



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“Do This”*

*Luke 10:25-37*

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The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known stories of Jesus. There are ministries and non-profits, hospitals and hospices, like Good Samaritan Hospice here in our own area, all named after the story. Many countries even have Good Samaritan laws to provide legal protections for those who act to help others. The good Samaritan has become the ultimate example of what it means to go beyond typical expectations in caring for others. In taking a closer look at our passage today, I hope we might receive a renewed glimpse of God’s Kingdom in this ancient story.

Jesus has just been approached by a man with a question. Jesus responds with a question of his own—and then a story, a parable.

Luke 10:25-27. <sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ <sup>26</sup>[Jesus] said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ <sup>27</sup>He answered, ‘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 your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>28</sup>And [Jesus] said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a



Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? <sup>37</sup>[The lawyer] said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

<sup>31</sup> Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

The situation Jesus describes is both ancient and contemporary. In the ancient tradition of Buddhism we read of the young prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha, taking outings. Outside his palace, he sees the human conditions of old age, sickness, and death. One day, he sees “an aged man as bent as a roof gable, decrepit, leaning on a staff, tottering as he walked, afflicted and long past his prime.” On the next outing, he sees a “sick man suffering and ill, fallen and weltering in his own water.” The sights grip him. Mentally, he could not get past them, he could not “pass by.”<sup>i</sup>

25 centuries after the Buddha, I see similar sights around me. A man panhandling at the corner of Franklin and Brandon. A woman suffering from mental illness, interrupting a conversation to ask for help with a broken phone.

Sadly, it’s not hard to make an endless litany of passing by on the other side.

A lawyer asks a question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The question assumes there is some to-do list—recite a prayer, offer a sacrifice, drop off some peanut butter for the PCC, put a twenty in the collection plate. “If [the man’s] efficient, he can inherit eternal life by lunch.”<sup>ii</sup> But his question is far greater than the man imagines.

In typical Jewish fashion, Jesus answers his question with another question. “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

The lawyer answers with two verses of the Torah known to all practicing Jews then and now: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength ...* (from Deuteronomy 6:5) *and [love] your neighbor as yourself* (from Leviticus 19:18).” It’s a good solid answer. It’s the right answer – but it’s to the wrong question. So Jesus changes it for him. The lawyer asked about “eternal life,” Jesus reframes what is at stake by exhorting, “Do this, and you will live.” The imperative “do” focuses not on a single action, but on an ongoing relationship. “Do this and live.” The point is to “live now” and not to be focused on “eternal life.”<sup>iii</sup>



“Wanting to justify himself,” the lawyer asks another question. “Who is my neighbor?” It’s not a bad question. One needs to know who are neighbors and who are not. But in the context of love, neighbor has to extend beyond the people in one’s group.<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus knew what the man meant by his question. To ask “Who is my neighbor” is a polite way of asking, “Who is *not* my neighbor?” or “Who does not deserve my love?” or “Whose food or shelter can I ignore?” or “Whom can I hate?” In short, the answer Jesus gives is, “No one.”

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was an 18-mile rocky path that descended from the height of about 2,500 feet above sea level to Jericho’s 825 feet below sea level. That’s about the distance of McAfee Knob to downtown Roanoke, if McAfee Knob were about 1,000 feet taller. Everyone in Jesus’ day would have understood how dangerous that downhill stretch of road could be.

A man was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. The traveler is stripped, beaten, and left half dead in a ditch. He is robbed not only of his possessions, but also of his dignity, his health, and almost his life.

Two men pass him by. Jesus never tells us why. Perhaps the priest and the Levite were in a hurry to get somewhere else. Two Princeton psychology professors ran an experiment on Princeton Seminary students, setting up a “Good Samaritan” scenario to test their helping behavior. You’d think seminary students would be a little more willing to intervene when seeing someone in need. The overall conclusion of the study, however, found that the people in a hurry were far less likely to exhibit helping behavior—seminary students or not. The study concluded: “Ethics become a luxury as the speed of our daily lives continue.”<sup>v</sup> So, maybe the two men were in a hurry...

Or perhaps the priest and the Levite didn’t feel safe stopping to help the injured man. As Martin Luther King Jr. preached, “I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible these men were afraid.... And so the first question that the priest [and] the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ ... But then the Good Samaritan came by, as he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” King went on, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?” King then went on to Memphis, and it was there he was assassinated. There *are* bandits on the road.<sup>vi</sup> So, perhaps the priest and the Levite didn’t feel safe stopping to help the man.

But then along comes the Samaritan. Whatever gave the priest and the Levite pause did not appear to be a factor for him. Where the other two men distanced themselves from the victim in the ditch, the Samaritan literally “went to him” and showed him compassion.

