

**STORYTIME:  
The One About The  
Guy In The Ditch**

**Luke 10:25-37**

*Being a good neighbor can bring you life.*

A sermon preached by  
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There is a movie coming out this week that I am going to have to see. I don't know if it will be any good or not, but the premise is irresistible. A struggling singer has an accident during a global power outage, and when he wakes up, he is the only human being on the planet who remembers the Beatles. For everyone else, the Beatles never existed. So he starts singing Beatles songs, and people think he is a genius. I'm sure it gets more complicated from there. The movie is called "Yesterday," and it opens this Friday.<sup>1</sup>

The premise of this movie is so far-fetched because it would take an actual global catastrophe for anybody to forget the Beatles. Their songs are part of our culture. Though their early albums came out over half a century ago, and the last one nearly half a century ago, their music is still being played and heard and enjoyed around the world.

The parables of Jesus are sort of like Beatles songs. They are much older, of course, and they are Holy Scripture. There is a difference, although some of us can recite more Beatles lyrics than we can Scripture verses. Like Beatles songs, the parables are part of our culture, part of the collective memory of the Western world, even for those who are not followers of Jesus or Christianity at all.

The rest of this summer, we are going to look at some of these great stories Jesus told. It's "Storytime"—doesn't that sound like fun?

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of those stories of Jesus that most of us recognize. Even if we can't tell the whole story, we know what a Good Samaritan is. A Good Samaritan is someone who stops to help someone, even a stranger, in need. The Good Samaritan is a model for living. We have a Good Samaritan Clinic in Fort Smith, providing free medical care to those in need. There are 18 Good Samaritan Hospitals in the United States.<sup>2</sup> A Google search for "Good Samaritan" turns up almost 20 million references.

I think one of the reasons the parable of the Good Samaritan is such a well-beloved story is because it is so easy to relate to our own experience. We have been stranded, or maybe we have stopped to help someone in need. Or maybe we have been passed by when we needed help. Or maybe we have passed someone by ourselves.

Like many of the parables, the Good Samaritan grows out of a conversation. A lawyer, a man who was well-versed in the religious laws of the Jews, questions Jesus, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus, ever the good teacher, answers the question with a question, “What does the Law say? How do you read it?” The lawyer responds with a statement we often call the Great Commandment: “*You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.*”<sup>3</sup>

This is interesting. Luke gives the Great Commandment in a very different context than Matthew and Mark. In those Gospels, the Great Commandment is something Jesus says during the last week of his life in Jerusalem. He speaks the Great Commandment in the context of being questioned by his critics. Scholars have found evidence that the statement of the Great Commandment, which combines a verse out of Deuteronomy and one out of Leviticus, was already a formulation familiar to the rabbis before Jesus. So the lawyer is stating a principle that was already part of the religious understanding of the time. And Jesus agrees with him: “You’re absolutely right. Do this, and you will live.”

But the lawyer has a follow-up question. Don’t they always? “Who, then, is my neighbor?” He wants to define his boundaries, limit his liabilities. And Jesus answers with a story.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. That’s a road that declines about 3,000 feet in altitude in 30 miles, and it’s surrounded by wilderness. It was notoriously dangerous. So, not surprisingly, the man was attacked by robbers, who took his stuff, beat him up, and left him for dead on the side of the road.

Fortunately, along came a priest. Surely he would help. But he passed by on the other side. Then a Levite, who was also a religious leader (sort of like a church staff person). But he, too, passed by the injured man. Let’s not be too hard on these religious leaders. They probably had important matters to attend to, and stopping to see about the man would have kept them from doing the Lord’s work. And there was that rule about coming into contact with a dead body. If the guy was dead, they would be unclean and unable to perform their religious duties. More on that later.

The third man to come by the scene of the crime was a Samaritan. To the ears of Jesus' Jewish audience, it couldn't have been any worse. Samaritans were the half-breed descendants of the occupation by Assyrian invaders eight centuries before Jesus. They worshipped other gods in other places besides Jerusalem—religious heretics, ceremonially unclean, socially outcast. Scum of the earth.

But lo and behold, this horrible Samaritan has compassion on the injured man. He stopped, took care of the man, carried him to an inn, and paid for his care. So Jesus again answers the lawyer's question with a question of his own: "*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*"<sup>4</sup> The lawyer had an answer ready: the one who showed mercy to the man. And Jesus agreed, but he answered with words that have changed lives for 2,000 years: "*Go and do likewise.*"<sup>5</sup>

Usually the parables of Jesus have one main point. This one does, too. But I also want to share with you the point before the point and the point after the point. The point before the main point is this: Being religious has very little to do with being a good neighbor. You can be as religious as a politician running for office, but if you don't act in love toward those in need, you are not fulfilling the commandment of God.

I cannot preach on the parable of the Good Samaritan without telling about a hot July day over three decades ago. I had just become the Methodist pastor in Lake Village, Arkansas. I had been making hospital calls in Greenville, Mississippi. On my way back to Arkansas, the traffic was backed up to cross the high, narrow bridge across the Mississippi River. There's not that much traffic down there, so I knew there was a problem.

Sure enough, when I got high above the Mississippi, I saw an old green pickup truck stalled on the bridge. As I slowly crept past it, I could see that there was a young blond woman, two little girls, and a baby in a car seat in this pickup truck stuck on the bridge. It must have been about 95 degrees outside. I am not a mechanic, and I was sure a state trooper from one or the other states would be there in a minute. But I promise, I felt bad about that little family all the way back to my air-conditioned office in Lake Village.

The next Sunday, I opened the church door to go in and preach at my new church. There in the vestibule was the young blond woman from the bridge!

She stuck out her hand and said, “Hi, my name is Kandi Keith, and I hope you’re not preaching on the Good Samaritan this morning!”

