust upon Him for your salvation. Then God pours His Gospel in. He empowers you to engage in Good Samaritan living that wages war against the spiritual forces of evil. Will you call out to Christ today to deal with your own sin?

Christians, ask God today to bring someone into your mind that needs mercy. Ask for the strength in your weakness to offer that ministry to them; God's power and gospel enables us to be strong. Pray that God would give you "Good Samaritan eyes." Let us thank Him that He stopped on the road when He came to us to save us when

we were beaten up and half dead by sin. Let's do that now as we come to His table.