

# The depth and breadth of being a neighbour

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our Bible reading this morning is taken from Luke chapter 10 and we'll read from verses 25 to 37. The well-known parable of the Good Samaritan.

Luke chapter 10 from verses 25 to 37. On one occasion, an expert on the law stood up to test Jesus.

Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What is written in the law? He replied. How do you read it?

He answered, 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 love your neighbour as yourself.

You have answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live. But he wanted to justify himself. So he asked Jesus, and who is my neighbour?

[ 1 : 02 ] In reply, Jesus said, a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

A priest happened to be going down the same road. And when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was. And when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.

Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper.

Look after him, he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have. Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

[ 2 : 18 ] The expert in the law replied, the one who had mercy on him. Jesus told him, go and do likewise.

Amen. There is a famous psychological study that was undertaken at Princeton Seminary in 1970 that involved 40 people, all of them training to be church ministers.

And these 40 men were all told to prepare a talk. Half of them were told to prepare a talk about job opportunities and half were told to prepare a talk about this parable that we're looking at this morning.

And then each of them individually, they were sent across campus to give the talk. And along the way, each of them encountered a man on the ground in the alleyway, coughing and slumped over, completely inadequately dressed for the temperature.

It was about 15 degrees below freezing. Now, this man was a friend of the study organisers. He wasn't in any actual distress, but the participants didn't know that.

[ 3 : 23 ] And of the 40 tested, only 16 offered any kind of help. And of those, well, most, the only help that they actually offered was they told somebody else about him and hoped that they would go and deal with it.

Only a very small number stopped to help themselves. And tellingly, what they'd been preparing a talk on had no impact whatsoever on the likelihood that they would offer help.

Those who were heading to deliver a talk about the parable of the Good Samaritan were no more likely to offer help than anyone else. There have been similar studies repeated since that explore different bounds of the question and have largely repeated those same results.

So what do we make of these kind of studies? Is this just an indictment of the sinfulness of all of humanity, as we've seen in the days of Noah and in Psalm 14?

Is it just an indictment of that Christians included alongside everyone else? Or perhaps it's a point of the amount of fear that a violent society has produced that we're scared of offering help.

[ 4 : 38 ] Or perhaps it means that we've misunderstood this parable, or at the very least failed to actually apply it. Well, I suspect the answer to all three of those possibilities is yes.

All of these are true. So, let's pray, shall we? Lord Jesus, change us through your word this morning, we ask.

Grant us not only understanding, but transformation. As we consider this well-known parable, may we be people who act in accordance with what we believe in theory.

Amen. Well, maybe you remember, maybe you remember last week, we thought about the extent of the corruption and the evil that can flow from disordered love.

We saw the problems when we are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, and lovers of ourselves rather than lovers of our neighbours. How do we know that there the disordered love is the root of the problem?

[ 5 : 41 ] Well, it's partly how it's structured in that letter to Timothy, but it's also, well, it's here, isn't it? Here in Luke chapter 10, correctly ordered love is how Jesus himself sums up the path to eternal life.

When the expert in the law comes and talks to Jesus, he's probably more trying to catch Jesus out than seeking information. But the question that he asks here is a really good one. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

There are a few questions more worth thinking about than that. Actually, it's a question that each of us needs to clarify for ourselves, isn't it? What is more vital than the route to eternal life?

And Jesus' response to this question, Jesus' response is to turn to God's word. Jesus treats the scriptures as authoritative, a definitive answer of what is true, of the answer to this question.

So come back next week because we're going to think more about why that is when we come to 2 Timothy again next week. These things are dovetailing together quite nicely.

[ 6 : 44 ] But for now, the man offers this excellent summary of what God's law demands. 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 love your neighbour as yourself.

So the parable of the Good Samaritan that follows, that kind of explores the second of these, the love of neighbour. Because that's where the legal expert, that's where he wants to try and pick holes and weasel out of what's required of him.

And now Luke doesn't ignore the first command. It seems likely that actually the incident of the home of Mary and Martha that follows on from verse 38, that kind of explores the nature of love of God.

And we'll come on to that another time. But the lawyer here, he's focused on the second part, on the love of neighbour. So when we focus in on this parable, it's introduced with the question, who is my neighbour?

And when we answer that question here, we're exploring the breadth of being a neighbour, if you like. How far does our obligation extend outwards? But I suggest along the way, this parable also examines the depth of being a neighbour.

