



Homes for Our Neighbors

More Than The Least We Can Do

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Luke 10:25-37

A man was putting his granddaughter to bed one night. Grandpa, will you tell me a story? Grandpa: What kind of story would you like me tell? Granddaughter: One with me in it.

Jesus told a story one time that we can all find ourselves in. But where we find ourselves is what really matters. Whenever we hear the story of the Good Samaritan, we are apt to identify with the Good Samaritan. And there's nothing wrong with that if we use it to inspire us to aspire to act as he did. But we should also pay attention to how we might just as easily be other characters in the parable, and be so warned.

Let's begin with the setup. A man of religious earnestness comes up to Jesus and asks him a question that should concern every one of us: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* After 2,000 of church history and 400 years of Baptist altar calls, we might expect him to have told the man to profess his faith in Jesus himself as his personal Savior. We might expect Jesus to lead him in the sinner's prayer and tell him to walk the aisle next Sabbath in the Temple and then get baptized by immersion in the Jordan River. Jesus doesn't say that. But what he does say is what all of that means, if we understand it correctly.

He asks the man his understanding of what God requires. The man answers in a way that shows he gets the heart of it, but only in his head. *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.* Jesus tells him that he's right. Do this and you will live. To that the man answers in a way that shows he's got his head on straight, but his heart's still crooked. Wanting to justify himself, Luke says, the man asks Jesus, *And who is my neighbor?*

The very question, *And who is my neighbor?*, tips us off that the man is trying to limit his obligation to others. He wants to do the least he can. Notice he doesn't say anything about how much he ought to love God.

This is the problem for many of us, and it's something we see in the story Jesus tells about the two religious men passing by the desperate neighbor on their way to church, so to speak, in Jerusalem. We think we can separate our love for God from the way we treat others. And Jesus simply won't let us do that.

The priest and the Levite both see the man in the ditch and pass by on the other side. Now, it doesn't say that they are headed to the Temple or are coming from it, but that's the implication. Either way, they continue on their way. The difference is that when the Samaritan sees the man, he has compassion on him. He takes pity. The word used in the Greek is interesting. It literally means that the man's entrails were disturbed by the sight. His bowels were moved. Too much information, don't you know?! But the point is that the man was sick to his stomach to see such a mess. He felt in his deepest parts that he had to do something.

I think he acts on behalf of the man in the ditch because he sees himself in the ditch with him. He understands, as we like to say, that “there but for the grace of God go I.”

Samaritans were the most reviled class of people to Jews. Better you were a dirty Gentile than a half-breed Samaritan. Samaritans were the low-class people left behind by the Babylonians when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah in 587 B.C. He took away all the well-educated, well-connected, and well-heeled Jews, leaving only those he figured didn't threaten him. Samaritans intermarried with Gentiles left in the land and then had the audacity to claim that they were God's true remnant because God had left them behind. Jews hated Samaritans, and vice versa. So for Jesus to make one the hero of his story says something to all of us about what God really pays attention to. What matters in the end is not just the purity of your heart before God, but the sacrificial care of your hands toward your neighbor in need.

This week we saw interesting contrasts of caring. On Tuesday night, Watauga firefighter Tyler Morris was reaching for a foul ball at The Ballpark in Arlington. He lost his balance and fell 30 feet from the upper deck into the laps of an unsuspecting couple below. The very horror of it left everyone sick to their stomachs. But those who were in the ballpark will tell you that all throughout the stands, people's hands spontaneously folded in prayer. Cleveland Indians players in the field and Texas Rangers players in the dugout dropped to their knees and began to pray. Miraculously, the man was released from the hospital Friday. Sympathy for the misfortune of another took center stage over a baseball game—as it should have.

By contrast, when LeBron James decided to go to the Miami Heat to play basketball, he left his hometown of Akron and the Cleveland area that has had so much bad news in recent times but that has treated him like a king for seven years and that offered him even more money than Miami for his loyalty. But he said he had to do what would make him happy. His mother even counseled him to do what would make him happy. Sidebar to you mothers: Stop that. Teach your kids that happiness is the by-product of a good life, not an end in itself. LeBron said he had to go where he could win a championship. Had to? And now we are supposed to applaud him for taking a five-year \$100 million contract instead of a six-year \$126 million one, as if he is making a great sacrifice, all the while leaving in the lurch the neighbors who needed him most.

