

Part 38: The Good Samaritan

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Most people think they're going to go to heaven when they die. And if you ask them why they think that, they'll normally say it's because they're a good person. And if you ask them to define what a good person is, they'll likely say "it's just loving people."

Well many years ago when I worked in retail, I definitely considered myself to be a good person. I thought I was pretty loving towards everyone. And I tried really hard to get all my managers and coworkers to like me and think well of me.

And I felt like I was pretty successful. But there was this one coworker in particular who I never seemed to be able to win over. For all my efforts to be kind and be a team player, he just never got on the "Daniel is awesome" bandwagon.

And it didn't help that we were the only two associates in the store that ever got the "regional all-star associate reward." And so whether or not he knew it, we were kind of rivals in my mind. He'd sell the most extended warranties then I'd sell the most extended warranties. I'd be buddies with a general manager then he'd be buddies with a general manager.

And so if I'm honest, in my heart, there was a part of me that despised him. Somehow he was this black spot on my record. He was the one associate I couldn't turn into an affirmation of my own goodness. He called into question "was I as good as I thought I was?"

And in our passage today we're going to listen-in on a conversation where Jesus explains what you have to do to get eternal life. Jesus is going to help us diagnose if we're good enough – if we're loving enough - to get eternal life.

And there's nothing more important that you can ask yourself. Your eternity might depend on your answer to this one question. And if there's even a possibility that you may be wrong, then don't you want to know what you need to do?

And our main point today is this: **Access to eternal life is not based on what you know but who you love.** Access to eternal life is not based on what you know but who you love.

And we're going to look at this in **three points:**

1. Knowledge isn't Enough
2. Love isn't Enough
3. Mercy is Enough

So let's start with our first point today: Knowledge isn't Enough.

1. Knowledge isn't Enough

So for context, remember that last week Jesus said that God the Father has hidden what he's doing from the "wise and understanding."

And now we're being introduced to one of these "wise and understanding." He's a lawyer – not in the sense of a lawyer today. Instead he was an expert in the Old Testament Law.

And so why is this lawyer concerned? Well everything about him is defined by God's Law. The Law is his source of status and authority. His entire profession is based in his ability to correctly interpret and obey the Law.

But Jesus just got done claiming exclusive access to God. And he's even telling his disciples that their names are written in heaven. So it seems like Jesus is teaching a way to eternal life that comes through him and completely circumvents the Law. This is very concerning. And so the lawyer thinks he has the perfect question to challenge Jesus and expose where Jesus has gone wrong.

Let's read **Luke 10:25-28**.

The lawyer asks a good question. But of course we know that the lawyer isn't sincere. He's trying to test and critique Jesus.

But surprisingly Jesus turns the question back on the lawyer. Rather than contradicting the Law he upholds it as the standard for eternal life.

Now we might not like the idea of a standard. You might think that's outdated. But every culture has its own standards. Today the standard is: "Be a good person." But how do you know you're meeting that? Can you really be certain that you're "good enough" when you're compared to someone else? Will the current cultural norms be enough to justify you in the end? We don't want to just "think" we're going to heaven – we want to know for sure.

And Jesus points to Scripture as the standard. He asks the lawyer, "What does the Law say?"

And the lawyer quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus and gives the correct answer. The apex of the whole law – the chief thing that God requires - is to love him and love others.

And loving God and loving your neighbor kind of sounds like "be a good person."

But let's think about what it really means to love God.

The first problem with the statement "I love God" is that it matters who you're talking about. It's no wonder everyone loves their own ideas of god because apart from the Bible, we each imagine that god is a lot like us. The things that are important to us are important to him. The things that we're okay with, he's okay with. The things we want to do, he wants us to do. But is my god the true God, or ultimately, is my god just a reflection of me?

The lawyer looks to Scripture and quotes from Deuteronomy. And he's reciting part of what was called the "Shema." It was the basic foundational statement that Jews recited often. And it began this way (**Deuteronomy 6:4-5**): "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." And then it continues "You shall love the LORD your God..."

So first, “LORD” in the Hebrew text was actually God’s personal name “Yahweh”. He revealed this name to his covenant people. So this isn’t just a generic conception of “God”. It’s an exclusive relationship with the one true God of the Bible.

