



Luke 10:25-37
The Path of Jesus' Life
And Like a Good Neighbor...

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Some of you might remember that every summer I take a week to plan out the sermon series, and the passages for each Sunday for the entire next year. That's the case with today's passage. And yet this could not be more timely, right? I mean, I had no idea in August who would be president and what their policies would be or how much our nation would be stirred up over those policies. So don't blame me, ok? ☺ You can blame Republicans, Democrats, Independents, people who didn't vote...you can even take it up with God if you want. But I kid you not; this is the passage that was laid out for this very Sunday – six months ago.

Now, that's not to say things are set in stone and never change...and honestly, when I looked at this passage this past week and even a couple weeks ago as I looked ahead in the series, I thought about changing it to something that didn't cut so close to the ginormous debate raging through our country about how to treat others who are different than ourselves, and yet are still our "neighbors" as Jesus defines it here.

So I want you to know, I don't intend this as a "political" sermon. If you've been here for any length of time since I became pastor here over 4 years ago, you know I don't delve into politics in my preaching, but simply let the passage stand on its own and draw out from it what we can learn and apply to our lives to live more Christ-like. And that's what I want to do today. But I know that sometimes people hear sermons the way they want to hear them and not how I intend them to be heard. And so I want to be clear about my intentions today. Probably some of you wish I would venture more into politics in my sermons. Some of you are glad I don't. The way I figure it, if I stick to Scripture and let it speak to us rather than sharing my own political biases, each of you can then think that my politics are the same as yours, and everyone is happy. I mean, isn't it true that there the two things that can divide friends and family are politics and religion? We've got the religion one figured out: we all have unity in Christ...so why let the other ruin it? Though hopefully our unity in Christ and our mission together as a church would be stronger than any political differences, and our differences could be seen as

an opportunity to learn and grow from one another.

And there are differences in our church and through out Christianity. There are well-intentioned, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving, church attending Democrats (which I know is hard for some of you to believe) and there are well-intentioned, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving, church attending Republicans (which I also know is hard for some of you to believe).

Having said all that, this morning's passage is as clear-cut in its meaning as it gets. Jesus does not leave a lot of room for interpretation variances. How you emphasize and view this passage in relation to others is maybe a *little* more open to debate...but an awful lot of Jesus' teaching and the teaching of the rest of Scripture is very closely aligned with this parable, as we'll see. It's hard to argue that "loving your neighbor" is a long ways down the list of the essentials components of the Christian faith.

So, with that large introduction out of the way, let's dive into today's passage. This is one of the best-known stories that Jesus ever told. In fact, this story and the one that we will look at next week that he tells in Luke 15 about the Prodigal Son are arguably the two greatest parables Jesus ever told.

And this one comes about because of a question that is posed to him. An expert in the law has a question for Jesus. This guy is a "nomikos" – that's the Greek word here for him, which is a "lawyer," most literally...and: **In the New Testament "nomikos" always means someone who is an interpreter and teacher of the Old Testament Law.** So this guy knows his Old Testament (Jewish/Hebrew Bible) well. He's no Biblical slouch. And he asks Jesus about eternal life, in an effort to test Jesus. He's looking to see about Jesus' orthodoxy and knowledge of the Scriptures.

And Jesus, as a good teacher will oftentimes do, answers the question with a question of his own, putting it back in the lawyer's lap. "How do you see it?" So the guy answers with two passages from the Old Testament. First, from Deuteronomy 6:5, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"** (Deuteronomy 6:5). And also from Leviticus 19:18, **"Love your neighbor**

as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Now, the Deuteronomy verse he actually adds on just a bit. The “with all your mind” is not in Deuteronomy 6:5. Who’s ever heard of a lawyer adding on to something to try and tip the scales in their favor, right? You can insert your own lawyer joke right here if you want. Of course, lawyers aren’t the only ones who do that kind of thing...it’s a human tendency to try and tip the scales in our favor. As a lawyer, as an expert in the Old Testament law, he’s fully engaging his mind all the time. That’s what a teacher does. And he’s a teacher of Jewish law.

But then with the Leviticus passage, he conveniently omits part of the verse, and it’s that omission, in some ways, that sets Jesus up to tell the parable that he does. Here’s what all of Leviticus 19:18 says, **“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord (Leviticus 19:18).”** Now, “love your neighbor as yourself” is certainly encompasses the stuff he left out. The problem is, by leaving some of it out, it’s also easy to make assumptions about who the neighbor is.

And, the verse is really a summary verse of the verses that come before it. For instance, the Lord says to the people through Moses, **“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:9-10).**

And then it continues: Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind. Do not pervert justice. Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. (Various verses in Leviticus 19.) It’s all focused on neighborly relations. And all this neighborly relations stuff culminates with verse 19 and its (almost) final words, “love your neighbor as yourself.” So there are some specific examples about who our neighbor is, and how we’re to “love them as ourselves.”

But Jesus affirms him. He’s answered well. The big picture answer is “love God and love your neighbor.” And he tells the guy to do this and he will live.

In other words, this is a key part of inheriting eternal life. But that's not enough for the lawyer. He wants to justify how he has lived this out, probably because he's left out some of the specifics of what it means to love one's neighbor and especially how we define who our neighbor is. Considering his position he probably *knows* the other verses...but he's trying to slip a fast one by Jesus, and see if he can justify a narrower scope of "neighbor" than Leviticus 19 lays out. It's clear in Leviticus 19 that "neighbor" includes people who are outside of the mainstream: foreigners, the poor, people who have handicaps, and so forth. And so the guy asks, "And who is my neighbor?"

