

25 One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?"

27 The man answered, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" **28** "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!"

29 The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

31 "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. **32** A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

33 "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. **34** Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. **35** The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'

36 "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked.

37 The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy."

Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

Have you ever been rescued by a "Good Samaritan?" Maybe you weren't beaten up by robbers and left for dead, but have you ever experienced a rescue in some form or another? A few months ago I was here at Harbor getting ready to head up to Nashua and when I got into my car I realized that the gas gauge was on "E." It was actually sitting right on the red line. Now, maybe you're like me and a moment like this causes an inner dialogue. "I think that's enough to get me up to Nashua. If I take the first exit there's a gas station that's not very far." "Hold on! That's crazy. There's a gas station just down the street. You can get gas there and not have to worry about it." "Yeah, but that means going in the opposite direction. Nashua is north. That gas station is half a mile south. It's out of the way. I think I can make it. I'm going north!"

So, of course, I turn right out of the parking lot and head toward Nashua. I get up to speed on the highway and look at the gauge and I have to have another conversation with myself. "That's really low. You know there's a gas station at the Tyngsboro exit. You should get off here. Why risk it?" "Yeah, but the gas there is always more expensive than up in Nashua. It'll be close, but I'm not going to run out of gas!" So I keep driving. You know where this is headed, right? Of course I ran out of gas!

I got to the exit in Nashua and felt really good. "I'm going to make it. The station is just up ahead." So I'm gaining confidence, only the light just before the gas station turns red, and while I'm sitting there I feel the engine start to sputter. Then it went dead. There I am, the station is just yards ahead of me, but I'm stuck with a line of cars behind me at the red light. So put on my emergency lights, I hop out of the car and motion to the guy in the car behind me. I'm out of gas. He rolls down his window and I say, "Hey, I'm out of gas. I was trying to reach that gas station there. Would you be willing to give me a nudge with your car?" He looked at me like I was crazy. "No, man. This isn't my car. I can't do that." 'Oh boy.' I thought. And I started to think of alternatives. But then he hopped out of his car and said, "Why don't I just push you?" "Alright! Sure. Yeah!"

So I hopped in my car, popped it into neutral and he started pushing. We rolled through the intersection and got a head of steam up as I turned into the gas station. He waved to me and I looked to steer the car up to a pump. But as I rolled through the station I saw that every pump was full. Helpless, I let the car roll to a stop behind one of the cars, just as they pulled away. Now I'm stuck again, just a car length away from my destination. But just as I started to ponder how I was going to get there, I felt a push on the back of my car. The same guy who had helped me over to the station had followed in his car to make sure I got to the pump. He rolled me into place and before I could even get out of my car he was back in his driving away with a wave.

Good neighbors can make huge differences in our lives. Sometimes they meet needs that we had no hope of meeting on our own. Sometimes they bless us out of the blue with acts of generosity. A good neighbor can get you through a rough season in your life, but they can also make the good days all the more sweet. You, me, everyone wants a neighbor like that. But the question for us today is the same as it was last week; can we be people like that? Can we be that kind of neighbor? Can we be that kind of friend?

Today we're in the second week of a three-week series that we've titled, *Mercy, Mercy*. Each message comes from this section of Scripture in Luke 10 where Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

For a long time the church really avoided the radical nature of what Jesus has to say in this parable. Followers of Christ reduced this teaching down to charitable acts performed in a perfunctory manner or simply giving to relieve agencies in times of emergency. But it is time that we look more closely at what Jesus had to say. What prompts a person to become merciful? What motivates our compassion? Over the course of this series weeks I hope we will discover how God intends to use us, His church, to heal the deep hurts, fill the deep needs, and transform the communities we live in.

Every world religion believes that its founder was a master teacher. Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius and various others founded these religions, and each of them are thought of as great teachers. Christianity, alone among the world's great religions, insists that its founder was not only a good teacher, but God Himself and savior. That's a tremendous claim, and it sets Christianity apart from other religions and it's troublesome to people. This claim is also the reason Christianity doesn't fit among the world's religions, it never has. But we can't miss this point: Jesus was more than just a teacher, which makes him *such* a teacher.

Last week we examined the encounter that Jesus has with this religious lawyer who is trying to trap Jesus so that he can discredit him. He asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" hoping that Jesus will slip up in some way.

Jesus turns the tables on the man by asking him to sum up the law. "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" Jesus knew the answer that would follow. It was common in those days, for the law to be summarized the way this religious expert does. He says, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.*" And, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" And it is the right answer. Jesus validates it himself. What do we do to inherit eternal life? Love God. Love your neighbor. Jesus knew the expert would answer this way and he's got him right where he wants him. Perfect love. That's what's required to inherit eternal life. The problem lies in the fact that none of us can love perfectly. Anyone who is being honest knows this is true.

Yet this religious lawyer resists Jesus. He doesn't want to admit that he's spiritually bankrupt and in need of rescue. It's pretty obvious that he feels the force of Jesus' argument because he attempts to "justify his actions" by asking what he hopes is a limiting question. "Who is my

neighbor?”

What was he trying to do? He wanted Jesus to define the second commandment (Love your neighbor as yourself) in a way that was reachable. Attainable. Instead, Jesus responds with this story that doesn't minimize the scope of the neighborhood, it actually expands it.

I'm reminding us of this again today because it's crucial that we understand that our call to love is not what saves us. No, we love in response to the lavish and sacrificial way that God has loved us. His love is perfect, where ours falls short. So when we hear Jesus expand the degree to which we are called to love, be mindful that we cannot do this in and of ourselves. It is the work of God in us that shapes our hearts. The spirit of God has to equip us for this kind of love. Are you willing to see the extent to which we are called, in Christ, to love our neighbors?

