

The parable of the Good Samaritan is very familiar to us. In fact, it's even familiar to the world. Because people use the expression "Good Samaritan" to talk about somebody who helps someone else. And Good Samaritan laws exist to protect those who want to help from being sued in return. But because it's so familiar to us, and because we use the term so often, we might think that Jesus is only talking about helping someone else in this parable, that he's only talking about showing mercy to those in need. And while that is true, and we should still keep that in mind, Jesus has so much more that he wants to tell us through this parable. Because in this parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows us what it means to keep the Law of God and to follow after him in everything.

So as Jesus is teaching, then, a lawyer stands up to ask him a question. Now, I know that when we hear the word "lawyer," we typically think of those who practice law, somebody like an attorney. But in the Bible, a lawyer is someone who studies the Law of God, who makes it his living to study it and to help others to understand what God wants them to do. So maybe the better way to understand this is as an "expert" or as a "scholar" in the Law.

But this expert, then, stands up to ask Jesus a question, but he's not looking to learn something from Jesus. He is asking him so that he will hear what Jesus says and then think about it and decide if he agrees with what he says. Is he trying to trip Jesus up by doing this? Is he trying to give him a gotcha kind of question? Maybe. But at the very least, he could just be asking him what he thinks. Either way, it doesn't ultimately matter. What matters is that he asks a very simple question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And to answer this question, Jesus turns it back to him. How would you answer it? What would you say? And to his credit, this expert gives a very good answer. He says in verse 27: "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." And it's a good answer because it points to the two great commandments of the Law: that we should love the Lord our God and that we should love our neighbor. These two commandments summarize everything that God says in the Law. It summarizes all that God wants us to do.

And that first part about loving God comes from Deuteronomy chapter 6, where Moses is speaking to Israel as they're about to enter the Promised Land. He is reminding them to look to God in everything, especially because they're about to go into the Promised Land and to receive all of these good things. And since we owe everything to God, it's important that we love him because of it.

And that second one, the love of neighbor, comes from Leviticus chapter 19, where God gives all kinds of specific examples of what that looks like. Loving our neighbor means leaving food for the poor. Loving our neighbor means not slandering one another. Loving our neighbor means giving wages to our workers and not keeping it back from them. All of these specific examples that God uses are summed up in that great commandment: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And those two commandments are so closely connected to one another. In fact, as John says in 1 John chapter 4: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." That's how closely tied together they are. If we love God, we also love our neighbor. And if we don't love

our neighbor, then there's no way that we can actually love God. The two go together, and whoever does these things will enter into eternal life.

But this expert immediately recognizes what we all do if we're being honest with ourselves. This is an incredibly high standard to follow. It's very easy to see how we have not measured up. It's very easy to see how far short we have fallen of truly loving God, and it's very easy to see how far short we have fallen of loving our neighbor as ourselves. But instead of asking God for mercy, instead of going to him and praying for forgiveness so that God would lift him up again, the way that we should do, this expert decides to justify himself. He's going to find a different way to keep the Law. And so he asks the question: "Who is my neighbor?" Because I'm sure he was thinking to himself, "Well, I've got the God part down. I can take care of that. I'll be able to do what I need to do. But this neighbor part, well, I need to narrow that down a little bit. Otherwise, I'm not going to be able to keep it. If I can show that I don't have to love this person, that this person is not my neighbor, and that this person is, well, then, I'll be able to do it. I'll be able to do what God says." Of course, the worst part about that was that he thought that he was actually serving God in this way. He thought he was doing the right thing. Because if I can just show that this is what God really means, that I don't have to love this person because he's not really my neighbor, then I'm still listening to what God has to say. I'll be just fine. I'm doing what he wants. All I need to know is: who is my neighbor?

To answer that question, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. He says in verse 30: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead." Now, this man going from Jerusalem to Jericho means that we can probably assume that he is a Jew. He probably has just been in Jerusalem in order to worship God, to do everything that he was supposed to do, and he's now probably going home. But as he's going home to Jericho, he is traveling on a road which in those days--and even to some extent still today--is a very dangerous road. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho is in a countryside which is filled with rocks and crevices, and it's extremely steep. It's the perfect place for robbers to hide. The only way to truly be safe on that road is to go armed or to go in a group or maybe, even better, to just not go at all. But unfortunately, this man falls in with some robbers. And they rob him and beat him and leave him for dead. He is in a very desperate condition. Who will come to help him?

