

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."

If there's one thing we've learned over the course of this series it's that good neighbors can make huge differences in our lives. There are times when they meet needs that we had no hope of meeting on our own. Sometimes they surprise us with acts of kindness. A good neighbor can get us through difficult times, but they can also make good days even better. You, me, everyone wants a neighbor like that. But the question for us has been the same all series long: can we be people like that? Can we be that kind of neighbor? Can we be that kind of friend?

What about when your neighbor is a royal jerk?

My wife and I learned that we had some problem neighbors on the day that we bought our home- the very first day. We hadn't even closed yet. We were going through our final walkthrough and everything to that point was great.

We showed up, along with our realtor, and went through the house. It's supposed to be a formality, right? The house was in good order. We were thrilled. Then we walked outside and discovered that the wooden fence in the backyard had been pulled up and was lying on the ground in sections everywhere. Who did this?!

We had a dog and were counting on having a fenced in yard for him to roam around in. Our realtor made some quick phone calls and discovered that there had been a dispute between the previous owner and the neighbor over the property line. Great! Wonderful! There's a disgruntled neighbor to deal with and we haven't even moved in. We decided to let it go. Our dog, who was quite old, actually died a week later, so we didn't even need the fenced yard anymore and we just moved on.

About two years later, my girls talked me into getting another dog. Now we needed a fence again. In all that time we had never really addressed the property line issue with our neighbors. They had been cordial toward us but mostly stayed to themselves. Somehow we convinced ourselves that putting up a temporary fence would be ok. I thought I had figured out the source of the earlier dispute. The previous fence had taken a jog back into their yard. They tore that part out and left

the rest. I thought, 'If we just keep the temporary fencing even with the part that remained we'll be alright.' I was wrong.

About a week later we discovered the temporary fence torn to shreds and scattered all over our yard. My wife saw it first and called me at work. I came home immediately. I had to see for myself. I couldn't believe it. If they had asked we would have gladly taken it down. Why wouldn't they just ask us to take it down? I decided to go over and to talk with them about it. I stood at their front door and rang the doorbell, but no one came to answer it. Finally I decided to go back to work, planning to return that evening. While I was on my way, my wife called me to let me know that the neighbor was at our front steps. He was screaming mad. She was scared. He was ranting to her about having a survey and how we had no right to put up the fence. She was able to get him on the phone with me and I couldn't get a word in. He claimed that I had gone over to his home cursing and screaming at his significant other. It was crazy. I tried to explain I had done no such thing. I didn't even think anyone was home. He wouldn't hear it, continuing to yell until he handed the phone back to my wife and stormed away.

We didn't learn until later that he had tossed one of the fence posts into our pool and tore the liner. We patched it up, but it never really held, so last year we finally had to buy a new liner. That's my neighbor. And to be completely honest, I have a really hard time loving him as I love myself. My guess is you have people in your life who cause the same difficulty. Maybe for you it's not a neighbor, maybe it's a co-worker or a classmate or a family member. Forget about people in the far corners of the world, I have a hard time loving my actual neighbor. So where does that leave me? Where does that leave us? Why can't we just stick to loving the lovable people in our lives?

Last week we found that every follower of Christ is meant to be a minister of mercy. We are, each of us, challenged to love our neighbors in the same way that Christ has loved us. But what if that's impossible?

That's exactly what Jesus was trying to show this religious lawyer. You remember the lawyer don't you? We talked about him the first week. He asks Jesus, "What do I do to inherit eternal life?" He wasn't trying to gain any insights from Jesus, he was actually hoping to trip Jesus up; hoping he'd show a weakness in his teaching that could be exploited. He wanted to discredit Jesus. Instead, Jesus turned the tables on him.

In the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus describes the degree to which we are to love our neighbor. Take note of this. Even though the compassion of the Samaritan is robust and full bodied toward the wounded man lying on the road- the point of Jesus story was not to demonstrate *how* we love, but *who* we love. To "love your *neighbor* as yourself" could be limited to a fairly small number of people. That's why the religious lawyer asks the question, "and who is my neighbor?" He was hoping that Jesus would narrow the scope of the law. Instead Jesus expands it. Samaritans and Jews were bitter enemies. Your neighbor includes the group of people who despise you. It includes the people you avoid at all costs. It includes the guy who tore down your fence, threw the posts into your pool and tore the liner.

The parable of the Good Samaritan was intended to show the religious lawyer a vision of selfless love so perfect that it was unattainable. Jesus goal was to show this man who believed he was spiritually rich that he was actually spiritually bankrupt. To declare yourself bankrupt is to state that you cannot make good on your debts. That sounds pretty desperate. But Jesus describes anyone who has come into that condition as "blessed." He says, "*God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*" (Matt 5:3)

Jesus wanted to show this religious lawyer that he was *poor* so that he could prepare him to seek spiritual riches in the mercy of God. We're in the same position of need. If inheriting eternal life is contingent on me loving my neighbor I'm in trouble. How about you?

So what are we going to do? What hope is there for us? It's this: though we are like the man in Jesus parable, lying half dead on the road, lost and spiritually bankrupt, God has provided a rescuer for us. He allowed His Son to become impoverished so that we could receive the inheritance He deserved.

Paul describes it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:21, *"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ."* Later Paul restates this truth in economic terms, *"You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich."* (2 Cor. 8:9)

This is the good news of God's grace. Though we were poor, we have been made rich through God's merciful love.

