

Costly Love

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Date: 24 February 2019

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[0:00] Well, there are times when the simplest of things can still pose a challenge to us. I'm sure you understand that. And I think tonight's passage is one such example.

Why do I say that? Well, let me explain. You see, it's a very familiar parable, right? I'm pretty sure everyone knows who or what a good Samaritan is.

And if someone is called a good Samaritan, you know what I'm talking about. And so many of you, I think, might be coming in here tonight thinking, you know what, I probably know this parable pretty well.

And I'm probably not going to learn anything new tonight. And so that's a particular challenge for me as I begin to preach it. And it may be that I might not say anything new.

But I think that as we come to God's word tonight, there should still be an expectation that God would surprise us whenever we come to his word. And therefore, that we'll keep learning new things.

[1:06] And so that's what I hope will happen tonight. It will still be a challenging parable to you, I hope. So let's begin with verse 25, where we read that on one occasion, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.

Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus' interlocutor, we're told, is a lawyer, an expert in the law, which means he's not an outsider, but a Jew, who thinks he's already in the covenant.

He's already in the kingdom, he thinks. And he's asking not what he must do to get into the kingdom, but what he must do to stay in. That's, I think, the purpose behind this question.

Further, I don't think he's really asking because he doesn't know. Rather, as it says, he's asking to test Jesus, to challenge him. So he may call Jesus a teacher, but he's probably thinking in his mind and hoping that he'll be able to teach Jesus a lesson or two.

It's rather like those duels you have in those kung fu movies. Have you watched those? It men, those kind? Whether Jesus is the new master and he's coming into town for the first time, and the existing masters are challenging him to a duel, to see whether he's up to it.

[2:36] Except here, Jesus doesn't take debate. He's not answerable to this lawyer. He's got nothing to prove. Rather, he wants the man to see the truth, the truth about him and the truth about salvation.

And so he puts the question back at him. What is written in the law, Jesus asks in verse 26? How do you read it? Or how does the law answer this question you've just put?

And the lawyer replies, 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 neighbor as yourself.

Now, to the lawyer's credit, he's got the right answer. If you read the other Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus himself summarizes these two as the greatest commandments on which the entire law hangs.

So the lawyer knows his stuff, which is why Jesus says in verse 27 exactly that. You have answered correctly. But then Jesus adds, Do this and you will live.

[3 : 43] Because simply knowing isn't enough. The lawyer has to live by it as well. So if you could love both God and neighbor, then eternal life was his.

Now, you may think this is slightly strange, particularly if you've been coming for the last couple of weeks, because this doesn't sound like the Gospel, does it? Where, after all, is the call to repent?

Where is the command to follow Jesus, to trust in him? It's not there, is it? Well, I think Jesus answers like that, because he's dealing with someone who is steeped in the law, and he wants to use the law, the very law that he's putting to him, to show the man the way to salvation.

But if we think more closely, I think to love God does mean that we need to love what he says. We need to love the one he sent, Jesus.

And so that does mean we end up loving and following Jesus, and we do repent, and we put our trust in him as a result. So although Jesus doesn't say it explicitly, if we join the dots, then actually to love God and to love neighbor does mean to repent and to follow Jesus.

[5 : 03] Which is why I don't think it's wrong for me to put on the outline, in answer to the question, what must I do to inherit eternal life? The answer, love. Because to follow Jesus and his commands, the way to eternal life, can be summed up in the commandment to love God, and as a result of that, to love our neighbor.

Of course, we need to be careful that love is what God defines it to be. I know it's very popular nowadays, even in churches, to say love is whatever we say it is.

But no, if we love God, then we need to love what God says. And so we need to study his word so that we know exactly how God defines love.

Now that brings us to the next challenge because the lawyer seems to think he knows what love is. So in verse 29, we're told that he wants to justify himself.

That is, he wants to show that he's aced the test of love. That when it comes to love, and in particular to loving his neighbor, he's doing exactly what the law requires.

[6 : 17] But Jesus has actually got this lawyer where he wants him. He doesn't know it, but he's actually being painted into the corner. And very soon, Jesus will expose his self-righteousness, not to shame him or anything, but to prompt him to repent.