[ 7 : 55 ] How far ought we to go in expressing our love of another? And it's actually the depth that I want to start with. No limitations and no exceptions.

So, this story that Jesus told, this shows us that as Christians, it shows us we should be deeply compassionate. That our compassion should have no limitations.

That we should be merciful, even when it costs us something. Because loving our neighbours may involve a price. I suspect this is a familiar story to most of you.

And actually, in many ways, the format of this story would have been familiar to those who were listening to Jesus at the time as well. First, you set up the problem. First, in this case, a man injured. Here he is, lying on the floor. Injured and close to death through no fault of his own. Without any kind of physical resources. Everything has been taken from him down to the shirt off his back.

[ 8 : 54 ] He's beaten, left for dead, presumably unconscious. The priests and the Levites, they come along, they ignore him, and they continue on their way.

Clearly, we're supposed to view their behaviour as reprehensible, but no comment is made or required about their reasons. Because attention quickly focuses in on the third passerby.

And this man, we're told in verse 33, took pity on him. That's not pity in the sense of kind of belittling in any way, but rather pity as in compassion.

And not just a casual compassion, but rather he is deeply moved by this man's plight. It troubles him to see a man so abused. How do we know that he's deeply moved?

Well, the evidence is that he does something about it. He takes action, and at not insignificant personal cost. Helping this man costs him money.

[ 9 : 54 ] He pours on the oil and the wine. He's going to have to pay to replace those. Whatever clothes or whatever it is that he uses to bandage the wounds, that is something that he's used up in helping this man.

And then a night's bed and board at the inn, and then the further two denarii that he gives the innkeeper for ongoing care, and that willingness to spend more if it's needed. It's not terribly easy to kind of work out an equivalence in today's money, but we're definitely talking over £100.

I would say probably double that or more if you want to kind of figure out what would that look like today to meet these kinds of needs. Now, we don't know the personal circumstances of this travelling Samaritan.

We don't know how readily he could afford to do this. But that isn't really the point, is it? The point isn't so much the amount spent. The point is that all of this injured man's needs are met.

The Samaritan is willing to do whatever is required, whatever he is able to do, willing to do whatever it takes to see this unfortunate man restored. And I suggest that that is a big challenge to you and to me.

[ 11 : 09 ] It's not uncommon to hear this parable applied, kind of transferred into the modern day, applied in terms of our obligation to help a stranded motorist as we drive along.

I can see how you get to that application, but I think it's a bit superficial, isn't it? I mean, quite apart from the fact that most of us faced with a stranded fellow motorist, most of us, the most we could offer would be to check they've been able to call the RAC.

It's going to do me no good to stand and look under the hood with someone. But more fundamentally than that, I don't think this works as a modern day equivalent because it's not costly enough.

What does it cost me to stop and check on a stranded motorist? Little, if anything. Now, we need to be more radical on that, don't we? We need to ask what it is that we're doing to help our neighbours to the extent that we actually notice it, that we feel the effect of having done so.

It costs us something. It's pretty easy, isn't it, to pop an extra tin of beans in the trolley for the food bank, and there's value in that, perhaps especially at the moment. Don't let me discourage you from these kind of small things, but it's not really plumbing the depths of what this parable is encouraging us to do, is it?

[ 12 : 32 ] It's been postponed due to this coronavirus nonsense, but we were due to have a speaker coming from CAP, from Christians Against Poverty. It's well worth checking them out.

They're doing great things, demonstrating the sort of compassion in action that this parable commends, doing the hard work of actually helping people for the longer term.

Maybe some of us, maybe we should be thinking more about giving £100 a month to an organisation like CAP or others that similarly focus on helping those in need. Maybe we should be thinking more about that than the odd tin of beans from Tesco and the small change in our pockets on the rare circumstance that we walk past someone asking for money on the side of the pavement. See, we may not often see somebody left for dead beside the road. Happily, that is a rarer occurrence today than it was in Jesus' day.

But the fact that we're not going to meet that situation doesn't mean we get off lightly, does it?

Because Jesus' instruction to this inquisitive lawyer and his instruction, therefore, to you and to me, his instruction is, go and do likewise.

[ 13 : 42 ] And that doesn't refer to the specifics of the situation. So much as it refers to the depth of the situation, to the seriousness of what is required, to the extent of what is offered.

So Bob pointed out to us, didn't he, a couple of weeks ago, that compassion for others, the practical demands of mercy and compassion, that these are an obvious outworking of the gospel of grace.

