

Ruth 2:1-23

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. It's good to see you this morning. We're going to continue our series in the parables of Jesus this morning, looking at Luke chapter 10. Would you turn there with me in the Pew Bible? That's page 735 in the Pew Bible. Luke chapter 10, verses 25 through 37.

Looking at the parable of the Good Samaritan this morning, before I read this text for us, let's turn to the Lord in prayer. Our Father, we pray that you would fulfill your promise to speak to us through your word by your spirit.

Lord, would you humble our hearts as we come to listen to you and your word? And God, would you bring clarity and bring understanding and bring heart change as we seek you in the scriptures?

Lord, we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Luke chapter 10, starting with verse 25. On one occasion, an expert in 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 neighbor as yourself.

[1:43] You've answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live. But he wanted to justify himself. So he asked Jesus, and who is my neighbor?

In reply, Jesus said, a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of 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 to 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, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day, he took out two silver coins 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.

[2:54] Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert and the law replied, the one who had mercy on him.

Jesus told him, go and do likewise. What comes to mind when you think of the phrase good Samaritan, I wonder?

Maybe you think of a person like Wesley Autry, who in 2007 saved a teenager who fell onto the train tracks of the New York City subway.

Do you remember this story? When Wesley saw the young man, apparently he had had a seizure and fell onto the tracks. When Wesley saw this young man, he apparently jumped down into the tracks after him. And seeing that there wasn't enough time for him to get him out before the train came, pushed himself and the kid down between the tracks as the train sped by.

Now that, I think, was a pretty exceptionally heroic and risky thing to do, don't you? But perhaps like other good Samaritans that come to mind, Wesley Autry's heroic deeds probably not a standard we want to hold others up against, is it?

[4:11] What he did was exceptional, not something that we should expect of everyone. But that raises the question, doesn't it? What is the standard that we should hold ourselves up to?

What is required of us in the ethical sphere? Our text this morning begins with just these kinds of questions. The scene opens with an expert in the law, a lawyer, who stands up to test Jesus.

Now the word test here means testing in a negative way. We might say that he's trying to trap Jesus. He says, teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Now the background, what's probably going on here, is that the law expert thinks that Jesus has no regard for God's law. So he's trying to corner Jesus into admitting it.

After all, didn't Jesus eat with tax collectors and prostitutes? Sharing a meal was a sign of friendship in the ancient world, so here we have Jesus eating with and befriending political traitors, tax collectors, and blatant sinners, prostitutes.

[5:22] There's no way he could have respected God's law doing things like that. He must have been a false teacher, a false prophet, leading people astray. At least that's what the law expert's probably thinking, and why he wants to lay this trap.

So when he asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life, maybe he's thinking Jesus will respond with something like, oh, God just accepts everyone. Or maybe the lawyer is thinking Jesus will say something to the effect of, well, you just have to trust in me.

And then the lawyer will be able to say, aha, I knew it. You don't honor God's law. You are a false teacher, and you must be silenced.

He's laying a trap for Jesus, trying to catch him off guard and get him to reveal a loose stance towards the law. But instead of walking into this man's trap, as it were, Jesus responds with a question of his own.

And he starts to turn the tables. Well, what's written in the law? How do you read it? Jesus asks. And the law expert, being an expert, after all, gives the customary summary of the law.

[6:38] Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. The first coming from Deuteronomy 6.5, the second command coming from Leviticus 19.18. Taken together, this was how nearly all the Jewish scholars of the day would have distilled the content of the biblical moral code.

Everything that God requires of us as human beings summed up in these two simple but profound imperatives. Love God. Love your neighbor.

That's the whole of the law. And Jesus completely agrees. You've answered correctly.

Do this and you will live. You see, much to the lawyer's chagrin, Jesus doesn't disregard God's law one bit.

Yes, Jesus says. If you can really love God with every ounce of who you are, if you can really love your neighbor as yourself, then you will inherit eternal life. As I've been studying this passage this week, I start to wonder if this is the first time this expert in the law really feels the magnitude of what these commands were saying.

- [7 : 56] And I wonder if you've felt it before. After all, do you really love God with each and every aspect of who you are each and every moment of the day?
- That's what the command is requiring. When you're standing in line at the grocery store, do your thoughts naturally wander to God and how great and how good he is?
- When you're faced with a decision about where to live or what job to take or how to spend your time and money, is your first thought, what would God think of this? How could I please God in these decisions I have to make?
- After all, it's only right that you should love God in this total way. If God is truly the creator, then absolutely everything we have is from him.
- Every beat of our heart, every pulse of our nervous system, every second of our existence is thanks to God.
- [9 : 08] And if that's the case, then it's not too much for God to ask you to love him with everything that you are. In fact, that is exactly what we owe him.
- And what about loving your neighbor as yourself? Do we genuinely seek to meet the needs of our neighbors with all the passion, with all the detail, with all the excitement that we go about meeting our own needs?
- Do you spend more time thinking of what you're going to get your friend, your roommate, your wife, whatever, for their birthday as you spend thinking what maybe you'd like to get for your own birthday?
- Jesus says to the law expert, sure, if you can fulfill these two commands, then you will merit eternal life. Do this and you will live. As I said, I wonder if this is the first time the law expert really began to feel the weight of these commandments, the force of them.
- And what makes me wonder this is the beginning of verse 29. Confronted with what the law actually requires, unsettled by the moral gap that he's just now starting to peer over between his life and the law, the man immediately wants to justify himself.
- [10 : 31] Now, there are a lot of ways we can try to justify ourselves. One way is to imagine that we're actually a lot better ethically than we really are. We think that compared to most people, we're not so bad and compared to some people, we're actually pretty good.
- But the whole approach is deeply flawed, isn't it? An old battery-powered flashlight might seem quite bright if you're shining it in a dark room. But when you open the curtains or step out into the true light of day, it doesn't seem quite so impressive anymore.
- Just because your flashlight's a little brighter than the next guy's doesn't mean you're shining with all the intensity and brightness of the sun. Just because you're comparing your good deeds with other people doesn't mean you're living the life that God deserves and that God requires.
- This then usually gives way to the second very basic method of self-justification. If we can't raise ourselves a little higher, then let's bring God's law down a little lower.
- We think, surely such an impossibly high standard can't be what God requires. And we proceed to put all sorts of limits and qualifications, circumscriptions around what God actually should require of us.
- [11 : 50] And that's precisely what the law expert attempts to do with Jesus. He's willing to go along with the fact that we're supposed to love our neighbor, but he asks, who exactly qualifies as my neighbor?
- Let's flesh this out a little bit, Jesus, shall we? Surely you don't mean I'm supposed to love everyone like that. Why should I love the unrighteous, undeserving people who've made a wreck of their life?
- I mean, some people just don't deserve that kind of love, do they? And more than that, some people just aren't my responsibility. I've got my own family to take care of.

You can't expect me to do someone else's job. And in response to this self-justifying question, who is my neighbor? Jesus tells us what is commonly called the parable of the good Samaritan.

The point of the parable, of course, is that our neighbor is anyone in need. That we can't put boundaries or limitations on our God-given obligation to love.

[12:53] But the way that Jesus gets this man to see this truth is really quite brilliant. Look with me again at this parable Jesus tells. Jesus says, a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

And when he says going down, he meant it. You see, Jerusalem was about 2,700 feet above sea level and Jericho about 800 feet below. And there were only about 17 miles between the two cities.

So it was a steep decline. The road was very steep. It had a lot of twists and turns. And because of the sort of treacherous terrain, the road was full of ideal spots for criminals to hide and to attack unsuspecting travelers.

So the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous in Jesus's day. Maybe it would have been like the New Haven of the ancient world. We are, after all, the fourth most dangerous city, aren't we?

As an aside, if you're wondering why God brought you to New Haven, it's because he has a mission for you. Welcome to New Haven, your mission field, the Jericho Road. I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you're joining us.

[14:05] The Lord has wonderful things planned for you while you're here. Well, the road was very dangerous. And unfortunately, this was the fate of the man in Jesus's story.

He fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. Here's where things get interesting. A priest and a Levite both happened to be going down the same road.

Now that would have been fairly commonplace. Lots of priests and Levites lived in Jericho and they would have had to go up Jerusalem fairly regularly to take their turn serving in the temple. So here come the good, upright, religious people.

Here come the vocational ministers, right? And this must mean that the half-dead man is in luck. Here comes God's rescue, right on time.

But no. First the priest and then the Levite. They both see the man and pass by on the other side of the road.

[15:04] Now we can't say exactly why they didn't stop to help the man. Perhaps they were afraid that if they stopped to help, they'd get mugged too. The robbers might still be around looking for another unsuspecting victim.

Or perhaps they were afraid of becoming ritually unclean. And according to the Jewish law, contact with a corpse caused defilement for a week. And it required a very costly purification process to get back in business as a religious professional.

Later rabbinic texts instructed people to keep at least six feet away from a corpse just to be safe. But here's the rub. Had these men been traveling up to Jerusalem, they might have actually had a sliver of justification to avoid ritual defilement.

And yet even then, saving a life was always to take precedence over the purity laws. But even so, these men aren't headed up to Jerusalem to serve in the temple, are they? Jesus says they're going down.

They're going down to Jerusalem. Presumably, their temple service is completed. Which means that all the more they should have been willing to help this man and risk ritual defilement.

[16:17] But for whatever reason, they don't. Now here's where things get really interesting. A Samaritan comes down the road. Now for us, Samaritan today means something like humanitarian, right?

A good guy. But in the first century, Samaritans, as some of you might know, they were an ethnic group. And you have to understand that Samaritans and Jews didn't usually get along.

In fact, Jews considered Samaritans to be racial half-breeds and religious heretics. One extreme opinion stated that even coming into contact with a Samaritan's shadow would make something ritually unclean.

But in Jesus' story, though the priest and the Levite walk by this half-dead man, it's the Samaritan that actually stops and helps.

And he stops and helps in an incredibly sacrificial way. He gets his hands dirty, caring for the man's wounds right on the spot.

[17:21] He spends an entire day transporting and caring for this guy at a local inn. He puts money down to cover the man's expenses and promises that when he comes back, he'll pay for whatever else he didn't cover with those two silver coins.

Now the impact of this parable on Jesus' original hearers would have been radically poignant. The hated Samaritan does the right thing.

Imagine the last person in your mind that you would consider capable of sound moral judgments. If you're a Red Sox fan, maybe it's a die-hard Yankees enthusiast.

How could they possibly do the right thing? If you're a Democrat, maybe Sarah Palin comes to mind. I don't know. But you get the point. The point of the story is that true neighbor love means sacrificially meeting the needs of anyone that comes into your path.

Of course, not everyone is your brother and sister in the faith, but anyone is your neighbor. And as such, you are required, Jesus says, to love them.

[18:36] You see, in telling the story this way, Jesus has actually turned the question around, hasn't he? The lawyer was wondering about his neighbor as an object. Who is my neighbor? Out there.

But Jesus' question 36 is about the neighbor as a subject. The neighbor we are. In other words, as he says, who was a neighbor to the man? In doing so, Jesus refuses to allow the lawyer to limit in any way the command to love your neighbor.

We can't draw a circle around who is and who isn't a worthy object of our compassion and our tangible, practical service. Even someone we might think of as an enemy, just as Jews and Samaritans thought of each other as enemies back then.

Even someone who might be an enemy, we are obligated to love. Jesus ends by telling the man, go and do likewise. Remember where we started.

How do I inherit eternal life? I'm not sure how Jesus could have made the obligation to love our neighbor as ourself any clearer and any more expansive. And here is Jesus saying, go and do likewise.

[19:51] This is the mercy that God requires. That we love sacrificially and that we love without discrimination to any race, class, or really any other barrier.

But if we stop there, we'd only be really scratching the surface of this parable. Yes, Jesus clearly wants to hold up before this lawyer, before this man, the mercy that God requires.

The sacrificial, non-discriminatory mercy that says your neighbor is anyone in need. And Jesus won't let this expert in the law turn away from the truth that God's law demands that we seek to meet these needs with the same energy, cost, and creativity that we use to meet our own needs.

That's the mercy God requires. But there's another current that's flowing through this parable. You see, in all of this, Jesus is ultimately trying to get this man to see the bankruptcy of his moralistic approach to God.

The man's opening question says so much, doesn't it? What must I do to inherit eternal life? Right from the start, the law expert puts himself in a position of someone who can do something to win God's favor.

[21 : 12] Perhaps that's where you see yourself this morning. If I do enough of the right kind of things, then God will accept me. But throughout this conversation, Jesus is trying to get us to see the immensity of God's law and the impossibility of actually keeping it.

In short, he's trying to humble this guy. Because only when we're humbled by the mercy that God requires of us are we willing and ready to receive the mercy that God offers to us.

