Don't Trust a Priest

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] If you would open up your Bibles to Luke chapter 10 on page 68, that would be terrific. Thank you to Dan for stealing my illustration about the fog.

The fog was going to be an illustration of what we've done to these two little stories in Luke's Gospel, Good Samaritan and Martha and Mary.
I don't know if you're aware or not and we are pushing uphill today because we have almost completely turned these stories on their head. Take the second story, Martha and Mary.
It's been used to distinguish two different paths of following Jesus, the active path and the reflective contemplative path. The Roman Catholic Church today still uses this passage to advocate the monastic life.
Even worse, the story of the Good Samaritan has been ripped out of its context and turned on its head and it's now used to mean almost the exact opposite of what it means in Luke.
[1:12] It's used today to mean that we should all be good Boy Scout philanthropists. We should be very neighbourly to each other and make the world a better place, which would be a very fine thing, but nowhere near as fine as if we understand what Jesus really meant.

There's a long history of this. In the ancient, particularly the medieval church, the approach to the Good Samaritan was treated as an allegory. Jerusalem's heaven, donkeys, well, Samaritan's Jesus, some people have the donkey as Jesus, the inn was the church, the innkeeper was the pope.
And you can go to a number of absolutely beautiful cathedrals in France today and the main stained glass window, which will have the story of redemption, is interpreted by the parable of the Good Samaritan.
That's the interpretation that's held up to us. The problem with allegory is it puts me in control. The text doesn't control the meaning. I import my meaning onto the text.
And it depends on who's most creative, and in the end, the cleverest person wins. I think you can only interpret this allegorically if you take it out of context. The modern way to turn it on its head is to turn it into a moral lesson.
[2:32] We should be kind and compassionate and help those who are less fortunate than ourselves. So the phrase Good Samaritan has become proverbial in our culture today to mean someone who bestirs and troubles himself to go and help someone who's in trouble.

So during the snow in December, I read in the Vancouver Sun that law enforcement officers were allowed, and I quote, Good Samaritan leeway with cars that were stuck in intersections.
They didn't ticket them. It's kind of the equivalent of good karma. You do a little bit and they'll come back somewhere else. Do you know in Manitoba there is a Good Samaritan Protection Act? And if you see someone in real trouble and you get involved with them, you're protected by law if something goes sideways.
One of the pastors of one of the largest congregations in New York City has recently written a book called Ministries of Mercy, subtitled The Call of the Jericho Road.
It's on my desk. On the back it says, Like a wounded man on the Jericho Road, there are needy people in our path. The widow next door, the family strapped with medical bills, the homeless man outside our place of worship.
[3:42] And I think it's just, it's so very hard to resist reading the story this way. And I can think of three or four very good sermons on stewardship if we read it this way.

But I don't think that's what the story is about. And I think if we put it in its context, we'll find it's almost the opposite. Look at the way it starts. Verse 25. Behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

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He's not really a lawyer. He's not really a suited guy who charges by the hour. This is a theologian. He's a theological expert. He's the Regis Professor of Theology from Oxford.
Or Cambridge. Or Yale. It doesn't really matter. But Luke tells us his motivation, his purpose was to test Jesus.
And the only other time that word is used in the Gospel is when Jesus says to Satan, you shall not test the Lord your God. It's a Satan word. So this man is not coming genuinely seeking.
[4:57] He's not even neutral. There's the smell of Satan on what he's doing. And you can see something of it in the question. He says, What must I do to inherit eternal life?

He's got some semblance of religion. But he asks the same question that the rich young ruler asks in a few chapters. They both want a religion that they can do.
That they can perform. Something manageable and doable. And so Jesus does the same thing that he did to the rich young ruler. He holds up the law as a mirror.
And he says, How do you read it? And the lawyer's answer is completely orthodox. Verse 27. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself.
And Jesus says, Fine. Just do it. Just get out there and do it all the time perfectly with everyone. But the lawyer can see where Jesus is going.
[5:53] He doesn't like this just do it business. And you see the problem, the problem with putting the law in this way, listen carefully, is that you just can't put limits on what you owe God.