By the time Jesus told this story in first century Palestine, the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. Both Samaritans and Jews claimed to be the



true descendants of Abraham. Samaritans had evolved in the Northern Kingdom, a result of Assyrian exile and return. They read only from the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible, and worshiped God on Mt. Gerizim. The Samaritans looked down upon the Jews in the Southern Kingdom like Jesus, the lawyer, the priest, and the Levite, b/c they read additional books like the Prophets and Writings (what we know today as our Old Testament) and because they worshiped God in Jerusalem.

To put this in more contemporary language, the Samaritan was the Other. The alien. The heretic. The object of fear, condescension, disgust, and judgment. Consider: Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to deem "the good guy?" The last person you'd ever want to ask for a favor—much less owe your life? Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, control, or save—but never, *ever* need?<sup>vii</sup>

In 2016, Joe Weidknecht was protesting a march at the University of Texas. This was just after the presidential election, and tensions were high. Joe, sporting his “Make America Great Again” hat and a sign that read “Proud to Be Deplorable,” became surrounded by anti-Trump protestors when Muslim student Amina Amdeen saw someone snatch Joe’s hat off his head. Amina says something snapped inside of her because she knew what it was like to be picked on, and she’s been in situations where people tried to snatch her hijab off her head. Amina rushed toward Joe, came to his aid, and the crowd around him disbanded. Later in an interview, Joe said that moment changed him. He never expected someone like Amina to step in and offer him aid.<sup>viii</sup>

Our story from Luke is a parable. The word comes from two Greek words: *para*—as in parallel—means “to put something side by side”; *ballo* means “to cast or to throw.” Thus, a parable casts two images side by side: the story in the text and the story in our own lives. If Jesus were to share a similar story for us today, perhaps it would go something more like this:

- *A progressive Democrat is robbed, and a far-right Republican saves her life.*
- *A racist white cop is robbed, and an African-American teenager saves his life.*
- *A transgender woman is robbed, and an anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life.*
- *An outspoken atheist is robbed, and a Bible-thumping fundamentalist saves his life.*
- *A border patrol agent is robbed, and an undocumented immigrant saves his life.<sup>ix</sup>*
- *A physician from Planned Parenthood is robbed, and an anti-abortion lobbyist saves her life.*

I don’t mean to trivialize the real and serious differences that divide us politically, religiously, racially, or ideologically. Those differences today are even costing people their lives. But I am trying to make the point that the enmity between the Jews and Samaritans in Jesus’ day was not theoretical, but embodied and real. Each was fully convinced that the other was wrong.



So when Jesus deems that the Samaritan was “good,” he stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was calling them to put aside the history and prejudices they knew. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might be more than their political, social, racial, and economic identities.

The man in the ditch, the one fallen upon by robbers, is the only character in the story not defined by his profession, social class, or religious beliefs. He has no identity other than his need. Perhaps we have to place ourselves in his shoes—broken and grateful to anyone who would show us mercy—before we can fully feel the unbounded compassion of the Samaritan man.

All tribalism falls away on the broken road. All divisions of “us” and “them” will disappear out of necessity. When you’re lying helpless and bloodied in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you’d prefer. What matters most is whether anyone will stop to show you mercy.

If it hasn’t happened yet, it will. In a hospital room? At a graveside? After another miscarriage? When a marriage fails? When the bottom falls out, after the storm, the betrayal, the war, the injury, the diagnosis? Somehow, somewhere, it will happen.

And when it does, it won’t be our politics or even our theology that saves us. All that will matter is how quickly you reach for the hand you hoped you’d never touch. How readily you’ll agree to receive help from the “other” you fear.

“Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asks. Your neighbor is the one who scandalizes you with compassion. Your neighbor is the one who shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbor is the one who mercifully steps over the line separating “us” from “them,” and teaches you the real meaning of “good.”

God comes where we least expect God to be, because that’s the way God always comes to us. God comes to us in unlikely people at unlikely times because God comes for all.

What shall we do to inherit eternal life? “Go,” Jesus says, “and do likewise.” Do *this*. Draw close. Show mercy. Extend kindness. See yourself in the victim and recognize the humanity in the one you hate the most. Do this and you will truly live.

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<sup>i</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Living By the Word: He Had Compassion,” *The Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1989.

<sup>ii</sup> Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories By Jesus*, (New York: Harper One, 2014), 78.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>v</sup> You can find a brief summary of the Princeton study here:

[https://faculty.babson.edu/krollag/org\\_site/soc\\_psych/darley\\_samarit.html](https://faculty.babson.edu/krollag/org_site/soc_psych/darley_samarit.html)

<sup>vi</sup> Levine, 94.

<sup>vii</sup> Debie Thomas, “Afflicting the Comfortable,” [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net) (July 7, 2019).

<sup>viii</sup> One Small Step: The NPR Special, Part 1 (Oct 20, 2020): <https://storycorps.org/podcast/one-small-step-the-npr-special-part-1/>

<sup>ix</sup> This list is adapted from Debie Thomas, 2019.

