

More than Obedience

Passage: Luke 10:25-37 | From the series: Luke

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Ruby Bridges, an African American girl, was living in New Orleans in 1960 when federal courts ordered the desegregation of public schools. At the age of six, she began attending Frantz Elementary School, but every day she had to walk through a mob of angry protesters, some of whom threatened to kill her. The local police refused to protect her, so federal marshals walked her to school.

Yes, Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28). Yes, but what about a six-year-old girl who is being abused by a mob of racists?

Today we consider mercy, which Jesus plants in one of his best-known parables. Although many of Jesus’ parables find their way into two or even three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—this parable only appears in Luke.

A question for a question

Luke 10:25-28:

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And 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 answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

The question of the lawyer, an expert in the Mosaic Law, concerns who will be part of the new and final age, who will be among the resurrection of the righteous, who are members of God’s covenant people? The lawyer, who wants to test Jesus, not learn from him, presumably believes he will inherit eternal life. Nevertheless, he asks what he must do to inherit eternal life—only to smoke Jesus out.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus has already hinted that eternal life has something to do with him: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Luke 10:22). In the gospel of John, Jesus says that “whoever believes” in him has eternal life and, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 3:16, 6:47, 17:3).

What one believes, however, is not separate from what one does. What one does is based on what one believes. What one does therefore indicates what one believes. What does the expert in the law think the law says?

The lawyer answers by combining Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:8: Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor. Jesus himself identifies these as the greatest commandments (Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31).

The lawyer knows the answer to his own question. He was trying to smoke Jesus out; but Jesus has smoked him out, making it evident that the lawyer asked the question disingenuously.

If the lawyer has answered “correctly,” can he “do this”? Can he love God with his whole being and his neighbor as himself? No, he can’t. No one can, except for the man that the lawyer is testing. Jesus answers a lawyer’s question with a lawyer’s answer—to show him he needs more than obedience to the law.

Like the lawyer, though we are called to obedience, we need more than obedience. We need compassion and mercy for our disobedience, for our failure to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. As Jesus continues to interact with the lawyer, we get compassion and mercy.

And what of the lawyer? He doubles down.

Another question

Luke 10:29:

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In response, the lawyer asks a second question—again, not to learn from Jesus. This time, he desires to justify himself and his views and presumably to expose Jesus and his views. If he were sincere, the lawyer might have asked something like, “How do I love God with my whole being and how do I love my neighbor as myself?” Instead, the lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Implicit in the question is that there are such persons as non-neighbors: There are certain kinds of people he doesn’t have to love.

We who have read this far in the gospel of Luke already know what Jesus thinks from the Sermon on the Plain: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28). Jesus thinks even enemies are neighbors! Perhaps the lawyer has gotten wind of Jesus’ teaching.

Forget about trying to justify yourself before Jesus. You can never hope to win. In fact, you always can hope to lose, because if you lose, you win: You can open yourself to his compassion and mercy.

Jesus answered the lawyer’s first question with a question. How will he answer the second question?

A man, a priest, and a Levite

Luke 10:30-32:

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, 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."

If Jesus answered the lawyer's first question with a question about the law, we might have expected him to also answer his second question with a question about the law. After all, the law had a few things to say about treatment of others (Deuteronomy 10:19, Leviticus 19:33-34). Instead, Jesus answers with a parable.

The journey from Jerusalem to Jericho was seventeen miles, descending some 3,425 feet. It was known for its danger because the road ran through areas of desert and caves where robbers hid.

We know nothing more about the man who was attacked other than his gender. Significantly, Jesus tells us nothing about his ethnicity or nationality—or whether he is friend or foe. Luke, however, creates some correspondence between the lawyer and the man. Literally, a "certain" lawyer tested Jesus; literally, a "certain" man was attacked.

The robbers left the man half-dead, fighting for his life. But there was hope, because as "chance" would have it, a priest was traveling on the same road. Priests were responsible for the main duties in the temple in Jerusalem. Literally, a "certain" priest was going down the road. Even though the priest saw the man, he continued on his way, even passing by on the other side of the road.

Still, there was hope for the man, because along came a Levite. Levites were responsible for lesser temple duties. Maybe the Levite was not so high and mighty as the priest. Alas, though the Levite also saw the man, he passed by on the other side, following in the footsteps of his superior.

Jesus has established a hierarchical pattern, from the greater Jew to the lesser Jew. If another traveler makes an appearance, we expect him to be something along the lines of a Jewish layperson. Is that who we get?

A man and a Samaritan

Luke 10:33-35:

"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'"

Do we get a Jewish layperson? No, we get a Samaritan. Literally, we get a “certain” Samaritan, just like the “certain” lawyer who approached Jesus in real life, just like the “certain” man who was robbed in the story, and just like a “certain” priest passed by in the story.

