

LIMITED LIABILITY

Understanding the Expert in the Law

Jericho Road Series (Part 1) | Luke 10:25-30

It is a delight to be with YOU today (wherever you happen to be) and a privilege to be kicking off a new message series we've simply entitled, JERICO ROAD. Certain street names carry particular associations with them, don't they? When I say PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, what do think of? (the president or politics) How about MICHIGAN or FIFTH AVENUE? (commerce or shopping). BROADWAY has become synonymous with theater and BOURBON STREET with partying and HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD with movie stars.

But what about **JERICO ROAD**? What does that conjure up for you? I bet some of you will say "The Good Samaritan." I'm praying that by the end of this series your answer will be "life as it is and as it can be." Of all the stories Jesus told, none is more widely known than the tale of what happened along that thoroughfare. Over these next weeks, we're going to take a deep dive into this renowned parable and the famous figures who populate it. I think you're going to find our world there and ourselves there and real hope for our society and souls there. This is going to be one of the most relatable and relevant series we've done in a long time.

Before we experience the *story*, however, it's important that we establish the *setting*. If you don't fully get the setting, you can't truly get the story. Because the story of what happened on Jericho Road is not just an interesting *account*, it is an inspired *answer* to one of the most important questions ever asked. Listen to the Word of God with me: **On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25).**

Now, I want to press pause right there and make sure we really get what's going on in this crucial opening verse. The setting for the most famous story that Jesus ever told is the life orientation of one particular person. It's very important that we understand this particular person, because the way he looks at life is the whole reason WHY Jesus goes on to tell the amazing story he does. We're told, first of all, that this person is **"an expert in the law."** In first century Israel, the term "the law" was shorthand for God's Law – sometimes called the = Pentateuch, which meant the = first five books of the Bible. In other words, this guy is someone who'd spent more time than the average person trying to understand how to live according to God's standards. Sort of like you and me, as evidenced by the fact that we are having this whole Bible conversation now, instead of being out at Home Depot or riding a bike or doing all of the other things that about 83% of the rest of America is doing at this moment.¹

Now, you probably don't consider yourself a religious "expert," but this man we meet here did. We know that not just because the Bible describes him that way but because of what he does next. The verse says, **"he stood up to test Jesus."** In the ancient Middle East, it was the normal practice of teachers to sit down while they were instructing people. People eager to learn from the rabbi would sit on the ground around him listening to what the teacher

said. If they had a question, they would stand up before speaking, as a sign of respect for the authority of the teacher.

This, however, wasn't the purpose of the particular person who stood up in Luke's narrative. We're told that he was out to **"test Jesus."** Have you ever seen a question used by a reporter to catch a politician in a contradiction... or by a litigator to trap a witness in a lie... or by an interviewer to snare a celebrity in a confession? That's what's happening here. Elsewhere in Luke's gospel we're told, **Keeping a close watch on Jesus, the religious leaders sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor" (Luke 20:20).**

So, this is another really important dimension of the setting of the story we need to understand. This guy, who is the whole reason Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, is unusually religious, but he's not really the sincere student of Jesus he pretends to be. The Greek word *mathetes*, which we translate as = "disciple," literally means = "continual learner." If you and I are disciples of Jesus, we are going to be continually taking in and adjusting ourselves to the teaching of Jesus. But sometimes even bright, religiously oriented people stop being sincere learners and start becoming secret litmus testers. Instead of staying open to the new information God is trying to impress upon them in order to further his transforming work in their lives, they test everything and everybody against what they feel they already know. In time, the once sincere student becomes the self-sealed expert, unable to recognize the presence or way of the true Master right there in front of them.

That's really scary. So, I ask myself – and I encourage you to ask yourself – *"To what extent am I this guy in the story?" What evidence can I point to in my family life, in my politics, in my relations with other cultures, in my leadership or faith – that I am still sincerely teachable -- that it is more important to me to grow in "righteousness" than to be "right"? What are the "aha's" Jesus has been able to provoke in me lately? If I can't point to any, then I probably need to sit and sincerely listen to Jesus more.*

A couple of weeks ago, Tracey Bianchi preached a wonderful message on the subject of "control." She talked about how COVID-19 and the various other calamities of our day have invited us to recognize that we don't have control and won't have it at the level any of us want. Our hope is in the fact that God does. God is working his good purposes out in a way that may not fit our itinerary or spreadsheet. We find peace and perspective by trusting in his grace. I don't know about you, but it is so easy for me to lose sight of that and to put hope again in my ability to manage everything, even my own salvation.

We see that stubborn human tendency illustrated in the question that the religious expert asks Jesus in this story. **What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25)** he asks. If you think about it, it's a crazy question predicated on a misunderstanding about what he can control. What do you DO to inherit something? You don't. An inheritance is something you simply receive. You wait for something beautiful in someone else to choose to bequeath something bountiful to you through their death. It is a gift of grace because of what someone else has done.