And this “love” is real genuine affection that you feel. But it’s also more than a sentiment. Loving affection leads to loving action.

So the rest of the commandment just amplifies the intensity of this love for God that the Law requires.

You are to love him with all your heart. And if you trace how the word for “heart” is used, you’ll find that the word for “heart” includes all of your emotions and affections. You feel merry or sorrow in your heart. Your heart can melt or feel glad. You desire in your heart and then your actions proceed from your heart.

But the heart also includes your intellect. You think and know in your heart. You devise plans in your heart.

So you are commanded to love God with all of your emotions, affections, and thoughts.

And then it says to love God with all of your soul. And in Hebrew this word for “soul” actually includes your physical body too, not just a disembodied spirit. He’s basically saying to love God with all of your being or all of your existence.

And finally it says to love God with all of your might. And the Hebrew word for might gets translated as both strength and mind in the Greek. And that’s because it actually means “very” or “much”. It takes a word and brings it to the maximum potential of what that word means. So you are to love God to the maximum of every capacity you have – devoting every bit of who you are to him.

And then finally you are to love your neighbor as yourself. And love for yourself is not being commanded here. Sometimes you’ll hear that you need to learn to love yourself before you can truly love others. But he’s already assuming that you love yourself. Elsewhere it says “no one ever hated his own flesh.” Even when I’ve said that I hate myself for the way I am, the reason I want to be different is because my life would be better if I was different. At the root I still love myself.

So instead the command assumes you love yourself and says that you must take that same concern you have for yourself and bend it outwards to love your neighbor.

And so love for God with absolutely all that you are produces love for your neighbor with the same sincere concern you have for yourself.

Jesus says “if you can *do* this, then you will live.”

Notice that the lawyer *answered* correctly, but then Jesus tells him to “do this”. It’s not enough for the lawyer to *know* the Law. It’s not enough to know right answers.

And that’s sobering for those of us who like reading and talking about theology. But it’s dangerous to let what we learn just be theoretical. All over Scripture we’re encouraged to grow in our knowledge of Christ – but its knowledge that accords with godliness. If it doesn’t help you love God and others then

you might be growing in knowledge - but it's only knowledge that puffs up instead of love that builds up.

In all of the lawyer's knowledge he still hasn't grasped what the Law requires. Remember we said "Access to eternal life is not based in what you know." If the lawyer would look to the Law as the means of becoming worthy of eternal life, then he must *do* all that the Law requires perfectly.

I heard a story of a missionary who likes to read his Greek New Testament on airplanes. He does it as a conversation-starter with the person sitting next to him. So one time someone asked him what he was reading and he told them. And the person asked the missionary what he believed people had to do to go to heaven. And the missionary replied with something like, "Oh that's easy. You just have to be completely sinless and never do a single thing wrong from the moment you're born to the moment you die." And then he went back to reading.

Now of course the man sitting next to him was alarmed by that answer because we all know that nobody can be perfect. We all have plenty in our lives that we regret or would be embarrassed for others to know. But the Law functions as a mirror. It forces us to take an objective look at ourselves and see ourselves for who we really are. In looking at God's objective standard we have to acknowledge that we don't meet it.

So that man on the airplane was having the same experience as the lawyer did. And the missionary - in imitation of Jesus - was ready to use the man's response to point him to what he needed.

Let's read **v.29**.

So this lawyer is feeling a bit exposed right now. But notice that he doesn't focus on the command to love God. Apparently he thinks that he's already doing that.

But the command to love your neighbor "as yourself" is a little more tangible. So do you see how by asking the question "Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer is trying to still make it a knowledge issue. He'd rather debate with words than take an honest look at his life.

So the lawyer is trying to narrow the definition of who his neighbor is so that he can narrow his responsibility to something more manageable. If he can do that, then he can congratulate himself that he meets the criteria. He deserves eternal life.

We all justify ourselves with our own subjective standards. Yet somehow all of us manage to end up with the same verdict. We all think "I've done enough" - "I'm a good person."

"Loving our neighbor" *sounds* nice - it's a nice sentiment. But Jesus is going to make it concrete. And he's going to do this with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan.

And this leads us to our second point, **Love isn't Enough**.

