

“Unexpected Compassion”
Suffering Servant
Downton
April 3, 2022

Last week was our STC Weekend as a family of churches, and we are taking the 3 weeks leading up to Easter to look at Jesus as our suffering servant.

Today we're gonna look at one of the most famous moments and teachings in Jesus' ministry, one we've looked at many times throughout our church history because of how important its implications are for us as God's people. We have taught it before so I'll try to give some additional context to help it feel fresh. It can be so well known that some of the meaning is actually lost on us. Open up your Bibles to Luke 10. Even if you're not a Christian and haven't been to church in years, you may have heard of this passage. It's the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Luke 10

25 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

So we have an expert in Jewish law approaching Jesus to put him to the test. Jesus was a very controversial figure, and a lot of the big wigs in Judaism were very suspicious of him because he was a twist on what they expected the promised Messiah to be. This is this guy's big moment. And his question is an important one: “possible messiah, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

Frequently Jesus answered someone's question with another question. He was a master at this, where he rightly turns the tables and says “You came here to question me, but I will actually be analyzing your answers today...” He knows this guy is trying to test him, and he puts the pressure back on him.

27 And he answered, “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.” 28 And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

The expert in the law responded with a great summation of all the Old Testament laws. If you had to boil all of it down to the simplest possible message, to explain it to a 4 year old, this is it. And he aces the test. What he says is very similar to how Jesus answers the same question elsewhere. First, the law requires a heart and mind totally submitted to and absorbed in God alone. Second, it requires that we must meet the needs of others, with all the speed, the eagerness, the energy, and the joy with which we meet our own.

Jesus says his answer is correct, and the Greek word he uses is “ortho,” where we get the term orthodoxy. Meaning correct, biblical doctrine. When he says “Do this and you will live,” Jesus

is affirming that wholehearted, lifelong compliance to this law is necessary for eternal life, which is impossible.

This is why I find arguments I hear sometimes about human nature to be silly. I've heard people arguing about whether or not people are, by nature, good. And it's all just a matter of definition. How are you defining good? As compared to your weird creepy neighbor, sure you're a good person. But that's not how God defines goodness. His standard is himself. His measure for goodness is constant.

Judging from the story, it's likely that the law expert felt the pressure of that call to perfection, and knew his own inability to live up to it. What you'll notice is that he doesn't say, "Well then I'm out of luck...what should I do?" Rather, he tries to lower the bar to a place where he feels like he can attain it.

29 But he, desiring to justify himself...

That's a key phrase here that gives insight into Jesus's response to him. See, anyone who is honest should hear those two commands, love God with all your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself, and think "Okay, well I haven't done that so what are my options now? Is there a plan B? Some way towards forgiveness and mercy from God?"

And when people come to Jesus with that posture and attitude, saying things like "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner" Jesus says things like, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has made you well." But this guy doesn't want to honestly assess himself as a sinner in need of mercy and forgiveness, he wants to justify himself as righteous on his own. This is his motivation, as he goes on to ask the following question:

29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" He asks a question that he thinks will bolster his defense as righteous on his own. He wanted to know what limits were put on the term "neighbor" so he could then show that he'd filled the demand and could walk away triumphantly and self-assured.

It will quickly become clear that Jesus answers him in such a way to help this expert in Jewish law realize his righteousness and goodness are insufficient, and he needs an alternate plan. He doesn't give the contract stipulations for who counts as a neighbor that the lawyer wanted, but instead tells a story:

30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

Presumably a man leaving Jerusalem would have been a Jew, someone the lawyer would have felt for. The road to Jericho is steep and dangerous. So dangerous that people call it "the bloody way." Jerusalem sits at 3,000 feet above sea level, while Jericho, only seventeen miles away, sits on land 1000 below the level of the Mediterranean Sea. The road between the towns descends sharply through the mounts, full of crags and caves, allowing thieves to hide, strike, and escape with great ease. Traveling the Jericho road in those days was very much like walking through a

dark alley in the worst part of a city, except that it was many miles to the nearest streetlight. And in this dark alley, so to speak, a man falls victim to crime. He is beaten nearly to the point of death, his possessions and clothes taken from him, and he's left there quote 'half dead.' Thankfully as the film *The Princess Bride* taught us, there is a big difference between mostly dead and all dead.

31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

A priest and a Levite come along in turn, and each of them pass along on the other side of the road from the man, not wanting to become involved with his needs. Let's not be too quick to judge them harshly though. Consider how you might react if you were anxiously taking a shortcut through a dark alley, by yourself. Imagine you see someone groaning on the ground, you might even assume there is a group of thieves waiting to pounce on you if you stop, and this is some sort of trap. So you run, because you've seen that movie before. The fear of what could happen to them if they stopped would've been great. And Jesus' audience here knows that you do not stop on this road, it's too dangerous.

