

# Who Is My Neighbor?

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Luke 10:25-37

Sermon Series:  
Gospel in Life

*Would we  
have been that  
Good  
Samaritan?*

**W**esley Autrey was standing at a Manhattan subway stop with his two young daughters waiting for a train. A college student nearby suffered a seizure, stumbled from the platform and landed on the tracks below. Wesley jumped to the tracks to help. The lights from an oncoming train alerted Wesley that there was not enough time to drag the man off the tracks. So he pressed the man into the hollowed-out space between the rails and spread his body over him to hold him down. The train cleared Wesley by inches, close enough to leave grease marks on his cap. When the train came to a halt, Wesley called to the frightened onlookers on the platform, "There are two little girls up there. Let them know their Daddy is OK."

Wesley Autrey didn't know this stranger and had two young daughters to consider. At risk to his own life, he reacted with compassion and extraordinary courage. He was instantly hailed as "Subway Superman" and the "Harlem Hero." The newspaper headlines described him in Biblical terms: "Good Samaritan Saves Man on Subway Tracks." Three weeks later, this subway Samaritan

was singled out by George Bush, Jr. in his 2007 State of the Union address. The audience greeted him with a rousing, standing ovation.

Would we have jumped onto those tracks had we been on the subway platform that day? Would we have been that Good Samaritan? Hold that thought; we'll come back to it later.

A lawyer steps forward to test Jesus in our story. It's his job to examine new teachers to insure their orthodoxy. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). How ironic that he asks what he must *do* to inherit eternal life since inheritance is typically determined by the giver, not the receiver.

Jesus turns the question back on the questioner: "What is written in the law?" You're the lawyer here. "What do you read here?" I'm reminded of a Woody Allen movie in which he is asked, "Why does a rabbi always answer a question with a question?" Woody Allen responds, "Why wouldn't a rabbi answer a question with a question?"

This lawyer answers Jesus' question appropriately: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, mind and strength; and your

***How far am I supposed to go with this neighbor business?***

neighbor as yourself.” These two commands originate from the great Shema in Deuteronomy 6 and a central portion of the Levitical code. Jesus commends the man for his accuracy: “You have given the right answer; do this and you will live”

The lawyer asks Jesus a follow-up question, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Notice he asks it to justify himself. Are there limits to my neighbor responsibilities? Does it include Gentiles, Samaritans, people with disabilities, lepers, foreigners? How far am I supposed to go with this neighbor business?

Jesus doesn’t answer his question; instead, he tells a story about a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Since Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level and Jericho is 800 feet in elevation, it’s downhill all the way. This 17-mile stretch of road between these two cities is notoriously dangerous. For centuries, it was known as the “Bloody Way.”

Sure enough, thugs rob an unsuspecting man and leave him for dead by the side of the road. A priest comes by and sees the man lying in the ditch. Perhaps the man is already dead. By touching the corpse, he would become ceremoniously unclean. Maybe he’s late for temple duties. Whatever the reason, he passes by “on the other side.”

A second man, a Levite, who is also assigned priestly

duties at the temple, passes by “on the other side” as well. It’s the same story, second verse.

The word neighbor in the Greek literally means “one who is near.” While a neighbor is one who comes near, the priest and Levite stay away.

This lawyer must be thinking if the priest and Levite wouldn’t help the man, what’s going to happen now? Here’s where Jesus uncorks a real shocker. The last person in the world this Jewish lawyer would expect to come to the man’s rescue is a Samaritan. He “comes near him and is moved with pity” (10:33). The Greek word for pity expresses gut-level compassion.

Samaritans and Jews are bitter enemies. John tells us in his gospel that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. Jews would go out of their way to avoid walking on Samaritan soil. Samaritans were considered rogue Jews. They intermarried with Gentiles, worshipped at different temples and read different Bibles. To call someone a Samaritan was an insult. The phrase “good Samaritan” would be an oxymoron. There is no such thing as a Good Samaritan. The only Good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan. There was too much bad blood. Yet, the Samaritan is the one who dresses the man’s wounds, puts him on his donkey, accompanies him to the Jericho Inn and pays for his lodging.

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“Which of these three was a neighbor to the man?” Jesus asks. The lawyer gives the only possible answer. He can’t quite bring himself to say the word “Samaritan” so he answers, “The one who showed the man mercy.”

In all my years of sitting in Sunday School and confirmation class, the only story I could recall was this Good Samaritan parable. It’s one of Jesus’ most familiar stories. Even people with zero knowledge of the Bible know something of this story. There is a section of American legal code called the “Good Samaritan Laws.” These laws protect from liability anyone who comes to the aid of someone in distress.

My Sunday School teacher tried to engage squirmy kids like me by role playing Jesus’ parables. We loved to play the part of the robbers in this parable. We’d go a little overboard on the one who played the part of the man who fell among thieves. He could receive a real beat down.

There is danger in reading this parable as a Mister Rogers’ type of story. Mister Rogers would begin every show the same way. He would open the door, put on the same Cardigan sweater and sneakers while singing, “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?” The Good Samaritan parable could be interpreted this way.

Two people don’t do what is right and one does. So, be like the one who does and be nice to other people.

But this parable has a real bite to it. It’s scandalous about this matter of who is my neighbor. The good guys in our parable do nothing while the bad guy, a Samaritan no less, goes out of his way to do the right thing.

I’ve been studying this Good Samaritan parable this week while processing the child abuse scandal at Penn State. This story hits close to home, since sexual abuse happened at our church with a youth director six years ago.

Sexual predators are often charming, winsome people. They can dupe whole communities of people into thinking their intentions are honorable while they secretly rob children of their innocence.

It’s easy to get on our high horse and talk about what we would have done in the Penn State scandal. Sure, knowing what we know now we would have said something. But lots of people don’t. Good people in our parable do nothing. How could respected trusted school officials do nothing? How could the legendary Joe Paterno, who wrote the book on building a football program the right way, not do the right thing? The same way lots of people do.

It’s called the bystander effect. In 1964, Kitty Genovese was murdered outside her New

York apartment in the same city where the subway Samaritan performed his heroic deed. Bystanders and neighbors heard her screams for help but did nothing. In the aftermath of this horrible crime, research bore out that people are less likely to offer help to people in distress if other people are present. We monitor other people's reactions as a gauge to our own conduct. We assume someone else will intervene.

There is a tendency in this culture that appears to be flying apart at the moral seams to retreat to our homes and do nothing. We must resist this do-nothing attitude. Surely Jesus calls followers like us to roll up our sleeves and get involved in the messy work of redeeming the world.

It's messy because Good Samaritan living will disrupt our well-ordered lives. Helping people will inconvenience us. We can become so absorbed about "picking it up and laying it down" that we don't see people lying in the ditch.

Some of the recipients of our care, to our way of thinking, are not all that lovable. Who knows what you'll find when you meet the neighbors. What is it Linus said? "I love mankind, it's people I can't stand."

The objective of our fall *Gospel in Life* sermon series is to connect Jesus' gospel to real life situations. This week's theme of justice means to do

the right thing. Here, in this Good Samaritan parable, we can fail to do justice by doing nothing. We can neglect justice by our refusal to get involved.

This Good Samaritan makes a personal investment in the man by the side of the road. He offers his only means of transportation and his precious time and hard earned money to insure the man's recovery.

No less is demanded of us today. That's why we walk for the hungry, promote Alternative Gift Marts and invest in the Walkers, who will leave our fellowship next month to begin their work in Tajikistan. We're unashamedly asking for your time and money to do Good Samaritan ministry.

Let me take you back to last Sunday. I invited the 1400 people in worship to join me in an experiment. I asked you to calculate ten percent of your annual income. I chose this percentage because the "tithe" meaning tenth is the most consistent Biblical principle with regard to our giving. You may not be at this ten percent figure. Let's say you are giving at the two percent level of your income. A good growth strategy would be to add one percent until you reach the tithe. Last Sunday, 625 of you indicated ten percent of your annual income which amounts to \$1,193,624. We estimate these cards represent about 30 percent of the giving potential of our church,

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There is so much potential in this church. God has a greater mission for our church than we have yet realized. We invite you, during our closing hymn, to bring your pledge card forward as an offering. Why bring it forward? Doesn't that seem a little showy? Our friends at First Baptist bring their offering forward every Sunday. Why do they do it this way? Their pastor, Kenny Smith, says it's because Scripture consistently says to bring your offering forward (Malachi 3:10). So, as some might say, bring it!