

Sermon preached at OCC, 13 July 2025

Faithful God, how blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sanctify us by your Word and Spirit so that we may glorify you in the company of the faithful, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Luke 10:25-37

Who is my neighbour?

Years ago, I read an article about complaints from a European tourist who had been unsuccessful in hitchhiking on less busy roads. After waiting four days, sitting on his backpack, he took out his frustration on the ‘Welcome to Punakaiki’ sign. He was billed \$3,000 for the damage.¹ The hitchhiker waited four days, unseen and unaided. It made me think: how many lie unseen on the roadsides of our lives, waiting for help that never comes? There may be several reasons why people are reluctant to offer a ride to others. It can be fear, such as a film like *The Hitcher*, a 1986 horror film about a psychopathic hitchhiker that spooked many drivers. A local paper reports that long-distance truck drivers – once a godsend for hitchhikers – are also now banned from picking them up.² Today’s reading in Luke deals with a similar kind of helping or being helped. Unlike any other scenario of helping people who may deal with the present situation, the parable was told in the context of how to inherit eternal life.

Being asked by a lawyer, Jesus replied with two questions. “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The lawyer cites a verse from Deuteronomy 6:5 ‘*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 one from Leviticus 19:18 – ‘*love your neighbour as yourself*.’ Jesus agrees with the lawyer, saying, “*Do this, and you will live.*” Then the lawyer follows up with a second question: Who is my neighbour?”

The lawyer’s question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ shows us that he sees himself capable of loving his neighbour. For him, the only thing that remains is to identify who his neighbour is so that he can fulfil the law. It is when Jesus begins to tell him the parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer, together with the first-century audience, may be a little surprised. For the Jews, Samaritans are despised inferior others who are even called ‘dogs.’ In the parable, the

¹ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/20-04-2023/the-lost-art-of-hitching-a-ride>

² ditto

expression of such noble compassion expressed by a Samaritan and not a pious Jewish layperson would have come as a surprise to the lawyer.

First, let's consider a priest and a Levite who pass by the injured man. One possible reason is that they may have feared ritual impurity as the law prohibited them from touching a dead body, which made them unclean.³ But there might be another – what if the injured man himself was a robber pretending to be dead or injured, as the road to Jericho was already infamous for its dangerous environment? The priest and the Levite may have been law-abiding people without any sins before God. Can we blame them for not acting like the Samaritans? They may have had fear, busyness, or personal urgencies, just like we all do. Likewise, if we don't pick up people who look like criminals, will someone blame us because of that? That is, we can't simply judge them by what happened. Like us, they may have tried to live as good, law-abiding people. While having this tentative conclusion, it's time to think about the Samaritan.

As always, there is a hidden upside-down element in Jesus' parables, and this is no exception. In Luke, the word 'compassion' that the Good Samaritan shows is only used for none other than God and God's agent, Jesus. The word 'he was moved by pity (NRSV)/'he had compassion' (ESV)/ 'he took pity on him' (NIV)⁴ occurs three times in all of Luke. In the other two examples, only God's agent, Jesus (Luke 7:13), and a figure representing God, the father of the Prodigal (Luke 15:20), show compassion. In other words, "showing compassion" in Luke's gospel is a display of the divine power and divine action. In this parable of the Good Samaritan, the act of compassion on the man in the ditch is functioning figuratively as God's agent.

The injured man, who is half dead, is unconscious. Otherwise, he wouldn't receive any help from the Samaritan at all. This man's condition, half dead and unconscious, only displays a total inability. Jesus calmly reveals that it is the current spiritual state of all people in the world. Regardless of the outward appearances, such as lawyers, scribes, or priests, scripture makes it clear that no one can keep the law entirely under the sun because "...whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."⁵

³ Leviticus 21:1-4; Numbers 19:11-13

⁴ Luke 10:33, *esplagnisthe* (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη)

⁵ James 2:10

At this point, we need to re-read the passage to gain a better understanding of it. When the lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus asks the lawyer in return, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The three represent a priest and a Levite who pass by the man, and the Samaritan who comes to rescue him. By reshaping the lawyer’s question, Jesus is pointing out that the lawyer himself is the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. And the stranger – the Samaritan is Jesus himself. If so, what is the lawyer robbed of, and who is the robber(s)?

Paul reminds us that without God, we are spiritually dead–trapped under the rule of evil powers.”

⁶ It means that Satan robbed the lawyer, and it was God who saved him from Satan. The sole purpose of the robber – e.g. the serpent in the garden of Eden- is to rob us, effectively separating us from God. The condition of half-dead (ἡμιθανῆ) symbolises our inability to attain eternal life by keeping the law perfectly, as we won’t get it through our efforts. All these conditions that lead us to death are just like the man left half-dead on the deserted road.

During our story time, we engaged in role-playing by putting ourselves in each character’s shoes. What we learn is that we as individuals may or may not be a good Samaritan, not to mention the eternal life. We may not be a good Samaritan, not because we are mean, but because we fall short of the glory of God.⁷ Also, when it comes to eternal life, the neighbour who will rescue us from such a dire situation is God and God only. Even so, Jesus still calls us to act like a Samaritan as we belong to Him. So today, may we see Jesus as our Good Samaritan, and we become his hands and feet in a hurting world. Let us pray: Lord Jesus, our Good Samaritan, thank you for rescuing us. Help us to see and love others as you love us. Amen.

⁶ Ephesians 2:1-2 - You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the Spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

⁷ Romans 3:23