2. Love isn't Enough

Let's read **v.30-33**.

The setting of this parable is a dangerous road down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The terrain made it easy for thieves to hide and ambush travelers. And that's exactly what happened to this man. He loses everything, and he's left half-dead.

And then it says that "by chance" a priest was going down that road. At first we would think "what luck!" Of all the people to show up, a priest is the one most likely to help this Jew. Here's someone who's wise and understanding. Here's someone who knows and keeps the Law.

But he goes out of his way to pass by on the other side.

Next comes a Levite. They also studied and interpreted the Law. And they assisted priests at the temple. If the priest was too important to help then surely this Levite would.

But he also intentionally goes out of his way to pass by on the other side.

Both the priest and the Levite share ethnicity, religion, and geography with the man on the side of the road. They both know the Law and both have been set apart for ministry.

But neither of them was willing.

Now before we come down too hard on the priest and the Levite, remember that we've all walked places at night where we didn't feel safe. We just want to get somewhere safe as quick as possible. And especially in this situation because there was proof right there in the half-dead man that there was a real threat. The thieves might have been nearby just waiting to ambush someone with a bleeding heart.

And maybe they felt that helping the man would interfere with their ministry. If the man died in their care then they would be unclean for seven days. It could throw off their plans. How often have you seen a need and thought "I don't have time for this"?

And so their fear and their self-importance keep them from getting involved. They block out the man's suffering. He's not worth the risk.

And it's at this point that Jesus introduces the Samaritan. Now if it had been a Jew instead of a Samaritan then maybe the moral could have been something like: "Don't be like the hypocritical religious elite. Throw off the outward religion and just get your hands dirty." That message would probably resonate with us. But instead he chooses to introduce a Samaritan.

Now it's hard for us to feel the impact of a Samaritan coming on the scene. When we hear the word "Samaritan" the first thing we probably think of is this "*Good Samaritan*". Or maybe we think of organizations like Samaritan Ministries or Samaritan's Purse.

But when a Jew heard the word "Samaritan" the farthest thing from their mind was that a Samaritan could be "good."

And that's because Samaritans were remnants of the norther tribes of Israel that had been conquered centuries earlier. And they had assimilated with foreigners who relocated there. They were almost like a counterfeit Israel with a mixed ethnicity and different worship while claiming to serve the same God. So they were hated by the Jews. In fact the first time Luke introduced Samaritans was in the last

chapter. And we saw how James and John were really eager to suggest calling down fire from heaven to consume Samaritans. But unlike the priest and the Levite, Jesus casts this Samaritan who has different Scriptures and a different place of worship – and he puts him in a positive light. This was completely scandalous.

All three saw the man. The priest and Levite passed by. But it's the Samaritan – the one who bears no political, ethnic, or geographic responsibility - the one who is hated by this Jew - this *Samaritan* is the one who has compassion. And compassion is where the story changes direction.

Let's read **v.34-35**.

He goes to the man. He binds up his wounds. He pours on wine as an antiseptic and oil to sooth his skin. He sets him on his animal. (Did you notice that the Samaritan himself has to walk now?) He brings him to an inn. And he takes care of him all night.

The next day he goes even farther. He pays two day's wages. He's an advocate with the innkeeper. He secures further care for the man. And he promises to come back to pay the bill.

Now needless to say, the Samaritan didn't get where he was going on time. He was tired from walking and caring for the man. And his money bag was a bit lighter. This was costly compassion.

So Jesus has finished the story. And now once again he asks the lawyer a question in response to the lawyer's own question.

Let's read **v.36-37**.

You know I've always read this story as if it were answering the question "who did the Good Samaritan consider to be his neighbor?" But that's not the question Jesus asks, is it?

Or maybe you've heard a lesson on this and were asked, "Are you like the priest, the Levite, or the Good Samaritan?"

We naturally identify with the Good Samaritan and see the story through his eyes. The Good Samaritan is an example of how I should love my neighbor as myself. I should consider the homeless or others in need and I should imitate this kind of mercy.

But Jesus asks the question in such a way that it forces the lawyer to say something that he would hate to say.