There was also, potentially, a religious reason why these men might have avoided the man. Levitical cleanliness laws prevented anyone from touching a dead body, and if they did so they were ceremonially unclean for 7 days. They would have been excluded from any worship ceremonies for a week. So the priest and Levite could've reasoned to themselves that to help this man would cause them to be unable to perform their religious callings for a week. So fear and significant disruption of their lives would have been obvious, serious concerns for these men. Those are not trivial concerns.

The irony of this is that the priests and Levites were actually the very officers of God's people who were charged with helping the needy. Priests were basically public health officials, along with other duties. Levites were the distributors of alms to the poor. So the external obligations placed upon them are insufficient to override their concerns about fear and schedule and whatever else might have been reasons to simply keep moving.

33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was,

You should know that the insertion of a character here who is Samaritan is intentional and provocative. Jesus does this on purpose and it would've gotten a reaction. Samaritans were the sworn enemies of the Jews. And when I say they were sworn enemies, let me explain because some of you may be thinking, "You mean enemies like Republicans and Democrats? Enemies like Clemson and Carolina fans?" No no no no. Much more enemy units than that...probably more so that we even have a category for really.

Jews regarded Samaritans to be unclean, because they were the half-Jew/half-Gentile offspring of the Assyrians who had conquered the Northern part of Israel and forced the Jews there to intermarry. They were seen as half-bloods so to speak. The Samaritans, on their part, retaliated

by saying that they were the true people of God because they lived in the land of Joseph and were his descendants. They built an alternate altar and said that theirs was the true one.

To a Jew, the only good Samaritan was a dead one. Jews considered just sharing the bread of a Samaritan as equal to eating the flesh of a pig, which was the most defiled animal to them. For a Jew to call someone a Samaritan was a deep insult. If you remember at one point some Jewish people say that Jesus is “a samaritan and demon possessed.” So those were seen as similar negatives. There was all sorts of violence back and forth. Samaritans would frequently rob caravans of Jews on their way to Jerusalem. They were known to desecrate the Jewish Temple on the eve of the Passover by launching pigs into the temple court by catapult and having them splatter around the altar.

I mean, how much would you have to hate someone to literally catapult a live pig over a wall, risk murder by falling bacon, and if it doesn't kill anyone, have the pig kersplatt all over their *church*, rendering them unable to do religious activities very important to them? The answer is...a LOT.

So whatever reasons the priest and Levite had to keep moving, the Samaritan had more. But you know what happens, keep reading vs 33.

33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.

“Compassion” - to be moved in your guts. The Greek word is actually an onomatopoeia. A word similar to the sound it refers to. It's a word that is supposed to be the sound of your stomach turning. splangh-nid'-zom-ahee

A deep in your stomach love and concern. It's a word for when you see something or someone in need and something inside of you moves you to do something about it. It's often used to describe Jesus. He sees crowds who need guidance and teaching and instruction and he has “compassion” on them. So he gathers them and teaches them. He sees people who are sick or hurting and he has “compassion” like he just has to do something about it. So he moves towards them and heals. When the word is used, it's always followed by an action. When this feeling, this sense, this experience called “compassion” occurs in someone, something is about to happen. My favorite example is the story of the prodigal son, if you're familiar with it. This son disavows his father and family, shames them by saying they are dead to him and runs off. He ruins his life and decides to return home and see if he can talk his father into having him back. But the father sees him from far off as he's walking home. And Scripture says the father has “compassion” on him. Deep in his guts he's filled with love for his son and takes off running towards him. There is something about compassion that causes people to move forward, move towards. When everyone else might be turning away, stepping back, stepping to the other side of the road, it makes you move towards those in need.

For the Good Samaritan, it is in a very real sense, a death defying compassion.

34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.

Wine as antiseptic and oil to speed the healing process.

Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii (a denarii was roughly 1 days worth of labor) and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

We’ve already heard about the priest and the Levite who walked on by, whatever their reasons. And now this Samaritan goes by, who naturally would have spit in the dust and kept walking...instead of simply moving on with his life, Jesus says this Samaritan has something he calls “compassion.” And this thing Jesus calls compassion, it takes the shape and form of friendship and advocacy and sacrifice. This guy risked his life to help the man in the ditch, he became poorer, he risked social estrangement for helping an enemy, and he was at least a day late to wherever he was going.

He provides physical protection, emergency medical treatment, transportation, significant financial assistance, and a follow up visit. He risks his own safety, changes his schedule, becomes bloody and dirty through his own personal involvement, and even puts himself on the hook for this man of a different race and social class. Helping came at a huge cost.

