

## The Parable of the “Bad Neighbors”

*Luke 10:25-37*

*Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

To tell you the truth, I struggle with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In our modern context, the phrase “Good Samaritan” often just means, someone who does a nice thing for another... Or even more graciously, someone who goes out of their way to take care of someone... A Good Samaritan today is just a Good Person.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan has been watered down and diluted to the point of Jesus simply offering sweet moral maxims that just make the world a happy place in his own little way. Jesus offers us a pleasant, easy, and unchallenging word about kindness.

This couldn't be farther from the truth.

In order to really understand what this parable meant to the first century audiences and what it means to us, then we need to look at the big picture of Jesus' life and ministry. We know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and raised in Nazareth. He preached and taught throughout Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, and even in Gentile lands like Samaria. Jesus was ultimately murdered by religious and state authorities, brutally and publicly as a means of silencing his movement of mercy, justice, and establishing the kingdom of God here on Earth. It is this final point, that Jesus was murdered for the things he said, that we need to keep in mind as we hear his parables in worship.

Jesus Christ was not just a nice dude who said nice things. Dr. Mark Vitalis Hoffman, a professor at United Lutheran Seminary, taught an ACTS course in the Virginia Synod in 2018 on the Parables, and invited the participants to look at these famous stories in a new way: understanding that these were the words that got Jesus killed.

You don't get killed for reading Chicken Soup for the Soul in public. Jesus was ultimately killed because his parables were so scandalous, so revolutionary, so detrimental to the status quo of power dynamics in his ancient world that the powerful sought to silence him.

I ask that we keep this in mind as we examine this parable today. Let's wave our traditional hearing of the “Good Samaritan” from our minds, and with new minds let's hear the Parable of “The Bad Neighbors.”

Jesus is questioned by one of his followers. One was a legal expert, who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus puts the question back into the expert's wheelhouse and asks what the Law says. The lawyer puts up a sound answer, citing both Deuteronomy and Leviticus, saying that we should “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.”

Jesus say, “Yep! You got it!”

“But wanting to justify himself,” is what our text says. Being uncomfortable with the potential broadness of that answer, being unhappy that the promise of eternal life is not tied to his identity as a Jew or his status as a legal expert or any number of other things, the lawyer asks again... “Who is my neighbor?”

Jesus tells the story of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. He’s a man with no other descriptors than “a man” so for this first audience, they’re most likely, in their minds, hearing about a Jewish man. He sets out on the road and is beset by robbers who beat him and leave him to die. A priest walks along the road, and ignores the broken man. A Levite walks along the road, and ignores the man. Based on the first answer given by the lawyer in this story, we know there’s trouble. A priest and levite would have been bound by the same law that was just quoted to Jesus. The command of their God was to love their God, and love their neighbor. They chose to walk by. Finally, a third man walks along the road: A Samaritan. This Samaritan is the one who cares for the broken man, binds his wounds, puts him on a donkey, sets him up in the inn, pays two days wages to care for him, and says he’ll come back and pay whatever more is owed.

These are the words that got Jesus killed. Jesus just highlighted the mercy and ministry of a SAMARITAN. This was unheard-of. This was horrifying. This was cause to pack your stuff up and leave in a huff in the middle of the sermon. A Samaritan? The Jews and Samaritans did NOT get along. The Samaritans didn’t acknowledge the writings of the Prophets. They built their own wrong temple on the wrong mountain and worshipped God in the wrong way. They lived in the wrong place. They were evil, they were horrible, they were unclean, (I mean, at least that’s what my family taught me) and they were the worst thing you could be because they weren’t US. These people were bad neighbors. And Jesus made this outsider the hero of his parable.

It’s easy to miss the scandal of this text two thousand years later, but the final answer to the parable is quite revealing. Jesus asks the lawyer, which man was the neighbor to the man beset by robbers. The lawyer couldn’t even say “The Samaritan”. He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Samaritan was poison on his tongue and he didn’t even want to say it. Jesus just told them a parable of a Good Neighbor, but told them that Good Neighbor was their Bad Neighbors.

