

Luke 10:25-37

Introduction

When you and I hear the name *Samaritans*, the chances are we think of a friendly voice on the end of a phone. Someone who's there to help if you're struggling to cope. It's an organisation for which people are grateful and appreciative. But for those who heard this parable originally, that name would have conjured up a very different image indeed. Not a friend at the end of a phone but a hated enemy. Someone to be despised. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans ran deep. So, the fact that Jesus chooses a Samaritan as the hero of this story is striking. It's a story which reveals the radical love, which Jesus expects to be displayed by his disciples.

If you were with us last week, you may remember that the seventy-two disciples had just returned with joy. They had been sent out by Jesus to proclaim the kingdom of God in the towns and places where he was about to go. And their mission had met with success. Even demons submitted to them in his name. And *their* joy had been matched by the joy of Jesus himself. He was overflowing with joy because his disciples were coming to know God and were seeing the kingdom of God breaking into history with their own eyes.

But now, an expert in the Jewish law, interrupts their conversation. The first three words of verse 25 are a bit misleading. In the original language, there's a sense of continuity between verses 24 and 25. This expert lawyer interrupts Jesus' joyful conversation and puts him on the spot with a question: '**what must I do to inherit eternal life?**' he asks. That's our first heading: what must I do?

What must I do?

Please look down at verse 25 again. **On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'**

It's a standard question that the Jewish rabbis regularly discussed. It's a question about behaviour. What kind of behaviour is expected from those who have a place in God's kingdom? What kind of behaviour marks out those who will inherit eternal life? It's a question that's intended to distinguish those who are inside the kingdom of God from those who are outside. And this expert in the law is asking this question to test Jesus. It's not an honest question. His attitude is antagonistic. He's putting Jesus on the spot and challenging his status as a teacher: 'Jesus, you claim to teach about eternal life in the kingdom of God. So, tell me, what behaviour must I exhibit to be sure of inheriting eternal life?' He's testing Jesus. And Jesus responds with a question of his own.

Look at verse 26. '**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 neighbour as yourself.”

It’s an answer that comes from the Shema, which was, and still is, foundational to Jewish life. It’s said every day as part of their morning and evening prayers. It begins with words from Deuteronomy chapter 6: **Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.** And the lawyer attaches to it the words of Leviticus 19: **“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.”** The kind of behaviour that leads to eternal life is behaviour that displays an all-encompassing love of God. And from that love of God, he says, springs love for others.

‘Well answered,’ Jesus says, ‘that’s correct.’ **‘Do this and you will live.’**

Jesus isn’t saying that he can earn his salvation this way. That isn’t the question the lawyer’s asking. Jesus is saying that this is the behaviour that’s expected of those who are *in* the kingdom. He’s affirming the ethical demand that God makes of all his people: to love him unreservedly and to treat others in the light of that love, loving them as we love ourselves. In fact, on another occasion, Jesus used the very same words himself to summarise the demands of the law. It’s kingdom ethics. It’s the behaviour that Jesus expects of all who follow him and know the Father through him. It’s the behaviour that leads to eternal life.

So, Jesus concurs. But the lawyer isn’t done yet. While there’s no ambiguity in the words of Deuteronomy, there *is* some ambiguity in the words of Leviticus. And the lawyer, being a *good* lawyer, seeks to exploit it. **‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’** says Leviticus. ‘But who is my neighbour?’ asks the lawyer. And that’s our second heading: who is my neighbour?

Who is my neighbour?

Please look down again at verse 29. **But [the lawyer] wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’**

‘To justify himself’ means ‘to show himself to be in the right’. That doesn’t mean he wants to justify himself before God. He wants to justify himself before the people who were watching and listening. He wants to be seen to come out on top. He wants to gain the upper hand and win the respect of those around him. And so, having set out to test Jesus, he now lays what he thinks is a trap. ‘Tell me then, Jesus, who should I regard as my neighbour, so that I can put these words into practice?’ It’s a question that’s intended to set a limit to God’s command to love others.

The word ‘neighbour’ literally means ‘near one’. In Leviticus 19, it explicitly refers to fellow Jews. But for those living in Jesus’ day, the meaning wasn’t quite so clear. When you’re living under Roman occupation in a cultural melting pot, people of any number of nations could be considered as ‘near ones’. People interpreted Leviticus 19 in different ways,

reaching different conclusions about who to regard as a neighbour. Many among the Jewish leadership put strict limits on who should be regarded as a neighbour and promoted a way of confrontation and hostility towards any who were not, such as Romans and Samaritans. And the lawyer is trying to trap Jesus into saying something contentious, perhaps something that might even sound heretical.

Jesus responds with a story. It's one of the best-known stories in the Bible. And he begins with *these* details: **'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...'** It's a sentence that would immediately create tension for the original hearers. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous, especially for a man on his own. It's a bit like saying, 'A man was walking down a dark alley, in the dead of night...' You expect something to happen. And it does. He's attacked by robbers, stripped of his clothes, beaten within inches of his life and left for dead.

Then a priest comes along. When he sees the man lying in the road, he gives him a wide berth and passes by on the other side. He does nothing. Jesus doesn't say why. We might wonder whether it's because the priest assumes that the man is dead. Perhaps he wants to avoid becoming ritually unclean by having contact with a corpse. But that can't be right because even priests had an obligation to bury a neglected corpse, if they came across one. If he thought the man was dead, he had no excuse. If he realised the man was alive, he certainly had no excuse. He should have done something. But he didn't.

The same's true of a Levite who comes along. He too passes by on the other side of the road and does nothing to help. These two men, the priest and the Levite, were both associated with the temple in Jerusalem. They represent the religious establishment. They were men whose professed love of God should have been evident in their actions. And the expert in the law has just described the behaviour that leads to eternal life. It's to **"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 neighbour as yourself."** On that basis, their love of God should have been evident in their response to the man in need. Yet they do nothing. Remember that Jesus is telling this story on his way to Jerusalem. The implied criticism of the religious establishment is unmistakable. But if that's contentious, then what he says next is staggering.

Look at verse 33. **But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.**

Here is a Samaritan. An enemy of the Jews. He's not a holy man but, in all likelihood, a travelling merchant. But what marks him out is not his ethnicity or his lack of religious pedigree. It's his compassion. In contrast to the priest and the Levite, he takes pity on the man in need. He would be expected to show contempt for the injured man, but instead he shows compassion. And this is the turning point of the story.

The Samaritan is under no obligation to help the injured man, yet he stops, bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine on them, puts him on his donkey, takes him to an inn and takes care of him. He pays for the man's lodgings and tells the innkeeper that he will reimburse him for any extra expense he may have. In other words, he provides for the injured man's ongoing care even at the risk of being exploited. And there's no suggestion of him wanting to be repaid. He cares for the man generously and selflessly. To say that this is shocking is an understatement. And then Jesus throws the question back on the lawyer.

Verse 36. **'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'**

The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'

It's almost as though he can't bear to say the name Samaritan. He can't bear to acknowledge who this man is. It was the one who had mercy on him, he says. He's right. And by implication, it was neither the priest nor the Levite.

And that's the shock of the story. It's not the holy men who display the behaviour that leads to eternal life but a hated enemy. And Jesus' point is dynamite. Those who claim to know God yet fail to extend his love to others have no place in God's kingdom, even though they might be priests or Levites. In fact, we can state it even more strongly than that. To the extent that this caricature was accurate, which it was, Jesus is saying that those who operated the temple system in Jerusalem, who were responsible for the religious life of the people, who were leading the people in hostility towards their enemies, were themselves outsiders to God's kingdom. Can you think of anything that would be more inflammatory than that! It's the kind of thing that would get you killed.

Those who *will* take their place in God's kingdom, on the other hand, are those who let the knowledge of God's love overflow in their love for others. Those who display love like this will inherit eternal life in the kingdom of God, whether Jew or non-Jew. While those who don't display such love will miss out, whether Jew or non-Jew, or priest or Levite.

Imagine how shocking that lesson would be to those in the religious establishment. They promoted a way of being God's people that was marked by confrontation with the pagan nations. Jesus came with a message of peace and love. Those are two visions of what it means to be God's people that are in direct opposition.

And imagine how personal this is getting for the expert in the law. Those who functioned as experts in the law were often off-duty priests. So, can you see how personal this is?

And it's no less personal for us. No matter how long we've been coming to church and moving in religious circles, the question we must ask ourselves is this. Do I have a relationship with God that overflows with love to others? It's a relationship that comes only through Jesus. Remember what he said a few verses earlier: **'No one knows who the Son is**

except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

The only way know God is to come to Jesus and let him reveal his Father to you. Jesus came to make his Father known and to open the way into his kingdom. And those who truly know the Father will extend his love to others. They will consider anyone in need as a neighbour and act in love towards them. They will cross all ethnic, social and cultural boundaries to extend God's love to others. They will have hearts that see, feel and serve others in love.

We must ask ourselves: do I have love like that?

If you don't, then hear the good news of the gospel. Jesus didn't come for the spiritually healthy, he came for those who know they're not. He came for those who know they fall short. Here in Luke 10, he's on his way to Jerusalem, where he will lay down his life on a cross. He's going to the cross to bear the punishment for our sin; not only for the wrong things we do but also for the good things we've failed to do; the love we've failed to show. Let him take your sin to the cross. Let him grant you his forgiveness. And let him bring you into loving relationship with his Father.

It's when we experience the Father's love for us in Christ that we're turned outwards from ourselves to others. But even then, loving like this is beyond our natural ability. No matter how hard we try, we find that we just can't do it. We need help to love like this. Help that is supernatural. And that's what Jesus gives us through the gift of his Holy Spirit, whom he sends from heaven. It is the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts who enables us to love like this. When the apostle Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, first on his list is love. It's the Holy Spirit who enables us to obey Jesus' command, to **'Go and do likewise.'**

Conclusion

This passage began with a question: **'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'** It's a question about behaviour. What behaviour marks out those who belong to the kingdom of God? It's behaviour that displays an all-encompassing love for God that overflows with a radical love for others. It's behaviour that's made possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. And its behaviour that brings with it great assurance of eternal life.

Once again, we must ask ourselves: is this what I find in my own life?

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for the love you have lavished on us in Christ. Thank you for the compassion you have shown us. Please help us to extend that love to others and so bring you glory. We ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen.