The Road to Jericho  
Luke 10:25-37  
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Right after seminary, David and I co-pastored a small church in Fairbanks, Alaska. One of the first things you learn about survival during an Alaskan winter is what to keep in your car in the event of a breakdown or emergency on the road. Because with temperatures sometimes hovering at 30-40 below zero, breakdowns become life & death situations. (Much like breaking down in the middle of the Baja Desert in August.) What is also important to learn during winter driving in Alaska is that if you see someone stranded, you must STOP AND HELP THEM. It’s a state law. You don’t worry about personal safety or danger with someone who is a stranger; you do the right thing and help someone in need because you most likely will be saving that person’s life.

When you respond to someone in dire need like this, you are often called a Good Samaritan. An expression that comes from a familiar passage in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verses 25-37. A story that you’ve probably heard countless times, and perhaps would prefer never to hear again! But that’s the interesting thing about stories, even well-known ones, if you listen closely, you can suddenly hear something that you’ve never heard before. So before we study the Good Samaritan this morning, let’s pray together. Pray that, God will open our ears and our hearts to a fresh truth, a penetrating truth, that will rock our world today!

(Pray)

I invite you to open your Bibles to Luke 10:25-37. Keep a finger there because I’m going to read and explain as we go along.

**On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.**

**Expert in the law/lawyer:** He was not the kind of lawyer who goes to court with us for a traffic ticket or to bail someone out of jail. This “lawyer” is an expert in the Old Testament law, in particular, the Law of Moses, which is contained in the first five books of the Bible. This man specialized, therefore, in the Law of Moses. This term “lawyer” is not used very frequently in the Bible. We find it only in the Gospels in Luke 10 and Matthew 22:35.¹

We’re told that this man has come to test Jesus by asking the following question:

“*Teacher,*” he asked, “*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (verse 25)

**Inherit eternal life:** This would be like you or I asking, “What do you have to do to be a good Christian?” Tell me the bottom line of what I need to do to be right with God.
It sounds like a legitimate question. A question many people are still asking today. So why are we told that this was a “test”? That although this lawyer appears to be seeking an answer from Jesus, he is really there for an entirely different purpose. Because, as an expert in O.T. Law he already knows the answer to his question. What he is doing is challenging another rabbi, another teacher, about his subject matter. He does not believe that Jesus, an uneducated carpenter, could possibly know more about the Old Testament than he does. He wants to prove that what Jesus is teaching is not consistent with the Mosaic Law so that he can ultimately say, “Your system is wrong. Mine is right.” He hopes to put Jesus on the defensive, and humiliate him.

But Jesus doesn’t take the bait. Instead, he answers by asking a question. “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (verse 26) Asking a counter-question is a great technique when you know someone is trying to trap you. Make the person answer their own question!

So the lawyer says to Jesus: “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 Love your neighbor as yourself.” (verse 27)

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” (verse 28) First, notice that Jesus’ response firmly puts this man in his place. “You have answered correctly.” Jesus assumes the position of authority as the teacher, and responds to this man as if he were the student. Second, the phrase “Do this and you will live” is an exact quote from Leviticus 18:5. Again, Jesus asserts his authority and knowledge of Scripture. You want to debate the finer points of the law and toss Bible verses back and forth, fine. We can do that all day!

Jesus also knows how impossible it would be to live out this command to the letter. The word “all” implies a total, selfless, continual surrender to God. It would be impossible to do this consistently, to the letter of the Law, as the Experts in the Law were required. These religious lawyers believed that one not only kept the law, but they also required that you keep the whole law perfectly. No omissions or failures were allowed. So, Jesus turned the tables and neatly caught this man in his own trap. Jesus was making him examine his system of relating to God, his theology, which sounded great on the surface, but once you dug deeper, was an exercise in futility.

And how do we know this type of exchange was happening? How do we know that this was a contest of wills? Because of what happens next. We’re told: But he (the lawyer) wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (verse 29)

This man wanted to justify his lifestyle, his relationship with God. This conversation wasn’t going at all like he’d planned, so he was going to try it again from another angle. And he hopes to find fault in how Jesus will answer his second question.

But, as usual, Jesus does something totally unexpected. He tells a story.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho . . .” (verse 30)
The Road to Jericho was a seventeen mile road that connects Jerusalem to Jericho. That road drops 3600 feet in those seventeen miles. It is a steep, winding, descending, remote road that for centuries has been a place of robberies.

