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We're spending some time in our Bible-teaching episodes between Christmas and Easter learning about some of the teachings of Jesus. In particular, we're exploring how Jesus taught using parables — a short allegorical story meant to illustrate or teach a truth, religious principle or moral lesson.

Last time, we talked about the Prodigal Son, and how that parable teaches that no matter how far gone a person may think he or she is, they always can turn back toward God, and our Creator is eagerly awaiting that person's arrival back home, in God's loving care and refuge. If you missed it, please check it out on my website, www.toddseifert.com.

Today, I want to share the story of The Good Samaritan. It's a story you may have heard. You certainly know the term. We use the phrase "Good Samaritan" all the time to describe someone who helps others, even if they don't know them personally. A few years ago, states passed a flurry of "Good Samaritan" laws to protect people who may hurt someone in the attempt to actually help them, such as breaking someone's rib while administering CPR compressions to help get a heart restarted.

And concepts from The Good Samaritan story appear many places in pop culture. In "Les Misérable," for example, the kindness of a priest offering food to a desperate Jean Valjean helps transform a thief into a hero. And in the funny Bill Murray movie "Groundhog Day," TV reporter Phil converts from a lost soul to a genuinely good guy because he adds good deeds to each day as he tries to break his life loop.

And we see it on the news. Around Christmas time, we hear stories of people leaving huge tips for servers in restaurants or of people paying for groceries or for Christmas presents for the people in line in front or behind them. What's sad is these are news stories because they are out of the ordinary, but the examples are solid ways for each of us to follow what Jesus teaches in this parable.

So, with that in mind, let's hear the story from the Bible. It's found in Luke, chapter 10, verses 25 to 37. If you have a Bible, Luke is about two-thirds back from the very front. You also can follow along on the YouVersion app or the BibleGateway app. Both are found for free in the Apple app store or on Google Play.

Here is our story ...

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"

²⁶ Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"

²⁷ He responded, *“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”*^[a]

²⁸ Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. ³¹ Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. ³² Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. ³³ A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day, he took two full days’ worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, ‘Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.’ ³⁶ What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?”

³⁷ Then the legal expert said, “The one who demonstrated mercy toward him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

That story may have sounded familiar to you. Here’s a brief summary with some further explanation.

We start with what the writer of Luke calls a “legal expert.” From what I’ve read, this isn’t a legal expert, as in a lawyer. Instead, it’s a religious leader, someone well versed in the Law of Moses, the 613 rules that Jews are supposed to live by given in the first five books of our Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They are comprehensive, and they are strict. If you’re like me and enjoy shrimp, do anything other than rest and read scripture on

a Sunday, and have any single piece of polyester in your closet, you are in violation of what is known as the Mosaic Law.

Welcome to the club! There's no secret handshake or membership card, but it means we're in violation of the Law. As we talked about in earlier episodes, our inability to follow that Law is why Jesus came to earth to live among us, teach us, die for us and, ultimately conquer death on our behalf. We'll get into much more of that as Easter draws nearer.

Anyway, back to our legal expert. He's trying to trip up Jesus because the establishment, "the Man," wanted Jesus to go away. He was threatening their authority by empowering the people. The expert's exchange with Jesus starts innocently enough. It sounds like he genuinely wants to know how to achieve eternal life. They share a recitation from the book of Deuteronomy — one of those books of Mosaic Law — that says the greatest commandment is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So far, so good.

But then the legal expert takes a rather dark turn. He is trying to trick Jesus into saying something that will get Him into trouble. He asks "And who is my neighbor?"

Make no mistake here. What the legal expert actually is asking is "Who is NOT my neighbor?" He is seeking a "free pass" of sorts here. He's asking who is lacking worthiness of love. In effect, he's asking in a stealthy way who he is free to marginalize.

Jesus, though, is not fooled. In fact, he's about to turn the tables on this guy and the audience around Him to teach a concept that is one of the basic tenets of Christian faith.

We'll hear all about it when we return to "In Layman's Terms" after this brief message. ...

... Welcome back to "In Layman's Terms." Today we're exploring another of Jesus' teachings — this time the story of the Good Samaritan.

As we just explored, Jesus is being asked a question from an expert in the Jewish law, also known as the Mosaic Law. The expert's intention is to trick Jesus. But Jesus is going to take this attempt at trickery and instead will teach a key component of the Christian faith.

Let's continue.

Jesus begins by saying that a man set out on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. Along the path, he is accosted by thieves who strip him naked, take all his possessions, beat him and leave him near death.

On a visit to the Holy Land in 2019, our tour guide took us to a valley that is widely believed to be the path Jesus had in mind for the setting of this story. In the first century AD, it would have been a likely road — a path, really, to go back and forth from Jerusalem northeast to Jericho. I've posted a couple of photos from that valley with this podcast link on my website at toddseifert.com.

If you look closely at that photo, it is a footpath approximately 6 to 8 feet wide known as the Valley of Doves. It has sharp inclines to the right and the left. Dozens of caves sit above the path, providing a good hideout for thieves and no chance of escape for anyone victimized by unsavory characters.

The thieves have done their damage. The traveler in our story is hurt and left for dead.

But there is hope! A priest enters the story by traveling that same path. Surely a “man of God” will stop to help. But instead of stopping to lend assistance, the priest crosses to the other side of the road and goes on his way.

But there is still hope! A Levite traveling that same path sees the man. Levites, like priests, also worked in the temple, in their case serving as the choir and assisting with maintenance and construction. The Levites also served as teachers and judges for the Jewish people. Certainly a person with this religious background and authority will stop to help, right?

Nope. Jesus says the Levite also crosses over to the other side of the road and goes on his way. Why would these two people not help? Jesus doesn’t say, but I can think of three practical reasons.

First, remember that narrow valley I described? After seeing it for myself, I think the priest and the Levite had personal safety in mind. They may have thought that it’s likely those same thieves who beat this guy up are still around. Their decision to move along and get out of there may have been a rather primary, simple act of self-preservation.

Second, this traveler had been beaten pretty badly. Jesus described him as being “near death.” Neither the priest or the Levite are described as being doctors, so they may have seen this guy as simply being too far gone to help. Maybe they thought he was a lost cause.

Third — and to be fair, this is the situation most mentioned in the Bible commentaries I have read over the years — the Mosaic Law considered people to be unclean if they encountered someone who was bleeding, requiring certain rituals and periods of time before the priest or the Levite could have interacted with the public again. If they had official business, they may not have been able to sacrifice the seven days or however long required to stay outside a city. Such moratoriums on contact were meant to protect people from disease, but they may have contributed to leaving this poor traveler where he was still lying on the side of the road.

Three reasonable explanations. But it’s still pretty cold-blooded.

Remember I said the path I witnessed was only 6 to 8 feet wide. If it was that way in Jesus’ day — and if this is really the setting Jesus had in mind — then the priest and the Levite passed within only a few feet of this person. It’s not like they took a path higher up a hill while this guy was down in a valley, like you see in so many drawings and paintings depicting this story. Instead, they would have passed within almost an arm’s length of this person.

Like I said, pretty cold-blooded.

Then comes the Samaritan. The description is significant. Jesus is telling this story in about 30 AD, give or take a year or two. Back in 721 BC, the Assyrian Empire conquered what was then known as the Northern Kingdom. I’ll spare you the extended history lesson, but the unified kingdom of Israel split into the northern kingdom of Israel about 200 years prior, in about 930 BC. The southern kingdom was named Judah.

So, the Assyrians conquer the northern kingdom in 721 BC and take away to Assyria all of the people with exceptional talent — the artisans, the inventors, the physicians and lawyers. If you were in any way highly educated or talented, you were carted off, never to return to your homeland. The people left behind intermarried with other, non-Jews in the region who came in to fill the void left by the Jews of that northern kingdom who had been led off into exile.