By my titling of the story, you may have been inclined to think that the priest and levite were bad neighbors because they failed to do the neighborly thing. No. The central tension in this story is not in failing to show mercy and be a good neighbor, it’s in the listeners assumption that there are inherently whole nations of “bad neighbors.” This assumption is counter to the Gospel. This proclamation cost Jesus his life.

This story isn’t meant to be a comfortable moralism of “just be kind and everything will be alright.” This story is meant to upset us, discomfort us, shake us out of our complacency and indifference toward our neighbors. This story is meant to break down the walls that keep out the bad neighbors, the outsiders, those who are different or who challenge us. The promise of everlasting life is open to all people, and we realize this promise—know God’s way of eternal life here and now—by showing mercy to one another.

The point of this story is that being a neighbor is not just about kindness to those we want to like. We are called to love and show mercy to the last person on earth we want to call out neighbor. The lawyer wanted to preserve God's promises for the insider community, hold tight to these promises and know that they were good for him and his friends alone. He didn't want to find out that bad neighbors were invited too. And yet he missed the point of the ancient texts he cited. He quotes Leviticus, saying that you should love your neighbor as yourself, as a means of keeping kindness in his closed circle of good Jewish friends. And he ignores the way Leviticus continues in that same chapter to say, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

God says, Yes, you are my people, but the point is that the same mercy you've received from me, you pour out on all people. Love the immigrant, love the stranger, love your friends. It is mercy that reveals the will of God, not your zip code, your language, your skin color, your church membership, your bank account, or any other petty thing. Mercy, even for those you think are bad neighbors. That's the whole point. Being able to receive mercy, even from those you think are bad neighbors. That's the whole point. It is mercy that points us to everlasting life here and now.

We are being called, challenged, and provoked through this Gospel to see even our "bad neighbors" as neighbors. Because in God's eyes, there are no bad neighbors. That's a human assumption. There are only children of God, worthy of justice, compassion, and mercy. We are not called to love our neighbors because God says so. We are called to love our neighbors because God loves them.

We are called to love our neighbors because when we have laid broken on the Jericho Road of sin in our lives, Christ has met us in great mercy, poured out love through the cross, and renewed us in mercy for everlasting life. We are being called to mercy, Dear Church, because the Jericho Road is real. Members of our own community are being beset by those who would rob them of joy, hope, peace, safety, property, and life along the many Jericho Roads of our world. And I'll admit, it's a struggle for me to understand this fully, because as a straight, white, cis gendered male from an upper-middle class family, there are far less roads to Jericho in my life. There are far fewer folks who inherently see me as a "bad neighbor". From this place of privilege, it is my responsibility, and the responsibility of all people of faith who share this place of privilege, to listen to the cries of our siblings who are being broken every day on the Jericho Roads of indifference, intolerance, and hatred. Immigrants seeking a safe home, women still seeking equality and respect, communities of color seeking to be heard and released from the shackles of white supremacy, trans youth who seek validation of their humanity, and on and on and on. The Jericho Road claims many victims every day. Because Christ has picked each of us up off that road in our own way, we are now, with new and eternal life to our name, being sent out with mercy along that road. We are being sent to transform the road into a path of Justice and peace, not merely bandage the wounds of injustice. We are being sent to hear the cry of the oppressed and follow their lead in the work of reconciliation and renewal. But to do this, we must realize there is no such thing as a bad neighbor.

This is why we need to hear Christ's message genuinely and urgently today. We need to move with haste into this communal understanding of mercy. We don't have time to spare in reaching the point where we realize, as God's people, there are no Bad Neighbors. Lives are being lost and families being torn apart as people of faith debate whether our neighbors are worth of mercy. There is no one unworthy of Christ's mercy, the same mercy with which we have each been washed and fed.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is meant to challenge us, guide us, keep us honest in loving those who we least want to love. It's meant to remind us of Christ's mercy for us, even when we've done nothing to deserve it. It's meant to give us new eyes to see our world, realizing that there are those who refuse to act neighborly, but there is no one who is inherently a bad neighbor in the merciful reign of God. Amen.