

The Way of Mercy

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- [0 : 0 0] Folks, we have sort of 8 to 10 minutes together. So this is an extremely well-known parable. Probably this one and the prodigal son are the most famous.
- This one, though, is so well-known that its name, the Good Samaritan, has become proverbial. So we say to people, be a Good Samaritan. You might read news articles which talk about somebody that was extra kind to a stranger.
- And in the news article, they're invariably called the Good Samaritan. Like, Good Samaritan helps single mom pay for groceries in a supermarket or something like that.
- Most states in America and provinces in Canada have Good Samaritan laws. You might remember the final episode of the TV show Seinfeld. All the characters were put in jail under a Good Samaritan law.
- Well, because of that, we assume the parable is saying, Would you please go out from church today and be a good neighbor?
- [1 : 0 5] And of course, that would be a tremendous thing to do. The problem is, I don't believe that this is what the passage is primarily about. In the Middle Ages, they looked at this passage and they allegorized it.
- So they treat it as a sort of a picture, like an allegory of the gospel. So everyone had parts. So the robbed man, he represented Adam. Jerusalem, where he came from, was paradise.
- Jericho was the world. The priest was the law. Jesus was the Samaritan, obviously. The wounds represented sin. The inn where the robbed man stayed was the church. And the innkeeper was, anyone?
- Anyone guess? The Pope. The Pope, right? And that would have been a cracker of a sermon 500 years ago. But I think we can agree that's probably not what it's about.
- In modern times, we fall into another era of interpretation, I would humbly suggest. And that is, we treat it as just a moral lesson.
- [2 : 1 4] Now, it is a moral lesson. But I don't think it's primarily a moral lesson. I think there's something else going on. And let me tell you why. The key to understanding is context.
- Think about, who is Jesus talking to here? Who is he talking to? He is talking to a self-justifying lawyer.
- He's speaking to a self-justifying lawyer. And Jesus says to this man, go and perform great things. Great acts of mercy. Why would Jesus point this man towards the thing that is already killing him spiritually?
- His self-righteousness. See, the lawyer's plan was to get into heaven on his own performance. So Jesus says to him, yeah, here's some more really amazing things to do.
- That's the secret to eternal life? Is that the message of this? I just, I don't think it is. That's why I think there's more going on here than simply a really good moral lesson.
- [3 : 1 6] So let's get into it. We'll walk through the passage. A lawyer puts Jesus to the test, it says, and asks him the question, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

The lawyer. Now the lawyer is not a lawyer in the sense of we think of him today. He would have been a well-liked, actually I could probably just leave it there.

No, he would have been a well-respected religious person.

He was a lawyer in that he was an expert in God's law. And he says to Jesus, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus says, what does the Bible say? Which is a great response.

And the lawyer says, love God with everything you've got and your neighbor as yourself. Great answer says Jesus. Now do it. Do it. And live.

[4 : 20] Live it out perfectly. And you'll be with God for eternity. Make sure you love God with everything you have. Make sure you do it all the time with no inconsistency.

Make sure you treat all people perfectly. Do this and you'll live. Go do it. Do it. Now again, here is where I think it's pretty clear this is not just a moral lesson.

It can't be. Jesus is saying, go do it to the lawyer. Not because he thinks the lawyer will rise to the occasion. But he's hoping that the lawyer will recognize, I cannot do this.

I'm doomed. I'm helpless. I'm lost. I need a savior. In which case Christ would offer him forgiveness and new life. But that's not how the lawyer responds. The lawyer, he digs in his heels.

Still trying to justify his life. And asks, so who exactly is my lawyer? Like my neighbor? Like who exactly is the neighbor we're talking about here?

[5 : 24] He wants the list. He wants to be able to tick a few more boxes. He wants DIY salvation. But he doesn't get a list from Jesus. He gets a story of radical and costly love.

The parable of the Good Samaritan. I'll summarize it for you. A guy goes on a trip. He's robbed and left for dead. He's lying there on the side of the road. And he sees a man walking towards him.

And he notices he's wearing a dog collar. And he probably thinks, ah, the clergy. Fantastic. Which is what you all think.

I'm sure. But the clergyman, he walks by. In fact, he crosses the street to avoid him. Then comes a Levite. And the same thing happens. Now, why didn't they stop to help?

We don't really know. But I think these two likely reasons. One, like us, they just didn't want to get involved in other people's messy lives. Another reason could be they thought they see the guy on the ground.

[6 : 28] Maybe he's dead. Maybe he's not. But if he's dead and I touch him to see if he's okay, I become ceremonially unclean. Which is a huge drama for these professional religious folks.