She and her husband became great friends while I was there—and still are—but it wasn’t a very good way to start off the friendship or the pastoral relationship.

So I can relate to the priest and the Levite in the story. Can you? They saw the suffering man, but they didn’t want to get involved. Being religious is no guarantee that you will be a good neighbor. But it doesn’t hurt. It might even help.

Shirley Williams shared a story with me this week that happened to her last Sunday. Shirley runs the video for the Connexion service, and after our Vacation Bible School celebration, she went by Wal-Mart on the way home. As she entered Wal-Mart, she heard someone crying, not like a child throwing a tantrum, but real, grown-up, painful crying. She walked by the pharmacy section, and sitting there on a bench was a woman just sobbing her eyes out. Shirley had a perfect priestly reaction; she thought, “Well, that’s weird,” and passed on by. But she was concerned enough that before she left the store, she went back by the pharmacy to see if the woman was still there. As she approached, she couldn’t hear any more crying. And when she came into view of the bench, there was the woman, but another woman had stopped and was sitting with her and comforting her. The new woman had a little child with her, and they both had on T-shirts from our Vacation Bible School. Maybe something that was said or sung last week in VBS opened up a pathway for compassion and enabled or empowered that woman to be a Good Samaritan. Shirley didn’t know them, but she sure was proud of them. I am, too.

This is the main point of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan: Yes, you *can* do this sort of thing any day and every day. Anybody can be a good neighbor. Even the most unlikely people can be in ministry. The Samaritan definitely fit into the “unlikely” category. He was everything that the priest, the Levite, and the lawyer weren’t.

So Jesus asks the question, “*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*”<sup>6</sup> Can you see what’s going on here? Jesus is changing the lawyer’s question from “Who

is my neighbor?” to “Who is neighborly? Who is acting like a neighbor?” Instead of defining boundaries and setting limits, Jesus opens up possibilities! He expands the boundaries of love. We don’t have to worry any more about who fits in the group we are called to love. We are called to love everybody, in every place, in every way. We are called to be good neighbors, and if a lousy Samaritan can do it, anybody can.

A modern-day re-enactment of the Good Samaritan happened recently in Jerusalem's famous Hadassah Hospital. An Israeli soldier lay dying of AIDS. He was gay, and his father was a famous Jerusalem rabbi. Both his father and the rest of his family had disowned him. The nursing staff on his floor knew his story and carefully avoided his room. He was condemned to die from neglect.

The soldier had been a part of a regiment that patrolled the Occupied West Bank. Their mission was to make life miserable for the Palestinians who lived there. The Palestinians hated these troops.

One evening the soldier went into cardiac arrest. All the usual alarms went off, but the nursing staff did not respond. Everyone was simply waiting for him to die. Even the doctors looked the other way.

On the floor another man was at work—a janitor who was a Palestinian Christian. He knew this soldier’s story. He came from a village that had been terrorized by the soldier’s regiment. He also knew the meaning of the emergency. When the Palestinian heard the alarm and saw that nobody was responding, his heart was filled with compassion. He dropped his broom, entered the soldier's room, and attempted to resuscitate the man by giving him CPR. While those who should have helped didn’t, the victim of the soldier’s violence tried to save the life of his enemy.<sup>7</sup>

This is the point of the parable. Anybody can be a good neighbor any time and any place. This is what the Kingdom of God looks like.

The point after the point is this: being a good neighbor will bring you life. Remember, the issue at stake for the lawyer is eternal life. How do we get it? We get it by fulfilling the Great Commandment, to love God with our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus says, “*Do this, and you will live.*”<sup>8</sup> Being a good neighbor fulfills the Great Commandment; being a good neighbor will lead us toward eternal life.

I read a story about a man who had no interest in spiritual things, but he had a next-door neighbor who was a Christian. They talked over the back fence, borrowed lawn mowers, and stuff like that. Then the non-Christian's wife was stricken with cancer, and she died three months later. Here's part of a letter he wrote afterward:

I was in total despair. I went through the funeral preparations and the service like I was in a trance. After the service I went to the path along the river and walked all night. But I didn't walk alone. My neighbor—afraid for me, I guess—stayed with me all night. He didn't speak; he didn't even walk beside me. He just followed me. When the sun finally came up over the river, he came over and said, "Let's go get some breakfast."

I go to church now. My neighbor's church. A religion that can produce the kind of caring and love my neighbor showed me is something I want to find out more about. I want to love and be loved like that for the rest of my life.<sup>9</sup>

Being religious doesn't necessarily make you a good neighbor. Nevertheless, any one of us can be good neighbors to those in need. Being a good neighbor will bring life, to you and to those you serve.

One final word. The power to be a good neighbor, to help others in times of need, comes to us because we ourselves have been helped when we were beaten and bloody on the road. We serve a Savior who has helped us in our time of need, even enduring the cross and death so that we could live. His Spirit continues to live with us and in us, to pick us up, to heal our wounds, and to comfort our pain.

We have also been helped by other people who have ministered to us with the love of a neighbor. How many times have you been robbed of your hope, lying in the ditch of despair, only to have a friend come by with a loving touch, a word of peace, or an act of kindness? We are empowered to help others because we remember, with humility and gratitude, how we have been helped ourselves.

Go and do likewise, and you will give someone an unforgettable experience of the grace of God. Go and do likewise, and you will give God

a real expression of your gratitude for his love. Go and do likewise, and you will really live!

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Barth and Richard Curtis, “Yesterday,” Etalon Films, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good\\_Samaritan\\_Hospital](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Samaritan_Hospital).

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:27.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:36

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:37.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 10:36.

<sup>7</sup> Gary M. Burge, *Jesus, the Middle-Eastern Storyteller* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:28.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Muck, *Men of Integrity* (March/April 2009).