

# RESOURCEFUL RELATIONSHIPS

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## Understanding the Robbed Man | Jericho Road (Part 2)

Text: Luke 10:25-30

Good morning. I want to welcome you to part two of a five-part exploration of one of the most famous and personally relevant stories of all time – the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Last week I suggested that to really get the message of this story you first have to understand the person Jesus was trying to reach through this tale.

The Bible says: **On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" 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.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." (Luke 10:25-28)**

Now, as we touched on last time, this guy Jesus is speaking with considers himself a person of above-average religious and moral quality. He still has a few questions about God and life but the reason he dares to **"test"** Jesus, is probably because he's fairly convinced that he's already successfully checking the right boxes to earn himself a place in heaven. He's an **"expert"** in following religious rules. **But he wanted to justify himself...** which is sort of like saying that he wanted to be extra sure that God and others would give him the maximum number of likes or stars for his outstanding performance... **so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29).** In other words, just exactly WHO do I have to be loving toward?

It's a question a lot of us would like an answer to, especially in these very conflicted times. But rather than giving this guy the manageable list of people he was seeking... or rather than scolding him for trying to limit his liability... Jesus did something aimed at creating a spiritual and relational breakthrough for this person. He told him an amazing story – a tale that just might open this man's heart to God and others in a new way... in a way that could usher him into the Life of Higher Love that is what **"eternal life"** is really all about. So, **in reply** to the expert's question **Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. (Luke 10:30)**

In my early thirties, I took a trip to Israel and found that there is still a road that goes from Jerusalem (which was the religious and cultural capitol of Israel) down to Jericho (which was the financial center). Jerusalem is up in the mountains and Jericho lies some 3300 feet below on the dry plain that leads to the Dead Sea. There's a modern highway by which you can travel the 18-mile distance quite quickly and safely. There's

a much older road that has been used for centuries and on which I traveled briefly by bus. And there is also this dirt path [PHOTO]. THIS was the Jericho Road in the time of Jesus and the setting for the story Jesus tells.

One afternoon, I walked down that road. It's a series of switchbacks and blind corners that winds through a rugged land. There was a string of us making the walk that day and I noticed that people in front of me would disappear around the corner up ahead and I would completely lose sight of them for a long time. It struck me that terrible things could happen to someone on that road and others wouldn't see it happening until or if they stumbled upon them or happened to look into the deep ravine into which some poor soul might have fallen or been cast. It was obvious how muggers could have a field day in this terrain and their victims would be highly dependent on the actions of those who came after them. Are you getting this picture?

So, again, **Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. (Luke 10:30)** Jesus speaks here quite matter-of-factly, as if events like this happened a lot. They did and still do. My guess is that one of the purposes of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is to awaken us to how many people ARE robbed in life – sometimes in ways we clearly see and sometimes "around the bend," as in out of our sight. Jesus wants us to think about people like this man in the story – people who've been stripped of their dignity or material resources, beaten and abandoned in some way, and left in a condition where they are not going to find fullness of life without somebody's help. This man "going down from Jerusalem to Jericho" represents a lot of people.

If you think about it, robbery is one of the oldest realities of human existence. You likely know that the Bible names PRIDE as humanity's original sin. The book of Genesis pictures the first human beings embracing the serpent's lie that **"you can be as God"** (Gen 3:5). In other words: *"You don't need to pay attention to God or your neighbor to fulfill your potential and purpose in life. It can be all about you."* Once pride took root, it was a short hop to ROBBERY as the second primal sin. God set Adam and Eve amidst an abundant paradise and put a fence around only one tree and its fruit, saying in effect, **"Thou shalt not steal" (Exo 20:15)** from it (Gen 2:17). But the first human beings became robbers.

Robbery has been in the news a lot these days too. We've seen people looting stores, and setting fires, and stabbing or shooting or suffocating others. I'm hooked by those stories because of my own personal experience. A robber in Jamaica beat my cousin Kirk to death, took his money and went away leaving his girlfriend, half-dead. Bank robbers stole the life of my uncle, leaving his five children without their dad. Every week, con artists call my mother, endeavoring to rip her off with one scam or another. Over the years, I've had my car and numerous other objects stolen.

And I'm very aware that I am not alone. As a pastor, I've heard a heart-breaking number of stories from people who, as children, were robbed by some scoundrel of their innocence or by some betrayer of their ability to trust. I've heard so many tales of women who were robbed of equal pay or career advancement opportunities, simply because of their gender. Who of us doesn't know somebody who was robbed of their livelihood and place of contribution because they were deemed to have aged out?

If you've had experiences anything like what I'm describing, then it's probably a helpful touchpoint for appreciating what's also going on at the heart of the racial unrest in our time. I'll confess that I'm personally prone to being distracted by this extreme view or that bad actor or this set of metrics or that organization whose agenda I don't like. But my study of Jesus' teaching in this Parable and elsewhere increasingly compels me to think that the central question is how will our hearts respond toward people we meet along life's road who have demonstrably been robbed?

