

# The Parable of the Good

## Samaritan

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Luke 10:25-37

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**Luke 10:25** Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall 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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

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I've preached on the parable of the Good Samaritan many times and you've probably heard many sermons on it. The common theme of my sermons is that Good Samaritan is an oxymoron because for a Jew there could not be a **Good** Samaritan. The point of the parable is to show us that even an unlikely person can be the neighbor to us.

This seems particularly important today after the events in Dallas, Minnesota and Baton Rouge this week and Orlando several weeks ago. Do we take seriously that we are all neighbors or are there distinctions that make some of us more neighbors than others? To put it baldly, can white people be neighbors to black people or is there some intrinsic difference that forces white people to assert that white lives matter, like this was ever in doubt? Is there some intrinsic injustice in a black president pointing out to the rest of us that violence happens to people of color at an outrageous rate, or is he just dividing the country by pointing out the obvious?

This morning I want to focus on how important it is to us to treat others as our neighbors if we want to be Christian. As Richard Rohr reminded us in his meditations this week, Christianity is not defined by my accepting Jesus Christ as My Lord and Savior but by **Our** accepting Jesus Christ as **Our** Lord and Savior. Christianity is all about community. It is misused when it becomes the vehicle for controlling people, or thought, or behavior. It is used correctly when it teaches us to love each other.

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Because I've preached on this parable so many times I decided to do research into what the New Testament says about the Samaritans.

The end result is that outside of Luke-Acts, the NT doesn't say much about them. Only Luke shows any real interest in them and they are mentioned in Luke 9:52 (a village that doesn't receive Jesus); 10:33 (present passage); 17:16 (healed leper who thanks Jesus); Acts 1:8 (listed as an area to evangelize); 8:25 (evangelizing the Samaritans); 9:31 (church in Samaria); 15:3 (interim stop on way to Jerusalem).

Luke is the only NT writer to have a positive understanding of the Samaritans. He maintains that they are important because they too have received the Gospel of Christ. For Luke, Samaritans are a sect of Judaism. For Luke's contemporary Jews, Samaritans were apostates who worshiped Yahweh in a heretical manner. For the Samaritans the Judeans (Jews) were the heretics and the true site of worship of Yahweh was Mt. Gerizim (near modern day Nablus) not Jerusalem. Samaritans continue to this day. They are few in number. They are descendants (or at least say they are descendants) of the Israelites (Northern Kingdom) and are not Jews (Southern Kingdom). They live in the West Bank.

Luke is talking about the need to see as neighbor, people who are very strange to us and maybe even threatening to us. He is talking about the need to be secure in who we are. Christianity really takes hold when we are secure in who we are as Christians.

Let me ask you a question and I want you to vote your answer by raising your hands. The fastest growing religion in the world today is:

1. Buddhism
2. Islam
3. Hinduism
4. Christianity

Buddhism gets a lot of press in the US and has some very vocal and prominent converts, but it is not a growing religion worldwide.

Hinduism is the dominant religion of the world's largest democracy, but it is not growing worldwide.

Islam gets coverage and sounds like it is growing by leaps and bounds. It strikes fear in our hearts and we wonder if someday our children will be Muslim. It is growing, but its growth is negligible when compared to Christianity.

Why is Christianity growing at a huge rate today? Precisely because people are hearing a Gospel that sets them free and promises them life. It is not growing because of the Prosperity Gospel or because of strict moral codes but because all are equally loved.

Christianity grows because of the promise it makes to love everyone unconditionally. This is part of the parable of the Good Samaritan: love your neighbor. The poor of the 3<sup>rd</sup> world comprehend this in a way that the wealthy do not. The center of the Anglican Communion may officially be Canterbury but in terms of the number of practicing Episcopalians/Anglicans it is Africa. We are growing as a denomination and as a faith (Christianity) at a huge rate in Africa. Christianity is the answer for people who feel downtrodden. We may read about the Islam/Christian riots in African countries but in fact Africans are converting to Christianity at an increasing rate. They embrace the Christian message that we are all neighbors and that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer

slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Where is Christianity shrinking? Europe and the USA. Christianity seems not to have a message to Europeans and many Americans. Liberal Christianity has so relativized the message that it has become pointless. There is no discernable vision behind liberal European and American Christianity and it is now a cultural relic without life. Churches in the US, UK and Western Europe are struggling to be relevant as more than museums of a time gone by.