Many of us have experienced this road to Jericho. It’s a metaphor for situations in our lives.

   It is the seventeen miles of violence and oppression many people have experienced in their families.

   It is the seventeen rooms of the corridor of the nursing home where Myrtle who has Alzheimer’s disease lives.

   It is the seventeen blocks on First Avenue South in downtown Seattle, where many people live who are mentally handicapped or teenagers on the run.

   It is the seventeen mile border between warring nations like Nicaragua and El Salvador, Namibia and Angola, Israel and Palestine, where thousands upon thousands of people have been killed.

   It is the seventeen years that Aunt Billie took care of Uncle Johnnie with his chronic heart disease.

   The Jericho Road is any place where there is violence; it is any place where there is oppression; it is any place where people are robbed of the dignity, love and freedom they deserve. The Jericho Road is always with us. The Jericho Road.

So, we have a traveler journeying on this Jericho Road.

“When he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” (verses 30-32)

Let’s stop here a moment. What was the role of a priest and a Levite during this time? Who were they?

The priest served in the Temple, assisting with the ceremonial aspects of worship. He was considered the holiest person there was among the Jews. He was taught the Scriptures. He was entrusted with offering sacrifices for the sin of the people. He was allowed to go further into the Temple than “regular” people were. If anyone was going to reflect the character of God, it would be the priest. As he saw this man lying in the ditch, lifeless, perhaps dead, he was probably thinking of Numbers 19:11 where the law said, “if he touched a dead man he would become unclean for 7 days.” For a whole week he would be unable to serve in the Temple, to worship God, to lead others into the presence of God. So he decides to not get involved and pass by on the other side.

While the priest was the religious leader, the Levite was the religious lay-leader. The Levite also served in the temple. His principal role included singing Psalms during Temple services, performing
construction and maintenance for the Temple, serving as a guard, and performing other services. Levites also served as teachers and judges, maintaining cities of refuge in Biblical times. He too would have been considered ceremonially unclean for touching this wounded, perhaps dead, man. It seems that he takes a closer look at this man in the ditch, but he, too, passes by on the other side.

What is even more shocking is that we’re told they were going down the road—they were going from Jerusalem to Jericho—which means they had probably just performed duties at the Temple. They had just worshiped the Lord God Jehovah in song, prayer, & sacrifice, before they passed by this beaten man.

Today, these two would be comparable to a Roman Catholic Priest, a Protestant Pastor, an Elder or Deacon, a nun, any man or woman who serves in an ordained or lay leadership capacity in the church. It would be like me or David (your pastors), and then Mimi or Rich (two people on the Leadership Team) leaving church this morning, seeing one of you lying beaten and bloody on the side of the road, and choosing to ignore you, to keep on walking, pretending we hadn’t seen a thing.

The reaction of the priest and the Levite would not have surprised this lawyer or any of the other people listening to the story. Everyone in Jesus’ day knew about the ceremonial laws to stay clean, and how strict those laws were kept. **A lifestyle of non-involvement, keeping everyone at arms’ distance, was nothing new.**

It happens in our world too. There is the story of an old man standing on a crowded bus. A young man standing next to him asked, “What time is it?” The old man said nothing. As the young man walked away, the old man’s friend asked, “Why were you so rude to the young man?” The old man answered, “If I had given him the time of day, he’d want to know where I am going. Then we might talk about our interests. If we did that he might invite himself to my house for dinner. If he came to my house, he would meet my lovely daughter. If he met her, they would both fall in love and frankly, I don’t want my daughter marrying someone who can’t afford a watch.

Sometimes it’s easier to not get involved because heaven knows what might happen if you do!

Jesus knew his audience well. But then, his story takes a surprise twist.

**“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” (verses 33-35)**

**Who were the Samaritans?** The Samaritans, due to intermarriage with other cultures, were considered half-breeds by the Jews. They were an off-shoot of the Jewish faith, worshiped in a different place, even used different portions of Scripture. If a Jew wanted to insult you, then he might call you a Samaritan. It was a racial slur. To expect a Samaritan to show compassion and mercy to another person would have
been an anathema to a Jew. Listening to this story, a Jew would have expected the Samaritan to probably see the man in the ditch and finish him off, not help him.

