

**THE RADICAL RABBI:
“A RADICAL HERO”
(Luke 10:25-37)
5.15.22**

Description: *Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, and forever redefines the concept of “neighbor,” and our obligations to them.*

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes there are things — a sporting event, a TV episode, a moment in time — that become so classic that literally the whole thing — the whole game, the entire episode, the complete moment — become clichés in and of themselves. Our story today is kind of like that — one of the most famous and recognizable moments in Christ’s entire ministry. But sometimes the fame of a moment has a way of obscuring the amazing lessons that a particular moment with Christ still has to teach us. But this still remains one of his most resonating and iconic stories precisely because it continues to be such a chest of treasures that he still wants us to know and understand. So as we get into this wonderful story, **let’s begin our return to its words with a moment in prayer.**

TEXT

We can only assume that this encounter occurred sometime during the course of Christ’s final journey to Jerusalem because of where it’s placed in Luke’s gospel. We’re really not told anything else that could connect it to anything more specific. So, in a sense, this story stands alone, and it starts like this: ***On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” — Luke 10:25.***

OK; let’s just think of this as a “high-stakes” pop quiz. Now this “expert in the law” would have been no dummy; he would have been thoroughly schooled in all the finer points of the law that Israel had received from God through Moses. In fact, the Mosaic Law was understood to be the pinnacle of the revelation of God’s will for his people. It was also, unfortunately, a powerful force for the religious leaders to maintain their hold on power. You’re talking about a group of men who had received an extensive education versus the great bulk of the common people who in many cases could not have even written their own names. That education gap was a great way to maintain power, prestige and position.

But then comes this radical rabbi from Galilee — a place commonly seen as the “backwoods” of their country. Galileans were the poor country cousins; Judea was so much better. I mean, think about it: Jerusalem was located in Judea. The temple was there, the chief priests were there, the greatest teachers and scholars in all Judaism were there. How much higher class or importance could you get?

Yet, despite all that, Jesus of Nazareth had come to be seen as a very unique and real danger to the existing power structure. And he hadn’t been found only in Jerusalem; for pity’s sake, he had been all over the place — Galilee as well as Judea, both sides of the Jordan as well as Jerusalem. And then, once you found him, that’s when your troubles really started: You couldn’t defeat him in logic; not even their wisest men could outmaneuver his grasp of the Scriptures. And then there were the “miracles” that everybody was talking about. Even some of the leadership had been witness to those, so disputing those particular moments created their own problems.

But maybe the greatest perceived danger came from this guy’s unbelievable popularity with the people. From the very first moment he had shown up, everybody, from all over the country, had flocked to wherever he was — always, it seemed, with this ceaseless expectation that they were going to hear something amazing, and simultaneously wondering if they might also see him do something miraculous. It seemed that stories about his incredible words and incredible works were being told from one end of the country to the other, with no end in sight. So how in the world could you even begin to fight this guy?

Now certainly some of the leadership had been discussing some pretty extreme measures for taking him down but, in the meantime, one of their main strategies in trying to deal with him had been to be constantly keeping the pressure on him by asking tricky theological questions that might cause him to stumble and ultimately discredit himself. In fact, as Matthew tells us, whenever they had Jesus in their midst, ***the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words — Matthew 22:15.*** That would be a whole lot quieter and a whole lot less messy than some of the solutions for getting rid of him that had been explored recently. The problem was that the only ones “being trapped in his words” had been the ones asking the questions. Jesus always wound up looking like a genius and his testing inquisitors always wound up looking like idiots. He always won and they always lost — big time, without fail! This had been the result from countless confrontations spread out over his three years of ministry.

But nevertheless, on this particular day, this expert in the law stood up with his question. While Jesus absolutely could discern the motivations of his heart, Luke tells us this guy’s perspective right out of the box: The Greek says that he asked his question to “tempt” Jesus. The meaning there is “to test thoroughly.” So he begins this test of Jesus with a very basic question: That eternal life thing you talk about — how do I get that? What do I gotta do?

Now, motives aside, it’s a great question. Jesus had been talking about eternal life his entire ministry. Whether to individuals such as Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well, or to the crowds who had pursued him following the feeding of the 5,000, his focus on an outcome of eternal life for those who chose to follow him had been no secret.

But note the question: “What must I DO to inherit eternal life?” The question underscores the mainline Jewish presumption that God’s favor was something that could somehow be earned by their good deeds. And, of course, they already presumed God’s favor because of their being “children of Abraham,” God’s very own chosen people. What more could they need?

So Christ responds with a question of his own: ***“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” — Luke 10:26.***

Now our contemporary western culture has deemed it socially impolite to answer a question with a question, but the fact is that Jewish dialogue was built on the give-and-take of questions — an ongoing exchange of “what about this, what about that.” So the fact that Jesus fires back with a question would actually have been taken in stride. And he of course asks a great one — one intended to draw this guy out: Sir, you’re the expert in the law. So what does the Law have to say? How would the Law answer your question?

Wow, this guy might have been thinking to himself, that’s not much of a response. I mean, he’s asking me, an expert in the law, a question about the law — pretty much my wheelhouse — but OK, Jesus; if you insist: ***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” — Luke 10:27 (quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18b).***

That first verse he quoted was taken from a section of the book of Deuteronomy called “the Shema” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) — so named because of the first words of that text: ***“Hear, O Israel!”*** — in Hebrew, “shema” is the word for “hear.” It is the most important part of the prayer service in Judaism. It was so important, in fact, that observant Jews recited it faithfully twice a day, and children were encouraged to make the words of the Shema the last words they said at night before going to bed. Jesus himself would one day testify to its importance, identifying it during another conversation with a teacher of the law as the most important command ever given by God (Mark 12:28-30). And the second verse was a quote from Leviticus, the third book of Mosaic Law — identified by Christ as the second most important command ever given by God.

Upon giving his answer to Jesus, the lawyer may have stepped back to look at him, a little bit of pride beginning to swell inside. Man, that was a great response, he might have thought — crystal clear and right to the point. Let’s see what he does with that! So imagine his surprise when, instead of his answer being

turned into some sort of theological pretzel by this radical rabbi's reply, that Jesus was actually smiling, at him — so much so that he maybe somewhat cautiously began to smile back — until he heard Christ's response to his response.

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live” — Luke 10:28.

In other words: “Exactly! I couldn't have said it any better myself. You nailed it, sir. You're absolutely right; that's all you have to do. Now just go and do it! Love God completely, and love your neighbor just like you love yourself, and you'll have that eternal life thing. Have a nice day.”

Whoops! It slowly starts dawning on this guy that he might be in a bit of trouble here. He begins analyzing Christ's return response: Love God, always and completely, with everything I got? And then love my neighbor, just like I love me, just as much as I love me? All of a sudden this expert, so sure that, in the eyes of the law he looking good, gets the first hint that he quite possibly ain't looking much good at all. And in the Greek, the idea of justifying oneself was basically seeking to make yourself look good. So how in the world do I get there from here?

But then it hits him: Maybe the key to looking good in this moment might be to get specific — you know, pin Jesus down, get some definition, set some parameters. Now in an incredible arrogance, he comfortably moves past his obligation to love God completely, with every part of his being — of course I love God completely; his law is my life — and instead looks at the other part of Christ's response, this whole idea of “neighbor.” Maybe that's it. Maybe there's a way to narrow the idea of “neighbor.” I mean, do I have to love everybody? There are some days I don't want to love anybody. But if I love a few people really good, well, ***[H]e wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” — Luke 10:29.*** Basically, what does “neighbor” even mean?

He wasn't alone: It's important to know that the prevailing opinion among the religious elite in Christ's time was that one's neighbors were only those who shared their righteousness. Therefore, anybody viewed as “wicked” — tax collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles and, especially, Samaritans — were to be hated and avoided because they were enemies of God. Now people trapped in sin should be a source of profound grief and mourning in us — as it is in God. But the scribes and Pharisees had elevated hatred to the status of a virtue, obviously making the second Great Commandment completely dependent on the definition of “neighbor.” So, in a sense, the expert in the law is asking, “OK, so what's the absolute least I have to do here?”

And the response Jesus gives him becomes one of the most famous illustrations he would share in his entire ministry: ***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, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead” — Luke 10:30.***

In Hebrew usage, the idea of “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” has nothing to do with direction. For us, driving “down” to Iowa means driving “south” to Iowa but, for Jews, going up or down referred to elevation — from a high place to a low place, very literally from “up” to “down” or vice versa. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was 17 miles long. A traveler leaving Jerusalem would first have climbed up the Mount of Olives (where Gethsemane was located). Bethany (the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus) was the last permanent town, leaving some 10 miles still to go until arriving at the Jericho oasis. The overall journey featured a drop in elevation of anywhere between 3-4,000 feet — well over half a mile. Some of the harshest hills in the entire wilderness country of Judea are found along this path.

And anybody hearing Christ tell this story would have completely understood the idea of a traveler being attacked. That particular road was notorious for the dangers it presented from robbers as there were many places for such people to hide from the unwary traveler until it was too late. The road was also a prime target because it connected Jerusalem both with the mineral wealth of the Dead Sea and the Spice Route beyond that — meaning that the travelers who used this road could often be counted on to be accompanying valuable cargo.

Jesus continues: ***“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” — Jesus Christ, Luke 10:31-32.***

For any Jew, the priest and Levite would have been thought to be the “heroes” in this story. Now, while both the priest and Levite would have been concerned for their personal ritual cleanliness, the text specifically says the priest was going “down” the road, meaning that these guys were leaving Jerusalem because their service at the temple was done. Now coming upon this man — beaten, severely wounded, probably bloody and looking more dead than alive — they easily could have assumed he was dead. And Jewish law would have considered a corpse unclean but, if their priestly duties had in fact been completed and they were on their way home (a number of wealthy Pharisees lived in Jericho), their concerns about cleanliness would have been grossly misplaced. And while it is true that both the OT books of Leviticus and Numbers relate God’s commands regarding the uncleanness of dead bodies, by this time the commandment had been stretched so far that it was thought that even their shadow falling on a dead body would render them unclean.

Beyond that issue, they also might have been concerned that whoever attacked this man might still be in the immediate area, thus making it possible that they would endanger themselves by remaining there. However, it is more likely, especially considering the point Jesus is trying to make, that they simply could not be bothered with the probable time commitment and inconvenience of helping this guy. They would prefer to keep on moving.

The story goes on: ***“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, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out 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’” — Jesus Christ, Luke 10:33-35.***

This is where the story really pivots to an unexpected outcome. Where any Jew would have seen the Pharisee and Levite as the heroes of this story due to their sterling examples of God-pleasing holiness, the hero in this tale is somebody quite different — a Samaritan, a man whose people would have been hated by the Jews.

The Samaritans were the result of intermarriage between Jews and Assyrians following the conquest of the nation of Israel (the 10 northern tribes) by the empire of Assyria some 750 years before Christ’s ministry. While most of the Jewish population had been exiled, the emptied land had then been repopulated by Assyrians. Jews held Samaritans to be half-breeds who had not just married foreigners but enemy foreigners.

On top of that, Jews accused Samaritan of false worship, not holding to the complete faith of their common ancestors — not recognizing the temple in Jerusalem as God’s designated worship center, and only recognizing the first five books of the Scriptures as valid. As a result, a deep hatred existed between those two peoples — illustrated by the fact that, over 700 years later, devout Jews would still go so far as to walk around the area of Samaria when traveling rather than set one foot inside their territory, even though that would greatly increase the time and energy needed for their journey. Obviously, hate can have some serious staying power.

But not with this Samaritan traveler. The Greek word for “pity” used here to express his heart means to be physically moved with compassion (literally, to be moved to your deepest innards). Seeing the helplessness of the wounded man struck the Samaritan deeply, and personally enough so that his compassion overwhelmed whatever differences there might have been between them. He graciously applied olive oil both as a healing agent and to simply soothe and ease the pain from the wounded man’s injuries. He also generously applied wine both to disinfect the wounds and as a mild painkiller. Obviously the Samaritan was using his limited supplies to tend to someone who needed those items more.

And beyond the medical care, the Samaritan put the wounded man “on his own donkey.” Leading a donkey for someone else adopted what was often seen as a servant position. To have this all these things done by a sworn enemy of the Jews, particularly when two Jewish religious leaders came upon the scene first only to pass it by, would have been deeply humiliating to a Jew. The Samaritan not only invested time in the wounded man, but also took steps to make sure his care was maintained by the innkeeper, promising to reimburse an extra expenses that the innkeeper incurred in the ongoing care of the man and his injuries — paying forward the equivalent of two days’ wages to cover the expenses of any further care the man might need.

And then Jesus ends the story, with the only relevant question that remains to be asked: ***“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” — Luke 10:36-37.***

Jesus returned to the original question that the expert in the law had posed to him: “Who is my neighbor?” — but with a twist: Jesus is now challenging this guy not to consider whether or not somebody might be considered his neighbor but, more importantly, whether or not he is actually being a good neighbor to the people around him. Jesus has significantly redefined the term to mean something far more substantial than his own people. Is “neighbor” to be defined by ethnic or racial considerations, or by religious or cultural ones? No! The point Jesus makes is that “neighbor” is not defined by this expert or by his culture or by religion or by tradition or by history, nor is it up to others to prove themselves neighbor to him. According to Christ, everyone has a responsibility to be a neighbor. It is our starting point — to see everyone around us as our “neighbor.”

So, if you’re keeping score, that’s 2 — two times that the man asked Jesus a question, winds up answering his own question, and then is told by Jesus to do what he just said. And, more importantly, “neighbor” has now been redefined to mean anybody to whom we have opportunity to show love, to literally demonstrate “Jesus” — regardless of any other considerations. Love does not have any limits, nor is it defined by any man-made societal or culturally-imposed boundaries. Everybody and anybody is our neighbor. That is how God defines who our neighbors are — and that becomes our standard because that is His standard. And beyond that, the idea of “neighbor” is now being more clearly defined by being seen not just as an attitude but more importantly as an action — a tangible way to demonstrate the heart.

APPLICATION

Now, before we get any farther, we need to remember that this very likely was at some level a real event, something that really happened. Jesus never called it a parable. And I mean, let’s think about: To be telling a story to a critical audience that is making the religious leaders look bad and a Samaritan of all people look good is risky if it’s not true. Jesus could be accused of making up a story just to prove some self-serving point, and it could very easily be dismissed with a “C”mon, Jesus; you know that would never happen.” The story becomes much more impacting if it is actually a real event that Jesus is sharing.

But that being said, what does this story, this wonderful moment in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, have for us? God has been incredibly transparent for me as I’ve been studying this week, and he has led me to a couple of conclusions which he has made me really excited to share:

The first lesson to be taken out of this story is its relationship to the sanctity of life. We often compartmentalize “sanctity of life” to refer to life in the womb, from the moment of conception, that all life is sacred — and rightfully so. But one reason we hold to that is that we believe that all human life is created in the image of God. If in fact that is true, then there needs to be a recognized sanctity of life applicable to everybody, absolutely everybody we meet — basically anybody alive.

What happened is that sin seriously damaged and distorted the image of God in man. What was once available and visible in Adam and Eve is no more; sin destroyed that. But what does the command to

evangelize teach? ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” — Jesus Christ, Mark 16:15. “[R]epentance for the forgiveness of sins” — Jesus Christ, Luke 24:47a.*** And with repentance through the blood of Christ comes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And what does the Holy Spirit do? Begin to restore the image of God into each individual into which He enters. That is the overall outcome of salvation that, by being restored into relationship with God, we would begin to restore the image of God — a restoration that finally be completed and consummated in heaven.

If all that is true, then the foundation for “neighbor” has to be that all mankind is seen as being created in the image of God. We seek to reunite people with the only means of restoring them to the relationship in which they were meant to live — relationship with God through Jesus Christ. “Neighbor” must by necessity begin with holding to that view of everybody. So who is my neighbor? Everybody. Why? Because we all have a common Creator.

CONCLUSION

And, as we close, the second lesson to be taken out of this story is its relationship to faith in God’s providing all our needs. The Bible teaches from one end to the other that God will lovingly, completely meet all our needs. David’s wonderful shepherd psalm begins: ***The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing — David, Psalm 23:1.*** Paul concluding his letter to the Philippians assured them: ***[M]y God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 4:19.*** God basically promises us that his shelves will never run empty.

Now let’s look at how this Samaritan responded when it became clear that this man needed help. Why did Jesus use him as an example? It’s how he understood that his resources were actually resources that God had already given. Remember what David said when celebrating how generous the people of Israel had been in contributing funds and materials for building the temple in Jerusalem? ***“[W]ho am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand” — David, I Chronicles 29:14.*** Perhaps that was the basis for how the Samaritan responded as well. Regarding the olive oil and wine, God was his grocer. The donkey? God was his vet. Stopping in a dangerous area? God was his watchman. Taking the time to minister to this man? ***[A]ll the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be — David, Psalm 139:16b.*** The money to pay for the guy’s needs? God was his accountant. If God was seen as the supplier and caregiver for every moment of this Samaritan’s life, what did he have with which to be concerned? This is how a life lived in that assurance looks like. That’s what we are promised as well.

And we have so much to look forward to in heaven; as Jesus reminded his followers: ***“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:19-21.*** The things we treasure in this life are pathetic compared to what we have to look forward to in eternity — yes, eternity. Precious metals like gold and silver, precious stones like diamonds and rubies and emeralds — they are going to be building materials in heaven. And unlike here on earth, where people can swindle and scam and steal and otherwise deplete our funds, in heaven our treasures are as secure as we are — for all eternity. Why value anything here on earth? It ain’t lasting.

So the conclusion of The Good Samaritan? Oh, what a mighty God we serve! Let’s let the world see him as we see do. Let’s pray!