Ever thought about that? Some of the laws are phrased negatively. Do not steal. Do not kill. Etc. And what those laws do is they limit my actions.
But when you put the law positively like this, love the Lord your God, love your neighbour as yourself, you can never know when you've fully obeyed it. There's no limit on the actions I have to take.
I'm never off the hook. I can never sit down and say, Well, today I didn't steal. Because there's always more I can do to love God and love my neighbour.
So you see, when Jesus says, Yeah, just go do it. He should have fallen on his knees and said to Jesus, Jesus, I'm a selfish man. I've never really loved my neighbour as I should.
[6:58] I need your mercy. Please forgive my sins. Instead, the lawyer steps up and he says, No, no, no, no. We've got to put limits on this. God can't demand this from me.

You see verse 29? Desiring to justify himself, he says to Jesus, And just, who is my neighbour? You can't expect a person to love everyone like that.
We've got to put limits on it. And Luke tells us he's trying to justify himself, which is what he's been trying to do since the beginning of the story. And of course, you can't do it. You can't justify yourself.
If you read through Luke's Gospel, you'll find there are two groups of people in Jesus' mind. There are those who justify themselves and there are those who justify God.
And those who justify themselves refuse repentance, they reject the purpose of God, and they exalt themselves. And those who justify God, they humble themselves, they repent, and they ask God for mercy because they are sinful.
[8:03] The law was never given so that we could justify ourselves. The law was never given so that we could gain eternal life. The Bible speaks with one voice on this. No human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law.

You just can't do it. If we've learned anything from Luke by now, we will know that Jesus has not come to give us a moral helping hand.
He's not come to call the righteous and give us a bit of a boost up. He's come to call sinners to repentance. But what the lawyer wants, like the rich young ruler in every religious person, he wants a do-it-yourself salvation, which is the opposite of the salvation that Christ has come to bring.
Do you remember? Jesus says, I've come to seek and to save the lost. I've come to bring forgiveness of sins through my death on the cross and through the resurrection.
That is why it's very important, you see. If you take this parable out of that context, we turn the meaning on its head. Listen, friends.
[9:10] We reverse its meaning. If we put it back in its context, this little parable, which we're coming to, ought to have a devastating effect on our pride and on our spiritual arrogance and it ought to make us fall down and beg Christ for mercy, to repent.

So, there are two little sections. We have the parable and then we have Martha and Mary. That was all introduction. And I've called them, well, I've called the parable of the Good Samaritan the misery

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of morality.
You know the story very well. We meet a man who falls in desperate need. We don't know anything about this guy. He's not white. He's not black. He's not brown. He's not green. We don't know his name.
We don't know his business. Through no fault of his own, he's attacked violently and left half dead in a dangerous place with no help at all.
He could be you. He could be me. First man to come by is a priest. Don't look to priests for help when you're in trouble. Priest is a good man, a righteous man, religious man, a man of priorities.
[10:17] He sees the guy and he walks around him. Second is a Levite, a very good man, a very religious man. And he walks him on the other side as well. We're not sure why. We're not told why.

Perhaps they don't recognise him. Perhaps he's not really any neighbour in any genuine sense. And they're very busy people. And I'll bet you they could give you a host of reasons for not interfering or intervening.
Then a Samaritan comes trotting down the road. And we're so familiar with the story, it's difficult to understand how shocking this is. Centuries of bitter hostility between Jews and Samaritans.
A mix of religion and race and ethnicity. If you were a Hutu, he would be a Tutsi. If you were a Muslim Croat, he would be a Bosnian Serb.
And he comes to this guy and we're told that he has compassion. Something happens in his heart and he acts. He goes to the man, he binds him up, he puts him on his animal, he takes him to a place of safety and pays for his restoration and healing.
[11:26] And then comes this amazing question from Jesus in verse 36. He says, What was the lawyer's question?

Who is my neighbour? And Jesus asks the question, which one, literally, became neighbour? The word proved is to become. It's used when the word became flesh or the mustard seed became a tree.
The lawyer wanted to limit what God is asking of him. He wants to know who fits in the category of neighbour so that I can know I've done enough for eternal life. And Jesus turns it on his head and he says, It's not about the lines and the rules and the categories and the definitions.
It's about you, he says. It's not about the qualifications that person has to be your neighbour. It's about whether you become neighbour.
It's not about their address. It's about your heart. You need to be remade. Again, at which point the guy should have fallen to the ground and said, Lord, I've never loved my neighbour like this.
[12:38] And clearly I've therefore never loved God properly. I'm lost. Mercy, forgiveness. Instead, he draws himself up in pride in verse 37.