Therefore, for Jesus to compare a Samaritan’s actions to that of a priest or Levite would not only be shocking, but somewhat insulting, and a story that would be talked about for hours, if not days afterwards. The Greek word Jesus used for “compassion” or “pity” (splanchnizomai) is a very vivid one. It comes from a word that refers to the intestines, or bowels. It sounds pretty gross! But it’s the equivalent of what we mean when we talk about a “gut feeling.” A gut feeling is one that comes from the deepest part of who we are.

The Samaritan saw the same pitiful man lying in agony beside the road and his heart churned within him so that he could not pass by without helping. When that Samaritan looked at that suffering man lying half-dead by the side of the road, something happened in his gut; something that made it impossible for him to walk away. He didn’t decide to help this guy on the basis of how worthy he was. He helped him because of how needy he was.

It’s important too, to notice the role of the innkeeper. The Samaritan rescued the injured man and took him to a safe place, but then he left him in the care of another. He practiced what in medical terms is called Triage. This is when you make an assessment of someone’s injuries, determine what type of medical treatment needs to be made first, and then proceed with the appropriate care. So the Samaritan responded with immediate, urgent care to stop the wounded man’s bleeding, and then he got him to an inn where the next level of care could be given. He enlisted the help of another person. He involved someone in the local community for long-term care while he assumed the financial responsibility. The Samaritan knew his boundaries. He knew what he could do, and what he couldn’t. But he still responded appropriately and with compassion to the needs of the person he found in the ditch.

*Jesus ends the story and says to the lawyer: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (verses 36-37)*

I wish I could have seen the look on the face of this lawyer when Jesus finished this story. Because the man had to have realized that Jesus had not only outmaneuvered him, but he had done it on such a grand scale that he looked like an absolute fool. He was the one who failed “the test” that he had set out to give Jesus.

*When Jesus asked him who was the neighbor to the hurt man, the lawyer couldn’t even say the word “Samaritan.” He said, “The one who had mercy on him.”*

The ways this lawyer wanted to classify people were not important to Jesus. This man wanted to classify the world in terms of commodities, liabilities, and entitlements. Who am I responsible to help, and who am I not responsible to help? In what situations am I accountable, and what are the situations in which I am off the hook? And Jesus points out that it is not about “Who is your neighbor?” but, instead, “Who am I towards my neighbor?”
Jesus wants to shake up the lawyer’s personal autonomy, his fear of personal risk, he wants him to ask these types of questions: **What will happen to this wounded man if I keep walking? What will happen to this man if I fail to respond with compassion? Who will take care of my neighbor, if I do not? And perhaps an even deeper question to ultimately ponder: why is it that this man has been denied safe passage in the first place?**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., exactly one year before he was assassinated, said something very similar:

“We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” (A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. by Martin Luther King, Jr.)

**True Compassion is more than flinging a coin at a beggar. Compassion. That gut-feeling that comes from the deepest place of who we are. To see someone in need and not be able to walk away.**

I am presently reading a book called “The Meeting of the Waters: 7 Global Currents that will propel the Future Church.” In this book, author Fritz Kling says: “There is a new generation of students and young adults who view service to others as a defining expression of their faith. Mercy is the heart-language of the next generation, non-Christians and Christians alike. Younger Christians are often ambivalent about the institutional church but completely committed to mercy. They are motivated not by a traditional career sequence, but by a burning sense of urgency about the needs of the world. They are looking for creative social entrepreneur programs addressing global needs.”

In other words, the next generation, our children and grandchildren, want to be the Good Samaritan. Their faith is motivated by mercy and compassion. They hear this story by Jesus, and they get it. Yes, faith is not about legalism, rules, dos and don’ts. My faith is about serving others, about putting my faith into action.

They are drawn to organizations such as these:

**Room to Read**: It opened 5000 libraries in Nepal in 8 years, and computer & language labs in Vietnam. They emphasize environmental sustainability so at least 4000 of these libraries use existing local spaces instead of new facilities.

**ATREE**: An Eastern Himalayan program that grows organic vegetables to supplement poor families’ income.

**World of Good**: This organization connects artisans in poor countries with affluent consumers in wealthy nations.
**Grassroot Soccer**: Uses local soccer stars in soccer-obsessed Africa to lead children through 20 hours of educational and trust-building activities dealing with HIV & AIDS.

