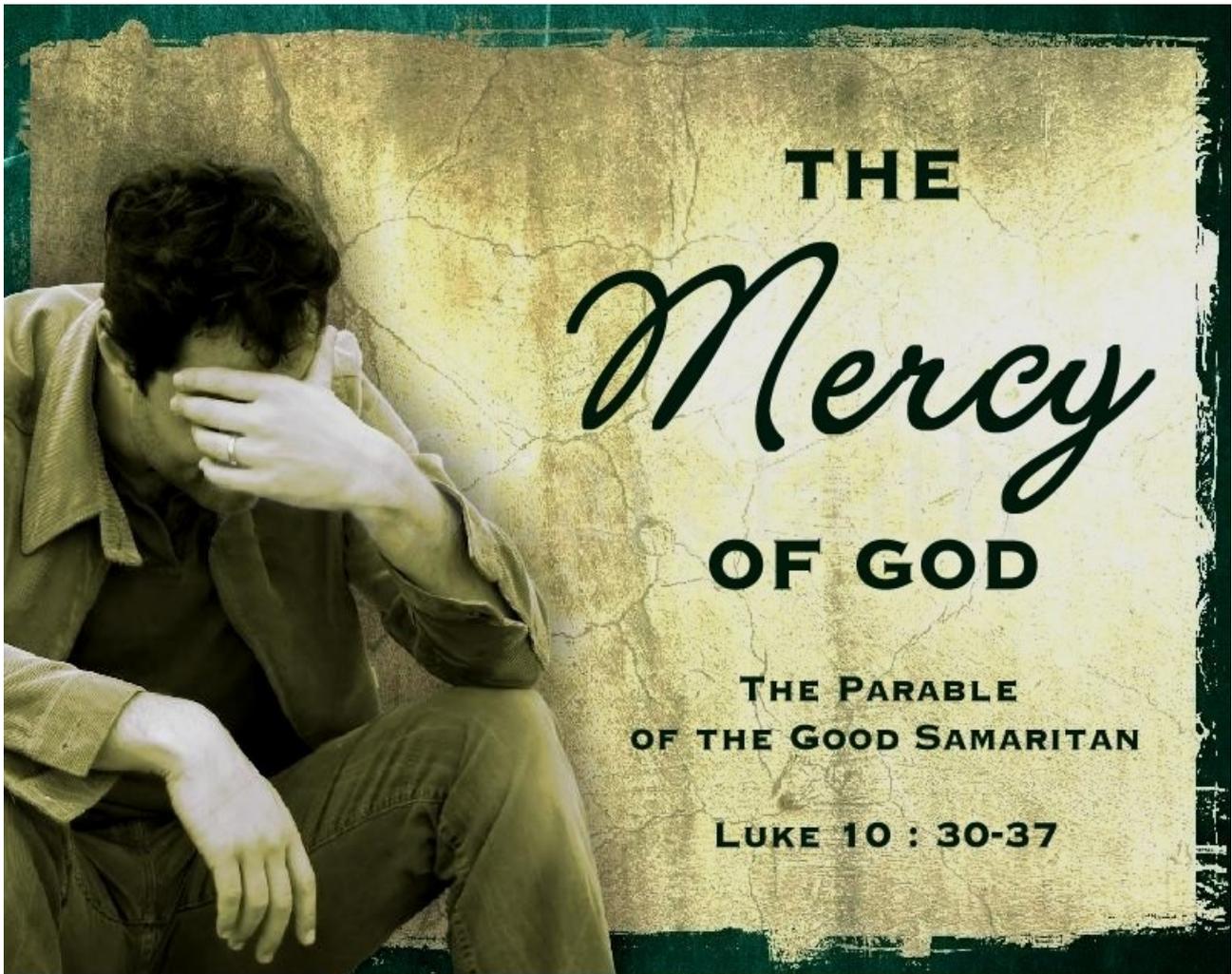


SERMON TRANSCRIPT



Ormskirk Christian Fellowship  
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## The Mercy of God

This story is so well known that it's become an idiom for sacrificial kindness. We call people good Samaritans if they find others in need and help them in unusual ways. But sometimes, I think our familiarity may cause us to think that we know what the story really is about; what it was intended to convey, when in fact we don't. There's a danger of us missing the point. Oh, we all know the story, but it's the point of the story that reveals the reason for Jesus telling it. If you ask most people, this is a story about helping someone in need ... but that's not really the point.

In verse 25 we see Jesus teaching, and in the middle of doing so, a lawyer, a scribe, an expert in the Law of Moses and the Jewish Law, stands up and says, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is the greatest question ever asked or answered, and it was on the minds and the hearts of the Jewish people all the time. They knew the Old Testament promised eternal life, a resurrection into an eternal Kingdom to live in the presence of God and the fulfilment of all his promises, and they wanted to be a part of it; they didn't want to miss it. That's why this particular question was posed so often, and appears in so many different places throughout the gospels. Jesus himself spoke frequently about eternal life, because it was very much the issue of the day. The lawyer asks him, "What must I do" (notice how personal this is) "what must ... **I** ... **do** ... to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responds in verse 26 by posing a different question. "What is written in the Law?" he says. Well the lawyer knew that. So he answers by quoting the summation of the Law, what he already knows are God's requirements, because just like every other Jew listening at this point, he'd have recited these words thousands of times ... twice a day, every day, for the whole of his life, "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 neighbour as yourself." These words are straight out of Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. There's absolutely no question that he knew the Law.

The verb 'to love' is used here in the present tense; it means constantly, continually in an uninterrupted way love to God like this, and love your neighbour as yourself; without there ever being any kind of breach or violation. In verse 28 Jesus confirms, "You have answered correctly." Then he quotes a different verse from Leviticus 18, "Do this and you will live." Live, in this context, means to have eternal life. What he's saying is 'do this and you will receive what you ask for. You want eternal life? Well, you know the rules ... love God perfectly, love your neighbour as yourself ... do this and you will live.'

Now at this point, the lawyer should have been honest. He should have said, 'Look, I can't love God like that. I can't love God all the time perfectly with all of my faculties, and I can't love each person around me with a perfect love in the same way that I love myself. I can't do that. I haven't done that. I'm not capable of that. I won't do that in the future. I admit my inability. I live in constant violation of this standard. I cannot be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect. I cannot be holy as He is holy. I am sinful. I am headed for punishment. I am going to miss the Kingdom unless I receive mercy and forgiveness.' He should have cried out for mercy just like the publican we read about in Luke chapter 18, beating his breast, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He should have been ashamed. He should have felt a deep sense of conviction. He should have been penitent, contrite, confessed his sin and cried out for mercy. But he didn't.

It says in verse 29, "But he wanted to justify **himself** ..." Wow. The lawyer has got it so wrong. He was trying to convince people that he was righteous, even though he knew that he wasn't. He wanted to maintain a front, a facade; and he makes things even worse by asking Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?" He's completely missed out the loving God part. 'I'm okay with God,' he's saying; 'there's nothing there that I need to deal with. And I'm pretty good with my neighbour too, unless of course, you have a different definition of neighbour?' Pretty mind-blowing, isn't it?

Jesus, at that point, could just have dismissed him. He could have said, 'Well, it's clear that you're not going to make it into the Kingdom of God,' and gone back to teaching. He could have left the lawyer standing there in his self-righteous pride and thought to himself, 'I'm not going to waste my time casting pearls before swine.' But Jesus, filled with compassion as always, decides to give the lawyer one more opportunity. He's going to give him one more gracious insight into

the state of his heart, the state of his sinfulness, to try to bring him to a true understanding of his position. How is Jesus going to do that? How is Jesus going to get through to him? Well, he begins to tell a story ... and **that's** what this parable is really about.

Jesus says, "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. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

To put this into context, Jerusalem is about 3,000 feet **above** sea level; Jericho is about 1,000 feet **below** sea level. That's a 4,000 foot drop over a distance of about 17 miles, so it's pretty severe. The road really does go down ... it's dangerous, almost frightening, with precipices that plunge hundreds of feet into crevasses, filled with caves and rocks. It's notoriously dangerous because it's so barren, with the caves and rocks providing hideouts for robbers and highwaymen. Jesus deliberately casts the story in a familiar place, an area that everyone would have known. It would seem almost inevitable to his listeners, that on this particular road, robbers, bandits and highwaymen were likely to pounce on him. But they didn't just rob him, they stripped him, and they didn't just take his purse, they took everything that he had; they left him virtually naked, and then they beat him. The word "beat" here suggests repeated blows. They pummelled him and they left him for dead. We would say nowadays that they'd left him in a critical condition; he was in the process of dying, he was pretty much half dead already.

Then, almost immediately, Jesus introduces a little bit of hope. He says in verse 31, "A priest happened to be going down the same road." On the face of it, this seems the best of news. Here comes a priest, a servant of God, one who would offer sacrifices on behalf of the Jewish people in the temple, one who lifted up the people before God, a paragon of spiritual virtue, the best of men, the godliest, the most righteous, the personification of virtue. A priest would know the Old Testament Law; he would know that if you saw a stranger in need, you should do whatever it took in order to meet his need. He would know the words of the prophet Micah. "He has shown you, O man, what is good ... to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) He would have known exactly what God expected of him in this situation.

But any hope the man might have felt was short lived, because Jesus goes on to say, "And when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side." He uses not only a verb here but also the word "anti" to strengthen it; the priest, quite literally, went in completely the opposite direction. He saw the man, and he went an entirely different way. Here in the space of just one sentence, what Jesus is doing is turning the lawyer's question onto its head. He's showing him that it's not a question of who your **neighbour** is, it's a question of who **you** are, that really defines love.

I find the story quite humorous at this point, not for the poor man who's just been beaten up, or for the lawyer asking the question, but because I've read a lot of commentaries to see how other people have interpreted these events. Many commentators stop at this point, and embark on a long discussion about why the priest in the story didn't help. Some say that maybe he thought it was a dead body; he wouldn't be allowed to touch a dead body, because that would have made him ceremonially unclean. Others say, 'He didn't go over to the man, because he was afraid he might meet with the same fate; that the robbers might still be lurking around, and he'd become their next victim' or even 'He didn't go over there because he didn't want to help a man, who was perhaps being punished by the wrath of God.'

Shall I tell you something? Shall I tell you why I find it humorous? Do you want to know what the priest was thinking? He wasn't thinking anything. How do I know that? Because he didn't exist; this is just a story. This man didn't live, he wasn't a real person; Jesus made him up and he's just using him as an illustration. We don't need to worry about the priest's reason, what his motives were, what his excuse was, what his thinking was ... he didn't have any. When you go off on a tangent like this, you're in danger of missing the point; and that's the sort of thing the Pharisees did all the time. The point is, that you'd expect a priest to go and help. But he didn't.

In verse 32 Jesus goes on to say, "So too, a Levite." Levites were assistants to the priests; they were the temple police. They saw to the issues of the liturgy and helped with official duties. They had to know something about the Law too; they were close. Levites were well acquainted with the function of Judaism, and the studies of the lawyers and scribes and so forth. They should have known what the priests knew as well. So the Levite comes to the place where this man is, he also sees him, and then he too passes by on the other side. The same verb is used here a second time, he doesn't just turn away, he goes in completely the opposite direction, and again you see an illustration of a man who had no love.

I think we can safely say that these two are among the ones Jesus refers to in verse 21 as "the wise and learned" from whom the things of God are hidden. We have to say at the very least, that neither of these men, if they were real people, would have qualified for eternal life by their own definition. They didn't love God, because if they did, they'd have kept his commandments. And they obviously didn't love their neighbour, because here's one lying on the ground, bleeding to death, and they want nothing to do with him. So being religious, doing all the ceremonies, being Jewish, being circumcised, being part of the system, being as tightly connected to the temple elite as you can get; being a priest and a Levite clearly isn't going to get you into the Kingdom of God. If you look at the character of these men and weigh it against the standards that they claim to uphold; if the real test is to love your neighbour as yourself, they've messed up big time. We can all see that ... in this story, in life, in human nature, even in ourselves.

And then comes the twist, in verse 33, "But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was." In the context of Jewish / Samaritan relations, this is just about the worst possible thing that could happen. The man, we assume, is a Jew, because this is Israel and when Jesus talks about "a certain man" that's what everyone else would assume too. They'd also assume that a Samaritan was going to be no help at all, because the Samaritans and the Jews despised each other. The animosity was so profound, that if a Jew needed to travel from north to south, or vice versa, although the easiest way was to go through Samaria, they never did; they always went all the way around it. Nobody went through Samaria; they wouldn't even have the dirt of Samaria on their shoes, the hatred ran so deep.

So here's a man, who by the lawyers own definition would be a blood enemy of this Jew, lying there near death, and along comes this Samaritan. What's the Samaritan's attitude going to be? Well, instead of going in the opposite direction, Jesus says that he felt compassion. Wow. What's Jesus trying to say here? We're going to see that in a moment, but for now, here's the important point. Two men had no love, and one man did. Two men were religious but they had no love; therefore their religion did nothing to qualify them for the Kingdom. One man, on the other hand, was a heretic and an outcast, but he did have love. Again, Jesus wants us to see that it's not a question of who your **neighbour** is, it's a question of who **you** are, that really defines love.

The Samaritan takes centre stage, and here comes the main point. Notice how he loves. First of all, he sees the man, and he feels compassion. Something in his heart just goes out to the man, a sadness, grief, empathy, pain, a driving need to rescue and recover him. In verse 34 it says he went over to where he was. He evaluates, diagnoses, and assesses his condition, giving careful attention to what's going to be required. You can just see him in the imagery of the story, leaning over the man and checking his condition. He discovers that the man has some wounds; the Greek word used here is trauma. It suggests that they were fairly serious wounds, maybe broken bones, and he was perhaps bleeding. At the very least he'd been pummelled and beaten.

Jesus says that the Samaritan bandaged up his wounds. The man is almost naked, stripped down to virtually nothing, so whatever he used for bandages must have come from his own bag or clothing. He starts putting a tourniquet on the man to stem the bleeding, and he binds up his wounds with bandages so that they don't get dirt in them, or become any worse. In the process of doing this he's pouring oil and wine on them too. Wine was used as an antiseptic because of its fermentation, and it would sanitise; it would cleanse whatever might have got into the wound to prevent it becoming infected. Oil was used to lubricate, to soothe and to soften the tissue; it was part of the healing process too. Whenever you set off on a journey, you always took some wine to drink and some oil to cook or eat, and so the Samaritan is actually using up his own supplies here. The word "pouring" also suggests that he generously washes the wine and oil over the man. He's not just dabbing it about. What we're seeing here is generosity; lavish, unselfish care. That's pretty amazing isn't it?

Then Jesus says, "He put the man on his own donkey." Presumably unable to get on by himself, the Samaritan picks him up and drapes him over his donkey so that he can take him somewhere else for food and water, care and rest. It's a pure act of mercy and compassion that leads him to examine the man and bandage up his wounds, then he pours oil and wine on them, and then he puts him on his own animal. We don't know how far away this place was, but he takes hold of the donkey by whatever kind of rope was attached to it, and he walks alongside whilst the injured man is draped over the back, holding on to him to make sure that he doesn't fall off. He finally gets him to an inn, and there he provides a mat for him to lie on, and some food, water and rest.

Then, as if all that wasn't enough Jesus also adds, "and took care of him." Having negotiated the place to stay, he takes the man inside, lies him down to rest, and he continues working on his bandages and wounds. He does this all night. How do I know that? Because Jesus says in verse 35, "On the next day ..." In other words, he's still there in the morning. He set aside the whole of his agenda. He gave up his own provisions, his own time and his own donkey. It's amazing to think that anyone would do this for a stranger, let alone his worst enemy.

That's not the end though. Look at verse 35, "On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Needing to continue on his way, he leaves him to be cared for by the innkeeper. In practical terms, what does that mean? Well, the cheapest and most basic inns would cost around one thirty-secondth of a denarius. So two denarii would be enough money for 64 days room and board. At the other end of the scale, a more up-market inn would cost around one-twelfth of a denarius, but that's still 24 days room and board. Either way, two denarii would cover somewhere between one month and two months all-inclusive care at the inn. That's pretty amazing, pretty generous isn't it? No question about whether this man counts as a neighbour or not; the only issue is how the Samaritan can love him to the full extent of his need.

In verse 35 he says to the innkeeper, 'Look after him, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' As if he hasn't done enough for this man already, now he's exposing himself to serious extortion! 'I need to continue on my journey, but spend whatever you need, give him whatever he requires for a full recovery, and when I come back, I'll pay you for that as well.' Generous, wouldn't you say? More than generous? Over the top, perhaps?

Maybe you're thinking well, I saw a stranger in need once, and I gave him ten quid ... oh, really? Did you ever see a stranger in need, somebody you didn't know, someone who might have been your arch-enemy, but you still went over to them, ministered to all their needs, gave them everything they required, took them to a place where they could recover, stayed with them, arranged a bed for them, fed and looked after them, stayed up all night until you were sure that they were recovering, then paid for two months ongoing care in advance? Did you say to the owner of the place as you went on your way, 'Oh, and if it's any more than this, when I come back I'll give you the rest?' Have you ever done that?

Most of you are shaking your heads, but you're wrong. There IS someone you've done that for, and it's you. That's how we care for ourselves, isn't it? Give **me** whatever I need. Get **me** to the best doctor, get **me** to the best place, get **me** the best care available, look after **me** for as long as I require. But for a stranger, never mind an enemy, this is over the top. Am I saying that nobody's ever done it? No, it could be done, and it has been done, and perhaps you've been very generous like this on an odd occasion in your life, but that's not the issue. The question is have you, for the whole of your life, loved strangers like this? Of course not! We're basically without limit in taking care of ourselves. People go into debt, in some cases bankruptcy, to make sure they don't deny themselves anything that they need. But who else do you love like that?

This story is about mercy and limitless love, you see. This is about someone who said 'I will care for this man without limits. I will love him, even though he's my enemy and a stranger to me; whatever he needs, I will provide it for him, and there are no limits. He has an open account. When I come back, just tell me what else was required, and I'll take care of that too.'

Friends let me tell you something ... that's what it takes, all of the time, to earn your way into God's kingdom. Anybody here qualify? No? I didn't think so. **That's** the point. That's the point about eternal life. **That's** the reason Jesus told this story in the first place. Sometimes we teach children, you know, share your lunch; be a Good Samaritan. No! Share your lunch is fine, but

don't confuse it with being a Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan didn't share his lunch, he expressed limitless love, to a man he never knew, who was a stranger and an enemy.

In verse 36, right at the end of the story, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer says, "The one who had mercy on him." He was right. Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Would you allow me to add something here? "Go and do likewise ... and if you do that, you will earn eternal life, but you have to **always** do that." Why did Jesus say this? What was it supposed to do? Produce conviction. Anybody in your path, any stranger you come across, even your worst enemy; love them lavishly, sacrificially, tenderly, generously, limitlessly, kindly, with an open account. That's how you love yourself. You know the law; love your neighbour as yourself ... go and do likewise.

Let me emphasise something important here. This isn't a command to a Christian; it's nothing that Jesus is commanding us to do. You can't, and you don't, and you never will be able to love like this. There may be a rare occasion when you express an exceptional degree of love for someone, but what Jesus is talking about is limitless, lavish love toward anybody and everybody, something completely beyond our capability. We love ourselves like this; we don't love others in this way. What Jesus is doing here, is giving the lawyer one last opportunity to say, 'I don't love like that. I can't love like that. I never will love like that. I'll never get in the Kingdom, if that's what's required. To tell you the truth Jesus, if I don't love my neighbour this way, I obviously don't love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength either. Why don't I give up now, and just admit it?' That would have been wonderful, wouldn't it, if he had said that? But he didn't.

And friends, if that's what it took for us to get to heaven, we'd never make it either. That's why the bible reminds us that we're saved and kept by the mercy and grace of God, are we not? We'll never be able to love God perfectly until we're in his presence, and we'll never be able to love others perfectly until we're in his presence either, and by the time we get to be in his presence, none of us will have any needs anyway. So it's going to be a different kind of expression of love.

What Jesus is doing here, is driving the same sword straight back into the lawyers heart. If he thought that his Jewishness, circumcision, law-keeping, sacrificing and all of that kind of thing was going to be enough, Jesus stops him dead by his own admission that the law comes down to just two things; loving God and loving others. He'd have to say that he'd always loved everyone in the same way the Samaritan loved that man; with limitless, open-ended, lavish, generous, sacrificial care. He knew, just as well as we do, that nobody can love like that ... but friends, that's how God loves us. This isn't a parable about the love of God, but that **is** how God loves us.

So what can we learn from this story, and what should our response be? I suspect the answer to that question, depends on which of the characters we identify with the most. But what if I asked you which character would you **like** to be? I think most people would say 'The Good Samaritan; the one who showed compassion and cared for his neighbour.' Am I right? You see, I think the majority of people only notice four characters in this story; the lawyer who asked the question, the injured man, the Good Samaritan and the two religious leaders.

The Samaritan took the man to the inn and asked the innkeeper to care for him; not only to care for him, but to spend his own money too, if required. The innkeeper agreed to care for someone that he'd never met, based on a promise from someone that he didn't know. In this story, the Samaritan takes nearly all the credit, but it's the innkeeper who's doing most of the work. Maybe this morning, what God wants us to learn is that we too should be living our lives in merciful service, just as the innkeeper lived his. The church needs more innkeepers.

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Father, we thank you for the richness of this story. Thank you that when we receive your mercy and new life in Christ, you enable us to love so much better. We confess that our love still isn't perfect; we don't love you or others as we should. We ask for mercy and forgiveness. Help us to grow in love and limitless devotion, to give to you all that you deserve, and to care for others in meeting their needs too. We ask these things for the glory of your name. Amen.