Before we get to Jesus' answer, I think it's important to recognize that: **This tendency to narrow the scope of who are our "neighbors" is a human tendency.** Let's not pretend like we're so much different than this guy or any of his contemporaries. In fact, the people of Israel struggled with it throughout the Old Testament. That's why passages like Leviticus 19 are there. And we struggle with it still today. That's why Jesus tells the parable that follows.

So Jesus tells this story about a man – and it would be assumed he was Jewish, though that doesn't really matter – who was on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. This would be about a 15 mile journey that would take several hours to walk, and was a frequently traveled road for them. It was also not the safest road to travel, probably in part because it was well-used: there would be lots of opportunity for robbers to take advantage of people on the journey. In fact, its nickname in Jesus' day was "The Way of Blood" because of the bloodshed brought about by robbers. So to tell a story of a guy going along this journey and getting into trouble with robbers would be well-understood by this teacher of the law and anyone else there listening to Jesus. They'd be all nodding their heads in agreement.

So who's going to help this guy who's been jumped by robbers and let for dead? Well, a priest comes along. The assumption is that he would. But he passes by the guy. That would be a little surprising to the listeners. Then a Levite comes along. Levites traced their lineage back a couple thousand years or soⁱ to Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah, and were the tribe of

Israel dedicated to caring for the worship facilities and various facets of worship itself. So much like the priests, these are people who know Scripture, have a high regard for it, and would be seen as examples of how to live out the Jewish faith. And in this story that Jesus tells, the Levite passes by this guy who's in need of help as well.

Now at this point, the people listening would definitely be surprised. The ones who should be helping this guy haven't, and they're probably wondering where this is headed. Maybe they're thinking it's going in the direction of the story about a Psychologist who came across a man who was beaten and robbed and left for dead. The Psychologist rushed up to him and said, "My goodness! Whoever did this really needs help!"

Well, maybe that's not what they were expecting but they never would have dreamed of the turn it then takes. Along comes a Samaritan. Samaritans and Israelites didn't get along very well. The Samaritans were partly Jewish: both by faith, and by lineage. They were mixed. For instance, their practice of Judaism had a several hundred-year history of being mixed with pagan religions. Additionally, when Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall after their release from Babylonian captivity, the opposition to their rebuilding that came from neighboring countries included Samaria. For instance Sanballat, who is named in the book of Nehemiah as one of the chief leaders of the opposition to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall, was a Samaritan.ⁱⁱ

So there are several hundred years of animosity here between these nations. And **Jesus tells the story with the disliked Samaritan being the one who was the good neighbor.** He's the one who "loved his neighbor as himself" and took care of this man in need. Not the priest, not the Levite...but the Samaritan. It's a complete and total shock. I would imagine that the response of the people was one of "how could Jesus tell a story like that"? Maybe even some anger that he would shape the story this way...definitely one of disbelief that Jesus would shape the story that way.

And this is the answer to the guy's question about "who's my neighbor?". Really, it's the answer he almost certainly knew in his head because of the

Leviticus passage and so many others in the Old Testament that teach about having compassion for the foreigner, the poor, the outcast, and so forth...but he simply didn't want to acknowledge with his heart. He wanted "loving my neighbor" to be easier than that, to be more familiar.

And Jesus concludes this by saying, "Go and do likewise." This is the model for what it means to love our neighbors, and it flows out of loving God. If we're going to claim the name of Jesus, if we're going to say we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength...and let God's love lead us to love our neighbors as ourselves...well, that even includes people we don't care for, and people who are different than us, people who don't think the way we do, people who don't believe the way we do, people who *aren't* like us and who *don't* like us...and whom we may not like, either.

It's a challenging teaching. Fortunately, it's one we have the opportunity to practice regularly. We're surrounded by people who are different than us – whether that's ethnic lineage, politics, religion, lifestyle, education, income, age, job, family size, or any other variable you can think of. You might have neighbors that you don't naturally get along with. You might dislike your co-workers. You might have classmates or teachers that you don't really care for. Heck, if you're married, your spouse might even fall into that category – at least sometimes. Ask my wife: I'm in that category quite frequently. But: **How we feel about someone is irrelevant to Jesus when it comes to how we treat them.** We can still be neighborly; we can still extend kindness, respect, and give people dignity. We can love them as we love ourselves. This is our missional opportunity. This is the chance God is giving you and me to be a good neighbor, to be the hands of Jesus, to show people what God's unconditional love is all about.

And the really good news is that Jesus models it for us. He died on the cross and rose from the grave because he loves you and me and the rest of the people who walk the face of the earth as much as he loves himself – even when we aren't very loveable. **We're in good hands with Jesus, even as his hands were stretched out from the east to the west on the cross.** And helping others to know that they can be in those same hands is one of the neighborly and loving things we can do for the people we come across on the

path of life. Because like the path in the parable, the path of life is filled with lots of dangers and pitfalls. And we're given lots of opportunities to help others and love them when they're feeling beaten down by life. So let's love God with all we've got, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves so that the people around us would know that when someone who loves Jesus is their neighbor and a part of their life, that they are in good hands.

ⁱ <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2016/04/29/when-did-each-of-the-biblical-patriarchs-live-and-die/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Samaritans.html>