And we can't pretend to the name Christian if we don't share Christ's heart of compassion, if we won't show our faith by our deeds. There's also another way that the depths of compassion are demonstrated in this story.

And actually, I think it's, if anything, an even more challenging one for us, certainly for me. See, the Samaritan expended not only his money, but also his time.

He didn't just take the time to stop and see whether the man was actually dead before hurrying on by, like the others did. Now, he took the time to bandage the wounds, to proceed to this inn, presumably more slowly than he would otherwise have done, because now he's walking instead of riding on his own donkey.

[15:01] And then he spends the night at this inn. I mean, maybe he was planning to stop there anyway, but quite possibly not. And of course, he's planning more time devoted to the situation on his return journey.

So we're all told this has cost him, what, the best part of a day? Something like that? To help this man? Many of us are willing, perhaps, to part with our money, but less so with our time.

It's true on the small scale. You might toss him 50p as you pass the man on the pavement, but are you likely to pause to go and drink a coffee with him and listen to his story and treat him as a person?

It's true on the small scale, and it's understandable, because for many of us, time is our most precious resource, isn't it? But the fact that it's our most precious resource makes how we use it all the more significant.

And in that Princeton study that I mentioned earlier, well, the topic they've been preparing a talk on had no impact on the likelihood of offering help. But the study did actually consider another variable, and that one turned out to have a massive impact.

[16:12] The other variable? Time. A third of the students were told that they were already late to give their talk when they were sent off across campus.

A third were told to proceed quickly, that they needed to get there promptly, but it was more or less going to be okay. And then the final third were told that they had a few minutes to spare.

And how much of a hurry they were in, that was the determining factor in where the help was offered. Those told to hurry, they thought it was going to cost them something to stop and to help, that they'd be even later for this appointment.

Well, sometimes helping others is going to cost us time or money or both. But this passage challenges us to pay that cost, whatever it might be.

And this has always been part of the reality of what God expects of his people, isn't it? It's not new in this parable. As I said earlier, this opening interaction, it's based on what's written in the first part of the Bible.

[17:16] This command to love your neighbour, it comes from Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18. And there's plenty of the rest of the Old Testament law that explains what this love of neighbour looks like in practice.

So it was expected of God's people in the Old Testament. It was expected of those who were listening to Jesus now 2,000 years ago. And it's expected of you and me today. Friends, be deeply compassionate.

No limitations. Secondly then, what of the breadth of being a neighbour? If we've plumbed the depth, the extent of what is required, what is the breadth?

Well, this story does also illustrate broad compassion, doesn't it? In fact, it says, there are no exceptions to neighbourliness. I said earlier, the format of the story was probably familiar to those listening to Jesus.

Not quite as formulaic as an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman. But just like the plot of every rom-com ever filmed is utterly predictable. So Jesus' audience knew what was going to be coming after the priest and the Levite.

[18:26] First you get the priest, then you get the Levite, and then comes the ordinary Jew, every man, the working class hero, a safe, comfortable form of gentle protest at the established clerical orders.

Except that's not what Jesus says, is it? In this story, the third person is not an ordinary Jew. No, it's a Samaritan. And the shock of that, the shock of the Samaritan coming where you expect the Jew, this is much worse than if I begin my joke an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Spaniard walk into a bar.

Because the Samaritans aren't just foreign. It's not just that they're other. No, they're the subject of hatred from the Jews. The two nations are long-standing enemies of one another.

Do you remember, back at the end of chapter 9 that we looked at several weeks ago now, back at the end of chapter 9, the disciples were rejected in a Samaritan village just because they were headed to Jerusalem.

Just because of where they were going, they were not welcome in the Samaritan village. But Jesus emphasizes this Samaritan. He's a profoundly unlikely hero to this story.

[ 19 : 38 ] I think the trouble is that we're too familiar with this parable, aren't we? Maybe you grew up with this story in Sunday school and maybe you've read this account numerous times.

And even if you've never actually heard this story before, well, you're familiar with the idea of a good Samaritan, aren't you? We talk about a person being a good Samaritan and all we mean is that they've helped out someone in need.

Didn't find any of them in the UK, but in the States there's numerous hospitals called Good Samaritan Hospital. Samaritan becomes synonymous with somebody who helps other people. There's the suicide prevention helpline and so on. And that's because this guy in this story, he's the Samaritan who for us defines what a Samaritan is.

