

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25–37

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous in Scripture—even among non-believers. The boxes we send abroad every Christmas through Samaritan's Purse are named after this parable.

There are two questions we want to answer in this sermon: (1) the teacher of the law's question, and (2) why this parable has survived for 2,000 years. We will briefly answer the first, then spend the rest of our time on the second.

(1) The Teacher of the Law's Question

Both Jesus and the lawyer agree that salvation is revealed in Scripture, but they approach Scripture very differently.

Luke says that: *The lawyer wanted to "justify himself."* That is the heart of legalism. Therefore, he reads the Scriptures in a self-centred way, trusting his obedience as the basis of his salvation.

Jesus teaches that the Scriptures point beyond the self to the promised Messiah. The more we read about the holiness of God, the more we should realize that we cannot stand before Him unless the Christ promised in the Old Testament comes to rescue us.

(2) Why Has This Parable Survived for 2,000 Years?

1. It surprises us.

Jesus' approach to parables is different from ours. For us, parables function as illustrations for the sermon; for Jesus, the parable is the sermon. Just like a good joke, whose climax comes at the end, Jesus' parables also reach their climax at the end.

As Jesus mentions a priest and a Levite who refuse to help their fellow Jew on the road, the audience naturally expects the next character to be an ordinary Jewish layman. But when Jesus introduces a Samaritan as the hero, He completely surprises the audience.

2. It confronts us.

Once Jesus finishes the parable, the ball is in the lawyer's—and the audience's—court. Will they condemn the clergy's apathy and praise the Samaritan's empathy?

From the teacher of the law's answer, we know it was not easy for him. He replied that the neighbour was "the one" who showed compassion. He refused even to say the word "Samaritan."

This is the shocking aspect of the story: according to the teacher of the law's "self-righteous interpretation", the priest and the Levite had probably done nothing wrong. According to his self-centred theology, if obedience to God required neglecting one's neighbour, then so be it. As long as they remained ceremonially clean...

Echoing the words "he wanted to justify himself..." Legalism keeps the letter of the Law while despising its spirit altogether!

3. It explains us.

In Greek philosophy, there is a useful concept called pathos (emotion). This story makes that profound concept universally understandable.

- The thieves display antipathy toward the half-dead man. The prefix anti- means "against" or "opposed to," so their attitude toward another human being is one of hostility. They beat him, robbed him, and left him on the side of the road.
- The clergymen display apathy toward the half-dead man. The prefix a- removes the substance of the word. They saw a man lying half dead, crossed to the other side of the road, and pretended they had not seen his misery.
- Empathy describes the Samaritan. He saw the man's misery, felt it and acted. He went beyond the immediate act of mercy by promising to return: "When I come back, I will repay any additional expense." In other words, "I will follow up on his recovery."

This story is not primarily about our love for God but about our love for one another. It teaches our responsibilities as fellow human beings. That is why it speaks to every culture, every generation, and every worldview. It does not matter whether someone is a believer, an atheist, an agnostic, a materialist, a Muslim, or a Hindu.

4. It exposes us.

In this parable, both the illegal and the legal are equally exposed. Perhaps the legal person's sin is even worse than the illegal person's.

A pastor and a thief being equally wrong? WHAT?! Let me explain:

The thieves are *illegally self-centred*. Their worldview revolves around themselves to the point that they rob and nearly kill another human being.

The clergymen are *legally self-centred*. Their worldview also revolves around themselves. Jesus does not explain why the priest and the Levite neglect to help,

because He expects His audience to know what everyone already knew: ceremonial purity. Had they touched what appeared to be a corpse, they would have become ceremonially unclean. Therefore, in order to avoid ceremonial uncleanness, they chose instead to defile their hearts and consciences by refusing to help their fellow man.

Last week we learned that “to whom much is given, much will be required.” We expect thieves to act like thieves; but when the clergy fail to do what is expected of them, that is truly shocking.

Those who had the greatest responsibility to help were the very ones who refused.

5. It leaves us without excuses.

Jesus includes several details that make the clergymen's apathy completely inexcusable.

- **Jerusalem.** The priest and the Levite were travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. That means they had already completed their service at the Temple. They had no immediate reason to be concerned about ceremonial purity.
- **The man's condition.** He was not dead. His death was only a distant possibility, while his need was an immediate reality.
- **The direction of the journey.** Jerusalem sits approximately 900 metres above sea level, while Jericho lies about 300 metres below sea level. The Good Samaritan was travelling uphill toward Jerusalem, while the clergymen were travelling downhill toward Jericho. The one with the hardest journey was the one who stopped to help.
- **The elements of the story.** Throughout the Old Testament, oil and wine are associated not only with everyday life but also with worship. Perhaps Jesus intends us to see that true worship of God is inseparable from love for our neighbour. The Samaritan worshipped God by serving his neighbour, while the ceremonially clean priest and Levite dishonoured their Creator.

Conclusion

Now that we have answered the question, “Why has this parable survived for 2,000 years?” let us return to where we began: the lawyer's questions.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and “Who is my neighbour?”

This is the second person who comes to Jesus asking essentially the same question. First, it was the rich young ruler; now it is this lawyer.

Both men believed they loved God and their neighbour well enough to earn eternal life. Yet both walked away exposed. The rich young ruler discovered that he loved his wealth more than God. This lawyer discovered that his love had boundaries. He could not even bring himself to say the word “Samaritan.”

Legalism, self-righteousness, self-centredness, good works, charity—none of these can save us before a holy God. The purpose of parables like this is to testify that we are not as good as we think we are. Nothing we do can save us. Only by Christ's grace can we be saved.

One final application.

The lawyer wanted to limit the command by asking, “Who is my neighbour?” It was an evasive question. “Define your terms!” is an old trick of lawyers and debaters (Wiersbe).

Jesus completely reversed the question: Instead of asking, “Who is my neighbour?” we should ask, “To whom can I become a neighbour?”

God's love knows no boundaries—and ours should not either.