Did you notice the specific words the lawyer used to answer the question? He said it was "the *one* who showed him mercy." He doesn't actually call him "the Samaritan". It's almost as if he can't bring himself to say it's a Samaritan who's the hero. He would have held the priest and the Levite in high honor. But he's stuck having to affirm his enemy.

So *why did* Jesus cast a Samaritan as the hero?

Well did you notice the difference between the question Jesus asked and the lawyer's original question? The lawyer asked "who is *my* neighbor" and Jesus asks "who is the neighbor of *the man* who fell among robbers." So Jesus restates the question and he equates the lawyer with the man in

the story who needed mercy. The person dying in the road is the one the lawyer was meant to identify with. And he's the one we are meant to identify with.

The lawyer focused on defining the word "neighbor", but Jesus actually focuses on the "as yourself" part. If you were half-dead in a ditch, you wouldn't care if the person passing by shared some affinity with you. Who cares about similar interests, political views, social class, or religious affiliation when you're dying in a ditch? You would just want mercy.

So who is your neighbor? Anyone who if you were in their shoes you would want them to show *you* mercy. Your desire to be shown mercy causes you to drop the restrictions on who you recognize as your neighbor. It's whoever you come across who needs mercy no matter how different or on the outside they are - even if it's your own enemy.

You know this story is an easy one to use to help promote social justice. Months ago I even had the thought that maybe when we got to this passage it would be a good time to promote mercy ministries. But are you starting to see where this story relates to mercy ministry and where it's actually emphasizing something else?

This story absolutely elevates compassion towards others. We see an example of mercy that should make us want to care for people who are suffering and ignored. But what is Jesus' main point?

The bigger issue is that we don't love our neighbor as ourselves because we hate Samaritans.

In that retail job I tried to evaluate my love based off of people who were easy to love. But loving my neighbor as myself would have included loving that difficult coworker.

Who are the Samaritans in your life?

Who do you want to avoid? Maybe it's your next door neighbor who's a nuisance.

Who is on the other side of the issue? Maybe it's a family member with different political views.

Who do you naturally feel superior to? Maybe it's a friend you feel snubbed by.

Who can you not forgive for what they've done to you? Maybe it's your ex-husband or someone else who ruined your life.

We want to narrow the definition of neighbor just as much as the lawyer did. But Jesus says "Go and do likewise."

And the other thing that this exposes is that it's not just neighbor love that this lawyer falls short in. Remember that love for your neighbor was the more tangible of the two commands. Love for the Lord is supposed to be with *all* your heart, *all* your soul, *all* your strength, *all* your mind. Loving your neighbor as yourself is secondary – it's an expression of love for God. So the fact that the lawyer falls short of loving his neighbor exposes that he doesn't really love God.

John says something similar in **1 John 4:20**.

So even if you know the Bible is true, is it really God that you love?

What did the religious lawyer really love? He may have loved reading God's word. He may have loved praying, giving money to good causes, studying theology – but if he loved God as the Law required, he wouldn't hate Samaritans.

The lawyer wanted to test Jesus but it's the lawyer who doesn't pass his own test. Oh, he can give the right answer. But there's a contradiction between the answers he gives and what he *does*. His affirmation of the law was not enough, his love for his Jewish people was not enough. He needed something more because of the sin in his own heart, the same sin that's in our hearts.

Access to eternal life is not based on what you know but who you love. And brothers and sisters, we all fail the test. None of us is worthy of heaven, because all of us have our Samaritans.

Whether you're religious or not, if you're looking to your goodness to get you into heaven then you are just like the lawyer. Whether you're dressed up in relativism or legalism, you can't fix the things you know you've done wrong and you can't make yourself good enough to be "not guilty" by God's standard.

So do you meet *his* standard? Do you still think you've done well enough to inherit eternal life?

And that's where Luke ends the passage. Jesus raises the standard impossibly high and then says "go do it." There's no mention of the gospel. There's no mention of grace. Why end the conversation here?

Well the key to understanding Jesus' response is to remember the question the lawyer asked. The lawyer didn't ask "how" to be saved. He asked what the requirements were – what he has to *do* to be saved. The lawyer is confident he already knows the answer – it's obeying the Law. He just hadn't counted on being condemned by the very Law that he thought gave him life.

