

Read the Parable of the Good Samaritan: Luke 10:25-37

When I was eighteen and undecided what to do with my life, my mother urged me to become a lawyer. She said, “You love to argue. You might as well get paid for it.” **Many of our family friends were attorneys and I enjoyed their company, so for awhile I gave it serious thought.** I even spoke with some attorneys, all of whom urged me to consider other vocations. The lawyer I knew best was John Vandivier, who owned a boat, drove a blue Lincoln Town Car, and loved nothing more than a spirited ethical or theological discussion. I’d met him when I became his paper boy at the age of twelve, and we clicked. **When John died, I did his funeral and had the distinct impression he wanted to rise up out of his coffin and have one last conversation.** I see John’s ghost in this story. The lawyer in the Parable of the Good Samaritan is usually portrayed as an antagonist, as someone looking to find a loophole. Luke believed he wanted to justify his lack of caring. But judging someone else’s motives is an inexact science and Luke might have been mistaken. **I suspect this lawyer had a philosophical streak and simply wanted to know what it meant to be a neighbor, who fell under that heading, and what neighborliness required.** Let’s not start the story assuming the worst about him.

Jesus had boiled the Torah down to two great commandments—love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. **That is a big task, maybe even impossible to be as deeply committed to every life as we are our own lives, so the lawyer asks Jesus a reasonable question: Who are the people you expect me to love that deeply?**

So Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is one with which we are well acquainted. A man is beaten, robbed, and left for dead along the roadside. **Two religious professionals, who should have responded with compassion, passed him by, while a despicable Samaritan stopped to help, binding his wounds and paying for his care.** We draw two lessons from this story: The first lesson is that Jesus defines neighbor not by physical proximity, but by need and compassion. The second lesson is that sometimes the people we expect to do the right thing *don't*, and the people we don't expect to do the right thing *do*.

Those are both important lessons and ones I don't wish to undermine, but as a religious professional I'm feeling an itch to stick up for my own kind, so today I want to talk about how *our over-commitment to a perceived goodness can blind us to human suffering*.

If you'll permit me, I'd like to reframe this story a bit. **We have traditionally assumed the priest and Levite passed by the man because they were uncaring or cruel or selfish.** They might well have been. We'd like to assume the people who work for religious institutions always care and always do the right thing, but we know that isn't true. **So perhaps the customary interpretation of their motives is correct—they were cold and unfeeling, and didn't care.**

But perhaps something else is going on here, and that is our tendency to be so single-minded about our duties and obligations that we ignore the suffering of others, even when it is right before us. **At no time are we so distracted as when we are convinced that what we're doing is virtuous.**

When I was a child, my parents taught me how to choose between bad things and good things. I can do that pretty well. **What I have a harder time doing is choosing between two good things.** That was the plight of the priest and the Levite. They had many obligations and responsibilities. God-appointed duties. Pressure. **To do one thing was to leave three other things undone, all of them important.** People to visit, rituals to oversee, ceremonies to direct, counsel to give, work to administrate. A long list of duties their community expected of them. Some of them routine, but others difficult and time-consuming.

The priest and the Levite were responsible men who did their duties well, and genuinely believed they were doing them on God's behalf. **But their single-minded commitment to a perceived good caused them to ignore human suffering.** They were not unlike a friend of mine who works sixty hours a week. When I ask him why, he talks about wanting to give his children everything he never had. He wants to send them to exclusive schools, provide a beautiful home for them, and one day get them started in their own businesses. **None of those are selfish things.** It's commendable to want to bless your children. Some of the neighborhood kids envy this man's children for all the things they have. But his children envy the kids whose fathers are present for them. **Unfortunately, my friend's commitment to a perceived goodness has made him blind to human hurt.** He did not set out for that to happen. His intentions were quite the opposite. **He wanted to help his children, but in pursuit of a perceived goodness he ignored them.**

There are other examples:

People who run for political office and go to Washington because of a genuine desire to help, then forget the people who sent them there.

People who keep their home meticulously clean so it will be pleasant, but make visitors feel as if they're a bother.

Parents who want to be friends with their children, so never teach them respect.

People who volunteer at church because of a genuine desire to help others and serve God, but become rigid and controlling, ultimately teaching others that church is about coercion and control, not compassion.

People whose single-minded commitment to a perceived good can make them blind to human hurt.

It can happen to any of us.

It happened to the priest and Levite. They were good men, pursuing good things, with such single-minded determination they ignored a hurting man.

I don't think Jesus told this story to demonstrate the hypocrisy of religious people, so much as to remind us that the most important choices we face aren't always clear-cut decisions between good and evil. **Sometimes our most important choices are between two good things—our dedication to a great cause, and our commitment to compassion.** Jesus taught that when the two are placed on the scales, we should tilt the balance in favor of compassion.

“Who proved neighbor to the man?” Jesus asked the lawyer.

“The one who showed mercy.”

“Go and do likewise.”