Jews and Samaritans shunned each other, going all the way back to the north-south split in the kingdom of Israel after the reign of Solomon, after which Samaritans intermarried with foreigners. We have already seen a Samaritan village refuse to receive Jesus, a Jew, whereupon two of his disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume the people of the village (Luke 9:53-56). Jews had “no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9). Many Jews considered Samaritans heretics, outcasts, and political enemies.

Just like the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan “saw” the man. We don’t know what the priest and the Levite felt, only what they did. But Jesus tells the lawyer that the Samaritan “had compassion.” What the Samaritan saw generated compassion. His compassion then motivated multiple acts of mercy.

Oil was used to sooth wounds, and wine was used as a disinfectant. Whereas the robbers stole from the man, so that he would have had no resources to provide for his care, the Samaritan provides for the man’s care. Two denarii would have covered about three weeks of expenses. And if that weren’t enough, the Samaritan told the innkeeper that he would cover any other expenses.

The Samaritan became the paramedic, the ambulance driver, the hospital receptionist, and the insurance company.

Recently, Jesus was rejected by a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-56). Now, he uses a Samaritan in a parable and makes him the hero. What’s he doing? He’s modeling mercy.

So the story ends. Ah, but Jesus does in fact have a question for the lawyer. Indeed, just as he answered the lawyer’s first question with a question, he answers the lawyer’s second question with a question—but not until after telling his little story.

Yet another question

Luke 10:36-37:

“Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

The lawyer had asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus’ question for the lawyer, though, is slightly different. He asks, “Which of these three . . . proved to be a neighbor . . . ?”

The lawyer acknowledges the obvious. The two representatives of official Judaism, whom the lawyer would identify with, did not prove to be neighbors. Instead, the Samaritan (though the lawyer does not bring himself to use the word “Samaritan”), who “showed him mercy,” proved to be a neighbor.

Implicit in Jesus' question is the answer to the lawyer's question. The lawyer correctly identifies the Samaritan as the one who proved to be a "neighbor." So, yes, the Samaritan is the lawyer's neighbor. Yes, the lawyer should love Samaritans; he should love his enemies. But there's more to it than that.

The lawyer first asked what he must "do" to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to "do this": love God with his whole being and his neighbor as himself. Finally, Jesus tells the lawyer to "do likewise." Like whom? Not like the priest, who passed by the half-dead man on the other side of the road. Not like the Levite, who "likewise" passed by the man.

Like the . . . Samaritan? Yes, the Jewish expert in the Jewish law should do what the Samaritan did. The Jew should not be like his fellow Jews in the parable but like a Samaritan. But there's even more to it than that.

If the "certain" man who is left for dead in the parable ends up being a "certain" lawyer in real life—the lawyer in the narrative—that lawyer may be overlooked by a "certain" Jewish priest, not to mention a Jewish Levite, and instead be rescued by a "certain" Samaritan. Can the lawyer recognize the Samaritan as his neighbor? If he can't, he might be left for dead on the side of the road. Will he let the compassionate and merciful Samaritan rescue him?

Receive mercy

We need more than obedience. We need compassion and mercy for our disobedience, for our failure to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. In the story, we get compassion and mercy. We get it from a certain Samaritan.

Who are you? You are a certain man (or a certain woman), beaten, robbed, and left for dead on the side of the road. And who is the Samaritan? He is Jesus, whose Jewish opponents accused him of being a demon-possessed Samaritan (John 8:48). Jesus is making his way from Jerusalem, where he died for the sins of the world, to Jericho and beyond, looking for all the wounded along the way. Indeed, Jesus says later in Luke, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Others have seen you and passed by on the other side. But Jesus comes to you, sees you, and feels compassion for you. He binds your wounds and heals your wounds and takes care of you. He pays for your well-being not with two denarii but with his life. He shows you mercy.

Indeed, in the gospel of Luke, we see both the compassion of Jesus and the mercy of Jesus (Luke 7:13, 15:20, 17:13, 18:38). He does all this, even though you were an enemy of God (Romans 5:6-11).

When I was searching for healing almost thirty years ago, not long after starting as a pastor at PBC, I felt the Lord say to me, "You will find healing in my cross." Indeed, I have found healing in his cross, and I continue to seek—and find—healing in his cross. I need mercy. I need to receive mercy.

Show mercy

If you're a certain man left for dead on the side of the road and Jesus comes to you, sees you, feels compassion for you, and shows you mercy, now what? What happens to your heart? Having been shown compassion, do you feel compassion? Having been shown mercy, do you extend mercy?

