

How Then Shall We Live? : Neighborly Grace
By Jason Huff
Deuteronomy 24:10-15,17-22, Psalm 10:12-18, Luke 10:25-37

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from Luke 10:25-37. Listen now to God's Word. "On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: "'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.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "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, "Go and do likewise.""

Over Memorial Day weekend, a despondent man walked into the chilly waters of the San Francisco Bay. Concerned onlookers called local authorities. They showed up, but they did nothing. They called the Coast Guard, who couldn't reach the man because the water was too shallow. The man eventually lost consciousness and drowned in front of 75 witnesses. Only after the man's death did one onlooker retrieve the man's body.

We can't be terribly hard on the first responders or the crowd. It turns out that funding for water rescues had been cut. The man was 300 pounds and could have overcome a rescuer, especially since he was suicidal and possibly dangerous. The water's temperature could have caused hypothermia. There are plenty of reasons why no one went out to try and save the man.

And yet, I am still haunted. What if that were one of my boys out there twenty years from now, alone, downcast, beat down by circumstances and thinking there's no way out? Heaven forbid, but what if it was? I pray that somebody would be a lifeline to them. And then I wonder...would I be willing to sacrifice myself, to put my life on the line, for someone else? Would I put my life on the line to live out my faith?

Those are the kind of questions Jesus poses to us in today's main passage. For the past few weeks, we've been looking at the foundations of morality in Scripture, and that's what Jesus addresses here. He shows us that morality isn't always about what you don't do but what you are willing to do for others.

In our first passage today, we heard how the Old Testament Law called on the people of Israel to avoid taking advantage of anyone. They were good laws, laws that respected the honor and dignity of every person, laws against oppressing people and withholding justice. There were laws designed to take care of the less fortunate, ordering the Israelites not to glean fields or grapevines a second time but to leave what gets missed for the poor and struggling. But there's something still missing in the Law of Moses – something that can't really be mandated by any law – and that's active compassion. Laws tell you what's not allowed, what you can't do, and the Old Testament Law was really good at establishing rules that told the Israelites things they were forbidden to do that wound up helping the less fortunate. But the Law generally didn't *make* the Israelites do much for their neighbors. The commands that ordered Israelites to act, to do something specific, they often ignored. Getting somebody not to do something bad is one thing; getting them to actively doing something good is another thing entirely.

That's where Jesus' parable came in. The Law said to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Those were active commands, commands that told the Israelites, "this is what you should do." Jesus confirms that doing these things is the key to inheriting eternal life. But there's a problem: the Bible left out the specifics. The Scripture didn't say *how* to love your neighbor or *who* your neighbor is, just to *do* it. The expert wanted to be able to make a checklist so he could *prove* he'd followed the law. So he asked Jesus to spell out for him exactly who his neighbor is. He wanted Jesus to say, "Your fellow Israelites," or maybe "the families that live within a mile of your home." After all, the legal experts argued about such things. They wanted to know who their neighbors were so they knew where their responsibilities ended. They wanted to be able to classify people into two categories: neighbor and "not-neighbor."

Jesus doesn't play that game. Instead, his illustration cuts through all the nonsense. Jesus' story is on a route all His hearers would know – the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, a place full of caves and hiding places for bandits. And sure enough, a man is beaten, robbed, stripped, and left for dead. Then Jesus puts two religious guys on the same road, a priest and a Levite. They are among the only people in the whole Israelite community permitted to make sacrifices and work in the temple. You couldn't get more spiritual than these two. And likely, these guys were faithful believers. They knew the one true God and served Him in Jerusalem. They likely could tell you a lot about the Scripture and the Law of Moses. They are the ancient equivalent of a pastor and a seminary professor. But they pass by on the other side of the road.

If we're fair to them, we have to admit we get it. They were busy. They had a lot of work to do and didn't have the time to deal with this guy. There was no reason to believe the bandits weren't still there. Even worse, this guy could have been part of a setup, made to look beat up so a passerby might be distracted when they jumped him. And other than "love your neighbor as yourself," there's nothing specifically in the Law that would make them stop and take care of this man on the side of the road. My guess is that when they saw him, they simply wanted to get as far away as possible, back to somewhere safe. We sympathize with that.