Jesus goes on, verse 31: "Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side." So this priest is probably also going back towards Jericho, because most of the priests lived in Jericho in those days, and they would only go to Jerusalem when it was their turn. Think of Zechariah, for example, going to the temple to offer sacrifice when it was his turn. It's the same sort of thing. They would go and then they would go back home. That's probably what this man is doing too. But in this case, he's the first one to come upon this man. So we have to ask, what is he going to do?

He chooses to do nothing, to do nothing whatsoever. He just simply passes him by. Now, why would he do that? It may be because he thought that the man was dead. And if the man was dead, touching a dead body would make him unclean. The Law of God, for example, in Numbers chapter 19 says: "Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days." And being unclean means that he wouldn't be able to worship God the way that he wanted to for those seven days. And so maybe that's what he was thinking. He wants to stay clean and in that

way keep the law of God. But there's a problem with that. The first thing is even the Law made exceptions to that rule. And the other thing was he wasn't even dead, and he probably knew that he wasn't dead. So the best explanation is probably also the simplest: he just didn't want to. He didn't want to help, and he used the Law as a way of making excuses for his behavior. "He's probably dead or he is about to die, and God told me that if I touch a dead body I'll be unclean, so I'll just do what God wants me to do and pass him by." And so that's what he did.

Jesus goes on to say: "So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." This Levite is probably also going towards Jericho, going back home, and he is the second one who comes upon this man. And so we ask: what is he going to do? But he also does nothing, nothing whatsoever. Now, why would he do that? We have to remember that Levites in those days were a special group within Israel. God had chosen the Levites to serve him in the tabernacle and in the temple. We're told in Numbers chapter 3: "Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine." So in other words, they belonged to God. They were especially God's people even by the very fact of their birth. And I'm sure that went to their heads. They probably thought that "no matter what I do, it doesn't matter because I will still belong to God. So it doesn't matter if I pass this man by. It doesn't matter if I don't do a thing for him, because God will still be pleased with me. Because I am a Levite!" And so he simply passed him by.

Now, at this point the people who first heard this parable probably thought that Jesus was going to say an ordinary Jew passed by. Maybe these priests and these Levites were just corrupt. Everybody knew how often they were corrupt. Everybody knew what kind of people they really were. So maybe they thought this is what Jesus was going to do. They thought that they saw his point already. They knew where he was going. But nothing could prepare them for what Jesus said next. Verse 33: "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion." A Samaritan? A Samaritan?! Who would expect anything good from a Samaritan? This man is a heretic! This man is a foreigner! This man is even a merchant! He's probably coming just to rob this guy a second time. Nobody would expect anything good to come from this Samaritan! He is the last person that we would ever expect to keep God's Law. He is the last person we would ever expect to please God by what he does. Where is Jesus going with this?

But it is this man, the Samaritan, who helps the man on the road, doing not only what he needed, but far more than he needed. Because this Samaritan cleans his wounds, and he binds them up, and he sets the man on his own animal, which meant that he had to walk the rest of the way. He took him to an inn and took care of him there, and as he was leaving, he gave two denarii to the innkeeper, which was actually a lot of money. It was enough to make sure that this man could stay at this inn for at least a few weeks, if not several months, through that much money. And that's especially remarkable because this innkeeper had a reputation, as all innkeepers did in those days, of being thieves and dishonest. So the fact that he even left an open tab with him shows just how remarkable this is. He goes above and beyond in helping this man to make sure that all of his needs are met. He went to great expense rather than just passing him by.

So who did the will of God here? Who was a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? It was not the priest, even though he thought that he was keeping God's Law. It was not the Levite,

even though he thought that he belonged to God. It was the Samaritan, whom they thought couldn't keep the Law, whom they thought couldn't do what God wanted. The Samaritan showed what it means to love our neighbor. Samaritan also showed by doing it what it means to follow after God. Because following after God, Christians, is not about making excuses for the things that we don't want to do. Following after God is not about redefining what God says so that we can get out of it. Following after God means being like God in all that we say and do. And in this case, following after God means loving our neighbor as ourselves. It means showing mercy to those who are in need. It means speaking truth about God. It means pointing them to Jesus so they would come to faith. In all of these ways, we are acting like God.

And we do these things, Christians, because of what God has first done for us. Because God first showed us mercy by giving us his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. God showed us mercy by giving us the Holy Spirit so that we would be a new creation in his sight. And since God has done all of these things for us, since God has shown this mercy to us, let us also show mercy to one another, because that is who we have been called to be. Then we will be like God, and by his grace and mercy we will enter into eternal life.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, who showed mercy to us by calling us to faith through your Son, Jesus Christ, help us to show that same mercy to those who are in need, so that we may be like you and glorify you in all things. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.