

The Motive for Ministry
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Luke 10:25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 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.” 28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 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. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 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. 35 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.’

36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

WHAT IS MY MOTIVATION?

Somewhere I saw a TV show about the training of actors. And one of the first questions the young actors were taught to ask is:

“What is the motivation of this character I am going to play?”

The most effective actors take that question very seriously and it shows, not only in what they say but also in what they do nonverbally. Knowing the motivation allows them to sort of enter the world of their character. And it makes them a better actor.

Asking about motivation is not only crucial to being a good actor. It’s also important in understanding the Bible. Take today’s lesson for example. Motivation plays a big role in this story so let’s look at our lesson for today from that angle.

Why do the people in the story do what they do? What is their motivation? And what does this teach us about faith?

TESTING JESUS

First, let's talk about the lawyer. The lawyer asks Jesus a question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now this guy is not like the lawyers we see on TV arguing that infamous case in Sanford. This man is an expert in Jewish law. He knows the law of God. And he also knows how that law has been interpreted down through the years.

He's an expert on God's law. But, he's not so sure about Jesus.

"Does this itinerant preacher really know what he is talking about?" In order to find out he asks Jesus a question in order to "test" him.

That's the motivation of the lawyer. He wants to test Jesus. He wants to see if Jesus knows the Scriptures. So he asks him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But, Jesus turns the table on this lawyer. Jesus replies, "That's a good question. Using your understanding of the law, tell me ...what does the law say about this?"

The lawyer knows the answer of course. That's his business. He gives an answer that Jesus also gave on another occasion. The lawyer says,

"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."

TESTING THE LAWYER

Jesus says, "Good job. You've given the right answer. *Do this*, and you shall live."

There's a reason that Jesus wants the lawyer to state this common summary of the law. Jesus knows that the lawyer has an imperfect understanding of the faith by the way he asked his question.

The lawyer is motivated by a desire to test Jesus. And Jesus is motivated by a desire to test the lawyer.

The lawyer asked, "What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?" The key word is "inherit".

The lawyer knew that he was a part of God's chosen people. And his question implies, at least in part, that salvation was his birthright. Salvation was his inheritance.

Lest we be too critical of the lawyer, there are many Christians who have the same misunderstanding. We sometimes misinterpret the doctrine of salvation by grace as a license to live any old way.

"God will forgive me. He's in the forgiving business."

Some people think that's all there is too it. We are Christians because we know the right words and say the right thing.

But, salvation is more than just saying the right words.

I think Jesus would tell us,

“Yes, you are saved by grace. But, you have not been saved so that you can get comfortable with your sins. You have been saved from you sins.

Salvation is not an inheritance. Salvation is a call to discipleship.”

SELF-JUSTIFICATION

When the lawyer answered Jesus' question and stated the summary of the law that he knew so well it was as if he was hearing that familiar law for the first time.

Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.” But, the lawyer knew that he had not put this law into practice. He had not loved his neighbor as he loved himself.

And so at this point in the story the lawyer's motivation changes. He's no longer motivated by a desire to test Jesus. Now he is motivated by a desire to justify himself. So, the lawyer asks a technical question,

“And who is my neighbor?”

We can understand that question. We can't be all things to all people.

So, we narrow our focus.

Neighbors are just those people who live next door. Neighbors are people who think like me. Neighbors are just those people who share my faith.

All of us draw a line when it comes to neighbors. I accidentally learned something as I was writing this sermon. I clicked on the Thesaurus and do you know what it had as a word to replace neighbor?

It gave the word “national” or “fellow citizen”.

And the opposite of the word neighbor or the antonym was the word “foreigner.”

Notice how well that fits with the answer Jesus gave. Jesus didn't give a technical answer to the lawyer's technical question.

Instead, Jesus told a story about a foreigner, an enemy who acted like he was a neighbor.

A GOOD SAMARITAN?

Now we know the story. Some of us can almost quote it word for word. But, I wonder if, when it comes to this story, we aren't a lot like the lawyer. We think we know what this story means, but maybe there's more to this story than we have imagined.

A recent book was entitled, "Over Hearing the Gospel." And the thesis of that book is that we have heard some stories in the Bible so much that we don't really hear them any more. We think that we already know what those stories mean.