And he says, Well, he can't even bring himself to say, So, so, Samaritan. So, he says, option three. And Jesus again says, Just go and do it then. Now, I don't want to give the impression that the Samaritan story on its own is not relevant to us.
Desperately relevant. What the Samaritan does for this man flows out of his compassion. And the compassion flows out of a heart that has been remade, a new heart, a heart of love.
This has always been God's will for us. It was God's will for us in the Old Testament. And if you're trying to follow Jesus and you have the Holy Spirit in your life, there ought to be a growing, unselfconscious compassion towards other people.
Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works, see your glory to your Father who is in heaven. But if we put it back in its context, what the parable does is exposes the misery of morality without a changed heart.
[13:50] The weakness of religion and a need for Christ to remake us. That's the first point. The second point is verses 38 to 42.

And I've called this the danger of serving. Verse 38. Now as they went on their way, he entered a village and a woman named Martha received him into her house.
Now this little section, 38 to 42, comes as the conclusion of the section that we began last week. This is why it's very important not to miss church for a week.
We began at 9.51, you remember. But I'll explain it again. Just in case you weren't here. In 9.51, Jesus began a pilgrimage. You remember?
He turned his face toward Jerusalem. And the pilgrimage he's on is going to go from Galilee to heaven through the cross. And we saw that these next 10 chapters in Luke's Gospel are about the

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fact that Jesus makes this pilgrimage so that we will join him on the pilgrimage and we will follow him and have our attention on him because he's our first priority.
[15:03] We saw that's what it means to be a Christian. To love Christ, to worship him. He's the core and heart of all that we do. And so we meet Martha. And Martha is the kind of person everyone wants to have around.

She's practical. She's busy. She gets stuff done. Verse 38. She welcomes Jesus into her home. She is not like the lawyer. She is a disciple, a full disciple.
And now she has Jesus and the 12 big eaters to feed for dinner. This is no little thing. Three times in these little verses Jesus is called the Lord.
How do you show hospitality to the Lord? How do you bring Jesus into the domestic arena of your life and show genuine welcome to him?
I'm not sure how I can illustrate this. Perhaps if you were to roll together Barack Obama, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Billy Graham into one and have that person for dinner, what would you do?
[16:09] You'd probably have another list. A different group of people, I know. Well, you obviously organise everyone in the house to get cracking, don't you? You strategise, you organise, you delegate, you get the best stuff out.

I mean, this is Jesus we're talking about and Martha says, I want to serve him. He's the son of the most high God. He's forgiven my sin. He's done so much for me. I owe him everything.
I need to get busy. And then she finds her sister, the only one in the house who knows where the best china is, sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching.
What do you do? You rattle the cutlery really loudly in the kitchen. That's what you do. You open and close the fridge with loud sighs. Who's going to make the gravy?
You walk through the middle of the teaching session, dropping things as you go. Why isn't Mary doing anything? Can't she see how important it is to serve Jesus? He's Lord after all.
[17:06] Come on. And if Jesus is Lord, can't he see how busy I am and how much I'm doing to serve him? Why doesn't he tell Mary to get off a lazy behind and help me?

Why am I the only one that's working here? And a thought enters her mind, perhaps he doesn't really care about me. I'm being dragged in 50 different directions. It's all to serve him and he doesn't seem to care.
Doesn't he know I'm doing this for him? All this work of serving. I seem to be the only one who's doing it. Nobody else seems to be doing it, especially Mary.
It's always this way. It always comes down to me. I'm always the responsible. When I was born first, I do this. Why doesn't Jesus send someone to help me? Can't he see how hard I'm working and how much needs to be done?
He just, he doesn't seem to care. It's an amazing moment in verse 40. Jesus goes up, sorry, Martha goes up to Jesus in the Greek.
[18:05] She goes right up and gets in his face and she says to him, Lord, hands on hips, don't you care that my sister, can't even call her Mary, has abandoned me to serve all on my own?