But in Jesus' day the Samaritan's not the good guy. The Samaritan is the default villain. Talking about a good Samaritan, it's an oxymoron that the ideas don't go together.

[ 20 : 39 ] This is more shocking than when Finn takes off his helmet in *The Force Awakens* and you discover that somehow there's such a thing as a good stormtrooper. It's even more unexpected and shocking than that.

Here from the most unexpected quarter comes the deep compassion that we were considering a few minutes ago. The expert in the law, he asked, verse 29, who is my neighbour?

And by the end of the story this expert is forced to concede it is this most unlikely of heroes. It is this despised Samaritan. It is he who is the true neighbour to the wounded man.

See, the lawyer wants a kind of esoteric, theoretical discussion about the scope of neighbourly responsibility. He wants, really, he wants to get away with as little as possible.

And yet, the story invites him to look at it from the opposite perspective, to imagine himself beside the road, bleeding and destitute.

[ 21 : 45 ] And considered from that perspective, well, don't you want everyone to think of themselves as your neighbour? And there's an implicit reciprocity, isn't there, in the idea of being a neighbour.

If I'm your neighbour, well, that means you're also my neighbour. If I want you to help me when I need it, well, how could I justify withholding help when you need it?

So this parable tells us to look for our neighbour in unlikely places. To look for our neighbour among those we are perhaps instinctively disinclined to like or to value.

This parable shows us that even one's enemy is actually one's neighbour. Neighbourliness is a very broad concept, it turns out. As defined here, it knows no borders and no limitations.

It's almost too obvious an application in our present environment. Almost too obvious to point out that this parable demonstrates that race should have no impact on our inclination or otherwise to a neighbourly attitude.

[ 22 : 54 ] We don't get to treat people who look like us as neighbours whilst walking by on the other side of the road when they don't. Whatever it was that caused the priest and the Levite to walk by on the other side, it ought not to be true of us.

See, this Samaritan, he sets aside all of the barriers and differences and the distance and so should you and I because in light of the gospel of reconciliation, it is repugnant when we allow any barrier to stop us showing mercy.

So maybe we need to take the time to consider what barriers we, each of us, allow to make us less likely to offer help, whether that is racial barriers, class snobbery or inverted snobbery for that matter, sex, level of education, sexual orientation, age, employment, etc, etc, etc.

See, Jesus' radical approach to neighbourliness transcends all of those barriers, doesn't it? this parable calls us to be a neighbour to everyone. This one's been a tricky sermon to write and that's not because the passage is difficult to understand but actually it's been hard to write because it's so easy to understand, isn't it?

I'm pretty sure you understood the point Jesus is making here the first time it was read. Go and do likewise. It doesn't really require a great deal of analysis, does it?

[ 24 : 30 ] If you want to follow Jesus you ought to be ready to show kindness and love to everyone who is in need. It isn't understanding that's hard, is it? It's actually doing it.

The trick is putting into practice the depth and breadth of being a neighbour. And the danger is that we come away from this morning that we come away feeling vaguely uncomfortable for not doing more and yet without anything changing in our lives.

That's the danger here, isn't it? And so my challenge is this. Could you, will you, at some point today, today, not sometime this week by which point you'll have forgotten about it, could you at some point today, maybe in a quiet hour this afternoon or over lunch with your spouse or when it's finally quiet in the evening when the children are at last asleep, at some point stop and think this through and consider, firstly, consider who are you inclined not to consider to be your neighbour and repent.

And secondly, secondly, consider where could you deepen your neighbourly love? what specific action could you actually take? What organisation could you give money to or volunteer time with even more?

What attitude could you take to be readier, to seize the opportunities to show mercy that cross your path? Friends, let's not leave this feeling vaguely uncomfortable, but doing something in light of what we have heard.

[ 26 : 17 ] please take time to think it through, lest, well, lest we all of us be like those seminary students who thought about this parable and then ignored the man in need.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you that your word is clear.

Thank you that you set the path to eternal life before the lawyer who asked. Thank you that you base your understanding upon what has already been revealed to your people.

Thank you that we know what it is that you want from us. Lord Jesus, we are sorry that we readily and often read these things, hear what you would have us do, and then go and do very little.

Lord Jesus, would you give us the genuine love of our neighbor, the compassion for all in this world that you have made, the willingness to do costly things in order to love and to serve others, to show your compassionate heart, your love for this world.

[ 27 : 40 ] In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.