I don't think too many of us debate any longer whether persons of color were robbed in our country's more distant past. Most of us understand that for all of our nation's exceptional beauty and goodness, our history has been marred by some serious systemic theft. Vast economic, political, philosophical and even religious systems were used to justify stealing the land, freedom, and resources of millions of human beings loved by God. For decades after that, Jim Crow laws and redline housing policies were employed to systematically exclude persons of color from privileges and possibilities not denied to families like mine.

With all of the progress made on various fronts in the last decades, a lot of us, including me, have been slower to grasp what still remains to be done. I've personally been slow to see how the War on Drugs set up incarceration practices that robbed black and brown families of their parents or children at a rate scandalously higher than among white families where drug offenses were just as high. It took me awhile to see how ill-considered welfare programs rewarded indolence and destroyed initiative. I've come to grasp how wildly unequal funding of schools, lack of economic investment in inner-city businesses, inadequate policing strategies, government corruption, organized crime, unequal justice under law, and just plain human sin have all combined to create a level of depression, despair and violence that have made parts of our cities as desolate and dangerous as that road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

I wish I was coming today with a simple fix for all this. I wish I could say to you just vote this way or that in the next election and everything will be fine, because this party or that candidate has the cure. But only God does. God and the creative influence he can exercise on human behavior is the greatest hope of any individual or society in every generation. If there is one theme that Jesus stresses on behalf of God which seems especially relevant to all that we've been talking about, it is the importance of having and building what might be called **RESOURCEFUL RELATIONSHIPS**. It's what

the Bible is getting at when it says that eternal life – which means the best possible quality of life – is gained through a loving connection with God and our neighbors.

When I think back to the times in my life or that of my family when disease or disaster or death or some diabolical person stripped and beat and left us half-dead, the secret to recovery was always the presence of resourceful relationships in our lives. It was the sense that God was with us and the practical love conferred by the family and friends and even the strangers who called or came toward us that got us through.

How have you gotten as far as you have in life or been able to surmount the losses you've faced, the beatings you've taken, the circumstances that left you half-dead? I'm guessing it had a lot to do with the resourceful relationships in your life. Maybe you had a parent or grandparent who not only deeply loved you but was genuinely present for you. Or you had people who modeled emotional intelligence in a way that made you better at building and sustaining healthy relationships. Perhaps you had teachers, coaches or mentors who saw your talents and helped you develop them. Or you were able to travel in ways that expanded your horizons and imagination. Maybe you had folks who supplied you with money in times of crisis or used their network to open up doors of opportunity to you. Perhaps you've never worried that when you were pulled over by a cop or went before a judge or sat for a job interview that their thinking toward you would be negatively tilted in any way because of your ethnicity or race. Maybe you received an inheritance that helped you fund an education, or buy a house, or build a career, or pursue a dream.

Most of us, I'm sure, have endured some destructive or disappointing relationships, but the extent to which our lives have been marked by a lot of resourceful relationships is the extent to which we've experienced what sociologists people call "privilege" and theologians call "grace." My life has been usually graced. I have been robbed fairly infrequently of what I needed to thrive and resourced quite extensively. My theory is that the relative number of robbing-versus-resourcing relationships is the essential difference between poverty and flourishing. Our personal efforts matter, but the quality and quantity of our helpful relationships are the most important factor for all of us.

This is what explains the violence and chaos we see in poor neighborhoods and the hope for its transformation, whether in Chicago or in Appalachia. If you doubt me, stop listening to the Blue or Red Media and read *A Beautiful Thing: The True Story of America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team* or *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. The hard truth is that if people are robbed rather than resourced when they are young it is very hard to turn around. If that is not interrupted, there will often be generational cycles of brokenness and bitterness. Most people can no more bootstrap themselves out of that ditch than the man in Christ's parable who fell among thieves could heal himself. What you have to pray for is that someone -- informed by their relationship with the ultimate Resource (or maybe even a whole Church of such people) -- will happen upon where you are on the Jericho Road.

Please pray with me...

*Lord, we confess that we are often confused and polarized by the clamoring voices of our time. Help us to remember that privilege is just another word for grace and that justice is simply how you describe those right and resourceful relationships that bring forth the flourishing for all people that your Word tells us you want. In this ever so politicized time, keep our focus on the vision of advancing your eternal kingdom. For it is in the beautiful name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

### **BENEDICTION**

“We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside... but one day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that a system that produces beggars needs to be repaved. We are called to be the Good Samaritan, but after you lift so many people out of the ditch you start to ask, maybe the whole road to Jericho needs to be repaved.”  
--Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.