I'm always the one that volunteers first, Lord. I'm always on the roster. I give up nights for you. I keep my commitments and you don't seem to care. Tell her to get up and help me.
Have you ever felt like that? Some of you probably have. Some of you probably should. Come and see me later if you want to know which category you're in.
And Jesus answers, very beautiful, verse 41. He says, Martha, Martha, twice. This is deep affection. And he takes what's behind her outburst and he pulls it out on the table and he says, you're anxious and you're troubled about many things.
I know your desire is to please, but in the pleasing you've become anxious and fearful and fretful. This is a wonderful word. This word anxiety and anxious is the same word he used a couple of chapters ago in the parable of the sower.
[19:24] The seed that fell amongst the thorns, he said, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by the, here's the word, anxieties and riches and pleasures of life and their fruit does not mature.

And how do we avoid this? What is the solution to this anxiety? Jesus says, one thing is needful. There's one thing that deserves our devotion and dedication.

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He says, Mary has chosen the better portion, literally the best dish and it's never going to be taken away from her. And what is Mary doing? What's the one thing she's doing?
She is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to teaching. Somehow Martha has allowed all her serving to come between her and Jesus. And it doesn't mean serving is bad and wrong, but if it gets between us and Jesus and if it becomes the source of anxiety, it is.
And what is the primary proof that we have Christ first? It is that we sit at his feet and we listen to his teaching.
[20:35] This is so important. If you have your Bible open, go back with me to chapter 8 for just a moment. Verse 18.

Take heed. This is Jesus speaking. Take heed how you hear. For to him who has will more be given and from him who has not, even what he thinks he has will be taken away.
There's a dynamic in listening. It's not engineering. This is a person. Then his mother and his brothers came to him and they could not reach him for the crowd and he was told, your mother and your brothers are standing outside desiring to hear you.
But he said to them, my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. He redefines his family in terms of our approach to and our submission to and our obedience to his word.
Do you remember in chapter 9 on the Mount of Transfiguration when God the Father says, this is my son, my chosen one. There's one thing he tells us to do.
[21:39] He says, listen to him. And I think this has two applications for us this morning and I want to finish with this.

The first is this, very simply. If we are to have Christ first, if we're going to follow Christ, we need to focus on him. Following Jesus means continually placing Christ at the centre and constantly taking myself and putting me out of the centre.
What's really important in the Christian life is not my love for Jesus but his love for me. Not my hold on him but his hold on me. And you know this is out of whack when you begin fretting about your performance and you begin fretting about other people's lack of performance.
You know it's out of whack when you begin to ask the question, does Jesus really care for me? The posture of the disciple is sitting at Jesus' feet.
It's looking to him. It's listening to him. And any idea that I'm going to get eternal life by what I do has to die. And any idea that I'm going to justify myself by my performance has to die.
[23:02] The lawyer needed to know that his morality was empty. Martha needed to know that her spirituality without him was empty. And both of them needed to come to the place where they could sing, in Christ alone my hope is found.

Focus on Christ. And the second point of application which is very obvious is that if we are going to focus on Christ it's very important the place that the Bible has in our lives.
That is, whether we actually use the Bible because it is his word. If you are new to Christianity you ought to know that reading the Bible each day and praying each day is the bread and butter of the Christian life.
It's the source of clarity and maturity. A growing Christian is a hungry Christian. Hungry for God's word. Hungry to know Jesus.
It's a spiritual hunger and it's a response to the great grace of the gospel. There's only two reasons why Christians don't read the Bible. Sin and Satan.
[24:09] And both of them hate it when Christians sit humbly at Jesus' feet listening to his word. That's why there's so much that crops up to distract us to keep us away from the place of blessing.

And I am very aware that this is not simple and it's a lifelong discipline for us to learn and we need to help one another in this. I want to encourage you after church when you're speaking to your Christian friends say to them, what have you found helpful in this area?
I read a letter recently from a young mother who had three children at home, out of school, young children and she was going spare, the word was.
And her husband who is a believer said to her, I will get up early three mornings a week and take the children and he gave her three mornings a week with half an hour where she sat down by herself in the bathroom with the word of God and a journal and her notes.
If we focus on Christ and if we listen to his teaching that is where the heart of compassion will come from. And we need to regularly put ourselves in the place of hearing the teaching of God's word.

