

Asking Jesus, Pt. 3
Who is My Neighbor?
Luke 10: 25-37

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**March 20, AD 2022
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1) What's the Question? We're considering the encounter which led Jesus to tell one of his most famous parables, popularly known as the story of the Good Samaritan. Again we'll follow the 5 step process that we're using everyday in *Asking Jesus*. We have already prayed and read the story. Now we can identify two questions asked of Jesus. 1) What must I do to inherit eternal life? 2) Who is my neighbor?

2) Who's Asking? A lawyer came up to Jesus to test him. Now we might immediately think of someone like a partner at Taylor, Porter. But this man's expertise was not civil law. He was a Bible scholar. He studied the Scriptures and the ways the Scriptures were interpreted through the centuries. Luke tells us that this professional in God's law came to test Jesus. He wanted to ferret out where Jesus was on key issues, and see if he could expose a weakness. So he asked, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" You might resay it, "How do I get all that God has for me?" Or "What do I have to do to be assured of heaven to come?" On the face of it, that seems like a reasonable question. Something everyone wants to know. But Jesus intuited immediately that his framing of the question was wrong.

3) The Question within the Question. The lawyer wants to know how he can *inherit* eternal life from God. Let's ponder that. How do you inherit from someone? You have to be part of the family. Inheritance is a gift. What do you have to do to get your inheritance? Basically don't reject your family. Don't repudiate your parents. Just be in the place they gave you. It's not about earning, it's about relationship. What's more, the lawyer was looking at eternal life as a *personal possession*. Once I get an inheritance, it's mine to do with what I will. So the question is looking at God's gift of eternal life as something he gets to shape for his own benefit according to his own ideas of what would be great. That's a million miles off the Scriptures' understanding of what it means to be human in the image of God for the glory of God in communion with God. The very question implied that he wanted God to exist for him.

Jesus' strategy of response was simply to hold up a mirror for this lawyer. "Tell me what you think first. What do the Scriptures say?" The lawyer was smart.

He fired back the correct answer. Every good Jew would recite Deuteronomy 6:5 every day: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul and might”. Then he even adds from Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19: 18). That’s dead accurate. So the young rabbi from tiny Nazareth replied to the sophisticated professional scholar, “Correct. Do this and you will live.” Bang. Test me and I’ll tell you the straight truth. Now see if you can act it out.

But the lawyer wasn’t finished. “And just *who* is my neighbor?” In other words, who do we really have to love? What’s the minimum to get the prize? He actually wanted to know who is *not* my neighbor? What’s the least love I can show and still get eternal life? Once again, the very question indicated this man was all about himself. He sought personal peace without lining up with God’s character.

4) Jesus’ Reply: he told the singularly brilliant, surprising, convicting and transformative story of the Good Samaritan. Now, I’m just going to tell you my angle on this passage today and then we’ll try to unpack it. I think we get close to the heart of Jesus’ parable when we try on this: *God is your neighbor*. And you’ve got to understand two things. 1) You have zero claim on God based on your worthiness. What you do does not compel God to do anything and 2) You desperately need God to *neighbor* you. That is, you require God to intervene savingly in your life. Until you get those two things straight, you’ll never know how to love God or your neighbor. This is the crux: God has neighbored you when he came to seek and to save the lost in Jesus Christ.

So a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Down is an understatement. The 17 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho descends over 3000 feet. That’s a steep road. Much of it is a narrow pass between rocky slopes. Travelers on this road are highly vulnerable to ambushes. There was no place to run. So it was no surprise that this man fell among robbers. He got waylaid. The thieves stripped him of his clothes and his possessions. For good measure they beat him. They wounded him so badly that he lay half dead. Then they just left him there.

Of course you know the story. A priest and then a Levite, two religious types of high social status, passed by the wounded man and just left him there. But then along came a Samaritan who stopped to help. Jews considered Samaritans to be half-breeds and heretics. They hated each other. Samaritans were despicable. We don’t feel the shock in this story anymore. But maybe we can get closer if we imagine Jesus telling a story in Germany in 1943 in which the hero was the Good Gestapo. Or if Jesus told a story in Minneapolis in 2020 about the Good Chauvin.

Or if he told a story today in Ukraine whose hero was the Good Russian. Wow Jesus, you just don't talk like that. Don't make the enemy a hero.

Now we're struck by how this Samaritan didn't just act out of some duty. As Jesus told it, the Samaritan saw the wounded man and felt compassion. We've talked before about how compassion is a rather weak way to translate that word. It's a word that means to be moved in your guts. To be disturbed in your inner being, to feel viscerally until you can't help but act. It's a word used only 12 times in the New Testament. And every time it's used to describe Jesus or used by Jesus in a story he told about God's compassion that got embodied in Jesus. The lover of our souls feels this heart-reaching, gut-feeling mercy towards the wounded, the broken and the lost. And that's where we want to settle for a minute.



For centuries Christ's people have been talking about this parable. And his artists have been painting it. Notice the helplessness of the beaten man in this 1647 picture by Balthasar Van Cortbemde. He is totally exposed, both in posture and in nakedness. The sheet is just there for decorum.



Luca Giordano in 1650 also depicted the victim totally laid out, nearly expired, utterly vulnerable. Here the Samaritan is touching his wounds. His gaze is locked on the wounded man. Compassion flows from his face like the healing oil he pours upon him. He heart-reaches toward the injured traveler.



