

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous stories Jesus ever told. Everyone knows it, even people who aren't Christian. It's probably so familiar because it resonates with our everyday lives. We know what it is to travel and to feel the dangers of the road. We know what it is to see someone in need or to need help ourselves. We can easily picture the scene: a lonely road, a wounded man, a passerby deciding whether to help or not.

Other parables Jesus told can feel a little distant to us. Stories about shepherds, vineyards, kings, and servants. But this one is close to home. It's easy to put ourselves into it. We can see ourselves lying in the ditch or walking past someone who is. But here's the surprising thing: even though this parable is easy to understand, that doesn't mean we truly understand what Jesus is teaching.

Jesus tells this parable because a lawyer – an expert in the Law of Moses – comes to Jesus to test Him. He asks, *“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Jesus turns the question back on him: *“What is written in the Law?”*

The lawyer answers rightly: *“You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.”* And Jesus says, *“You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”*

That's the heart of the Law. Love God perfectly, with everything you have. Love your neighbor completely, just as you love yourself. The two tables of the Law, perfectly summarized.

God's Law is crystal clear. It doesn't say “try your best.” It doesn't say “do enough to get by.” It says “Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.” Nothing less.

Jesus says, *“Do this, and you will live.”* And, of course, He's right. The Law promises life... if you do it perfectly. Leviticus 18:5 tells us that same thing today, *“You shall keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them.”* But who among us has loved perfectly?

And so Jesus tells a story to show what loving our neighbor perfectly really looks like. A man is beaten and left for dead on the road. A priest and a Levite, respected religious men, see him lying there... and walk right by. They might have had excuses. They might have even been good excuses. They might have feared becoming unclean. They might have thought, “I don't have time,” or “someone else will help.”

And in this, as much as we want to judge them, we also can relate to them. Because we see people who need our help all the time and we also look away. We're afraid to get involved because it might cost us time, or money, or comfort. We're too busy or too distracted with our own plans to stop and notice.

We see the need, but we wonder how our help can possibly make a difference, given the size of the problem. We see the need, but then we wonder what kind of risky, awkward, messy problem we'll be getting ourselves into. So we pass by on the other side.

We might even try to limit who counts as our neighbor. The lawyer who came to Jesus knew the Law of Moses well. He clearly knew our Old Testament lesson today, because he quotes directly from it. But in these laws, “neighbor” usually meant the people who actually lived near you: fellow Israelites, the people in your own community. These commandments helped keep order and fairness in Israel's everyday life, protecting family, property, and the poor.

But Jesus expands the word “neighbor” far beyond the lawyer's comfort zone. In His parable, the neighbor is not just someone who lives nearby or belongs to the same people of God. The neighbor is anyone in need. Even a complete stranger. Even an enemy.

That's a radical shift. And it pushes past the usual boundaries we like to build. We want to keep our neighborhood small and manageable, but Jesus breaks it wide open. He shows that love for your neighbor does not stop at the border of your tribe, your family, your people, or your comfort. It goes to anyone God places before you in need, no matter who they are.

And so, in this parable, it is the Samaritan – someone hated by the Jews – who is the one who helps. He shows compassion, tends the wounds, gives his own money, and promises to return. This is true love for your neighbor. Love that is costly. Love that is messy. Love that never even considers whether or not it's deserved.

In the catechism, we learn that God's Law is like a mirror. It shows us who we really are. And what God's Law shows us today is that, more often than we want to admit, we are not the Good Samaritan. More often than we want to admit, we are the priest. We are the Levite. We are the one who passes by on the other side.

And so the Law crushes us. It strips us of our pride and beats us over the head, like the robbers in the parable. It leaves us in the ditch, half-dead and helpless. Because we cannot fulfill the Law's demands. As our Epistle reminds us, we need rescue. We need to be delivered from the power of darkness because we cannot save ourselves.

And here is the good news that Jesus wants us to see. Because though we are the ones in the ditch, half-dead and helpless, He is the One who comes to save us. Jesus Himself is the true Good Samaritan.

For Jesus became our neighbor. He took on our human flesh, stepped into our world, shared our struggles, our pain, and our weakness. He didn't have to do this. He was under no obligation to come down and rescue us. But He chose to become our neighbor, to live among us, to stand in our place, and to bear our sins.

Just as the Samaritan crossed the road to help a stranger, Jesus crossed from heaven to earth to help sinners. That is how far His love goes, that He became our flesh and blood neighbor to save our sinful, mortal, flesh and blood from eternal death.

He comes to us when we are beaten up by sin and the guilt of the Law, unable to help ourselves. He takes on our uncleanness. He binds up our wounds with His forgiveness. He pays the cost to heal us with His own flesh and blood on the cross. And He promises to return for us and bring us safely home.

Paul writes in Colossians, *"He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* We could not love perfectly, so Christ came and loved perfectly for us. We could not heal ourselves, so Christ healed us with His grace.

And now, Jesus says, *"You go and do likewise."* And he doesn't mean, "Go earn eternal life by being a perfect neighbor." We already know that's not possible. Instead, he means, "You have been loved. You have been healed. You have been rescued. Now go, and show that same mercy to others."

Go and love others without fear. Go and be generous, as God's Law calls you to be, caring for the stranger and the hurting. Go and show kindness even to those who we think might not deserve it, because you yourself have received undeserved mercy from Jesus.

At the beginning of this reading, the lawyer asked, *"Who is my neighbor?"* But after hearing Jesus' story, maybe the better question for us is, "Who is my Good Samaritan?" And the answer is clear. It is Jesus Christ. He teaches you what it means to be a neighbor to people who are nothing like you. He is your Good Samaritan, so that you may be a Good Samaritan to others. Amen.