It could be argued that this man's actions are unreasonable. And I mean that most literally. There doesn't seem to be a reason. The hurting person is an enemy. So there is no “in group” motivation. There is only risk here and no reward. There is nothing to be gained and potentially a lot to lose.

Jesus is about to bring the story home:

36 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Notice that the Jewish lawyer did not even say “The Samaritan.” He simply says “the one who showed him mercy.” It’s possible to become so familiar with this story that it loses its impact on us. We’ve all heard the term “good samaritan”, it’s become a term that is used when someone does something kind for a stranger. Some of us have heard this story dozens or even hundreds of times, so it’s possible for the story to lose some of its impact.

Because we might hear this teaching from Jesus and think “Ok, I need to go be a good samaritan.” Ok, yes. But not so fast.

Because this story would have been roundly offensive to this man. Remember this whole story is set up by giving us the motivation of the lawyer. He’s trying to justify himself. To prove his own righteousness. And Jesus proceeds to tell not a motivational, feel-good story, but a story that would have deeply prodded his sensibilities.

To this man who had done everything he was taught to do to measure up and earn God’s approval, Jesus uses this story to say that, to meet his standard of goodness we are to look to meet the needs of people around you, even strangers, even enemies--with all the energy and speed and sacrifice that you look to meet your own needs. It’s an impossible command. And not just impossible, but also, who would even want to do that? I mean, why in the world would

anyone want to live their life that way? Looking to help and serve others, whether you know them or not, in ways that could prove personally costly? Why would anyone even want to do something like that? To live like that?

And secondly, it's offensive because of who the hero is in the story. Think of all the social dynamics at play in this story for the man who asked the question of Jesus: out of the 3 who passed by, he would have had, by far, the most in common with the priest or the Levite. While he had nothing but absolute disdain for the Samaritan. So why did Jesus choose to make a Samaritan the hero?

Why not tell the story in a way where the lawyer can identify with the person who offered the help? Why not say, "*The priest came by, then the Levite, but then a really nice Jewish man came by, and he risked his life to help someone in dire need. So you go be like that good Jewish man, and do likewise.*" And he could have walked away feeling inspired and enlightened, having his definition of neighbor expanded. Instead, Jesus used a character who could not have been more different from the guy asking the question. A person whom the lawyer could not relate to.

This all makes more sense when you realize who the character Jesus wanted the lawyer to identify with really is. You see, the lawyer came into the conversation as the helper. The lover of God and neighbor. The one who has it all together, but wants to cross his t's and dot his i's to make sure he's not leaving anything out.

And Jesus tells him a story about, presumably, a Jewish man who had to travel from Jerusalem to Jericho. A Jewish man he would have identified with. The lawyer would have known the dangers inherent in such a journey. His heart would have gone out and identified with the difficulty of that journey. And then this man gets robbed, beaten, left for dead. He is not able to play the role of helper anymore, but is the one in desperate need. And then the shock factor resounds when someone who had no reason whatsoever to help him has deep, gut-level compassion for him, shows extravagant mercy, unexpected mercy, to him. Someone who does everything that he couldn't do for himself.

The person Jesus wants the lawyer to identify with first and foremost is actually not the priest, or the Levite, or the Good Samaritan. The person he wants the lawyer to identify with first is the guy bleeding on the side of the road. The guy who needs help before he could ever think about giving help. The guy who needs mercy before he could ever think about extending it.

What Jesus is actually saying to this lawyer is "I want for you to realize that you are actually the man in the ditch!" Your whole life has been devoted to saving yourself, but you can't. You are hopeless in your sin and inability to obey God's law. **You are not the Good Samaritan...you need a Good Samaritan. I want you to realize that you need a savior!**

The real Good Samaritan is Jesus, who put himself into the path of danger and poured out his own resources to save us. He burdened himself for us. He suffered for us. He assisted us out of his supply of wealth, put himself on the hook for us, risked his life for us. It cost him far more

than a few day's worth of wages, but he was willing to give it all to heal us. To bind up the wounds our sin caused, to apply the healing ointment of his blood over our sin.

What Jesus is actually saying to this lawyer is, "You are the man in the ditch!" You entered into this conversation thinking you were the hero--I have difficult and wonderful news for you--you are not the hero. You are not the helper. You are the man in the ditch, dying and hopeless, completely at the mercy of another to save you. The mercy of another who has no logical reason to save you.

In effect Jesus is using this story to ask: what if you actually lack the ability to save yourself? Your whole life has been devoted to saving yourself, but in reality you can't? And what if you're at the mercy of another who has no logical reason to save you. But he does so at great cost to himself.