But this expert guy standing before Jesus doesn't yet get this. But Jesus shows incredible patience toward him. Instead of calling out his insincerity and ignorance, Jesus responds to the man's crazy question with another question: You're a legal expert, so **"What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" (Luke 10:26)**. In other words, *"What HAVE you learned about what God desires? Let's start there."* **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 neighbor as yourself.'" (Luke 10:27)** The expert was accurately quoting the Old Testament moral law.² **"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." (Luke 10:28)**

Jesus is saying, in effect: To gain eternal life by your own deeds, all you need to do is to completely and consistently fulfill the moral law. Just love God with everything you are and have... and love others in every situation as you want to be loved... and you're in. In fact, that's what eternal life is. The kingdom of heaven is the place where God's perfect self-giving love reigns and conditions everything.

Do you love that way? I don't. Not on my best day. So how do I hope to gain eternal life or how can you? By inheriting it from someone who DOES love perfectly. Being justified before God and being saved from our sins and being included in God's family is not something we DO. It is something that God, through his amazing grace – expressed supremely in Christ's death on the cross for our forgiveness – does for us. As St. Paul puts it: **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by [human] works, so that no one can boast (Eph 2:8-9).**

Do you know how you can tell that you are sincerely receiving that inheritance? Your life will become less and less about trying to justify yourself through your good works or boasting in your achievements and it will become more and more about living from a heart of gratitude for what you've been given. Your heart and hands will be more open to other imperfect people. You'll be eager to extend them the kind of grace and self-giving love you've received from Christ. You'll be a lot less concerned than you were before about "limiting your liabilities." What do I mean by that?

Well, let's go back to the dialogue between Jesus and the expert in the law. Jesus has made pretty clear that to earn his way into eternal life, he would need to love God and others perfectly. The man probably thinks: *"I'm pretty sure I've got that loving God part down. After all, I go to the temple, I observe the hygiene and dietary rules. I can check that box. But need to get clearer about what doing that NEIGHBOR part involves."* The text literally says, **He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)**

This is where the narrative gets really interesting and a little too personal for me. Scholar Ken Bailey says: *"As a good first-century Jew, [the expert] expects Jesus to respond with a list that [he] can manage."*³ The list, he assumes, will of course include fellow Jews who keep the law in the precise way he does. In fact, the Old Testament law explicitly read: **You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people,**

but you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18). On that basis, most Jews to concluded that the category of “neighbor” was limited to “my own people.” Never mind that the end of the same chapter in Leviticus reads: **The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Lev 19:34).**

By the first century, most Jews had completely forgotten that the standard of God’s love was that generous and self-giving. It would take a Cross to convince some of them. Meanwhile, most figured the word “neighbor” couldn’t possibly embrace those decadent Gentiles, those deplorable Samaritans, and a bunch of others. Thus, when the legal expert asks, **“Who is my neighbor?”** it’s not because he is eager to learn from Jesus or have his moral vision expanded. He’s trying to limit his liability.

Can we limit the Neighbor List, Jesus, to people I mostly like? Or who mostly like me? Or who are most like me? Can being nice or generally polite or at least not mean satisfy that whole “loving neighbor” standard? I mean, I’m cool with sharing the snowblower with that fine family over there, but then there’s that neighbor whose mulberry tree drops those berries in my yard, and that really weird guy who lives all alone. Can we at least agree, Jesus, that certain people shouldn’t be loved because it would just encourage them to stay the way they are? And while we’re at it: What do I really HAVE to DO to qualify as a good child, spouse, parent, colleague, or Christian? Can we keep that list short, so I can manage it, so I can check those things off?

I wish that my natural instinct was to ask Jesus: *“How much more of me do you want? How much more could I give? How much more like YOU might I become?”* If I’m ruthlessly honest, however, my inclination is often to say, as the first man in this story effectively does: *“How little is acceptable?”* But I think that if I could really take in all that God has done for me – if the wonder of creation and the cross and the cascade of graces that have watered my life could seep more deeply into me – I think I might learn to live more with a sense of robust responsibility than with limited liability. Which is why, I think I need to go (and hope you’ll join me) on a fresh walk with Jesus down the Jericho Road.

Let’s pray together...

God, as we start this Fall season, we sincerely want to grow as your disciples. We want to keep learning, to keep being transformed, for the good purposes you have ordained us to play in our families, neighborhoods, society, and world. By your Holy Spirit, show us this week where we may have gotten stuck in a limited liability mindset and where you would have us exercise a more robust responsibility in extending a self-giving love like yours to others. Make us the neighbor who helps change for good the character of our neighborhood. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

¹ It is estimated that only 17% of Americans participate in a church on an average weekend

² Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18

³ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 2008) p. 287.