The wise and understanding don't even understand the most basic command of their faith. Jesus is the one who is actually taking the Law seriously. And the Law demands perfect love. They can't see their need for mercy so they can't understand their need for Jesus. They think they need to protect the Law from Jesus but it's them who need Jesus to protect *them* from the *Law*.

The lawyer assumes that it can't mean what it says because it's impossible to do. But that's the point. The goodness that God requires for salvation has to come some other way. Jesus held up the mirror of the Law to show the lawyer God's true standard so that he would see his own need for mercy.

And so this passage actually shows us an example of how God has "hidden these things from the wise and understanding." It's not that Jesus refuses to dialogue with the lawyer. It's not that the lawyer yearns to know Jesus but God intervenes and prevents him from seeing Jesus. Instead Jesus actually leads the lawyer to the very point where he should recognize his need for mercy – his need for Jesus. But instead of humbling himself and acknowledging his need, he's self-righteous - he justifies himself. You won't receive the cure for a disease you won't admit. But Jesus chooses to intervene and reveal his Father to those who best display his grace – not the "wise and understanding" who look like they've earned it, – but to the weak, the outsiders, and the no-accounts who can do nothing but receive his mercy.

If the lawyer had acknowledged his need for mercy, he would have found that mercy was right there.

And this brings us to our final point: **Mercy is Enough.**

3. Mercy is Enough

The story ends without the lawyer acknowledging his need. But what about you?

Remember that in the story, you aren't meant to see yourself in the Good Samaritan. Spiritually, you're worse off than the half-dead guy. You have been stripped and lay bare in your guilt and shame - beaten and left half-dead by your own sin. You may cry for help to the Law or to your own standard but there is no help there to be found. You are even more incapable of reviving yourself - you're already *dead* in your trespasses and sins. Your only hope is that you would be shown mercy.

And Jesus - greater than the Good Samaritan - shows us God's mercy.

Though you were hostile to him, Jesus journeyed from heaven to come for you. He is the one who had compassion on you. He is the one who cares for you. Jesus is the one who binds up your self-inflicted wounds. Jesus himself was poured out for you - he himself bore the cost of your sin on the cross. He gives you *himself* and promises to *always* be with you. You don't need something to "do", you need him.

The Samaritans in our lives reveal that we lack the love the Law requires. But Jesus *has* loved us as he loved himself. He *has* done what the Law required. Because he met God's standard, he was able to die in your place to pay for your sins and offer you forgiveness. Because he met God's standard, he has lived a perfect life in your place so he can offer you his perfect record. So everything necessary, Jesus has already *done* for you to inherit eternal life.

And the majority of people have heard, "Jesus died on the cross for my sins". But then if you ask them they *still* think they're going to heaven for being a good person. There's a disconnect that just renders the cross meaningless.

Don't leave here today thinking that. When you stop trusting in yourself and start trusting in Jesus - you can have *confidence* that you have eternal life. Just receive the gift.

So what will your answer be on the Day of Judgment? Don't live with the sad uncertainty of not knowing whether you've done enough to get into heaven. You have to decide if you will trust in *your* goodness or in *Jesus'* mercy.

And that's the primary point of the parable. But what about those of us who've already given up on our own merit and put our trust in Jesus? Well the whole Christian life is one of continually repenting and turning to Jesus. We see our sin again and again, and we see his mercy again and again. And his grace leads us to worship.

But God didn't just give us these commands to show us our need for mercy. He really *does* want us to love him and love our neighbor. Jesus didn't just obey these commands to fulfill the Law for us - he obeyed them because that's who he is. And he wants us to share in his love.

So when Jesus says "You go and do likewise" this is meant to point the self-righteous to their need for grace. But through grace, as his little children with our names written in heaven, our marching orders are still the same.

We were once the half-dead man. Now we're to imitate the Good Samaritan. But like the innkeeper, now all we need in order to care for our neighbor, the greater Good Samaritan more than supplies.

We understand what love for neighbor looks like now because we've experienced it in Christ's love for us. Now with Christ dwelling in us we are called to go and do likewise.

And we're quickly going to look at this in three ways:

1. Mercy for the Lost
2. Mercy for the Weak
3. Mercy for You

First, there's Mercy for the Lost.