And the way Jesus does this, as he does in many other places, is to tell a parable. So as I said, it's a familiar parable, but we're going to look through it anyway. So verse 30, Jesus replied, 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 traveled, 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, 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.

[7 : 38] Now we all know that Jesus has chosen these characters very, very carefully. Both the priest and the Levite were chosen because like the lawyer, they are respected members of Jewish society.

In fact, they are often held up as models of society. If you wanted an example of what righteous living looks like, then look to the priest, look to the Levite.

And yet here, Jesus portrays them not just as people who ignore others in need, but actually people who go out of their way to avoid helping others.

For you see, as they saw the man, obviously in dire straits, he's half naked, half dead, lying by the road. Instead of being moved by compassion, which you would expect any decent person to do, they deliberately crossed the road, you see, to pass by on the other side.

They actually go out of their way to be uncaring. Now worse, this is hypocritical behavior because priests and Levites are often teachers of the Lord.

[8 : 49] Here they would be in that synagogue or in the temple preaching, love your neighbor, only for them to be failing to do it as they walk along this road. Now for many of us, we probably, this is probably nothing to us because we've seen pastors and bishops and all that fail in our time.

But in Jesus' day, this parable would have sent shockwaves to the hearers. Jesus would have been seen to be impugning the reputation and office of priests and Levites.

It's just unheard of. And to add to that, what does Jesus then do? He goes on to choose a Samaritan as the one who does the right thing and helps the poor man.

Now I know I'm going to offend a few people by saying this, but it's almost like choosing someone who is a Collingwood supporter to be the one that does the right thing in Melbourne. Now I love Collingwood supporters, but that's the reaction you get, right?

Anyway, we have the Samaritan and notice some of the details of the story here. First, the Samaritan was away from home. So in verse 33, Jesus says that he was traveling, probably on a business trip, and he's on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

[10 : 05] And if you look at the slide of the map, you see that Jerusalem and Jericho are in Judea. They're not actually in the home province of Samaria, which is where the Samaritan would have come from.

So he's away from home. He's not in the comforts of his own country, as it were, or the security. Second, notice the care he gives to the man. He dresses the man's wounds on the spot.

Then he brought him to the inn. He pays for him to be looked after. And then he said he will even return and make good any further debts. This is in stark contrast, isn't it, to the priest and the Levite?

Because what we have here is the Samaritan actually going out of his way to care. And thirdly, as I alluded to earlier, Jesus chose the Samaritan deliberately because Samaritans were members of what used to be the northern kingdom of Israel.

And they were despised by the Jews who lived in Judea from the tribe of Judah and Benjamin from the south. To the Jews, the Samaritans were the ones who corrupted themselves.

[11 : 11] They intermarried. They worshipped outside Jerusalem instead of coming to the temple to worship. So all they did signified that they weren't entitled to be God's people.

They had sort of forfeited their share to the promises of Abraham. And so as Jesus concludes this parable, he puts the lawyer's questions back to him.

He says, he's sort of saying, you know, you ask me who is your neighbor? Well, let me ask you instead, Mr. Lawyer. Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

Can you see, did you notice how Jesus actually changed the question? It's not who is my neighbor anymore, but who are you a neighbor to?

Whereas the lawyer wants to limit what he has to do to love, to prove that he's done enough, Jesus is pushing him to expand the scope of who he's to love, to love as many people as possible.

[12:19] And I think the lawyer isn't really happy with this question. He's just been painted into a corner and the last thing he wants to do is give an answer that says, the Samaritan.

So instead, what he says in verse 37 is, the one who had mercy on him. You see, in his mind, it was inconceivable that a Samaritan could be a neighbor, that a Samaritan could obey the law better than he could or the priests could or the Levites could.

Because for him to say that the Samaritan is the loving neighbor would mean that the Samaritan is entitled to inherit eternal life. But the lawyer's own answer skews him, doesn't he?

Because he's just said that the one who shows mercy is the neighbor which God approves. And what has he just done? Well, he's just shown that he's unable to show mercy to the Samaritan in this story.