Then comes the kicker. Jesus introduces a Samaritan into the mix. The Samaritans were the descendents of the wicked northern kingdom of Israel that fell apart in 722 BC. When their ancestors came back to the region out of exile, they intermarried with the local pagans and brought with them a deformed, corrupted form of the Old Testament. Both the Jews and Samaritans worshipped YHWH, but they had different practices, different places of worship, and each side thought the other was wrong. As far as Jesus' audience was concerned, you couldn't get any lower than a Samaritan.

And so it comes as a shock that this Samaritan not only pities the man, he shows him genuine compassion. He risks himself in order to help this man on the road. He puts the man on his donkey, slowing his own journey down, leaving him all the more vulnerable to bandits. He uses oil and wine on the wounds, which were not inexpensive. He delays his own plans to take the man to an inn where he cares for him. The next day, the Samaritan gives the innkeeper two days wages, enough to pay for the man to stay at the inn over three weeks, and says, "When I come back, I'll pay the rest of the tab for his care."

Now Jesus doesn't tell the expert in the Law, "Go become a Samaritan." The Samaritans had strange religious beliefs; their knowledge of God was incomplete. But here's what Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." Go and be a neighbor to the people you meet, the people you see in need. Follow the Samaritan's example. Put what you believe into practice.

There are two things I want us to pull out of this passage today that are really important. And the first one is this: there's no way we can love our neighbor like this on our own, which is why we so desperately need Jesus. When the expert in the law quotes the passage about loving God with all you are and loving your neighbor as yourself, Jesus said, "Do this and you will inherit eternal life." At first, it appears that He is teaching that works can in fact get us into heaven. But that's not what Jesus is getting at. Jesus shows through the parable that we do not love our neighbors as ourselves. The Jews may have practiced neighborliness by not oppressing the weak according to the letter of the Law, but they weren't helping strangers on the street. They hated the Samaritans, they hated the Romans, they hated the Gentiles...all people they had to come in contact with on a regular basis. They tolerated them, barely, but they did not show love to them. Jesus' story showed the contrast between a faith held only in the mind and a faith put into practice, and He showed how much we lack.

In our modern culture, we don't even know our neighbors, let alone love them! The incident in San Francisco last week is tragic but not uncommon. Even among those of us who believe in Jesus, we would rather not get involved. It's too messy, too dangerous, too burdensome. We cannot live this command out on our own. We need Jesus' salvation because it goes against our nature to be anything but selfish. We need God's forgiveness because we do not love our neighbors as ourselves; we do not give up our comforts for them. We need Jesus to wash us clean from our sin and selfishness because we're doomed if He doesn't. We truly need God to save us from ourselves.

But here's the great news that's the second lesson of this passage I see: with God's forgiveness and the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we can become those who go and do likewise. It's not because we must earn our salvation, but because this is the way God wants us to act, the way He calls us to live. If the Holy Spirit lives in those who believe, then we simply need to start listening to what He urges and do it.

Everybody knows what a Good Samaritan is. It's so rare that a Good Samaritan makes news. But dream with me for a minute. What if being a Good Samaritan was not the exception but the norm? What if there weren't news stories about Good Samaritans because it was simply the way life was? What would it be like if the phrase "Good Samaritan" fell out of use and the word "Christian" described the same concept because Christians were so well known for helping those in need? Faithful followers helping the world know Christ by helping those around them – that's the vision of the New Testament.

I never gave it much thought while I was in high school, but the youth group at our church regularly got involved in the lives of others. One week, we'd play with the kids down at the womens' shelter so they could get the help they needed. Another week, we'd sing and talk with the residents of a nursing home. We'd go to Appalachia in the summer and put on VBS – and because there wasn't a church there, it was sometimes the only time the people there heard the good news of Christ. We had a yearly trip to Mexico to distribute bibles and build homes. Many of us served as camp counselors. What strikes me about it was that it wasn't anything special. It was simply considered normal. It was presented as the way Christians live, a natural part of having faith, as natural as going to church or Bible study or youth group. When I went to a Christian college, it was much the same. Most of us naturally became part of something where we helped the stranger in our midst.