The Samaritan has hefted the naked, limp man onto his own mount in this painting by Frederick Walker in 1861. He's got an arm around the victim's waist to keep him on the horse. He grasps the wounded's wrist to hold him draped over his shoulder. This rescue is full body contact.



We catch a contemporary look in this 1987 painting by Karin Kraus. The Samaritan holds him close, almost in a lover's embrace. He looks deeply at the wounded man, even as the priest and Levite cover their mouths as they pass by. The Samaritan makes the life of the victim his own. He gives himself to him.



Now let's turn to the vivid picture by Vincent Van Gogh. The artist Van Gogh suffered from mental illness, including violent fits of emotion. In 1889, Van Gogh had voluntarily checked himself into an asylum in France. His episodes had become psychic breaks and he was deeply concerned for his sanity. In 1890, just a few weeks before his death, Van Gogh completed this depiction of the Good Samaritan hefting the wounded man onto his horse. Can you imagine why a suffering, depressed, frightened artist

might be drawn to a scene where a helpless man overwhelmed by powers too great for him was carried to safety?

The rescue required enormous strain and expenditure of strength. Lifting dead weight is a fight for leverage. You don't want to drop the man or hurt him further. So the victim's chest is smashed against the Samaritan's. The Samaritan is working blind because the injured guy has mashed the Samaritan's face to the side. He's gasping for air with all that weight against his lungs. His leg muscles pop out with the strain and his feet look prone to slipping. If the robbers should return now, he's completely unable to defend himself. This is total commitment to rescue.



Now consider the ancient tradition of seeing in this story as an emblem for lost humanity requiring rescue by a Savior. He came to find us waylaid along the roadside. Broken, overcome, helpless, all our resources and reasons for worth have been stolen. We have nothing with which to purchase rescue. No grounds for why we are worth saving. But filled with heart-reaching, gut-churning compassion, the Triune God saw us and determined to come to us. He came to us as one of us. Along the very Jericho road of life. And he gave himself utterly to the task of saving us.

Henry Martin, an Anglican priest and artist has written a beautiful book about this parable and this painting. I want to quote some of the connections he makes between the Samaritan and Jesus:

- Both [Jesus and the Samaritan] appear as a mistrusted outsider, rather than as part of the Establishment.
- Both bring God's salvation to those who have no understanding of what is being done for them.
- Both place themselves at huge risk for the benefit of another, giving their all at great physical cost. We see especially how the Samaritan bodily bears the burden of the wounded man.
- Both recognize the human [need] and respond with compassion.
- Both are filled with the kind of compassion that leads to decisive action.
- The Samaritan risks his life for a stranger. Jesus lays down his life, even for his enemies.
- Both provide a concrete Yes to our desperate human question, "Despite our smallness, our helplessness, do we have significance?"
- Both give love as a rich personal gift, undeserved and unasked for; love so valuable that any notion of repayment or settling the debt is utter foolishness.¹

5) Responding in Faith and Prayer

The parable leads us to identify with the unexpected hero. The despised Samaritan acts like a neighbor to a wounded man he could have ignored. Go and do likewise. Yes, absolutely that's how we're called to love. But here's the kicker. It's never going to work if try to live this way as a guilty "should" and "ought." It's never going to work if we try to do this in our own strength. Or if we think we can earn God's favor by such effort. That's impossible. We need another identification.

The message within the message to the lawyer was radical. You want eternal life? Your pride must die. Identify first with the man wounded on the roadside. You're the tourist in a country where you don't speak the language. Your phone has been stolen. Your credit cards and passport are gone. Your clothes are gone. You're not even conscious. No one cares how rich you were back home. No one cares where you went to school or what clubs you're in. Your only hope is mercy from someone who doesn't have to give it. You require someone whose only motivation is love. Can you go there?

When you realize how profoundly you cannot solve your own life, you're ready to hear the answer to your question. Who is your neighbor? The Son of God

who came to seek and to save the lost is your neighbor. He is the savior you require. And there are no terms on which you can demand his help. You have to receive his help as an act of mercy. He takes you into his family where you inherit eternal life not because of what you do, but just because he loves you. Life is about communion with the Triune God and one another.



When you know the depth of the mercy you require and the wonder that such compassion has been given to you by Jesus, then your heart can be open to love. Then you look mercifully upon your fellow humans. Because you are as broken and needy as those you used to despise. And real life, eternal life, means entering that loop of mercy. Christ Jesus picks you up and carries you home in mercy. Then he sends you out to do the same. It's not outside in: what I should and ought to do to get what I want. It's from the inside out. How can I show love to the one who put me on his shoulders and carried me home? By sharing the mercy I have come to know.

Lord Jesus, we are wounded along the way!
The great liar and thief tempted our first parents,
Then left us for dead. Such is the human fate without you:
Now our hearts are battered, we are exposed in our shame,
We are broke in a famine,
We lack the needed skills to improve our own condition.
We have no resource which can purchase redemption.
We wait helpless and hopeless.

Yet when all seemed lost,
You came to us, as one of us.
You brothered us and neighbored us.
You looked on our lowly estate
And felt not disgust but mercy.
You carried us in your heart and
On your shoulders from death to life.
You spared not your life to save ours.

So join us to your heart of mercy.
Send us with eyes open, hearts soft,
Time available and hands ready
To extend your compassion
To any still waylaid among the rocks.
Send us to search and rescue
With your love and gospel grace.

¹ Henry Martin, *Vincent Van Gogh and the Good Samaritan: The Wounded Painter's Journey* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2021). Chp 7. Martin's book was enormously insightful for preparing this sermon.