# ***PARABLES THAT PREACH: THE GOOD SAMARITAN***

# John C. Peterson

# Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

# July 10, 2022

# Texts: Luke 10:25-37 and 1 John 4:7-11

We were on our way home from church one Sunday morning several years ago, and the hymns from morning worship were still echoing in our heads, or at least in the head of five-year-old Emily. She wanted us to join in a family sing-a-long. “*Let’s sing the one we sang this morning*,” she said. “*You know, ‘For all the saints who from their neighbors rest.*’”

We may need rest from our neighbors now and then, but God’s command is to love those neighbors as ourselves. That is what the Parable of the Good Samaritan is all about – about the neighbors we are to love. Jesus told that parable in response to a question from a scribe, a first century lawyer, who was much less interested in his neighbors than in securing his place in heaven. In fact, his true motivation may have been even less honorable when he stood to test Jesus with his question: “Rabbi, Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It is a question that you too may have asked. Yet the form of the question itself poses a problem. Inheritance is not something that is earned. It is something freely given. When I was practicing law, I remember sitting with two brothers after the death of their mother. The mother had bequeathed one half of her estate to each son; that was their inheritance. One son wasn’t satisfied with that. He had borne the bulk of the care-giving responsibilities over the months preceding his mother’s death, and so thought he should receive a larger inheritance than did his brother. But an inheritance is not earned; it is a gift – to be given or taken away at will.

So it is with eternal life. It is the free gift of God, not something to be earned or merited, but something graciously received – as God wills. Yet the scribe somehow believed that there was something he could do, some task he could perform that would guarantee his eternal future. His question might well be paraphrased, “*What must I do to guarantee my place in heaven?*” That is the question we really want answered. We want to know how we can take control of our eternal destiny, how ***we*** can be in the driver’s seat so that standing before the Judgment Seat we can present to God our completed checklist and claim our place in heaven. But it is not quite that simple – and for that we should be eternally grateful! For the more we know about God’s will for our lives, the more we know how many items on that checklist are never completed, how far short we fall of earning our way into heaven, even on the best of days. All that remains is the grace of God. And thankfully that is enough.

The Law of Moses is one of those gifts of grace, given to guide our lives and our life together. But the scribe wanted it to do a little more. He wanted it to make his reservation in heaven. He was an expert in the law; he knew it inside and out. So, when Jesus responded to his question about what he might do to inherit eternal life, he was quick to respond with the Great Commandment – “*You shall love the Lord your God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself*.” To this Jesus simply replied, “*Do this and you will live*.” It is the same commandment that we are charged to obey. It is the same commandment that Micah paraphrases when he says, “*Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God*.” It is the same commandment of which John writes: “*Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another*.” The commandment describes our relationship to God and our relationships with one another. Both are defined by love.

But Jesus’ answer put the scribe in an awkward position. He had answered his own question; it might appear that the scribe should have known better than to ask in the first place. So in order to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “*Well, who is my neighbor?*” It wasn’t a wholly innocent question. As one Middle Eastern commentator has noted:

*The question…is asked in order that [Jesus] will answer, “Your relative and your friend.” The lawyer will then answer “I have fully loved these.” Then Jesus will praise him and say to him, “You have truly fulfilled the law.” The lawyer will then depart, basking before the people, in the praise of his good works, and enjoying a newly won honor and confidence based on that praise*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

While love for God is to be boundless, the scribe expected love of neighbor to have certain boundaries within the society that would make it palatable and attainable. That is what he wanted to hear, and perhaps that is what you would like to hear as well. Instead we get this parable.

“*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead*.” It’s about seventeen miles on the descent from Jerusalem to Jericho on a road that is fraught with danger. Robberies were not uncommon there. This robbery was particularly brutal, so the man could make no plea for help or answer any question as to his identity. Stripped of his clothing, he had nothing by which he might be identified. No one seeing him would know who he was, where he was from, whether he was Jew or Gentile. He was simply a man beaten unconscious, lying in his own blood on the side of the road on the edge of death. Would anyone stop to help him before he died?

Before you criticize those who come along that road, you might ask yourself whether you would stop? Seeing an unidentified body along the side of the road, would you stop to minister to his needs or would you keep on going, perhaps call 911, or tell someone in town about what you’d seen along the way? After all, it could be a trap – with bandits lying in wait for anyone foolish enough to venture to the side of the road to help. Or he could be dead already; he could have some contagious blood disease – there was lots of blood and no latex gloves readily available. Even if you stopped, what could you do to save him in the first century?

Think about those things before you condemn that priest who passed by on the other side. He was certainly riding, consistent with his position.[[2]](#endnote-2) Not only those practical thoughts were running through his head, but also the requirements of the law. If he touches a dead body he is defiled. If he comes in contact with a non-Jew he is defiled. And if he is defiled, then he cannot do his job, and his family will suffer the consequences. The process of purifying himself is both costly and time-consuming. So, while he had the means to help, the priest had good reasons under the law not to stop and lend aid to the man who, for all the priest knew, was already dead.

It was much the same with the Levite. As a leader in the synagogue, he was bound by the law, but not by the strict requirements binding a priest. He had more leeway in what he might do to help. But he also had fewer resources at hand. The priest at least had a donkey on which he might put the injured victim. The Levite was on foot. Is he expected to carry this fellow on his back all the way to Jericho? Or might he reasonably follow the example of the priest. He decides to do as he did, so he too passes by.

Then along comes the Samaritan, and the immediate response of those who heard the parable from Jesus would be boos and hisses. Along comes one with whom they would have no dealings, one whom they despised. It is hard for us to imagine the depth of feeling between Jews and Samaritans. In Jewish synagogues prayer was offered daily asking God that the Samaritans not be partakers in eternal life.[[3]](#endnote-3) Were it today along that Jericho Road, the Samaritan might be described as a member of Hamas or for us, a soldier of Al Qaeda. Yet it is the Samaritan who stops and has compassion. It is the Samaritan who binds his wounds, places the injured man on the back of his own donkey, and takes him to an inn. It is the Samaritan who provides for his care out of his own money and promises to pay whatever future bills might be incurred at that inn for the injured man. It is the Samaritan who leaves without a trace or a thank you or a *You Owe Me*. It is the Samaritan who is the neighbor – not the priest nor the Levite who diligently follow the law. “*Go and do as the Samaritan did*,” said Jesus.

Go and show mercy. Go and minister to the needs of those you encounter along the way. Go and offer a touch of grace to those you regard as untouchable. Get off your – donkey – and minister to the needs of your neighbors wherever they are, whoever they are, whenever they need it. If that means stepping beyond bounds within which you ordinarily live in order to extend mercy, then do it. For that is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself, says Jesus. That’s not to say that it’s easy. Some neighbors are harder to love than others; some don’t just lie there quietly and let you minister to their needs; some require of you going out of your way or taking a risk. The point of the parable is that we are to love our neighbors regardless of who they are or how unlovable they may be.

Mother Teresa, who knew a great deal about loving her neighbors in her work in Calcutta, put it this way:

*People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.*

*Love them anyway.*

*If you do good, people will accuse you of ulterior motives.*

*Do good anyway.*

*If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.*

*Succeed anyway.*

*The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.*

*Do good anyway.*

*Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.*

*Be honest and frank anyway.*

*What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.*

*Build anyway.*

*People really need help but may attack you if you help them.*

*Help anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth.*

*Give the world the best you have anyway!*[[4]](#endnote-4)

That is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. That is what you must do, says Jesus. And when you’re done, when you’ve loved your neighbors – the good, the bad, and the ugly – beyond your last breath, then who knows? You too may join those saints who from their neighbors rest. Amen

1. Ibn al Tayyib, folio 101, quoted by Kenneth E. Bailey in *Through Peasant Eyes*, p.39 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p.43 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background*, p.162 quoted in *Through Peasant Eyes*, p.48 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted by David G. Berry in the *Newsletter of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale*, September 5, 2001, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)