



“Go and Do Likewise”

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

Many of the remaining parables in this series are parables about discipleship. In some respects any parable could be placed in this category, for all the parables are about discipleship to some degree. The Gospels were intended to create disciples and to enable disciples to create disciples. So it is not surprising that the parables have the same function.

At the same time, some parables so specifically define and direct discipleship that they deserve to be treated as especially appropriate to this topic. The parable of the Good Samaritan falls into this category. With its “Go and do likewise” ending, it is the most explicit of the so-called example stories.

Background & Immediate Context¹:

To understand the full meaning of the parable, we need to be aware of the Jewish hierarchical society of the time. The priest, the Levite, and the ordinary Israelite were the familiar triad of that society. Those who belonged to Israel (insiders) were sharply distinguished from those who were not (outsiders).

Samaritans were not only looked upon as outsiders, but as the enemies of Israel. They were regarded as unclean people, descendants of a mixed population occupying the land following the conquest by Assyria (2 Kgs 17:6, 24). They opposed rebuilding the temple and Jerusalem (Ezra 4:2-5; Neh 2:19) and constructed their own place of worship on Mount Gerizim.

Thus, as one who was considered ritually unclean, socially outcast, and religiously heretical, the Samaritan was the very opposite of the lawyer as well as the priest and the Levite. By making the hero of the parable a Samaritan, Jesus challenged the long-standing enmity toward Samaritans held by his Jewish audience. The story would have been shocking to the lawyer and others listening, overturning the categories of who are and who are not the people of God.

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, pg. 344.

The conversation between Jesus and lawyer and the parable occur immediately after several scenes that emphasize **the presence of the kingdom**: the sending of the seventy (10:1-16), the return of the seventy and Jesus' announcement of Satan's fall (10:17-20), praise for God being revealed in Jesus and the privilege the disciples have in witnessing this revelation (10:21-24). The lawyer's question in v. 25 in effect asks **"What must I do to be ready for the kingdom?"** echoing the last words of Luke 9:62.

The structure of their exchange in vv. 25-28 is carefully paralleled in vv. 29-37. Each begins by revealing the motives of the lawyer. In each round the lawyer asks a question, Jesus asks a counter-question, the lawyer answers Jesus' question, and then Jesus answers the original question:

Round one: the lawyer stands to test Jesus

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| 1. Lawyer, Question 1 | What must I do to inherit eternal life? |
| 2. Jesus, Question 2 | How do you read what is written in the Law? |
| 3. Lawyer, Answer to 2 | Love God and neighbor. |
| 4. Jesus, Answer to 1 | Do this and you will live. |

Round two: the lawyer wishes to justify himself

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| 5. Lawyer, Question 3 | Who is my neighbor? |
| 6. Jesus, Question 4 | Who proved to be a neighbor in the parable? |
| 7. Lawyer, Answer 4 | The one who showed mercy. |
| 8. Jesus, Implicit answer to 3 | Go and continue doing likewise. |

The emphasis throughout the scene is on action and especially on "doing" (vv. 25, 28, 37). As the parable focuses on the Samaritan, the story itself suggests movement. Notice the progression to the man: "a priest *came down in that road*" — "a Levite *came to that place*" — and "a Samaritan *came to him*."

All three travelers see the man, but for the priest and the Levite seeing is the reason for caution and self-protection, while for the Samaritan seeing is the source of compassion which motivates his helping.

The Parable²

"Good fences make good neighbors" (Robert Frost, "Mending Wall") and that attitude predates our current day by at least two thousand years. A lawyer asks Jesus a question about fences. He doesn't use the word *fence* per se, but it's there. Having come to question Jesus and then finding himself questioned by Jesus, the lawyer seeks clarification: **"Who is my neighbor?"**

The question traces back to the lawyer's own understanding of what the law requires to inherit eternal life. "You shall love the Lord your God...[you shall love] your neighbor as yourself." Loving God is relatively clear. But if love of neighbor is involved, then who is my neighbor? What are the limits? Where is the fence that separates neighbor from stranger or enemy or whomever the obligation to love omits?

In answer, Jesus doesn't point at the crowd and say, "There's a neighbor" or "There's *not* one." Jesus tells a story. A man on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. The road is notorious for such events. It follows a steep canyon, dropping in seventeen or so miles from 2500 feet above sea level to 800 feet below sea level. Marked with high ridges, secluded caves, and blind corners, it offers ideal settings for ambush.

² This section was written by John Indermark and excerpted from his book *Parables and Passion* (112-14)

That potential for being ambushed probably played into the decision of the priest and Levite not to stop. Delays on that road only increased exposure to danger. And who is to say that what looks like a beaten traveler is not a robber in disguise, with partners ready to victimize any who take the bait? Besides, the priest and Levite have religious considerations. If they are on their way to serve at the Temple, stopping may pose another danger. Leviticus 21 forbids priests to touch a corpse. To do otherwise makes one ritually unclean, unable to perform sacred duties. The priest and Levite are not monsters but persons with responsibilities who have to choose among competing duties, either to a known Temple or to an unknown stranger.

In a sense, the established religious tradition built a fence that argued against these two from risking aid. So the parable moves outside that tradition to lift up the exemplar of the neighbor. “But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.” For hundreds of years Samaritans and Jews lived in hatred. To the Jews, Samaritan religion represented an unholy mingling of Judaism and local customs. Samaritans promoted their own temple on Mount Gerizim as rival to Jerusalem. When it came to Jews and Samaritans, it wasn’t just that good fences made good neighbors; you needed good fences to keep out bad neighbors.

Jesus’ parable demolishes that ancient fence, not by denying past history and old stories but by redefining neighbor. “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” “*The one who showed him mercy.*” “Go and do likewise.”

Fences do not make good neighbors; good neighbors transcend fences. As long as the lawyer could draw distinctions between those who were neighbor and those who were not, he could place limits on the obligation to love. But where the lawyer sought a fence line to define who qualifies for love and who does not, Jesus got out a pair of wire cutters. Neighbor resides not in pedigree or residency: neighbor takes shape in need and opportunity in aid.

How well do we practice such neighborliness in our churches, not to mention our wider communities? It is far easier to be in the fencing business. In the days of the civil rights movement, it was said that the most segregated hour in the United States was 11:00 AM Sunday. In many places, perhaps it still is. And not just racially either. Liberal versus conservative, old versus young, rich versus poor, and we could name many more.

We have this innate ability to dwell on things that differentiate us and then build walls to insure we keep our side pure. We build our fences to keep it so...and by keeping *us* so. But when it comes to God’s mercy, fences are made for trespassing. What else can be said when Jesus names a Samaritan as the example of neighborliness?

Even that poem of Robert Frost, which many assume to celebrate the need of fences, does just the opposite. At both its opening and near its close, Frost asserts: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” That something in the parable is the mercy of God, revealed in the actions of a Samaritan. A mercy that makes shambles of any would-be fences between us and neighbor, a mercy that makes flesh eternal life by embodying eternal love. May we go and do likewise.

Applying the Parable³

♦ **At its most basic level, the parable forces us to realize the importance of one’s neighbor.**

- **Christianity is always relational.** We do not relate to God on our own; our relation with God is expressed through our relation with the people around us, and it is God who enables our relations with our neighbor.
- Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s question negates the question’s premise that there are boundaries to the definition of neighbor. The question “Who is my neighbor” ought not be asked. Jesus refuses to allow any thought that another human can be a non-neighbor. Franz Leenhardt’s often used statement is compelling: **“One cannot define one’s neighbor; one can only be a neighbor.”**

³ Snodgrass, pp. 357-61.

- Kierkegaard captured the goal by saying, **“To love one’s neighbor means essentially to will to exist equally for every human being without exception.”** In other words, the parable addresses us about our own identity. Does a sense of neighbor rooted in the two love commands – love of God and love of neighbor – define our lives and way of being? If so, this identity excludes the possibility of asking about the boundaries of who is a neighbor. Boundaries are an important means by which we establish our identities, but an identity growing out of Jesus’ sense of being a neighbor demolishes boundaries that either close off compassion and mercy or permit racism and attitudes of superiority.