It wasn't until later that I learned this was not the expectation of most people who came to church on Sunday mornings. Most adults see the church as an entity, an enterprise that must be run and managed. We may volunteer a couple hours a month to help the gears turn; we give some money to make sure that salaries are paid and the heat is on. Sometimes, the deacons and the pastor are the ones seen as doing the "job" of ministry, of taking care of the congregation and occasionally helping somebody on the outside. We like the *idea* of helping, but we don't always get involved in the *business* of helping, especially when it's uncomfortable or there is risk involved or it means we have to get involved with people we don't really like very much.

That grows out of what we've been taught as an institutional church. For generations, the old paradigm has been, "build a church, offer services and classes, and people will come." But that paradigm no longer works. People are no longer coming. People don't see the need and they don't have the time. As Catha was passing by the baseball diamonds on Groesbeck on her way to church last Sunday, she told me how the fields and parking lots were full. Most people are filling the void they feel with activities that keep them distracted, jobs and sports and hobbies that they try to assign meaning. Their first impulse is not to say, "I could find what I'm missing in my life at the local church." Their first impulse is to deaden what they feel by keeping busy. But our world is hurting, full of people emotionally bloodied and half-dead by the side of the road, people who don't even know that it's the church where they can find healing, people who wouldn't have the strength to come even if perhaps they did.

It's our moral responsibility to act as Jesus taught, to go and do like the Samaritan did, to bind up their wounds and invite them into a relationship with the living God who can heal them in every single way. The ethics that Jesus taught do not give us the option of sitting on the sidelines. But that said, God presents all sorts of ways to get involved, to get into the game. I'm so happy the Vosburgs were here this morning and could share with us a bit of what they are doing. I appreciate that the work they will be doing will help educate teachers, people they've never met who will be able to train their brothers and sisters in their home countries about the love of Christ. Technology may have changed the methods of doing missions work, but it's still about sharing the love of Christ with those who do not yet know Him. Thinking "outside the box" will help their work reach thousands around the world. I'm also proud of our church – proud of those who have served through mission trips with Habitat, proud of those who served at the memorial service yesterday, those who've helped through Angel Food. But that has to be the regular way we think – helping our neighbors is simply what we do.

And I encourage us to start thinking outside the box too. How can we move past the walls of our building to reach the world around us? Maybe we should simply not have a worship service one Sunday and go out to the ballfields with sodas and water in hand to share with them the love of Christ! Maybe it's going to other community events. Maybe it's going door to door. Maybe it's simply paying attention to what's going on with our neighbors and offering to help. Maybe it's organizing the old block parties of yesterday and getting to know the people who live near us. Maybe it's volunteering at a tutoring program – maybe at a school, maybe at a prison, who knows? Maybe it's spending some time helping down at the Hope Center, our new partner in ministry. There are countless ways we can show neighborly grace to those in our communities. What way might God be leading you?

And let's remember too that it can go beyond the area in which we live. I never thought about it much, but not a single youth group project we did specifically helped our church in a tangible way. The women at the shelter were too far away to come to our church, let alone the folks in Kentucky or Mexico. The friends we made at the nursing home were too frail to attend and had no money to give. There was no financial benefit, no bigger membership, nothing like that. It was simply about expanding the Kingdom of God and showing His love to all.

And you know what? Our first call is not to expand the membership rolls or to build a bigger and better building, as nice as those things might be. Our first call from Jesus comes from Matthew 28, where He says, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Our main moral imperative, then, is to be Good Samaritans, to help those who can't help themselves and can't help us, to show them the way of discipleship so that they too might become a part of God's Kingdom.

There are a million ways to do it – a million ways to show a stranger in your midst the love of God and to make them a disciple of Jesus. What's yours going to be?