One of the reasons we go to church week in and week out—which is the same as the priest and the Levite who were on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem in the parable—is so that we will develop the way of thinking necessary to stop on the way to church or from it and help the man in the ditch, not in order to hone reasons to justify ourselves for not helping.

Listen to this from a preacher, because you may never hear it again: If going to church becomes an end in itself, stop going to church. If you use church to fulfill your obligations to God and justify your personal salvation so that you will not care about people in need, then church is getting in the way of your salvation instead of making it possible. The church is the body of Christ, and if the Spirit of Christ is not in the body, then it isn't really the church.

You want to know where Christ is? He is wherever a man has fallen among thieves and is left in a ditch to die by good people who pass him by. If you want to be with Christ, you have to be with the man in the ditch. You have to be with the one who least deserves it, and then you have to do more than the least you can do.

In the beautiful new movie *Toy Story 3*—see it in 3-D for the full effect—we see a great example of how deeply embedded in our hearts is this story of the Good Samaritan. When Andy is heading off for college and has to dispose of his boyhood toys, he chooses to take his favorite, the Cowboy sheriff, Woody, with him. He tries to put the others in the attic, but they accidentally get put out with the trash. Woody can't enjoy his good fortune while his friends are going to the dump. They stick together, and the story unfolds from there. We learn that salvation goes to those who care about their neighbor more than just for themselves.

An older movie that didn't get the attention it deserved says the same thing. In *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, starring Penelope Cruz and Nicholas Cage, Cage plays Corelli. He leads a group of opera-singing Italian soldiers who take over a Greek island during World War II. In a powerful scene, Corelli is talking to a German officer about why the Italians care for these Greeks they have conquered. He says that Italians don't have the advantage the Germans have of thinking of themselves as superior to others. The German captain replies that it's merely a matter of scientific fact that they are superior. Corelli says, *I don't care about science; I care about morality. If I come upon someone in need, I see him as a brother and help him.*

That's the Good Samaritan. Can you see every man and woman as your brother and sister, especially those in need?

One of the reasons our church does missions work is to help people in need, but a secondary reason is that we need to do it. We know that our salvation is tied up in our becoming the kind of people who act this way without even thinking about it.

A nurse in our church, Nancy Stretch, recently went on a medical mission trip to Honduras. She had the wonderful experience of being able to restore the hearing of man who had long been deaf for lack of medical care. Nancy looked into the man's ear and began to drag out impacted material that had long been embedded in his ear canal. Bystanders commented that they couldn't believe how much she dug out of the man's ear, but when she was finished, the man could hear. His life would never be the same. And it would only be different because she cared enough about people who lived in a remote part of the world and who had no one to pass by them on their way to church unless they went out of their way.

But didn't God do that for us? Didn't God go out of the way of heaven to come among us and find us in our sickness and sinfulness? Didn't God open the treasure of heaven to heal our wounds and take our plight in the person of Jesus, who was despised by many of the religious people of his day for not being holy enough to keep away from our kind of folk?

Scotty Bushor grew up in inner-city Detroit, the only white kid in his high school. He had almost nothing himself, so he knows firsthand that thinking poor people are always lazy is a sure sign of a weak mind. But he didn't dig himself out of poverty only to live now for what he can get for himself. He knows that of whom much is given, much is expected; life is unfair, and we are our brothers' keepers. His friends know he would give the shirt off his back for a total stranger without a second thought, and they know that because he does.

For many years Scotty has celebrated his birthday by having a sandwich party. He invites friends over to make sack suppers for the people at Austin Street Shelter. He wants mustard, fruit, bread, sandwich bags, and deli meat. Every birthday party he has had for 15 years revolves around preparing bags of food for those who are hungry, and then he spends his birthday evening passing out those bags.

LeBron James has done a lot of good work for the Boys and Girls Clubs around the country through his foundation. He's probably not the complete egocentric villain I made him out to be earlier. None of us is totally good or bad. He's only 25, so maybe he will grow. But who is really hero-worthy in our culture? I would rather watch a one-hour TV special on Scotty Bushor's birthday ritual than on LeBron James's decision about who signs his paycheck. You?

We are most likely to become like those people we call our heroes. That's why it doesn't matter so much when we start what character we identify with in the story of the Good Samaritan; it matters where we end up.

Go and do likewise, Jesus said. He is saying it still: *Go and do likewise*.