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[25:28] I sometimes hear people say that we focus too much on the word of God here at St. John's. There's too much Bible. It's the reverse of what Jesus is saying. We do a lot of things badly here, don't get me wrong.

What we want to do and what we have to do, the one thing that's most needful is to focus on Christ through his word. It's not that there isn't anything else important.
It's that without that thing, all the rest becomes busy work. But this is the good portion. This is the one thing needful.
And if we do this, it will never be taken away from us. Amen. So let's kneel and pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you now as one small corner of your church, Universal.
We thank you for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who we now join together with in prayer for your church. We pray that you would fill your whole church with all truth and that in that truth we may find peace.
[26:39] Where your church is corrupt, purify it. Where it is in error, correct it. And where anything is amiss, reform it. Where your church is right, strengthen and confirm it.

Where it is in want, furnish it and make it whole again. Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.
Almighty God, you commanded the apostles to go out and tell the good news of Christ to the whole world.
We ask you now to fill us with the willingness to do your work so that all people may desire after you and seek you and find your salvation and peace.
Change us in our hearts so we may prove to become neighbors to all those who you set before us. Lord, in your mercy. Encourage and protect our missionaries.
Make them faithful and true witnesses to your glories. Prosper their work so your light may shine even in the darkest places. We remember especially Heather in Afghanistan and the media ministry in Cairo and all those involved with Genesis in Vancouver.
[27:52] Lord, in your mercy. In your mercy. At this time of year, Heavenly Father, we pray for all those beginning a new school term. For preschoolers all the way through to postgraduate studies, we pray that knowledge will be increased among us and all good learning flourish and abound.

Bless all who teach and all who learn. Grant that in humility of heart they will look to you as the architect of all wisdom. We pray for ourselves as students of your word that our hearts may be made clean as we sit and hear Jesus.
We pray particularly for those training for ministry. We hold up to you Regent students and all our TESO interns. Pour out your whole spirit on them. Make them modest, humble, and constant in their work.
Give them a ready will to love and to obey all spiritual disciplines so they may become faithful ministers of your word and sacraments. We pray for our Sunday school and youth group.
Heavenly Father, you have graciously made us a church filled with young people. Cause us to continue to commit to their care and nurture. Give wisdom and grace to all those who teach, provide for their needs in bringing forth teachers and leaders for our young, and bring your light upon the young so they may walk in your ways.
[29:16] Where there are needs in our Sunday school, Heavenly Father, bring forth those in the congregation who you are calling to fill positions. Lord, in your mercy. Almighty God, you are the creator of the world under whom all other authority comes.

We pray now for our government. We pray that at every level they would seek your ways and model your work. We pray for the upcoming budget and new session of Parliament.
We pray for safety and courage for our troops laboring for peace in other parts of the world. We pray for right relations amongst various constituencies that make up our nation and around the world.
And we pray this week especially for our neighbors. Protect and prosper President-elect Obama. Bring around him strong, wise, and godly counsel so that his decisions and decisions of his administration may reflect your will both for America and for the world.
Lord, in your mercy. We pray for our church as we face uncertain times. Be with all those who are discerning and making decisions on our behalf with regards to our legal matters.
[30:28] Guide our leaders and lawyers to seek first, always, your will. We pray for the possibility of mediation with the diocese and humbly pray for a settlement that does not involve Christians being in court.

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We pray that, should we end up in court, you will provide the judge of your choice for our trial and that they too will be filled with your wisdom in these matters. We pray also for financial provision for the legal work to be done.
We know you will provide for our every need. Please work in our hearts so we may each be generous and do our part financially as we finally see this matter to a close.
Lord, in your mercy. Amen. We pray now especially for those amongst us who are suffering from illness, loneliness, anxiety, grief, or any other despair.
Jesus is the great healer. We ask now that that work of healing would continue among us. Cheer, heal, and sanctify the sick. Bear the sorrows of the sad.
[31:32] Comfort the grieving. We pray especially for Paul, Gail, Rowena, Peter, Caroline, Ben and Nancy, Carl, and Craig, and any others who are known to us and to those not known to us but who still need our prayers and your healing.

Lord, in your mercy. Be mindful, God, of your people bowed before you now. Receive our humble requests as we call upon you. We ask this all remembering only your kindness and grace to us and your awesome power.
In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen.

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