When we finally realize that we actually can't love like God wants us to love, like we ourselves actually kind of know we should be loving, then we're in a place to receive the love that God offers us freely in Christ.

There are lots of ways Jesus could have told this parable. The way we might have expected Jesus to go about telling it is something like this. One day, a Samaritan fell among robbers. A priest passed by, a Levite passed by, but a regular Israelite stopped and cared for the Samaritan.

Go and do likewise. Love your enemies. But that's not how Jesus tells the parable. And here's why. For starters, having heard the parable that way, the man probably would have said, Jesus, you're just making unrealistic demands.

[22 : 39] Come on. No one can really love like that, and no one probably should love like that. We don't owe Samaritans anything. They're enemies and not our neighbors. But, by making the Samaritan the one who showed mercy, Jesus is pricking this man's conscience.

He's showing this lawyer that he would want someone to stop and help him, even if that person was from a hated race. And therefore, Jesus is forcing him to conclude, shouldn't he be willing to stop and help someone?

Might he naturally despise them? And so, the second reason Jesus tells this parable the way he does is to get the man thinking in a new way about his position.

His leading question, what must I do to inherit eternal life, assumed he could do something to inherit it. But in the parable, the way Jesus tells it, the lawyer is forced to put himself in the position, not of the one who comes to the rescue, but of the half-dead man in the sidewalk.

Which one was a neighbor to the man, Jesus asks? Put yourself in his shoes. Who would you want to help you? And wouldn't you receive it, even if it was from a Samaritan?

[24 : 00] Perhaps as you think about the love and mercy God requires, you find yourself a bit uneasy. Perhaps you start to see for the first time that no matter how hard you try, you still fall short of the standard.

Maybe you're even hearing yourself use some of the self-justifying strategies we mentioned earlier. You're telling yourself, wait a second, am I really so bad? I mean, I love God and my neighbor as good as the next person, don't I?

Or maybe you're thinking, God's law can't possibly be that all-demanding. Surely God wouldn't require that high of a standard, would he? But maybe you're starting to get a taste that despite your best efforts to justify yourself, you stand in a very needy place before God.

No longer are you in a position to do, but like the half-dead man, you're only in a position to receive. And here's where the parable points to something radical indeed.

The pattern of mercy that Jesus describes in this parable, sacrificial, non-discriminatory mercy, is the one that he himself came to fulfill. When we were lying on the road, dead in our sins, wasn't it Christ who came and met us where we were?

[25 : 19] Wasn't he the one who owed us nothing because we were his enemies, but he had compassion on us? Wasn't he the one that at the cost of his life restored us by dying on a cross to pay the debt for our sins?

This is the true love of neighbor that God requires. The love that Jesus Christ has showed to all those who believe in him. And now you see that we can receive God's mercy through faith and we can inherit eternal life, not because Jesus minimizes or ignores the law, but because Jesus fulfills the law supremely in our place.

So the parable of the Good Samaritan is all about humbling us with the mercy that God requires of us so that we'll be opened up to receive the mercy that God offers to us in Christ.

But before we finish thinking about this parable, there's one point we have to consider. We've seen the mercy that God requires, we've seen the mercy that God offers, but now we have to consider the mercy that God's grace actually does bring forth in our life.

You see, just because we're saved by the mercy of God in Christ, it doesn't mean we're not supposed to go and do likewise. As Jesus says at the end of the parable, we most certainly are.

[26 : 46] But in Christ, now we do so with a completely different motivation, with a whole new compulsion, with a whole new power, not out to earn eternal life, but out to live life as those who have already received it.

You see, the gospel can help. The gospel can't help, but create a people of mercy, of sacrificial, unrestricted mercy.

The Christian community in any given location ought to be a fountainhead of generosity and compassion. Historically, this was nearly always the case.

The earliest portrait that we have of the church in the book of Acts shows us that Christians eagerly sold their possessions in order to meet people's needs. Luke says in chapter 4 of the book of Acts, There were no needy persons among them.

In the centuries that followed, we have records from pagan emperors who are practically frustrated at how generous and merciful Christians are. The Emperor Julian is recorded as saying it's disgraceful that while impious Galileans, that was how he was referring to Christians, can support both their own poor and ours as well, that all men see that our people lack aid from us.

[28 : 00] In other words, he's saying the Christians weren't just taking care of their own poor, but the poor among their pagan neighbors as well. Historian Rodney Stark argues that such radical, sacrificial generosity is one of the major reasons why Christianity grew so rapidly in the centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection.

And today, it can still be the same. Each of our families, each of our small groups, can function like cells of mercy ministry, like pockets of hope scattered throughout our New Haven region.

We can be prayerfully assessing the needs of our neighbors and seeking to meet those needs with the resources that God has given us. Of course, the deepest need that people have is our spiritual one, is it not? That we're separated from God because of our sin.

And to meet this need, God has given us the gospel of Jesus, crucified and risen, our Lord. But there are other needs as well. And you must pray, we must pray, how God has equipped us to meet those needs.

And to meet those needs with the love of Christ. The elderly woman down the street who needs some companionship and probably her lawn mowed this time of year. The single mom next door who could use a cooked meal and a babysitter every once in a while because she's burnt out.

- [29 : 22] The new guy in your apartment building looking for a job who could use a ride to an interview and probably some help with his resume. The possibilities are endless and I pray that God would open my eyes and open all of our eyes as his church to see the needs around us.

Needs that God has specifically and providentially equipped us to meet. And as we think about our ministry of mercy as a church, it's crucial to see that this is in every member ministry.

After all, the hero in Jesus' parable isn't a vocational minister or a church officer, is he? In fact, the religious leaders don't get a very good rap in this parable.

Sorry, brothers and sisters. God hasn't just equipped a few of us but every single one of us to do this work. We're all called to speak and to serve and to lead in the various spheres and the various relationships where God has placed us.

You see, no matter where you're at in your Christian walk, if you're just getting started or if you've been going at it and following Christ for a long time, a primary question always ought to be, how can I be ministering in Christ's name?

- [30 : 39] Which is simply to say, how can I be identifying needs and meeting those needs for the sake of Christ? After all, this is why God has saved you.

Ephesians chapter 2 contains one of the most rousing passages in the Bible about God's saving, sovereign grace. And this is how it ends. We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

In other words, from all eternity, God has had good works, ministry opportunities in mind specifically for you. And he has saved you in Christ so that you will carry them out for his glory.

So when we start asking, how can I be meeting the needs of those around me? We're actually fulfilling God's eternal purpose for our lives. But how is all this the case?

How does the gospel create radically merciful people? Well, one of the main reasons the gospel creates people that overflow with mercy towards others is actually hinted at in this parable.

- [31 : 55] What was it that made the Samaritan different from the priest or the Levite? They all saw the dead man. What made the Samaritan stop when everyone else kept going? Jesus says, when he saw him, he took pity on him.

Now the word pity has very sentimental connotations for us. But the word here means something more like he was moved from the very core of his being. There was something deep within him that went out to this half-dead man and resonated with him.

Compassion's probably a better word. It's compassion that makes the Samaritan different from the priest and the Levite. And the reason why the gospel has power to create people of lasting mercy is because it has power like nothing else to produce compassion in the very depths of our being.

You see, in the gospel we come to realize that though we deserve nothing but wrath and exclusion from God in Christ, we've been forgiven and welcomed. You see, the gospel tells us that we were helpless, we were poor, we were weak, we were addicted, we were displaced.

But God in Christ came to us and rescued us at infinite cost to himself. So now when we see others struggling with poverty or sickness or addiction or displacement, we can remember that before God we were at one time in exactly the same place.

[33 : 34] And though we didn't deserve it, God came in Christ to rescue us. And if that truth settles in, you can't help but have compassion for others no matter what their story, no matter what their scenario.

out of compassion will flow deeds of generous, sacrificial love. This is the power of the gospel, friends, in us by the Spirit.

So I pray that the Holy Spirit would make this gospel real in our hearts through faith so that God would be glorified in us through deeds of mercy. Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, thank you for this parable of the Good Samaritan that completely deconstructs our attempts to try to win favor through our moral performance.

Jesus, you show us plainly and clearly here that it can't be done. But Lord, how you've pointed us to yourself, how you've come to meet our need, to forgive our sins, to grant us your righteousness, to fill us with your Spirit, and so, Lord, to empower us to actually live lives of mercy.

[34 : 56] God, I pray that we would become a people who are continually, increasingly, creatively, merciful, in practical ways for this city and this region of ours so that the name of Christ might be glorified in our midst.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.... Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen..