

## The Cast | People Engaged in the Story of Jesus Christ

### *Good People*

Luke 10.25-37

February 18, 2018

*And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"<sup>26</sup> And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?"<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."<sup>29</sup> But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion,<sup>34</sup> and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.'<sup>36</sup> Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?"<sup>37</sup> And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."*

We've been looking at people engaged in the story of Jesus Christ... the many characters who had dealings with Jesus of Nazareth and are included in the accounts told by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Today we look at the very famous Parable of the Good Samaritan... probably the best known of all the stories Jesus told... a lot of people are familiar with it.

BUT what we may not know or may not have seen is how this parable came about... It was a response to a question posed by a cast member.

Luke saw in the dialogue that followed a deliberate rhetorical pattern used by ancient teachers and Luke captured that pattern in his record.

And IN this brief exchange - questions and answers are strategically placed almost like a chess match and this expert/theologian, a scholar of the Mosaic Law is cornered – “check-mate” ... but very definitely for the good of the man, “a certain lawyer.”

There are some glaring ambiguities in the dialogue that make us wonder. For instance: the conversation begins when the man “stood up” and that could be a sign of respect OR he could be attempting to rise above Jesus (“put Him to the test”)? He addresses Jesus as, “Teacher”. Is that another sign of respect OR was it a way of saying, “Let’s see what you got...let’s see if YOU, ‘Teacher’, really know your stuff (like I do)!”

BUT as the conversation progresses, Luke does us the tremendous favor of revealing the man's motivations: (v.29) "But wishing to justify himself..."

That's where we begin: #1 The Overwhelming Urge to Justify Ourselves (self-justification) #2 The Painful but Necessary Exposé (self-realization) #3. The Characters in the Story: Where do you see yourself? (self-identification) (self-justification; self-realization; self-identification)

Jesus is delegating the work of the Kingdom of God. He has just empowered 70 of His followers to go into the towns where He’d visited. He tells them that the signs of His coming will go with them ... and they are to help people and to offer people the peace of the Kingdom – to be reconciled to God.

And when they return all wide-eyed and amazed...then Jesus Christ rejoices that these simple fisherman/laymen simply trusted (like children) IN Him and IN the blessed intrusion of God... And He prays, "Thank You Father that You have revealed these things to infants but not to the sophisticated and intelligent and wise."

And IN that moment of solidarity and celebration... UP STANDS ONE OF THOSE wise and sophisticated people to whom the ways of the Kingdom are strange and threatening... “a certain lawyer”. He was probably a Pharisee, a theologian, who knew all things doctrinal/ethical. He interrupts (“and behold!”).

It says "he put Jesus to the test". He seems very earnest and asks "What must I DO to inherit eternal life?" Not all the Jews believed in eternal life ...Jesus did... and this expert in religious Law wants to hear Jesus render an opinion.

And Jesus Christ answers the question with a question: "What is written in the Law? How does it read to YOU?" And the scholar answers in a savvy way: he summarizes all 613 laws of the Hebrew Bible into just two: from the Books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and love your neighbor as yourself."

A question answered with a question followed by an answer and then a conclusion: Jesus says, "That's right! DO this and you will live."

It's as if Jesus has said, "Good answer! How's that workin' for ya'? Do you always keep the Law?"

Then round two; the same pattern: question met with a question, then an answer capped off by a conclusion. First the question: "But wishing to justify himself he asked Jesus, 'And who IS my neighbor?'"

Now, you may know that this word "justify" is a big theme in the New Testament! Later, St. Paul writes, "By the doing of the Law, no one will be justified" (Romans 3.20) - In other words, God's Commandments point out our failings (because no one really keeps the Law; no one loves God or loves other people like they should).

So now that this good person has offered a good answer...suddenly he's aware that he's NOT that good! It's not as simple as he's made it out to be ...

And fearing that HE may NOT be living up to the standard of neighbor-love the Law demands... and feeling a little naked/ashamed... the lawyer looks for some fig leaves...looks for a covering...some way to defend himself before the searching eye of the Law.

"Maybe we can debate this idea of neighbor-love."

His chosen defense mechanism is his learning, his proficiency in his field ... his knowledge of the many differing opinions of what really constitutes a full- fledged neighbor I am responsible to love.

He happens to know that some rabbis teach that Gentiles... are not what the Law envisions ... Moses got that word when Israel was in the wilderness and all the neighbors were Jewish... and even some Jewish people aren't Jewish enough to be considered neighbors. It's a very interesting discussion don't you agree, Teacher? 'WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?'... maybe we could have a discussion."

Then Jesus Christ uses a story to cut through these fig leaves of self-justification.

Have you ever noticed the overwhelming pressure to justify yourself? Whenever we feel we've been caught or exposed and we feel embarrassed...we feel SHAME. Whenever we look incompetent or inadequate or uninformed or uncool or left-out. WE WILL DO ANYTHING TO GET RELIEF FROM THAT FEELING OF EXPOSURE. Shame hurts like Hell and we will do almost anything to avoid it.

People who don't normally lie will LIE...to cover over some relatively small failing... "Gee ... sorry I'm late the traffic was murder!" (but the truth is - I just didn't plan well and left later than I should have).

We'll minimize our faults. We'll blame them on others (a form of "character assassination"). We'll lash out. We'll psychologize. It's in the first recorded instance of shame - the man and woman in the garden run, hide, cover and blame - and we've been doing it ever since.

To be exposed as wrong, to feel shame, to not measure up (socially, physically, morally, intellectually, financially) and to feel that... is so painful that I will instinctively do anything in that moment to get rid of the shame...to show that I am actually RIGHT. And that's exactly what the word justify means - to declare or demonstrate that one is right. "I'm not the disappointment you think I am ... I am not incompetent ... not wrong ... not bad ... it's not my fault...I didn't mean it...you're oversensitive ...it couldn't be helped...mistakes were made...but NOT by me!"

All our fig-leaves...all the ways we run, hide, cover and blame, all our strategies for justifying ourselves, for dealing with shame. This lawyer was trying to hide behind his knowledge of the Law (to substitute knowing for doing) ... the one thing he was unwilling to say was that he was guilty ... because shame (as we've said before) shame hurts like Hell.

And you'd think Jesus would get that and let the man off the hook but instead ... He closes in on the man ... and He strips away this competency behind which the man is hiding... and Jesus changes the whole question to lead the man to self-realization.

The man is standing in front of the very embodiment of Love and this man is exposed (and feels a need to justify himself - to neutralize the shame but he can't).

Jesus Christ tells a story... to trap the trapper. Not to destroy the man but to help him feel "redemptive shame" ...this "sanctifying trauma" that will send the man looking for a real covering, something better than the fig leaves of his self-justification.

A man is on a very steep very dangerous stretch of road. As often happened, there's a robbery. The man is beaten and robbed and stripped and left half-dead.

And then ... a savior appears - a grace-man, a priest. He's the epitome of holiness. He's been to worship - maybe in that afterglow of worship. And...Good News He sees the beaten man and... passed by the other side... Maybe he was afraid to touch a corpse and be declared ceremonially unclean... we're not told what excuse the priest gave (we don't need help imagining excuses ... we've all invented our own).

Then a deacon... a Levite; these guys were responsible to collect alms and distribute them to the poor. This guy's job is to care for the needy ... and though he too sees the beaten and naked man ... he too passes by.

And then "a Samaritan", despised cult-member, he follows that pattern that's repeated over and over ----- again in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ: he sees, comes near, HE FEELS and he tends to the person in need... He covers the man. He binds up the broken man. He has a first aid kit.

He transports the man to an inn ... He tends to him. He stays with him; is present with him. THEN, he pays for his ongoing care (two denarii - probably two week's worth of room-and-board) and he commits to return and pay any additional expenses.

Then Jesus turns again to this certain lawyer and He asks a question that sort of reverses the original question ... The original question was "who IS my neighbor?" but the final question is "who is neighborly?"

As one writer put it, "one cannot define one's neighbor; one can only be a neighbor."

The real question is NOT WHO qualifies to receive love but DO I QUALIFY AS ONE WHO LOVES? "Which one proved to BE a neighbor?"

The lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word, ("Samaritan" yuck!), He says, "The one who did mercy to him." Checkmate! ... "Go and do likewise!"

Now ... we don't know what happened to this lawyer. He's cornered. He's exposed. It's checkmate for him but what did he do about it? The next verse begins a totally different scene (that seems to have nothing to do with this one).

If that guy was a friend of yours and if YOU had been there on that day (maybe you would have winced when he stood up to ask that original question!) and if at the end of the conversation, he looked at you as if to say, "What should I do?"

What would you say? How would you counsel him? after the self-realization, is there a next move? Is the man just to go away and start asking different questions (Like "how can I be a neighbor in this situation?") ... I should just start loving people and quit making excuses... IS "go and do likewise" the whole point and nothing more?

Isn't the point that he (and we! moral people, people concerned with right and wrong ... AND also prone to self-justification), isn't the point that we are too much like the priest and Levite ... seeing a lot of needs but for whatever reason (reasons are never hard to find!) we justify ourselves, excuse ourselves, pass by on the other side; we content ourselves with questions that

miss the point... practical questions... setting our principles and definitions and guidelines and policies?

And isn't the real problem that WE are not like Jesus Christ or like this Samaritan: we SEE but we don't approach (tolerance is NOT the same as love!) feel and we don't give ourselves.

Maybe the thing to say to the lawyer - and to ourselves is THAT: WE see but we do not feel ...we do not approach and we do not love, as we ought to love. And the answer is to stop justifying ourselves and come to the only One who can fix us.

Maybe the answer is to say, "I see myself in this lawyer and my own tendency to self-justify... and I see myself in the priest and in the Levite - I am a calculating Law-abider not a compassionate brave self-sacrificing neighbor."

"I am a broken person ... I am the man in the ditch ... stripped of all my excuses and in desperate need of restoration... and healing and help ... I must identify with that man...see that I'm worse off than I think."

And I must see Jesus Christ so like that Samaritan... a Foreigner... an Outsider... One despised... who came to me and scooped me up and carried me and paid for my restoration with His own life.... paid it ALL!

What do we tell that lawyer after the checkmate? Is there another move?

And it seems the only other move for him and for us is to concede... admit defeat. Our game has failed. Our excuses are lame and the only way to feel love for the needy ... is for us to come back to Jesus Christ and say, "Lord Jesus - the true Good Samaritan - who justified me by His own life, death and resurrection ...I want to feel like You feel. I want to see myself as a ruined but redeemed person... I want to be used by You in the healing of the world ... Help me to love like You love...to see, to feel, to help.

I have no excuses ...I need new mercy ... so I can feel for others and show them the mercy You always show to me."

(Let's pause in silence and pray that.)