1) Mercy for the Lost

As one pastor puts it: "Christians care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering." This parable shows us our need for the gospel. But are you willing to be uncomfortable and share this gospel with someone else who needs it? No one likes to look into God's law and see they don't measure up. No one likes to have their self-righteousness and misunderstanding of Jesus exposed. But do you love your neighbor enough to care about where they'll spend eternity? Do you love God enough that you desire for your neighbor to worship him for all eternity?

You'll never feel equipped enough – you just have to start. The truth is that with practice, sharing the *message* does get easier, but the *act* of sharing may always be hard. It is for me. But we have to realize that most of our excuses are really just fear of man instead of trusting Jesus. He's the one who saves people – but he uses little children – little, inarticulate, dependent children - like you and me to tell people about him. You never know when you might be sharing the gospel with someone – as clumsy as it might feel - and it's the exact moment that Jesus chooses to reveal himself to them.

Secondly, there's Mercy for the Weak.

2) Mercy for the Weak

Mercy for those in need isn't merely a sentiment. The Good Samaritan's compassion cost him something.

1 John 3:17-18 says this.

And **James 2:15-16** says.

So if we have received mercy then we will inevitably be sensitive to those who need mercy. And that looks like meeting needs that are physical, emotional, and financial.

And it would be easy at this point to start promoting our mercy ministries and give you a tidy little volunteer slot to sign up for. But that's exactly the specific standard that the lawyer wanted. And Jesus doesn't give him a checkbox.

Helping refugees is a good cause. Helping women experiencing an unexpected pregnancy is a good cause. Helping serve the homeless is a good cause. But Jesus isn't after an hour of your volunteer

time. He's not after everyone getting a job in social work. He's after your whole life. Is your life characterized by mercy? When people in your life are weak or needy or difficult - do you have compassion on them? Do you humble yourself to serve your closest neighbors – your spouse, your children, aging parents or grandparents, roommates – no matter how thankless the job? Are you ready to look out with costly compassion on *whoever* you encounter in the way?

When you're tempted to pass by on the other side, remember where you'd be if Jesus hadn't felt compassion for you. b. When you're tempted to neglect what's hard because other things you could do feel more important or appreciated, remember where you'd be if your High Priest hadn't come for you. When you're tempted to be stingy, remember where you'd be if Jesus hadn't covered the cost for you.

Now some of us need a gentle nudge. But there's also others of us who are really trying to love like this and you just feel exhausted. There's so many suffering people you should help, but it's never enough. You just can't measure up. And maybe sometimes it leaves you wondering if you're really even saved.

Well if this describes you, then remember that there's Mercy for You.

3) Mercy for You

Over the past month if you've driven through the intersection by our old church building, you've seen a wheelchair with flowers in it. The wheelchair belonged to a homeless man named Kyle who passed away. Kyle used to sit at that corner with a cardboard sign waving to cars as they passed by. And I stopped to talk with Kyle on several occasions. I shared the gospel with him, I prayed for him, I brought him snacks or gloves or a blanket or a headlamp. I cared about Kyle.

But I also wrestled with feelings of guilt. Sometimes on my way home, I hoped that he wouldn't be out there because I'd feel like a hypocrite if I didn't stop. In my head I'd start justifying myself as I drove past - or I'd feel a sense of relief when he wasn't there.

Then a month ago I was driving past one Sunday morning and his *wheelchair* was there but *he* wasn't. Instead there were the flowers and notes saying that he'd passed away.

I was really sad that he was gone. And immediately I felt guilty. It had been months since I'd taken the time to stop. I wondered if I had truly treated him the way I would have wanted to be treated if I were in his shoes. I should have been more direct in calling him to repentance and faith. I could have read Scripture with him. I could have taken him out to a restaurant or taken him home for dinner.

Could I ever have done enough? Am I just kidding myself thinking that I loved Kyle?

But dear brothers and sisters, remember where Jesus wanted to take the lawyer. It's those who trust in their own effort that need to despair of not measuring up so they *stop* trusting in themselves and start trusting in him. Don't drift into relying on your own effort. You will never reach the perfect standard of Jesus. You can't walk in the relief of his love while also trying to prove you've earned it. Just receive the gift. And from humility seek to walk in his love. Remember the compassion and the mercy you've received because Jesus proved to be *your* neighbor.