

Who will be your neighbour?

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[0 : 00] Amen. Do take a seat and please take up your Bibles. We are back in Luke for our parables series. Last time we were in Luke chapter 8. We're now in chapter 10. Beginning to read at verse 25. If you've got a church Bible that's on page 1041. Luke 10 verse 25.

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've 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 was attacked by robbers.

They stripped him of his clothes. They stripped 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 to where the man was and when he saw him he took pity on him.

[1 : 48] He went to him and bandaged up his wounds pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey brought him to an inn and took care of him.

The next day he took two denarii 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 the robbers? The expert in the law replied the one who had mercy on him.

Jesus told him go and do likewise. Well may God bless his word to us as we carry on in this series. As we go through the parables it's going to be important for us to remember to look very carefully at the text in front of us. Because for many of us we're going to be familiar with the stories already.

[2 : 55] I think I heard this story more times in assemblies at school than I've heard from a pulpit or from Sunday school. Most of us will know the gist of the Good Samaritan.

But the words that we find in our Bibles are all placed there by the Holy Spirit of God. So if we want to understand God's meaning then we should be looking carefully at the text. Making sure that we're not trying to form a meaning out of it.

But rather hear what God is saying to us. We're not trying to construct a message. We're trying to hear the word of the Lord. So to that end let me be up front.

This is not primarily a parable about loving your neighbor. Now it is about that. It's an unavoidable instruction that I'll make no attempt to dodge.

But this is primarily a parable about how to inherit eternal life. This is the question initially given to Jesus isn't it in our passage. Teacher, how can I get eternal life?

[4 : 02] And before we dive in it's worth noticing one more thing about the shape of the exchange in front of us. There's an ask and answer pattern which is this. It repeats twice. The lawyer asks a question.

Then before answering Jesus asks it back. The lawyer gives his answer. And then Jesus answers the lawyer's question. The passage slightly disguises that pattern just by its length.

Because the second response contains the entirety of the Good Samaritan story. But it's going to be important as we track with what Jesus is really saying. Because Jesus on the second way around will subtly change his second question.

But all in good time. We'll look down. We'll get to our first heading up on the screen hopefully. Yep, there we go. We've got them all there. The self-justified neighbor. So as we look at the first verse.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. Let's stop here already.

[5 : 11] When someone taught in that culture it was normal for them to sit and for everyone listening to stand up. Now I mention that whenever I can anyway because I have a vague hope that one day I'll come.

There'll just be a couch waiting for me and you guys can all stand for a bit. But it is important here as well. Because the man stands. And so it seems that despite being an expert in the law and a teacher.

It seems he's taking his place under Jesus. He's saying right you're the teacher. I'm going to listen to you. And yet despite the fact that it looks like he wants to learn from Jesus.

Despite the fact that he calls him teacher or rabbi and asks how to get eternal life. Despite all the outward respect and humility. Luke lets us know that he's hiding something.

His motive wasn't to honor Jesus when he stood. But to test him. So already we see this is someone with a curious disconnect between their thoughts and their actions. He stood respectfully but he's testing.

[6 : 19] He's up to no good. So why does Luke tell us that the law is testing Jesus? Well, Luke told us this so that we would understand that when Jesus answers the man's questions.

He's not primarily just answering the bare question given. Just the words of what's been asked.

He's answering the motive. Now if that sounds strange, you all do this.

I have in my wardrobe a favorite jumper. It is bright pink, bright blue, bright yellow, bright green. It says I am Knuff.

It's modeled by Ryan Gosling in the Barbie movie. And whenever I put it on, invariably Susie will ask, Oh, is that what you're wearing today? Now she can see perfectly well that that's what I'm wearing today.

What she means is please don't. And depending on each of our moods, I suppose either I'll relent or I'll crack on with it. Don't judge Susie, by the way, by that. It really is quite a lot.

[7 : 21] But here we see similarly a man saying one thing but meaning something else. And so we're trying to understand that Jesus is answering the man's motives. This man does it twice, by the way.

First, he's submitting to Jesus and asking him a question about eternal life, but testing. Then later he'll ask another innocent question. And we'll see that there are some seriously self-destructive motives behind that when we get to it.