That's especially true of this story. What do we usually call this parable or example story? We call it the parable of the "Good Samaritan."

And this title has become a part of common speech. A serviceman recently jumped onto the subway tracks to save a man whose wheelchair had tipped into those tracks. What did they call him? They called him a Good Samaritan.

And he was.

But, notice that nowhere in the story is the Samaritan called good. And as we have noted in the past few weeks, in the ancient world Jews did not think any Samaritans could be good.

Samaritans were the enemy. Samaritans were heretics. Samaritans were (as my Daddy used to say) of questionable parentage.

So when the lawyer asked Jesus, "So, who is my neighbor?" I'm sure he thought that the boundaries of neighborliness stopped at the border.

If they had the money to do it, I'm sure the Jews would have built a huge fence to keep the Samaritans from crossing their border and contaminating their land. The Samaritans were considered to be the opposite of a neighbor. They were truly foreigners who were estranged from God's promises and people.

Several weeks ago we read that James and John, wanted to call down fire from heaven because a Samaritan village would not welcome Jesus. I think that was a pretty common attitude in those days.

And that's the surprise of this story. The Samaritan who is supposed to be the bad guy is not the bad guy. He's the good guy.

And the people in the story who are supposed to do the right thing, the priest and the Levite are the ones who do the wrong thing. Now we don't hear it that way because we live in a different time and a different place.

If Jesus were to tell this story today, it would be the story of the "good terrorist". And we would reply, "What are you talking about? There are no good terrorists!"

And Jesus would say, “The label we put on people is not what matters. The important thing is what a person actually does.”

And the important question to ask is not, “Who is my neighbor?” The important question to ask is: “What does it mean to be a neighbor?”

Instead of worrying about those other people and what they are doing, we should worry about our own life and what we are doing.

It’s true. Religious people can be very callous and cruel. And enemies can sometimes act in very loving ways.

Now what makes the difference? How can we follow the command of Jesus to the lawyer, to act like the Samaritan in the story?

I think once again it is the motivation of the characters in the story that make the difference.

FEAR

What motivated the religious professionals, the priest and the Levite to pass on by on the other side of the road?

There are several possibilities. Perhaps they didn’t want to get involved. Maybe they didn’t want to be made ritually unclean by possibly touching a dead body.

But, I vote for fear. They passed by on the other side because they were afraid of what might happen to them.

Think about it. Maybe this was a trick. Maybe the robbers left this man by the side of the road so that they could claim another victim.

That fear was not an unrealistic fear. We have so-called Good Samaritan laws because even today when someone stops to help that person can be victimized by a lawsuit if things don’t turn out well.

What fears keep us from helping others? What fears cause us to pass by on the other side?

Don’t misunderstand. It’s possible that our fears are realistic. It is indeed dangerous to help the broken person by the side of the road.

But, a life guided by fear alone will soon become quite self-centered and meaningless.

COMPASSION

That brings us (finally) to the star of our lesson for today, the “Good” Samaritan.

But, remember I said that the word “good” does not appear in this story. I would contend that the motivation for the Samaritan’s actions is not so much a sense of morality, what is good.

According to the Bible the Samaritan is motivated by “compassion.”

The Samaritan showed mercy toward the man who broken by the side of the road. The word translated compassion or mercy or pity is a word often used of Jesus.

For example, Jesus had compassion on the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus had compassion on the widow whose son had recently died.

The Greek word suggests what we might call a gut reaction to the plight of those who are broken by life.

Ministry is not cool, calm and detached.

Ministry is about crying with those who cry. Ministry is using the broken places in our own life as a way to connect with others.

So let’s rename this parable. Instead of calling it the parable of the Good Samaritan, let’s call it the parable of the Compassionate Samaritan. I think that’s more accurate description of the parable.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

One of the most important books in my formation as a minister was a book by the Jesuit priest, Henri Nouwen. The title of the book was *The Wounded Healer*. The Bible teaches us that the wounds of Jesus heal us. (1 Peter 2:24)

How does that work?

We say that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. And this means among other things that he knew temptation. He knew pain. He knew loneliness. He knew frustration.