"What if you were bleeding to death on the road, and your only hope was an act of free grace from an enemy who did not owe you anything? After you had been rescued like that, what would your life look like?"

That is key to his command for us to "Go and do likewise." Unless you understand that you were the one in need and he's the one who has shown you unreasonable compassion, it will never compute. We are the ones who were rescued by a radical God who had every right to regard himself as our enemy. Only that can birth the kind of compassion that overrides our self-interest, our fear, and our distaste for being inconvenienced.

Jesus's message to this man is that God is not simply after rule-followers. He wants people who love like he loves; who respond like he responds. And that can't be produced by a law. That can only be produced by a radical experience of unreasonable grace...

- Unlike this lawyer, we don't love our neighbors because we have to do great things in order to be saved, but because something great has been done for us, to save us.
- Unlike the lawyer in the story whose questioning prompted Jesus' parable, we don't love our neighbors in order to earn heaven. We do it because heaven was given to us as a gift, and we now want to become to others what Jesus has become to us.
- We love because we have been loved, because Jesus loved us first.

Understanding grace unlocks compassion because you begin to see yourself in people who are in need.

You know what it's like to be in need, to be helpless, to be completely at the mercy of someone else stepping in to assist you. The grace you have received compels you to go and do likewise.

Conclusion:

OK so those are the principles.

and obviously this is all biblical backing for our STC weekend last weekend and those partnerships.

I wanna tell you a story about how all of this can look when a community of people have been changed by Jesus's compassion to them and therefore begin to show it to others, to their neighbors. I wanna tell you a story about a man named Ben. Some of us knew him as Benny. Then he had been living on the street in Columbia and eventually he found his way to transitions. As you know transitions is one of our Serve the City partnerships. They serve folks who are homeless and would like to begin the hard work of moving off of the streets. A couple years ago there were some midtown members who on Sunday mornings would take our old green van to transitions to offer to pick up anyone who would like to come here on Sunday for Sunday gathering. One Sunday Benny decided to take the risk and he hopped in the green van and came here. While he was here he met someone who invited him to their life group's brunch. It was a rhythm that their life group had every Sunday and part of its purpose was to be able to invite people into it. So Benny went to brunch. From there he got invited to that life group's meeting time during the week. Apparently from that point forward he did not miss a Sunday brunch or a mid week life group meeting time.

The member of our church had been holding a room in his house specifically in the hopes of offering it to someone from transitions. So he and Benny got connected and then he moved in with him and became his roommate.

There was another couple in our church who heard about Ben's situation and they gave him a car. With that car Ben was able to get a job delivering pizza.

Then heard about our recovery ministry and he immediately hopped in. For the first cycle he was there for himself and the next cycle he was there for himself and a friend that he brought with him every week, with his car. In fact as of a few months ago Benny was celebrating two years of sobriety.

Throughout all of this process Ben became a Christian. In fact just a few months ago we got to baptize him here on a Sunday. And as you can imagine there were a lot of overjoyed people that morning. And any of the people connected to Benny would tell you that in no way was he simply a recipient of compassion. In fact he was one of the most generous people that you could ever meet. There are all sorts of stories that highlight this including the time at Christmas that ben used his income from delivering pizzas to buy every family in his life group a whole Christmas ham and give it to them as a Christmas gift.

Part of the reason that I'm bringing all this up is that just a couple of weeks ago, Benny died in his sleep due to health complications from his previous life. And he left a lot of people behind grieving.

But here is the beauty in it for me. And I don't want you to miss this.

Benny, who was formerly homeless, died with dignity in his own bed. In his own home. Where he lived with his family in Christ. He left behind people who grieved for him because he was loved. He was a genuine part of a community that he cared about, who also cared about him. What he needed was compassion. And that's what he got. Compassion from God himself and

compassion from God's people who had also received compassion from God himself. And he became an extension of that compassion into the lives of others until God called him home.

We showed you this on the day Ben was baptized but I want to show it to you again. This is Ben's baptism video.

This is the type of thing that can happen when people see themselves helplessly in need of God's mercy and kindness and compassion and help. And they receive the mercy and kindness and compassion that they so desperately need. They then become extensions of that kindness and compassion into the lives of those around them. And particularly the people in need around them. Both in formal ways like Serve the City and in informal ways as they live as a neighbor to others.

Let's pray.

Jesus thank you for your compassion on us. Thank you for being our true good Samaritan. And thank you that downstream from what you have done for us we get to interact with people like ben. Beautiful examples of what your compassion can lead to in the lives of others. We thank you for the compassion that we received from you and for the privilege it is to be an extension of that in our city so we ask that you would continue to make us good neighbors for your glory and our good, amen.