I'm just going to keep walking here. Maybe that's the reason. We don't know. But along comes the Samaritan. He's the hero of the story. And as some of you know, Samaritans were a hated race.

They were seen by others, other Jews, as Jews who had turned their back on their heritage and intermarried with pagans. They were a hated group. But shockingly, it's the Samaritan that does stop to help.

He does some first century first aid. And he takes the rob man to an inn. And he gives the innkeeper like a couple of months worth of money to take care of him. Just like astonishing love.

Sacrificial love. Risky love. Because the Samaritan could have been ripped off by the innkeeper. And remember, they were technically enemies. So just remarkable compassion there.

- [7 : 29] And Jesus finishes the story and says to the lawyer, there's my story now. Of the three men who was the neighbor to the robbed man. And it's a no-brainer. But still, the lawyer can't bring himself to say Samaritan.
- They were such a hated people group. He says, you know, the one who showed mercy. And Jesus says, you go do likewise. And again, remember, the lawyer is trapped by his own toxic, self-justifying ways.
- And Jesus gives him a new task. Gives him like some kind of bonus level of holiness and goodness. I mean, what's going on?
- Why would Jesus do that? Jesus tells him this parable to give him an impossible task. To show him he needs a savior.
- Do you see? Jesus is trying to deflate this man. He's trying to show him that the law is not a ladder he could ever climb to the top of. C.S. Lewis.
- [8 : 35] There's a great quote from him. It says, morality is a mountain we cannot climb by our own efforts. And if we could, we would only perish in the ice and unbreathable air of the summit.
- It's true. Now, perhaps you don't agree with my interpretation here. But I want to suggest this is not the first time Jesus has used this approach.
- It's not without precedent. Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler? A young, wealthy man. A sincere man. A good guy. He comes to Jesus with the same question.
- The same question. Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life? It's like he thinks he's nearly at the top of a mountain and just needs this one special thing. And then he's in.
- He's peaked. He's done it. And Jesus says, sell your possessions and give them to the poor. And the young man's really sad because he's filthy rich.
- [9 : 30] Jesus says, and I'm quoting here, how difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. For it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.
- Those who heard it said, how then who can be saved? But he said, what is impossible with man is possible with God. Do you see what Jesus says there? Jesus is giving the rich young ruler a task he cannot do.
- Give everything away. Give it all away. The guy cannot do that. And Jesus explains, yeah, I know. It's like really hard. It's really hard, isn't it? It's going to be really hard for a guy like you to be saved.
- It would be like trying to thread the largest animal in the Middle East through the tiniest hole imaginable. In fact, it's so hard, it's actually impossible. It is impossible for you to do that.
- But nothing's impossible for God. What's he saying here? Jesus gives this rich young ruler an impossible task so the man will recognize he's in a hopeless situation.
- [10 : 39] That he needs a savior so he can be saved. That's how Jesus approached the rich young ruler. It's how he approaches this religious lawyer.
- We'll finish up shortly. Some of you will know the name Bertrand Russell. He was one of 20th century's most forceful and clever atheists.
- He was so anti-Christian he set up a school so that his kids didn't have to attend a state school where they might be accidentally indoctrinated by Christianity.
- What's not as well known is that he had a daughter called Catherine who became a Christian as an adult. And I read this week that it was the doctrine of original sin that brought her to Christ.

Isn't that interesting? Isn't that interesting? She said it was such a relief to stop being told be perfect, be perfect, be perfect. And to quote her in her biography she says this, For me the belief in forgiveness and grace was like sunshine after long days of rain.

[11 : 51] No matter what I did, no matter how low I fell, God would be there to forgive, to pick me up, to set me on my feet again. Though I could not earn his love, neither could I lose it.

It was absolute, not conditional. Isn't that lovely? Jesus wanted the lawyer to know that kind of forgiveness and grace.

But first the lawyer had to see himself as a sinner. Which is why the parable was told. He should have seen that he could not love like the Samaritan.

And begged for forgiveness. Now before we end, let's be clear. At the start I said this is not just a morality tale. But just as a note here, it doesn't mean we get to ignore Jesus' call to costly acts of love.

But the sequence is important. The sequence is important. First we turn to Christ. We know him as our saviour. Because we know ourselves to be sinful and unable to help ourselves.

[12 : 59] And then our hearts are remade. And we find forgiveness. And then Christ gives us new life. Causes us to love radically. Gives us new aspirations.

That's the sequence. I hope that's helpful to you this morning. Amen.