And finally Jesus knew the agony of a terrible death.

Why is this important? The book of Hebrews puts it this way, “We have a high priest, a representative before God who can sympathize with our weakness.”

Jesus has compassion on us. Jesus feels for us because he has been there and done that. That is Jesus’ motive for ministering to us. (Hebrews 4:15)

And that should be our motive for ministering in Jesus’ name.

I wonder if the Samaritan had been broken by life in some way. And I wonder if that sense of brokenness in his own life gave him the motivation to risk and give his life for another.

The Bible tells us his motive.

He didn't pick up the broken man out of a sense of righteousness or guilt.

He did it out of compassion. Compassion means to feel with someone. Compassion means to feel the pain of others.

Our Stephen ministers have been training to be compassionate, to feel with others in their time of need. And one of the hardest things they have to learn is how to listen.

When someone says something or has a situation in our own lives that reminds us of a difficult time in our own life, there is a strong tendency to talk instead of listen. We want to say, "Let me tell you what happened to me."

In that case we are not being compassionate. We are speaking out of fear or self-interest. Instead of ministering to the needs of the broken one we are taking care of our own needs.

Compassion is using the broken places in our own life as a motivation to meet the needs of others.

We don't know what happened in the Samaritan's life that caused him to be compassionate. We just know that he was. He stopped and showed mercy to the one who was broken.

Compassionate people don't insist on telling their own story or on having their own needs met. Compassionate people act. Compassionate people pick the broken one up off the side of the road. Compassionate people serve others.

Jesus asked the lawyer a question. "Who do you think was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?"

And the answer was obvious even to the lawyer whose motives were less than stellar. He said, "The one who showed him mercy."

GO AND DO LIKEWISE

And then Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." Jesus tells us the same thing today.

What is your motive for ministry? Why are you here today? Why do you seek to serve in the name of Jesus?

Do you want to inherit eternal life? Do you want to "make it into heaven"? Are you trying to justify yourself?

I know some people that actually serve God out of fear. They believe if they don't do enough then they won't be saved.

None of those motives will promote true ministry. The only motive that promotes true ministry is the motive of compassion.

Remember the question that Jesus asked the lawyer? He asked in effect, "What is a summary of the law?" The lawyer got it right. He summarized the law very well.

And the summary of the law had two basic parts:

1. Love God.
2. Love neighbor.

Both of those are important in developing a compassionate heart.

When we love God, we reflect upon God's grace.

We were saved by God's grace. We were broken by sin. We were lying by the side of the road helpless and all alone.

And then God in Christ came and picked us up and attended to our wounds. He helped us when we could not help our selves. When we could not walk he picked us up and carried us.

He left us in the hands of those who nursed us back to spiritual health.

And this gives us the motive to help others. This is our motive to be a neighbor to the one who is in need.

But, if we do not act upon that, if we do not pick up others in the name of Jesus, then the joy of our salvation grows cold. Like the priest and the Levite we begin to walk by on the other side because our life is filled more with fear than faith.

Don't let that happen.

Let the Samaritan be your guide.

Let ministry flow from gratitude and a compassionate heart.

Amen.

Let us pray...

Loving Father,

We were broken by life, helpless to do anything about the evil that had overwhelmed us.

And you saved us.

You picked us up and carried us.

You cared for us.

You forgave our sins.

You gave us hope for the future.

And so out of gratitude and joy we vow to serve you. Because you have been a gracious God to us, let us be a gracious people. Help us have the courage to pick others up in your name. Help us forgive and forget.

Thank you Lord for the neighbors you have sent our way. Just as you sent you Son to live among us and tell your story, so you have given us brothers and sisters who make your Word a flesh and blood reality.

This day we pray for this among us whose wounds are fresh and deep. We pray for those who are seriously ill. We pray for those who face a long and difficult recovery. We pray for those who mourn. We pray for those who have lost hope.

We pray for healing as a miraculous sign of a greater hope, a harbinger of that time when your kingdom comes and your will is done.

Give us strength for the living of these days. Fill us with the power of your Spirit, the Spirit of your Son Jesus. And may we live and pray as He taught us saying, ...