The descendants of those intermarried people became known as Samaritans, named after the region’s capital of Samaria at the time that the northern kingdom fell. Today, this is part of the West Bank that appears so often in the news out of the state of Israel.

Since these people were not “pure-bred” Jews, the Jewish people in Jesus’ day largely looked down on the Samaritans. These people were considered less than human, an inferior race. Sound familiar with any part of American history? Unfortunately, we still deal with this today? As a brief aside, I want to recommend a book titled “How to Be an Anti-Racist,” by Ibram X. Kendi. It’s a masterful book that talks about how people of all races have to change their way of thinking so no one race puts itself above another. Doing so, Dr. Kendi explains through his work, is how we can bring true harmony to our nation — at least in terms of race.

Off my soapbox and back to our story: This Samaritan, a member of the looked-down-upon race, stops and was moved by compassion. Not only does he stop, but he actually offers aid. He bandages the man’s wounds. He treats the wounds with oil and wine to stop infection. He puts the man on his donkey, meaning he now is walking the rest of the journey.

This is a good time to remind you that the Samaritan faces the same challenges as the priest and the Levite. He has some place to be. By dealing with this injured traveler, he technically is unclean. And by stopping to render aid, he is at risk of being attacked himself by whomever is camped out in those many caves above him.

Jesus continues the story to say that the Samaritan continues to go above and beyond any expectations. He takes the traveler to an inn to allow him to rest and recover from his injuries.

The Samaritan pays for the lodging with his own money — the equivalent of two full days’ worth of wages ... not chump change. And then he tells the innkeeper to keep watch over the man and tend to him, promising to stop on his return trip to pay any additional costs.

Jesus concludes by asking the question that no doubt stunned the legal expert and grabbed the crowd’s attention: “Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?”

The legal expert had to admit it was the one who demonstrated mercy, leading Jesus to instruct him and the crowd that had gathered to “Go and do likewise.”

What exactly does this all mean for us today? We’ll talk more about that after this brief message. ...

... Welcome back to “In Layman’s Terms.” We’re talking today about the parable of The Good Samaritan.

I love this parable. I like the story, and I like its message. I also applaud the example it sets for us by making us look in the mirror by putting ourselves into the shoes of each character.

The traveler simply wants assistance. He can’t help himself, so he needs for someone else to work on his behalf. Sometimes we have to admit that we need help. That’s not easy for me, and it may not be easy for you. But there are times when we simply can’t do things ourselves. We have to rely on others.

The priest and the Levite clearly notice that there is a person in need, but they put their own interests ahead of the person they find lying in the road. I think many of us are guilty of this at some points in our lives. We may want to help and don’t think we have the resources. Or we notice someone who needs help and we turn the other way. I caught myself avoiding eye contact a few days ago with a person holding a sign asking for help at the entrance to a local Wal-Mart. I had \$5 in my wallet that I should have given him, but like the priest and Levite, I had somewhere to be, so I looked the other way and drove off — not at all neighborly.

The Samaritan goes above and beyond, serving as the example that we all should mimic. Think of the world we would live in if we all chose to love our neighbors as ourselves, as displayed by the Good Samaritan.

We would care for the people who live next door to us, who live in our subdivisions or apartment buildings or folks we encounter in our places of work or school. We would care for the disadvantaged in our society, the marginalized in our world. We would care far more for the immigrant seeking a better life than in protecting our place of power or influence. We would visit the sick and not think of it as an inconvenience. We would visit the imprisoned and remember they are a beloved creation of God and not merely the consequences of their actions. Admittedly, that last one can be very difficult.

But Jesus' story didn't provide any "in case of" statements or any "unless" statements such as "love your neighbor as yourself UNLESS he or she ..." insert excuse here.

Jesus didn't say you have to necessarily like the person. You don't have to have a relationship with the person to love them as a neighbor. The Samaritan didn't know the person he helped. But he showed love to him anyway.

That's the lesson of the Good Samaritan: Put others above ourselves because when we need help, we want it, and we want it now. Likewise, people in need — our neighbors — need our help.

So let's love others as neighbors, as ourselves.

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