And by the way, Luke's already primed his readers to know that Jesus really does understand what's going on in the man's heart. From the very start of his gospel, Simeon prophesies over the baby Jesus.

He says, So whenever in these parables we see something that's going on in someone's mind or in their heart, we must know that Jesus knows that.

That's laid before him like a book. And again, that's particularly important in this parable. Because when we read this passage, it's worth knowing that Jesus isn't the world's worst evangelist.

[8 : 29] If someone comes up to you genuinely asking, Hey, how do I get eternal life? The best response is not to say, Well, be perfect.

Love God perfectly. Completely obey all the laws. And love your neighbor and you'll be golden.

That's not actually the answer. That's an unachievable task.

If you're here today and you'd like to know how to inherit eternal life, then stick around. Jesus will give us the real answer. As he tells this parable. And as he reframes the question. But for now, this is the question the lawyer asks.

How do I inherit eternal life? Which is a very strange way of putting that question. It's quite ridiculous, really. How do I inherit?

How do you inherit anything? I'll give you the steps to getting a great inheritance. Step one, have super wealthy parents.

[9 : 30] Step two, there are no more steps. This man is asking how to win an inheritance. He's asking how to earn something that can only be given. And stranger still, this is a Jewish man and an expert in the law.

As one of God's chosen people, he's asking how to earn what's been promised to him. Well, we'll look at inheritance a little more next time in the lost sons.

But this man wants to achieve something that even in the way he's asking it, he knows can only be given. And Jesus doesn't answer the question as asked.

He asks his own question back. Because it needs to be dismantled before the answer can land. He says, what do you reckon? And the lawyer says, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

He's quoting directly from Deuteronomy. He describes the love for God. And it seems that he got the summary of the rest of it. He says, the love your neighbor part from Jesus himself.

[10:36] Who elsewhere said that loving your neighbor as yourself was the second most important commandment. So the man's not wrong in his summary of the law. But he is wrong if he thinks he can keep it perfectly and win eternal life.

It's worth noting here that Jesus can often be quite sarcastic in the Gospels. Not in a mean way. I think we'll say it a few times in our John series as well that Jonathan's taking us through. Jesus isn't sarcastic to be unkind, but to cut through people's defenses. To show up foolishness where it needs to be challenged. And so here I think that's what's going on when Jesus agrees with the lawyer's assessment of how to get into heaven.

He's being a bit dry, a bit barbed. Think of it. How do you get into heaven, Jesus? What do you think? Be perfect. Okay.

Yeah, go on. Do that then. Winner. And you can see that as Jesus says, yeah, go on then. What he says is true. You can see that Jesus' comment hits home.

[11:42] Luke again gives motive and says the man wants to justify himself. That is, he wants to make himself righteous. So he asks, well, who is my neighbor then?

Who do I have to love in order to qualify? Do you see what's going on? If I have to love my neighbor in order to get into heaven, in order to get eternal life, then let's get a list going.

So I know exactly who is and isn't my neighbor. He wants to know what the minimum is. He wants to justify himself.

He knows, fine, well, he can't love everyone. You can see he skipped right over the whole loving God aspect. He wants to know precisely how little he can get away with doing. Because that's what we will do if we're trying to justify ourselves.

Work out the minimum because the maximum is unachievable. So he says, right, well, who is my neighbor then? So that he could justify himself.

[12:44] Because he expects or wants Jesus to say, well, your neighbor is your close family and your fellow teachers of the law, perhaps. And then he can go and buy an airport toberone for all of his colleagues and some just pre-wilted garage flowers for his mom and his wife.

And then he can go, there you go, how have I done? Is that enough? So many of Jesus' parables are about this type of person. So he's just trying to justify themselves.

Self-justification is a huge trope in all of these parables. We'll see even just in this short series.

Presumably because self-justifying is something that we do quite a lot.

Think how often we avoid apologizing because we'd much rather explain why actually what we did was okay. We'd much rather justify ourselves than appeal to grace.

Self-justification actually is one of only two real possible reactions to being told that you have to earn salvation. Either, on hearing that, either you will go, well, I'm not doing too badly.

[13:55] I love my family. I give to charity. I'm basically decent. You'll just end up self-satisfied trying to self-justify yourself. And the other reaction, we'll hear all of those things and just feel the weight of it.

You know you don't measure up. And you will just despair. If you think you need to earn salvation, you'll either go, yeah, I'm the best.

Or, no, never going to get it. Not even worth trying. And the lawyer is type one. But Jesus isn't preaching the law to him to produce either of those responses.

He echoes back the man's answer to expose what's going on. To expose the question underneath the question. Now we're starting to get into what Jesus is showing the man.

Jesus is showing the man the futility of trying to earn his own way. And to do so, he tells him this parable of a man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

[14:59] We are still on point one, by the way. They are not evenly matched. So don't you despair. This road is a real-life road. And you really do go down it.

It's just over 20 miles long and drops near about 4,000 feet on that road. So you're going down. It's pretty rough going. Not very nice underfoot. And as we know from the story, patrolled by bandits. So this man's going along when he's set upon. And the robbers beat him to within an inch of his life, strip him naked, and leave him for dead.

Now, maybe the stripping thing sounds a bit strange, a bit weird. But to be honest, back then, just good sense for a robber. A huge amount of a person's wealth would be in their clothes. They wouldn't have an expansive wardrobe.

So a lot of the gains from the robbery would have been on his clothes. But the point here is that once the man's been stripped and unconscious, there's no real way of identifying him.

[16:00] Is he a Jew? Is he a Gentile? He's a Samaritan, important, rich, poor. There's just no way of telling. He's just a man lying on the side of the road. And at this point, a priest comes along.

And we'll try to be as fair as we can to the priest. He's coming from Jerusalem, it looks like.

Because, again, he's going down. And he's almost certainly then, as a priest, just finished his two-week stint on duty at the temple.

And he now has the arduous journey back to his farm or wherever it is. And when he sees the man lying as if he's dead, he crosses to the other side of the road.

Because if he comes into contact with a dead man, that makes him ceremonially unclean. And if he did that, he'd have to do a 180-degree turn back to Jerusalem.

He'd have to buy himself a heifer and the means to burn it to a crisp. It would take a minimum of a week in total. He'd then have to stand at the eastern gate with everyone else who's unclean or sinned against God.

[17:04] Until another one of his colleagues, another priest, came along and purified him. So there'd possibly be some shame or guilt. He'd certainly be out a whole bunch of money.

Unable to take the tithes and offerings and food. And he wouldn't just suffer. His family would suffer as well if he helps this man. It would be a sacrifice. And he can't even just take a closer look or prod him with a stick or anything to see if he's alive.

Because the law will say he's ritualistically unclean if he gets even within four cubits of him, which is about a me, about six feet. And so that's why he crosses to the other side.

Leaving plenty of room. Very easy to judge the guy. Very hard to be sure you wouldn't have done the same. When encountering what seemed to be a naked, dead body on a lonely, dangerous road where there is trouble afoot.

In fact, it would have been a wake-up call, wouldn't it, for the priest. He sees the body and is reminded of the fact that there are bandits in the area. You can't imagine they've fled very far. No one's got a mobile or a payphone.

[18:12] They've not legged it before the police arrive. They're just counting their cash, planning their next robbery. So the priest hurries on. Next we see a Levite.

And we can spend less time on the Levite simply because he's bound by the exact same laws as the priest. Possibly he would have seen in the story, possibly he would have seen the priest's reaction just taken as cue from him.

He's lower down the pecking order. But the Levite also doesn't break stride, just crosses to the other side and hurries on. And so we're supposed to relate, or the man, the lawyer is supposed to relate, to this poor man who's beaten and lying in a wretched state on the ground.

And the story would sound, I think, to a Jewish lawyer like a terrible dilemma. Because there is this helpless person. But being an expert in Jewish law, he'd have to conclude that what the priest and Levite did was at least sensible.

Of course, they don't need to purify themselves. It's a shame for this man, obviously. But for the self-justifier, there's an understanding of the priest and Levite's reaction. But now as we move to our second point, the justifying neighbor, a Samaritan comes along.

[19:35] Jews and Samaritans do not mix. They wouldn't even sit and eat together, John tells us. There's a large amount of written evidence to show that Jews hated Samaritans so much, they even had liturgical prayers, imagine this, pleading God not to show mercy to Samaritans.

Lord, please do not grant Samaritans eternal life. They were so despised, and the feeling was mutual. What had happened was about 750 years previous to this, during the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians took away all the leaders, left everyone else where they were, but then as they carried on spreading their empire, they would then grab people from

these other places.

This is one of their means of conquest, and just kind of relocate them. So various other cultures were being dragged into this northern kingdom, and within a century or so, they were thoroughly mixed with the native Jews, having married each other.

Big no-no for the Jews. They'd had children, they'd married others, and before you know it, you've got a new people, the Samaritans. Now, being in the northern kingdom, they didn't have access to Jerusalem without going into another nation's territory, and so they adapted their religion just to make things easier.

All the Old Testament stuff regarding the temple in Jerusalem, the prophets, that was thrown away, but they kept the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, and built their own structures of worship in the mountains.

[21 : 05] Now, that's important here. Why? Because the Samaritan, being a Pentateuch, first five books of the Bible man, would have been bound by exactly the same purification laws that the priest and the Levite were.

It would be a serious amount harder, in fact, for him to get to his place of worship and sort himself out. The difference wasn't, then, that the Samaritan was somehow freer to help the man.

No, the difference is that he had compassion. The Samaritan climbs off his donkey, puts the man onto it, takes him to an inn where he binds his wounds, pays the innkeeper, holds himself responsible for any extra cost.

Again, this is hugely significant. The man's been robbed. He has nothing to his name. There's no bankruptcy laws to protect him, no free NHS at the inn. If he wakes up and has incurred a debt, the innkeeper would be well within his rights to make the man his indentured slave, to pay off what he'd lost.

So the Samaritan literally ransoms himself for the man, pays his debts, both those already incurred and those who will later incur, past and future debts.

[22 : 19] He balms his wounds, he tends to him, and he saves him. And now Jesus asks his most fascinating question. Did you see that this time, Jesus hasn't just repeated the question back?

You see, the lawyer says, who's my neighbor? And Jesus doesn't ask, who was the man's neighbor? He asks, who was a neighbor to the man?

That is, if the question, who is my neighbor, equates to, well, who must I love then in order to be saved? Who do I love in order to earn righteousness, to earn salvation?

Well then, who was a neighbor to the man flips it. Who must love you in order for you to be saved? You're looking around asking who you have to help in order to earn heaven, but Jesus, the Old Testament and the New, are all completely consistent with one another.

You are helpless. You are dead in your state of sin. You cannot earn your way into heaven. You are hopeless. Who will love you?

[23 : 31] Who will be your neighbor? Which person hated and reviled by the Jewish priests? Which person who bombs and binds the sick?

Which person who covers debts, past, present, and future? Which person who ransoms those who would be made slaves? Which person will be a neighbor to you?

That is the question we must ask. And perhaps if you are just really familiar with this story as a great story encouraging people to love them, to love those who are different from us, that's absolutely there, we will get to it.

But that is what's going on here. And you might be suspicious of me inserting Jesus into this. It can be a bad habit just to look at stories in the Bible, pick out a character or an object, and just go, well, that one must be Jesus.

But I think it is clear here that this man really is. The Samaritan really does represent Jesus in the story. This lawyer came to Jesus to ask how to gain eternal life.

[24 : 41] Well, where did you think Jesus was going to point? He wasn't taking a break from preaching the gospel to give a message to the ethical A students.

You know, I'll save everyone else, but if you want to have a crack at earning your own way into heaven, have a go. Absolutely not. Jesus is not telling this man to love his neighbor in order to earn heaven.

The chapter immediately before this in Luke's gospel shows Jesus resolutely setting down the very road that features in this story, the road to Jerusalem towards the cross.

Now, if we can inherit eternal life by doing good deeds, then what on earth is the cross doing at the end of the gospel, at the end of the road that Luke's taking us down?

No, the message is clear. You can't save yourself. In terms of context, there's another thing that might be worth looking at here. Immediately after this paragraph, it gives us the story of Mary and Martha.

[25 : 48] Martha is running around in the story. You can have a look at it if you can. Martha's running around doing everything, busying about, doing all these jobs, and Mary's sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him.

Martha then complains. And if the parable of the Good Samaritan were primarily saying, well, do good things for people, help people out, love your neighbor, then Jesus should have, in this story that follows the Good Samaritan, Jesus would have said, Mary, get up and help your sister. Your sister's doing all the work. Get up and help her. But he doesn't. He says, in fact, that Mary has chosen the better thing. That sitting at the feet of Jesus and receiving from him is the better thing than the serving, than the busting around, than doing all you can.

So Luke's placed these two passages side by side deliberately, and together they tell us not that doing good is bad, but that receiving from Jesus must come first.

Doing flows from that, never the other way around, which takes us to our final point, the justified neighbor, or the justified neighborly neighbor.

[27 : 10] First point, the self-justified neighbor, that's the man who's looking for someone to love and earn some heaven points. The justifying neighbor is Jesus, not the one we love and save ourselves, but the one who loves and saves us.

But now, once we are saved, now we are justified, we are indeed called to a life governed by God, to love, to love God, to love your neighbor.

And so, go and do likewise, has two very different meanings, depending on whose ears it falls on. Depending on the state of the heart of the person who hears.

It could, if the lawyer is still resolute and trying to justify himself, then it's just another dig at him. Go on then, fulfill the law. You want to know how to love your neighbor?

Like this. This level of complete sacrifice for nobody, for someone you don't even know. That's what it takes. This is what loving your neighbor looks like.

[28 : 23] If you're up for it, go and fulfill it then. But the fact is that if we're justified, then loving our neighbor, rather than an unachievable test score, rather than a weight around our shoulders, is now something that we falteringly, failingly, but faithfully, try to do.

Not with the threat of hellfire burning at our backs, but with the Holy Spirit burning within us, living within us, the posture of one who knows that all they have is because Christ has given it to you.

We are free then to pursue this radical love that the law describes. Do you see that the Old Testament law is good, not bad? A terrible burden if we have to keep it in order to have salvation. A delightful rule of life that shows us what is good and pure if we're already saved. So don't even think for a second about replacing the gospel with some nice sounding, let's do good to people message, and therefore we will get to heaven.

It is not kind. It is a weight around the necks of those you tell it to. It sets everyone up to fail, leads all away from grace, to say you must do good if you want to get to heaven.

[29 : 42] You must fulfill the law if you want to inherit eternal life. It is a deeply wicked thing to put that on people, especially when the truth is so much more beautiful, because nor must we dream or dare to take that imperative to look after the weak and the needy out of the gospel message.

Our neighbor is whoever's in need. That's the answer to who our neighbor is because once we understand that we're not justified by our own works, by what we do, we can set our eyes not on the bare minimum, but just on general compassion.

We can live lives of greater love and service as a result of knowing that we're not doing it to earn anything. John Bunyan captured this brilliantly.

He's the author of Pilgrim's Progress. He was a tinker by trade. He used to, he'd have to carry his wares, so all of these pots and pans around with him.

He was a traveling tinker. So he knew what it was like to carry a heavy burden and have that in mind if you ever read it and I do encourage you to. He describes the moment that his main character, Christian, finally understands grace and this huge backpack that he's been carrying the whole story just falls away from him and tumbles down the hill.

[31 : 06] John Bunyan really knew what it was like to shed a burden. And it was after his conversion that Bunyan was able to write this poem. I tinkered with it, that was un- I fiddled with it to capture the freedom to live greater lives of service and compassion once saved.

This is what he wrote. Run, John, run, the law demands, but gives me neither feet nor hands. A better song, the gospel sings, it bids me fly and gives me wings.

The law alone makes demands that you cannot fulfill. Christ calls you to live radical lives and gives you his Holy Spirit to help.

And where we fail,