In one of his parables, Jesus told a parable about a servant whose debt was forgiven by the king but then turned around and didn't forgive the debt of a fellow servant. The king then told the servant, "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matthew 18:33). Yes: If God has mercy on us, shouldn't we have mercy on others?

Don't ask, "Who is my neighbor?" Instead, be a neighbor. To whom? To a "certain" man (or woman) because you were a "certain" man (or woman). The certain man is everyman, and everyman could even be your enemy.

Earlier in the gospel of Luke, a woman described as a "sinner" shows love for Jesus in contrast to a Pharisee, who stands aloof. Jesus tells the Pharisee that the woman "loved much" because her many sins had been forgiven, adding, "But he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:36-50) Have we been forgiven for much or for little? If we've been forgiven for much—rather, if we know we've been forgiven for much—then compassion will grow in us and mercy will flow from us.

You can't put it more succinctly than the apostle John: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

In view of Christ's love for him and the other apostles, the apostle Paul says of himself and the other apostles, "For the love of Christ controls us" (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Even the bad people

In 1960, Robert Coles, a psychiatrist and Harvard Medical School professor, was studying stress and decided to study Ruby Bridges, the six-year-old girl who was abused daily by a mob of protestors.

Coles was amazed to find no signs of stress in the girl. He learned from Ruby's teacher that she prayed for her tormentors every night before she went to sleep.

Coles writes:

I asked Ruby, after a while, about her prayers—first telling her what I'd heard from the teacher. Ruby was cheerful and matter-of-fact, if terse, in her reply: "Yes, I do pray for them." I wondered why. She said only, "Because." I waited for more, but to no effect. I started over, told her I was curious about why she would want to pray for people who were being so unswervingly nasty to her. "I go to church," she told me, "every Sunday, and we're told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do." She had no more to say on that

score. [Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 20-23.]

"[A]nd a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). Jesus: "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Luke 18:17).

My wife Karen took a class from Coles some twenty-five years after his encounter with Ruby Bridges. Karen said he was still talking about Ruby. The little girl made quite an impression on him.

In an interview earlier this year, Ruby Bridges, now seventy-one, said, "Out of all the commandments, if you could only keep one, the one you should keep is love thy neighbor." And her faith? "As long as we keep him [the Lord] first, we will continue to rise." Preach it, Ruby! Preach it as only you can, considering what you've been through.

Learn mercy

To receive mercy and show mercy, learn mercy. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13) Go and learn mercy.

Can you learn from an opponent, even from an enemy? Yes, you can. Jesus told the parable to the lawyer not least so that the lawyer could learn from the Samaritan. We can learn about mercy from an opponent or even an enemy: about receiving mercy, about showing mercy.

Desmond Doss was a medic in the U.S Army during World War II. However, he was a conscientious objector and refused to carry a weapon. Many soldiers in his unit ridiculed him, calling him a coward. One man in the barracks warned him, "Doss, as soon as we get into combat, I'll make sure you won't come back alive."

Doss's commanding officers, who viewed him as a liability, tried to intimidate him and declared him mentally unfit for duty. They attempted to court-martial him for refusing to carry a gun.

During the battle of Okinawa, when his unit was forced to retreat under enemy fire, Doss stayed on top of Hacksaw Ridge and repeatedly ran into the heat of battle to treat fallen comrades and carry them back to safety.

Now, if you were among the wounded, and the medic you ridiculed is risking his life to save you, do you refuse his help? Of course not. Who proved to be a neighbor to those men? Desmond Doss saved more than seventy-five men at Hacksaw Ridge, including many soldiers who had ridiculed him for refusing to carry a weapon.

Capt. Jack Glover, who tried to remove Doss from his command for his refusal to carry a rifle, revised his opinion of Doss after being saved by the medic: "Even though I said those things to him in regard to carrying a rifle, [that] he would never be by my damn side at all unless he had a rifle, but then, in the long run, finding out that he was one of the bravest persons alive, and then to have him end up saving my life was the irony of the whole thing."

To say the least, those who ridiculed Doss and were saved by Doss learned from him.

How do you read it?

Receive mercy. Show mercy. Learn mercy.

Many of the scenes in the gospel of Luke are open-ended. They are stories without endings. Such is the case with the scene of Jesus and the lawyer, with features the parable of the Samaritan.

Did the lawyer, who started out testing Jesus, learn from Jesus? We don't know, do we?

How about us? Having read the narrative and the parable within the narrative, how do you read it?

Which of these three—the priest, the Levite, and Samaritan—proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? The one who showed him mercy? Yes, the one who showed mercy: the Samaritan. Go and do likewise.