The next generation wants to help the poor, do justice, and proclaim the gospel. They want to minister to physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

Debbie, a 20-something from Dublin, Ireland, found her heart touched by God when she visited India and witnessed firsthand the subhuman repressive treatment of women. Even at that age, she says, “I realized that it was women who needed to reach women in India. A man couldn’t do it, because it was just not appropriate in a country like that.”

Debbie went home and eventually studied law in Dublin at one of the country’s largest universities. She chose law because she wanted expertise in advocating justice for the poor. After graduation, passing her law exams, she returned to India where for the last 3 ½ years she has been growing a Christian organization called Freedom Firm. She lives with, works with, and is an advocate for girls rescued from brothels. Freedom Firm has rescued 90 girls and is working on dozens of additional criminal cases against perpetrators.

Debbie, and others like her, are dedicated to being agents of compassion, justice and mercy.

New York pastor Tim Keller says, “We live in a time when public esteem of the church is plummeting. For many outsiders or inquirers, the deeds of the church will be far more important than words in gaining plausibility. The leaders of most towns see “word-only” churches as costs to their community, not a value. Effective churches will be so involved in deeds of mercy and justice that outsiders will say ‘we cannot do without churches like this’.” *(The Meeting of the Waters by Fritz Kling)*

So, what kind of neighbor are you?

**Are you like the expert of the law, the priest, the Levite?** Is your relationship with God based on saying all the right words, quoting all the right Bible verses, rehearsing the right prayers, memorizing the most familiar songs, and showing up in church every Sunday just for good measure?

**Or, are you willing to take a risk and be like the Samaritan?** To base your relationship with God, and with your neighbor, on mercy and compassion. To let your gut, your deepest heart-felt feelings, propel you to take actions that may be risky—sometimes to your health, your finances, your time, and your belief system.

A professor at Harvard Divinity School gave a test to the students in his class called “Christians and Society.” The test was three hours long. It was focus of this test was “Being a Moral Christian in An Immoral Society.” Half way through the test, the professor arranged for a 10-minute break. The students were to leave the room for ten minutes, get fresh air, and then come back and take the last hour and a half of the test. The students were writing as fast and furiously as they could: writing down all their
knowledge of morality, what does it mean to be a moral person in an immoral society. But now it was break time and the students went out into the courtyard, where there was ice tea and cookies. When they went outside, the students discovered a man, all beaten up, huddled in a corner. The students looked at him, drank their tea, ate their cookies and said to themselves, “What should we do? Should we help him? But we have this test to take.” All the students went back into the classroom to finish the written part of the test. What they had failed to realize was that this man was also part of their test. The real test. And none of them responded to his need. The professor flunked them all.

So often, like these students, we--the church of Jesus Christ--flunk the tests in real life, because we are so busy with our classes inside the four walls of the church that we fail to recognize the real tests outside, on the Jericho Road.

That’s what was going on with this lawyer in our text today. He was so busy studying the law, interpreting the law, trying to live out the letter of the law that he failed to see the needs of his neighbors around him. **How many of us do the same thing week after week?** We come to church, read the Bible, sing songs about Jesus, pray to Jesus, listen to the sermon, and then walk outside to travel the Jericho Road and pass by countless people in need without showing one ounce of compassion.

What’s even more humbling, is that our children and grandchildren are modeling compassion and mercy way more effectively than you and I who are 30 years old or older. Young people are going to parts of the world, taking risks with marginalized peoples, and modeling the love of Jesus in ways that you and I have forgotten how to do.

**Remember when you used to take risks?**
**That’s what it means to travel the Jericho Road.**

To walk outside these 4 walls this morning and boldly pray, “Jesus, show me someone who has a need, and then show me how to meet that need. I’m going to walk the Jericho Road, and trust you to work out the details.”

Listen to this story one more time (Luke 10:30-37):

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said. ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”
The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him (Jesus tells us), “Go and do likewise.”

Let’s pray.


2. Ibid.


4. Ibid.


6. “On Jericho Road” by Jill Cantrini from *A Slice of Infinity*, January 16, 2012. [slice@sliceofinfinity.org](mailto:slice@slic eofinfinity.org).