So let's examine the story that Jesus tells. There's a Jewish man heading south from Jerusalem to Jericho. If you travel to Israel today and attempt to take a similar route, you'll notice that it's mountainous terrain. The road to Jericho is steep and dangerous. So dangerous that people called it "the bloody way." Jerusalem rests at 3000 feet above sea level, while Jericho, only seventeen miles away, sits on land 1000 feet below the level of the Mediterranean. In between, the land is full of caves, making the conditions perfect for criminals and thieves to hide, strike, and escape with ease. Travelling the Jericho road in those days was very much like walking through a dark alley in the worst part of a city, except it was miles from the nearest place of safety.

In this "dark alley" a man is beaten and robbed. They strip him of his clothing and leave him half dead. Soon, a priest and then a temple assistant come along, each choosing to pass on the far side of the road. Neither wanted to help the man. Before you're too quick with judging these two, consider how you would react if you were anxiously taking a shortcut through a dark alley. Seeing a man there on the ground would be definitive evidence of the danger you are in. Who knows if the thugs are still nearby or if the man lying there is, himself, part of some scheme? Surely the wise thing is to seek safety. You could send help later. So you run.

So they walked past this wounded man. In the process they also passed by the clear teaching of Scripture- to have mercy on even strangers in need (Lev. 19:34). The irony of this verse is that the priests and temple workers were the very ones charged with helping the sick and the needy. In that time, the priests were health officials along with their other duties, and the temple assistants were given the responsibility of distributing aid to the poor. This was a priestly calling, and yet these two neglected this man.

Finally a Samaritan man arrives at the scene. He is a sworn enemy of the Jewish man lying in a pool of his own blood. The Samaritan faced the same danger that the priest and temple assistant faced. In addition, all his training and experience should have led him to simply step *on* the victim, not just *over* him. Samaritans and Jews were the most bitter of enemies. When the Jews were furious with Jesus, they called him a "Samaritan" (John 8:48), because they could not think of a worse name.

Nevertheless, in opposition to all these forces, the Samaritan had "compassion." This compassion was full-bodied, leading him to meet a variety of needs. This compassion provided friendship (he soothed the wounded man's pain), emergency medical aid (he dressed his wounds), transportation (he placed this injured man on his own donkey for the journey), a hefty financial gift (two silver coins was a tidy sum); and even a follow up visit. Now that's compassion! That's mercy. And we have nothing less than an order from our Lord to, "do the same."

Our calling is to behave in the same manner that the Samaritan did- he risked own safety, he put aside his schedule, and he became dirtied and bloody through personal involvement with a needy person of another race and social class.

Now listen, *you agreed* to see the degree to which Jesus calls us to love our neighbors. This is far he intends for us to extend ourselves. This is the measure of our calling.

Are we, as followers of Christ, obeying this command *personally*? Are we as a church obeying this command *completely*?

The parable of the Good Samaritan is nothing if not provocative. It's a reverse trap by Jesus. He's being coerced into saying something that might implicate him as a false teacher, but instead he shows this religious lawyer and all of us that we're the ones who really don't keep the law. Jesus attacks our complacency and our comfort. The points he makes are shattering even today.

Mercy is not optional.

Followers of Christ today are certainly not *against* helping the needy and hurting. But "social relief work" is often thought of as secondary- something we get to if there is time and money in the budget- after we are satisfied with the reach of our ministry. That set of priorities is decimated by this parable. Jesus uses this story of compassion to show us the essence of the righteousness God requires in our relationships.

This isn't the only place in Scripture where we receive this instruction. In James 2:15-16 and in 1 John 3:17-18 followers of Christ are charged with meeting physical and economic needs. It's not an option. "*If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person?*" (1 John 3:17)

Because we are united with Christ, every believer is to be a minister of compassion. We are not, most of us, skilled psychologists, counselors or health care professionals, but we can still be of help to others. For too long, we've tried to just let the "experts" handle these things.

You are a minister of compassion. You are. What does that mean? What does it look like? I could lay out a persuasive case for every element of what the Good Samaritan does in the story, but I'm not going to do that. I hope you'll look to the story as a reference point, but there's no cookie-cutter template for what it means to love our neighbors. I like to think of it this way. What would a friend do? When we encounter a person who is enduring some form of difficulty or pain or hardship how should we respond? Like a friend would. Respond like a friend would.

-Would a friend try and see how quickly they can bring a conversation to an end, or would a friend make time to listen? I think a friend would listen?

-Would a friend hear about a person's hurt pat them on the shoulder and walk away, or would they see if there was a way to help? I think a friend would try to find help.

-Would a good friend forget about a person as soon they are out of sight, or would a friend remember and revisit? I think a good friend would remember.

I know what you're thinking. There are problems that are beyond our ability to help. They require tools and skills and resources that we do not possess. I share that concern. We would be foolish to try to fix someone's problem if we do not possess the skill for such a task. But a friend would probably walk with someone to get to the right kind of aid. They wouldn't leave a person to do so alone.

Friends make time. Friends listen. Friends support. Friends remember.

I know what you're thinking now. There are so many people who are hurting; so many needs and I'm just one person. It's true. You and I will never be able to help every person in need. And that can be the excuse we use to avoid helping anyone, or we can decide to be there for one person, the way we wish we could for everyone. Start with one. Make time for one person who is hurting, the way that you wish you could for everyone. Be a friend to that person. My guess is, if you think for even a short moment, that a specific face will come to your mind. Someone you know who could use a friend right now. Make time for them this week. Give them a call and listen. Show them the kind of support that makes sense to you (if you wonder what that looks like, ask God for wisdom and listen to His spirit at work in your heart.).

- People in need of compassion (card on the chairs)
- Compassionate Care Team (to join the team sign connect card/attend meeting 2/22)
- Outside looking in? (join a journey group)