

# The Good Samaritan

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** Loving our neighbor means serving others with a heart of compassion, not self-justification.

“You’re asking the wrong question.” That’s a phrase you hear every now and then during a contentious debate, when two sides are trying to come to an agreement. Asking the wrong question is different than giving the wrong answer. Whenever someone says, “You’re asking the wrong question,” they are implying that the framework for the conversation needs to change. A new window of imagination needs to open up.



## Voices from Church History

“If God’s Word became visible, our words must too. We cannot announce God’s love with credibility unless we also exhibit it in action.”<sup>1</sup>

—John Stott (1921–2011)

Jesus was a masterful teacher, and He often flipped upside down the expectations of people in His day either by telling a story or changing a question. In this session, we’ll see how He did both.



When have you been in a situation in which you needed to “change the question” so you could look at things from a different angle?



How did changing the question affect your process of thinking?

In this session we will study the parable of the good Samaritan. An expert in the law asked Jesus how to gain eternal life and then summed up the message of the Old Testament in the commandments to love God and love one's neighbor. In response to the man's question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of a man in distress and an unexpected act of compassion. As followers of Jesus, we recognize that God's compassion toward us should motivate us to show compassion to people in need.

## 1. Loving God and loving neighbor sums up the law (Luke 10:25-28).

*<sup>25</sup> And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup> He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."*

There are questions, and then there are *questions*. Have you ever been in a classroom setting where someone asked a question but it was obvious that the questioner was trying to show off? In other words, the person wasn't asking a question in order to discover new knowledge but instead to demonstrate the knowledge he or she already had. This kind of thing happens whenever people feel the need to justify themselves or to put themselves on a pedestal and show off their status or intellectual abilities. Something similar happens in this passage.

"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Some readers immediately think the question is about going to heaven after you die. But in its first-century context, the question would have had a different shade of meaning. Asking about "inheriting eternal life" meant something like this: "Teacher, how can I make sure I will be part of God's kingdom when the Messiah comes and establishes His reign on earth? How can I make sure that whenever God returns to us, His people, and makes everything right, I'm going to be part of that inheritance?"

Look at how Jesus responded: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" In other words, "You're the expert in the law, so tell me what you find there." Jesus often responded to a question by asking another question. It's a way to reveal the heart behind the question. And that's what He did here.



What was Jesus' aim in answering the man's question this way?

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What do you think these different aspects of loving God (heart, soul, strength, mind) refer to, and why do they matter?

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Jesus congratulated the expert in the law. The man had answered correctly, just as Jesus Himself would have summed up the law (Matt. 22:36-40). Then Jesus said, "Do this, and you will live."

Reading this account today, some Christians might wonder if Jesus was teaching that fulfilling the law is the way to earn eternal life. Was He really saying that loving God and loving neighbor is what it takes to be part of His kingdom? The answer, which may surprise you, is yes! Complete obedience to the law of God—summed up in perfect devotion and love toward God and neighbor—brings salvation. "Do that fully," Jesus said, "without failing, and yes, you will live."



### Voices from the Church

"To be human is to have fidelity to God expressed as respect for others and concern for cultivating a world that honors the One who created it."<sup>2</sup>

—Vincent Bacote

But here's the catch, and we'll see how the heart of the man was revealed in the next part of this passage: *Who can fully and at all times love God and neighbor as they ought?*



Put yourself in this scene. If Jesus had told you that the way to inherit eternal life is by loving God and loving others, how would you have responded? What questions would you have asked?

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## 2. Loving our neighbor means showing compassion (Luke 10:29-35).



<sup>29</sup> But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”  
<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.  
<sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and

when he saw him, he had compassion.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

“Who is my neighbor?” The expert’s question was a pointed one. He realized the immensity of Jesus’ words, and he felt the weight of this responsibility—to love God and neighbor everywhere at all times. And now, “desiring to justify himself,” he asked a question intended to limit his love. “Tell me who it is I need to love, and I’ll make sure I love that person.” The intent was to limit the circle to a manageable group. “Tell me who my neighbors are, and I’ll make sure I love them.”

Jesus responded to that question by telling one of His most famous stories—the parable of the good Samaritan. This story is filled with drama from the beginning. First, you have a man, presumably Jewish, who fell into the hands of robbers on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Next, you have the introduction of two well-respected characters: a priest and a Levite. Both were religious leaders. Both were Jews. Both would have been expected to do something to help the man in distress. But both of them passed by the wounded and dying man on the far side of the road.



Why do you think the two religious leaders passed by the man in distress?

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What reasons do we give when we want to “pass by on the other side” and not show compassion?

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Shockingly, a Samaritan man stops to help the wounded Jew. The Jewish people in Jesus’ day despised the Samaritans for religious and ethnic reasons. For the Samaritan to become the hero of the story, and for the Samaritan to be the one to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries, was scandalous. Imagine if we were to retell the story today about a wounded Christian being passed over by two Christians but helped by a Muslim!

The parable scandalizes, but it also opens up new vistas of imagination. And it raises a number of questions: Why do people, even those who are religious, fail to show compassion when required? What does compassion look like? How should we consider the cost of compassion and rightly take upon ourselves the responsibility for other people’s welfare?

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 90. Social Concern

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the Spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth (Mic. 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:12).



What do we learn from the Samaritan's sacrificial actions on behalf of the wounded man?

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What are some practical ways we too can show compassion to people in need?

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### 3. Compassion from Jesus leads to compassion for others (Luke 10:36-37).

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

Do you see how Jesus changed the question? The expert in the law asked, "Who is my neighbor?" or to reword it, "Whom do I need to see as my neighbor?" Jesus' question was different. His focus was on *to whom you can be a neighbor*. Instead of limiting the circle to a few "neighbors," He widened it without limit.

In response to Jesus' redirected question, the expert in the law, perhaps hesitant to praise the Samaritan in Jesus' story by name, simply said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus' answer was for the man to go and do the same. Be the person who shows mercy. It's not about fulfilling a quota of "compassionate work" for a few neighbors. It's about *being* the kind of person who shows mercy to those in need. Jesus' story was going for heartfelt transformation, not just a to-do list of activities one can check off as a way of fulfilling a duty.



What is the difference between doing acts of compassion and being a compassionate person?

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In the centuries following the telling of this story, many Bible readers saw the good Samaritan as an allegory for the story of Jesus. But to read and interpret this parable in an allegorical fashion is to ignore its context and the type of literature this is.

At the same time, however, I don't think Luke would have ruled out the possibility that this story hints at Jesus being the One who comes and, at great cost to Himself, shows us compassion. There is a sense in which Jesus is "the great Samaritan"—the One who takes charge of our welfare and shows us compassion when we are helpless.

Surely this was one of the lessons the expert in the law needed to learn. He thought if he could simply whittle down the law to two main commandments and then limit the circle of neighbors, he might be able to justify himself. But Jesus smashed all of those assumptions with the story He told. We trust in the compassion and mercy of God for salvation, and only then are we able to "go, and do likewise"—to show compassion and mercy for others.

"Go, and do likewise." We cannot come to the end of this parable without feeling the full weight of Jesus' instruction to us. Now that we have received the compassion of God, shown to us most clearly in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are commissioned to love our neighbors by showing mercy to those in need.



### Voices from the Church

"The question Jesus asks here is not about defining (or limiting) who our neighbor is...It is about *being* a neighbor, even to those society would say we must avoid."<sup>3</sup>

—Stan Guthrie



What does it say about us as Christians if we fail to be compassionate?

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How does our ministry of mercy back up what we say we believe about God's mercy to us?

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## Conclusion

Stories help us ask questions. Telling a story opens up windows of our imagination and changes the frame so we can see things differently. Having read the story Jesus told and having considered the way Jesus changed the question of the expert in the law, we are now in the position to ask new questions about our own hearts and lives.

How can our churches be places where we show the scandalous, pursuing love of God for humanity? How can we reach across ethnic and cultural boundaries to show that God shows mercy and compassion to *anyone* in need? How can we make sure that our attempts at “loving our neighbor” are not just ways to justify ourselves and show off our righteousness? How can we move from *doing* acts of compassion to *being* compassionate people who can't help but overflow for those in need? How can we ensure that we are not offering excuses as we “pass by” those who need help the most?

The parable of the good Samaritan doesn't give us the answers to all of these questions. But the story Jesus told fires up our hearts and minds, changes our questions, and helps us begin thinking and living as the people we are—people who are loved by God and who are now called to love others.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Jesus' story of the good Samaritan shocked His original audience and challenged the sensibilities of those who thought they could earn a place in His kingdom. Even more surprising is the story of how God saw us in distress, sent His Son to do what religious observance could never accomplish, and rescued us from destruction through His death and resurrection on our behalf.

# HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** God calls us to display the beauty of His compassion toward us by showing compassion to others who are in need.

1. How does the parable of the good Samaritan challenge you in the way you relate to people who are different from you?

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2. What are some needs in the community that your group could work together to meet while showing compassion in Jesus' name?

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3. Write a prayer asking the Father to help you see and take advantage of opportunities to show mercy and to be a neighbor to others for the sake of the gospel.

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