

## *Habits of the Heart*

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Luke 10: 25-37

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Let's start out today with a little imagining and/or remembering. I wonder if you can place yourself in this situation I know I have found myself in many times.

You probably are not in Uvalde, but most likely in a large city, maybe it is San Antonio, maybe Dallas or Austin, maybe New York City. You are walking down the sidewalk or are in the park and you glance down to see a man lying on the sidewalk, passed out. He looks dirty and scruffy—he probably hasn't showered in weeks. You can even smell him from where you are standing.

Person after person has walked right past him and didn't even hesitate, didn't seem to care. You come upon the man and you are moved in your heart to call 911, to send for help because you are not even sure if this man is dead or alive. *However, you don't.* You don't want to appear as some yokel, not knowing the ways of the big city, not wanting to look naïve about the drunks these folks must see every day. Not wanting to stand out in the crowd, you pass him by.

Now let's think about the three men in our story today. They all saw the man in the ditch—a man badly beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Two of the men just kept walking and one of them stopped.

The parable in our lesson for today is probably one of the best known of all of Jesus' parables. We use the term "good Samaritan" all the time in our vernacular, referring to someone who lends a hand to another person and helps him or her out.

I did a quick google search for Good Samaritan and found page after page of news articles.

"Good Samaritan plunges 20ft to his death after going to aid of neighbor who was locked out.

Jennifer Garner Has a Gas Playing Good Samaritan

. . . .another good Samaritan helped FDNY paramedics put the child into an ambulance."

There's many Good Samaritan Hospitals, the Good Samaritan Nursing Home, the Good Samaritan Society, and all of these come from this parable we just read.

This parable is so well known; we sometimes try to put it in very simplistic terms –"Be like the Samaritan, and not those two other guys who

passed by." Or, on the flip side, there is a tendency by the learned to make the parable way more complicated than it is—to dig out hidden meanings behind each character and event. But, acts of compassion don't always require the burden of self-analysis and contemplation. Sometimes they are just habits of the heart.

"Biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine suggests another way for us to view this parable. She says, "To hear this parable in contemporary terms, we should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then ask, 'is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge, 'She offered me help? Or "He showed compassion"?' More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, *then* we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan."<sup>i</sup>

What if we were to substitute the word Muslim or Hindu or Taliban for the word Samaritan? That gives a whole new angle and a whole new light on the parable, doesn't it? All of a sudden, it's not so easy to be a "Good Samaritan," it's not so easy to define who we think our neighbor is any more.

Thinking of the parable in these terms helps us to understand that this parable we all thought to be so simple, all of a sudden is just not anymore. It makes it a little easier for us to understand just what a radical Jesus Christ was if that priest and Levite were feeling the same uncomfortable-ness we are all feeling right now. All of a sudden, being a Christian just got way harder.

Being a Christian *is* hard! It pushes us to the limit of seeing the world and being in the world the way **we** want to see it, and drives us closer to the road **God** intended us to follow.

Let's look at the lawyer's question in this lesson. He asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" The lawyer, in typical lawyer fashion, is able to take the impetus off himself; he takes the action of *being* a neighbor away from his responsibility and just wants to know a definition. "The lawyer wants to define who deserves his love, but Jesus' parable suggests that love *seeks out* neighbors to receive compassion and care, even when established boundaries or prejudices conspire against it."<sup>ii</sup>

This story is not about the goody-two-shoes Samaritan, it's not really a morality story at all. This is a story about mercy.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem, where this story takes place was only 16 miles long making a descent over 3600 feet in that short span. It was a treacherous road, full of twists and turns. It was a path that was known to have robbers and thieves all along it, and a road that only a fool would travel by himself. The man in the ditch was probably a fool to do so.

He should have known better than to put himself in that dangerous situation.

The man in the ditch was like some people in our society—our town. He was just like “some of the people today who are held responsible for their own suffering—you know the unwed mother who should have had the self-discipline to abstain, or the welfare recipients who just need to get off their rear ends and work a little harder. [Or what about my Dad—if he hadn’t smoked cigarettes for so many years, he wouldn’t be in the shape he is today.] Yes, the victim in today’s story was only reaping the consequences of his own irresponsible behavior.”<sup>iii</sup>

Yet look whom Jesus uses to make his point to the lawyer: a despised enemy of the man in the ditch. He chose such an unlikely person—the Christian fundamentalist who think unwed mothers should be condemned, the politicians who think welfare is an unwarranted handout, the anti-smoking advocate who protests at city hall—those are the people Jesus chose to let the lawyer know just who was his neighbor. Just like Dr. Seuss said, “A person’s a person, no matter how small.”<sup>iv</sup>

You see, it was the *quality of mercy* that separated the Samaritan from the priest and the Levite who passed the victim by. What this means, folks, is that being faithful, being a good Christian neighbor has nothing to do with being holy, or being theologically savvy, or any denominational affiliation or racial-ethnic identity. It has nothing to do with our morality standards.

“Being faithful—being a good neighbor to oneself and to God and to *all* the other humble creatures that co-habit this earth with us has to do with **mercy**. It has to do with a way of seeing and acting that is shaped by certain habits of the heart.”<sup>v</sup>

Easy for me to say, right? Well, not really. We all wish we could just decide today to change our hearts and be a neighbor to everyone we come across, to be totally merciful people, but it usually just does not happen that way. There are some steps you can start to practice, though, that will lead you down the right path.

The first practice is **empathy**. Empathy is the effort to relate to the feelings of those who are suffering (whether they deserve it or not). An empathetic person can relate to the sufferer’s feelings to their own feelings. They are able to walk a mile in the other’s shoes.

The Samaritan could relate to the man in the ditch because he, too, had been battered by rejection of the “good” people who treated him like dirt. Instead of blaming the victim for being foolish, the Samaritan identified with the victim’s humanity. Can we do the same? *Can we stop seeing the*

world and those in it as **us and them** and embrace the world as **we**? That is the nature of empathy.

Out of empathy grows compassion and mercy. The Samaritan, when seeing the man in the ditch, was moved with pity, moved with compassion. This is more than just a quick, warm feeling, or sending up a quick prayer for the sufferer. It involved **doing** something. The Samaritan touched the man, he lifted him, he sweat for him, and he financially gave to someone to take care of him.

Sometimes our believing and thinking just gets in the way of our doing. “The story of the Good Samaritan ends with a command, which is also an invitation. Jesus looks directly at the lawyer—Jesus looks directly at you and at me—and he says: ‘Go and do likewise.’

May it be so, for the sake of our own souls and the soul of God’s precious world. Amen.”<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 148-149.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew Skinner, *Feasting on the Word*. Luke 10:25-37: Exegetical Perspective. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), David Bartlett and Barbara B. Taylor, Eds. Page 243.

<sup>iii</sup> Susan R. Andrews, “The Mirror of Mercy-Luke 25-37.” <http://www.goodpreacher.com>

<sup>iv</sup> Geisel, Theodore Seuss. *Horton Hears a Who*. (New York: Random House, 1954).

<sup>v</sup> Andrews.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.