Now I'm often classified as a liberal so I want to hasten to add that I prefer to be classified as a radical because I think that radical Christianity, that is looking at the roots of Christianity—from the meaning of radical as looking at the roots—to be the only way to maintain Christianity in the modern world. Radical Christianity means that I have to think of new ways to love my neighbor, for instance, if we are to take today's gospel seriously.

There's not much call for Radical Christianity in the U.S. today. We hear that denominations that are growing are consistently conservative and stand for traditional values. Further study shows that this is an oversimplification. As is true in any activity, organizations, even Christian ones, grow because of vision and leadership. Increasingly liberal churches have given up their vision because they want to seem liberal and PC and having given up vision they have nothing to exercise leadership for. One need not be a democrat to be a liberal Christian. Liberal Christianity is characterized by a general feeling that faith is nice but not demanding of a change in my behavior. One can be very conservative politically and still be a liberal Christian if one sees Christianity as comforting like a hot water bottle comforts or protective like a rabbit's foot protects or even if one sees Christianity as the guardian of moral standards. Liberal Christianity frequently tells us that my way of being is superior to the others' ways of being. Liberal Christianity supports my culture against other cultures. On the other hand radical Christianity sees Christianity as being very demanding. The bible and its precepts are to be taken seriously. We don't need to take the bible literally to take it seriously. I can believe that God created the world without believing that he did it in 7 days. I can believe that Mary was the mother of God (Θεοτόκος) without believing the literal virgin birth. I can believe in the resurrection without the necessity of the empty tomb. I can live as if I am the image of God and realize the responsibility that gives me if I take the creation story seriously. I can regard anyone as my neighbor if I am secure in my identity as a Christian. Christianity thrives where it has vision and stands for a way to act. Christianity dies where it relativizes and apologizes for the culture it lives in.

For instance Christianity today is dying in the rural South. Increasingly it is abandoned by poor, white, single mothers who lack education and community and see only judgment in the church.<sup>2</sup> Their faith is as much as anything in being White because that means that they might not be much but they are more than non-whites.

The parable the lawyer might have expected of the Good Samaritan would have the man who was beaten neglected by all three of the passersby. Each had apparently good and sufficient reason to walk on by. Only the Samaritan saw his

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 3:28

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam & David L. Campbell: [American Grace](#).

neighbor in the victim. This makes the parable threatening to Jews or to our contemporary whites.

This week we've demonstrated that for minority citizens some of us with power believe that they are not our neighbors. I don't know how to respond to Dallas except perhaps that Violence begets Violence.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus is asking us to imagine who our neighbor is and then act on that imagination. Jesus in doing this was challenging his audience who believed that neighbors were people like me. He is saying instead that neighbors mean all of humanity, even apostate Samaritans.

Given the events of this past week I must comment that we, speaking of white Christians, have not acted as if blacks are our neighbors. The news has been full of statistics on the targeting of blacks, and especially black men, for harsh policing. My wife and I saw the movie, *Free State of Jones*, this week and I highly recommend it. It has a discouraging message for today. We are not treating blacks noticeably better than they were treated in Mississippi during Reconstruction. We are more polite and quiet about our discrimination than they were then, of course. We do not take the challenge to treat everyone as our neighbor seriously. We are afraid of that which is different.

I invite you this morning, after hearing a sermon full of loosely linked ideas about the contrast of radical Christianity to liberal Christianity, to examine what you are looking for from your practice of Christianity and work to take the church more seriously. I'm not telling you that you don't already take it seriously, I don't know you well enough to comment on that, but I do believe that all of us could take the faith we profess more seriously.

Only Luke tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and only Luke challenges his audience to see the world through different eyes. Christianity has long opened the eyes of the black church because they know they are powerless against a majority culture that doesn't accept them as neighbors. May Christianity open the eyes of our nation, finally after much discrimination, so that we will regard all of us as neighbors.