He's unable to be gracious enough even to name the Samaritan as the one who's the most loving. But if you're honest with ourselves, I think we find it hard as well, don't we, to be loving our enemies and to acknowledge that actually they could actually be more loving than we are.

[13:44] By contrast, Jesus does exactly what the parable preaches. If you think about it, he's actually the ultimate Samaritan. Did he have enemies?

Of course he did. Who exactly were some of them? Well, if you were here two weeks ago, you remember that it was the Samaritans who rejected him.

As the disciples went to a village, they rejected him and so the disciples asked for Jesus to rain down far from heaven and what did Jesus do? He said, no, don't do it. He rebuked the disciples and right here, just in the very next chapter, what does he do?

He uses one of them, one of the Samaritans as a model for what it means to be a loving neighbor. And Jesus shows that same love to us as well.

He didn't leave us in our shame or nakedness, did he? Even though he could pass us by. Instead, he laid down his life for us. Jesus is the ultimate neighbor to all humanity.

[14:51] He paid for all our debts, carrying our sins all the way to the cross. Jesus is merely asking this lawyer and all of us, those of us who want to inherit eternal life, to do what he himself did, to love our neighbors sacrificially.

That, in a nutshell, is the application of the passage. You probably already knew that and so probably nothing new.

But I guess the real difficulty is not trying to understand this parable, is it? The real challenge is to try to live up to it. Now, I could make it easy for us today, simply wrap it up here, and we can all go our merry way and we can go, yep, we understood the main message of the parable, we got it reminded again, that's fine, all's good, let's go on with life.

But that would be pointless, wouldn't it? Because the lawyer knew the answer, didn't he? He got the right answer. And yet, Jesus had to say, do this and you will live.

And so, I'm going to do the more challenging thing for us tonight, and that is to pose to you two questions, which is on the outline, two questions to challenge us so that we might examine our own lives.

[16:16] So first, let's ask how we may love better. It may be that we're already doing so in a costly way. I'm sure many of us love and love in a sacrificial way.

So, please don't get me wrong, the purpose of this exercise is not to beat people around the head and say, you know, you have to do better all the time. No, what I want to do instead is to just challenge us and prompt us to increase the scope of our love rather than to be content to limit it with what we've done.

So, for instance, it's easy to limit the scope of love to only what's been described in this parable, that is, to think only in terms of practical and physical needs.

You know, loving is about helping the poor, giving to the needy and doing all that kind of stuff. And for some of us, that may be indeed what we need to do, be more generous with our money and donations.

But for others, there are other ways of being unloving as well, isn't it? In our Old Testament reading tonight, in that little snippet of Leviticus, it ends with the command to love your neighbor.

[17:24] But actually, if you look at all the verses just preceding it, you see actually a great variety of what it means to love one another. It's not just about helping the poor, is it? So I'll put it on the slide again and have a look at what it says.

So, for example, loving our neighbor includes not slandering your neighbor, not spreading lies about them, not putting their lives in danger by speeding, perhaps, or hating them in your heart.

But notice also, it means rebuking them frankly. In other words, correcting and calling them to repentance so that they might remain in God's love. It's remarkably broad, isn't it?

Love encompasses not just physical well-being, but emotional, relational, and the spiritual well-being of your neighbor as well. And so for some of us, we're probably comfortable helping people practically.

But then we find it really hard to speak up when someone is going down the wrong path. We may see them destroying their lives with bad choices, and yet we're afraid to say anything, because we think to be loving is not to offend them.

[18:34] But if we read this verse, that's not true, is it? It's the opposite. Sure, we have to be gracious in our speech, but actually warning them is the loving thing to do.

Or take as another example the whole five love languages thing that I always talk about in the context of marriage. Let's say my love language is acts of service, in which case loving others through service is the easy thing for me.

I can give them a hand, help them with stuff, but maybe words of affirmation is not my love language. So I struggle to love people with words, to affirm them when they need encouragement, to say thank you, to show appreciation, to say sorry when we've done wrong, or even to say I forgive you when some wrong has been done to us.

But love is not just about action, is it? Love is about words as well. We can show hate or love through our words. That's why there's such a thing as hate speech.

So maybe for some of us, our challenge is to be more loving with our words. And then finally, as a third example, costly love doesn't always involve things, does it?