Why should genuine faith in Christ result in compassion? What is it, exactly, about our faith in Christ that motivates us to extend mercy to those in need? Or to those who irritate us? Or to those who oppose us? Does it stem from a sense of duty? Or guilt? Or pity?

No, I want to suggest that real love starts when you discover the love of Jesus who sacrificed his life in order to pay our debt. Real love begins when you see Christ's love for you.

I know what you're thinking, there are people all around us and all through this world who have no connection to Jesus whatsoever, and they can still love. It's true. Love for friends and family exists outside of the knowledge of Christ's love. Of course it does. But there is a particular type of love that is born in those who have received the love of Christ. Some of you here are familiar with what I'm talking about. This type of love is indiscriminant- it does not require reciprocation. It endures even in the face of hatred. It is unconditional.

If you know that you are a sinner saved by grace it humbles you; it melts you.

I love what Tim Keller has to say about this. He writes, *"There is a powerful effect that the gospel of grace has on a person who has been touched by it. The person who knows that he received mercy while an undeserving enemy of God will have a heart of love for even (and especially!) the most ungrateful and difficult of persons. When a Christian sees prostitutes, alcoholics, prisoners, drug addicts, unwed mothers, the homeless, the refugees, he knows that he is looking in a mirror. Perhaps the Christian spent all of his life as a respectable middle-class person. No matter. He thinks: "Spiritually I was just like these people, though physically and socially I never was where they are now. They are outcasts. I was an outcast."*

There is only one lasting motivation for living a life of compassion; it's produced when we experience and understand God's grace toward us in Christ (though I confess I have yet to fully understand God's grace). When we learn that, broken and wayward as we are, Jesus loved us and sacrificed his life for us- it opens our hearts to the broken and wayward around us. We are compelled to love them because, in our own state of ruin, Jesus showed us compassion, and so we reflect his heart.

A person who is attempting to approach God on their own merits believes that God will favor them because of their morality and respectability. This type of person will more often than not show

contempt for the outcast. "I put in hard work to get to where I am, and so should everyone else." Those are the words of the moralist. The language of a heart that has been touched by the love of Christ is much different. "I am only where I am because of the unmerited grace of God. I am no better than any other person."

What do we do with this? How do we respond?

First, I need to ask, have you experienced this grace, this amazing grace, personally? Have you? Today, I'm hoping that some of you might be at a place where you're ready to receive the grace of God by accepting Jesus as Savior of your life. Two weeks from today there will be a pool of water up here near the front. There will be people who are lowered into the water and back up again—buried with Christ and raised to new life. It's a simple but powerful act that says, "I need Christ to be my Savior and Lord. I want Jesus to rescue me from my brokenness and fill me with His life." Maybe you'll be one of them? If that's something you're considering, please come to the Baptism Lunch today. At the very least fill out the connect card on your program. Let us know you are interested in what it means to accept Christ and we'll get back to you this week.

The priest and the temple assistant in Jesus' story did not stop to help their countryman who was wounded on the ground in front of them. No one expected the Samaritan to be the one who showed mercy. Jesus put him in the story, no doubt, because by virtue of his race and history he would have no obligation to stop and provide aid. No law or social convention would dictate that he should help. And yet he stops. Why? Verse 33 says he "felt compassion."

Do you know what this means for us today? God requires the love that is not required. Mercy is commanded. We are called to show mercy, but not as the response to a command. It is an overflowing generosity in response to the love we have received from God. The deeper our experience with the grace of God, the deeper our compassion must become.

In 2 Corinthians 8:2-3 Paul explains that a church in Macedonia gave generously to the church in Jerusalem who were suffering from a famine. He writes, "*(The Macedonians) are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity.*" The people from Macedonia were experiencing hardship of their own. Why should they respond to the needs of others? It was their "abundant joy" and the fact that they gave themselves first to the Lord. Their gifts were not given out of obligation to a need, but in response to the gift of Christ.

Why is compassion the mark of a follower of Christ? Imagine a person who is deathly ill. The doctor explains that there is a medicine that can cure him. Without it there is no hope. But the doctor explains that the medicine is costly. "To pay for it you'll have to sell you home and your cars. You might not wish to spend so much." The man replies, "What do my cars mean to me now? What good will my house be? I must have that medicine. These other things used to be important to me, but now they pale by comparison. They are expendable. The medicine is precious to me. Give me the medicine."

The grace of God makes Christ precious to us. Now the things that used to mean so much to us—our stuff, our money, our time, have become expendable. They used to be crucial to our happiness, but not anymore.

The lawyer was right about one thing. Eternal life is something to be inherited. And to receive an inheritance you have to be an heir. No amount of doing will make you into one. Keeping the law is a way of life, not a way to life. Only when we have *become* God's people by His grace, will we begin to show compassion as He does.

What was the point of Jesus parable? He was humbling us with the mercy God requires so that we can receive the mercy God offers. This is the gospel. All of us lie helpless and bankrupt, dying in the road. Jesus Christ, who is our natural enemy, who owes us nothing, nevertheless stops and rescues us. He saves us. It's difficult to prove that Jesus was describing himself as the Good Samaritan in the parable. But the story presents the pattern of God's mercy and it's impossible not to see Jesus in the pattern.