♦ **With its underlying theme of racial hostility the parable is very close to Jesus’ emphasis on loving one’s enemies.** We cannot limit boundaries of care and obligation to our own group and have different or hostile standards for others. The lawyer sought a boundary for his obligation of loving the neighbor, but Jesus by example destroyed any concept of boundary. We cannot say to God, “I met my obligation; I can quit now.” Peter’s request for a boundary for forgiveness (Matt 18:21-22) was met with the same kind of response.

- The Samaritan represents what we identify as evil or an enemy. Most first-century Jews could not have imagined calling Samaritans their neighbors. Like the lawyer, the parables forces us to acknowledge the divine image embedded in those we detest or distrust—and perhaps even accept compassionate service from them.
- The message that is being communicated in this parable is that the kingdom of God knows no boundaries. And by making the Samaritan the hero of this passage, Jesus may be saying that one’s enemy is the most important neighbor of all — especially if one wants to determine if our faith has turned us into people who are significantly different from the world. Because the kingdom of God knows no boundaries, disciples of Jesus are those who refuse boundaries for the identification of neighbor. Instead, we are to love even our enemies.
- This parable may not tell us how to love our neighbor as ourselves, but it creates a reality that challenges our passivity and self-interest. Loving neighbor as oneself is difficult, but there is no alternative for followers of Jesus.

♦ **Applying some parables, and certainly this one, is obvious: Just do it! We cannot do justice to this parable without emphasizing that it seeks *action*, that people must put love of neighbor into action.**

- This parable not only changes the paradigm of who are our neighbors, it challenges us to act. The parable underscores that compassion (the turning point of the parables, v. 33), mercy, and love, are the key factors in living for God (and therefore discipleship to Jesus), and it teaches that the love command overrides all others.
- Like last week’s parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the parable of the Good Samaritan also insists “Is it not *necessary* for you also to show mercy to your fellow servant as I have shown mercy to you?” (Matt 18:33). Mercy is a requirement for disciples of the kingdom; mercy must be demonstrated.
- The idea of knowing God and yet not being conformed to the ways of God is one that Scripture always combats and one that we must combat as well. In telling the parable Jesus seeks to make a man of knowledge into a man of practice, for anything less is not sufficient for eternal life.

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor?” Jesus asked.

“The one who showed him mercy.”

And Jesus said to him, “Go, and do likewise.”

Who needs your mercy this week, even if you have to slow down from your hurry to show it? Who do you need to recognize as your neighbor, whom you may have been ignoring or even despising? May we prove ourselves as neighbors to all people by our action. May we walk the world as the mercy of God.

Discussion

1. If Jesus told his parable today and wanted to make the Samaritan character someone who a typical church audience might despise or look down upon, whom do you think Jesus would choose? Who would be the most offensive to you? Do you consider such a person your neighbor?
2. How does Jesus reverse the lawyer's original question about eternal life? How is love for neighbor the true test of a right relationship with God (and what does our love of neighbor reveal about our love of God)?
3. Why did the lawyer get hung up on the definition of neighbor? How would this parable challenge his worldview, the way he considered those who did not look or think or act like him, and his treatment of such people?
4. Share some concrete examples of how you are growing in love, mercy, and compassion for others, (perhaps especially those whom you've struggled to see and treat as a "neighbor").
5. What are the "fences" that divide individuals and groups in our church, community, and/or nation? How are these fences maintained?
 - Focus on one of these "fences" in light of this parable. What do Jesus' words of "go and do likewise" mean for us and this dividing wall?
6. Who needs your mercy this week, even if you have to slow down from your hurry to show it? Who do you need to recognize as your neighbor, whom you may have been ignoring or even despising? What need might you have to allow someone else to minister to you, even if that person may not be a fellow believer?