[19:49] Because sometimes what's most costly to us is our time or our privacy or our relationships, which we guard jealously. And so maybe for some of us, we need to love by giving others our time or letting them into our lives and relationships.

Well, hopefully that gives you a flavor for some of the things that you can think about. What I want to do now is just to pause for a minute. If you've got a pen, allow you to write down one or two things that have come to your mind, or if not, for you to just remember them, and then after a little while we'll move on.

So let's do that now. Okay, hopefully you've got something in your mind, but let's move on to the second question now where we consider not just how we love better, but who else we could love.

And here again, there will be some people in our lives which we find easier to love than others. Because let's face it, some people just rub us up the wrong way, don't they?

Just some people just make it so hard for us to love. And, shock horror, some of them might even be brothers and sisters in Christ. at other times, it's the views of people that really put us off.

[21 : 06] So if you're a conservative thinker, you can't stand people who have progressive views, probably. If you're progressive, you find it hard to love those on the right. Or if you're an intellectual person, you don't like the people that keep talking about their feelings all the time.

Or if you're a touchy-feely kind of person, you don't like it why always people have to make rational decisions. And sometimes you happen to be husband and wife as well. But the thing is that what is worse is that when we start thinking like that and feeling like that, we end up also thinking that these other people are not capable of doing anything good.

That was the problem with the lawyer. He couldn't imagine that the Samaritan could somehow be more loving than he was, that he could be a better neighbor and therefore keep the law.

But you see, when we start to think like that, then what we've done is committed the sin of pride. We've become self-righteous, just like the lawyer.

Because when we hate someone, we're actually saying they're not deserving of our love, not even our courtesy or kindness. We're saying that somehow we're better than them and their faults are worse than us, so bad that we cannot forgive them.

[22 : 25] And if we keep thinking like this, then there will be eternal consequence. Because God opposes the proud. The proud are those who cannot see their need for Jesus.

The proud are those who think they deserve God's love, rather than to be thankful for God's mercy. No, it's because of God's mercy for us that we too are to have mercy on others.

It's just like the lawyer says, the one who has mercy is the one who loves their neighbor. Because they know that they are to show love to all, whether they deserve to receive it or not.

Now in a while I'm going to ask you to put a name or two down on that question, but I have to be honest with you, if you ask me to put names under that question, I would probably have quite a long list.

there are just people that have hurt me in the past, hurt my family, maybe offend me all the time by saying the wrong things or just grates at me.

[23 : 34] And as I look at that list, I have to admit that actually I'll be pretty much at a loss what to do, because in my own strength, I don't think I can muster up the virtue to love any of them.

And so what do we do then? How do we even start to love them? Well, I think for a start, putting their names down is a good beginning, because what we're doing is we're admitting to God and praying about it, admitting that we failed to love people, and therefore we have sinned.

But as we put the names down as well, what we're doing is asking God to give us the grace to bit by bit, step by step, change our hearts so that we can begin to love them, and firstly, maybe even just to forgive them.

We're asking God to help us to see them as people made in God's image, and if they're Christians, children of God. So it probably wouldn't be that after you put the name down and pray that all of a sudden, tomorrow or tonight, you go up to that person and just be able to give them a big hug, and you're going to be besties from there on in.

That's probably not going to be realistic. But it does start you on that journey to wanting to love that person, to stop treating them as an enemy, and to begin to see them as someone to love.

[25 : 05] So it may be hard, but I'm going to pause again, and I'm going to invite you to write down a few people that come to your mind, and then I'm going to just pray to wrap up this sermon tonight.

So why don't you do that? Let me pray. Father, you have shown us in your Son what costly, sacrificial, and selfless love looks like, love that drove him to the cross to take the place of judgment for his enemies.

And we thankfully have been the beneficiaries of this, for we are blessed, forgiven, and welcomed into your kingdom because of him. Help us now to do the same.

Help us to love even when it's costly. Help us to love those we find hard to love. Change our hearts by your Spirit so that we may do this in your strength.

We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, let's rise and sing again. It's a song celebrating our unity in Christ and therefore our love for one another.

[26 : 11] Oh, how good it is. Thank you.