

The Greatest Parable

TEXT: Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-37

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 31, 2026

There is stiff competition when considering which of Jesus' parables is the greatest. Many would go to the mat for the Prodigal Son; and Octavia Butler makes sure the Parable of the Sower stays in the running. But the one I have preached about the most across my career is the Parable of the Good Samaritan found in the Gospel that records more parables than any other, Luke.

The first advantage I think the Good Samaritan parable has, is that Jesus puts it in a well-known historical location, so we're better able to put ourselves in the story. In any story, when we can feel like we're there, and experience some version of what the characters experience, we're better able to understand and learn from its message.

The parable begins with Jesus describing a man traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. That road had and has strategic importance, with the oasis of Jericho, now in Palestinian territory, the place where royalty and oligarchs of the Hellenistic-Roman period put their summer palaces. It's in Jericho that Jesus finds and converts the corrupt tax collector, Zacchaeus.

Jericho is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, dating back to about 9,000 BCE. Marking the border between the territory of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the road was an important trade route. But it was not for the faint of heart. Jericho is close to the Dead Sea, which is the lowest point of land on earth. If you climb the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, as Jesus did at least twice in his ministry, you had to ascend 3,500 ft. in 24 miles of road, just two miles shy of marathon length.

The grade of the incline for Heartbreak Hill in the Boston Marathon is 3.3%, which you have to run for half a mile. The grade of incline for the 24-mile Jerusalem-to-Jericho Road is 14,583%. The climate is also dramatically different on the two ends, with a Mediterranean climate in Jerusalem and the dry desert surrounding Jericho.

So, the road itself took a physical toll, whether going up or down. Then, you add in the thieves who lurked in the shadows and behind the hills along the way, taking advantage of both the physical weariness of its travelers and the fact that both the very rich and traders, moving between the capital and the oasis palaces of Jericho, all had to use that road. Almost all would need to stop and take breaks along the way, making easy pickings for thieves, who had a very good chance of a substantial haul should their attack succeed.

At the halfway point along the road is an inn—or rather it was an inn until it became an Israeli national park, museum and archaeological site. Guides on tour busses today, point it out as Christian pilgrims ride comfortably down the road, describing the hillside location as the location of the inn where the Good Samaritan took the wounded man in the road for care. I heard it myself on my visit in 2007 and about came out of my seat.

What I wanted to shout at the tour guide was, "It's a **parable!** It's a story Jesus made up to help someone who asked him a question remember the answer. The Good Samaritan did not go to that place you're pointing to any more than Atticus Finch delivered his monologue in a very particular Alabama courtroom; because they are fictional characters! There was an old inn on the site of the current museum called the Good Samaritan Inn, but it was built in the sixth century on top of an early Byzantine fortress.

The reason the guide's identification so upset me is that it furthers the misunderstanding that the Bible is a compendium of facts. As you've heard me say many times, truth and facts are related, but ultimately different things.

Facts are considered “true,” but are in a category of truth reserved for things that can be proven with the tools provided by math, science, or verified historical record. But facts are only a subset of the much broader category of Truth. And all truth—even the factual kind—is not only *frequently* taught, but *best* taught through either direct experience or stories where we can be drawn in to gain that experience through either historical or fictional characters. Historical fiction gives us both.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is historical fiction; and both are great because they both use places, cultures, and dangers well-known to their audiences to help them experience, and thereby come to understand, the same truth about what it takes to love our neighbors. It’s a hard and uncomfortable truth, which is why *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most frequently banned and challenged books in the United States.

I think the lawyer comes to test Jesus because he doesn’t like the love your neighbor truth either; and one of the reasons I give the Parable of the Good Samaritan the crown is because Jesus sees that coming, and rubs the guy’s nose in it.

It’s important to note that the Parable is told in response to two questions asked by a legal scholar—which in this context means a scholar of the Torah, likely a Pharisee. The man’s motive for asking is laid out in the text—he is there to “test” Jesus, and the word for “test” in the Greek is the same word used for the devil’s temptations in the wilderness in Matthew 4. So, it’s a testing, yes, but with the intent to cause Jesus to veer off course or fail in some way. The Greek word is only used four times in the entire New Testament and the other three all warn not to do it.

Unlike the Parable of the Prodigal Son and several others which appear in groups of parables on similar themes, this one stands on its own. It’s not part of a broader teaching, but is a response to a particular question; and I think Luke put it here to emphasize a point Jesus makes just before.

The parable comes right at the end of two mission trips made by various groups of Jesus’ disciples. Before going to a town, Jesus would send out a forward team to scout out a place for them to stay and to determine whether a town would be generally receptive to their presence. Jesus sent his closest twelve disciples out on such a mission in Luke, chapter 9, and then, at the start of chapter 10, Jesus sends 70 others out to surrounding towns to help plan his route.

Right before the lawyer questions Jesus, the 70 have just returned, overjoyed at their reception. Jesus rejoices at their success—specifically because this was a group that likely could not have been successful were it not for God’s power working through them. Jesus prays, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”

Then he turns to the disciples who just came back and says, privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

And it’s right after that that the lawyer stands up to test Jesus and will end up proving Jesus’ point in that prayer: The wise and intelligent of the world—that is, the lawyer—are clueless while the infants—Jesus’ disciples—see plainly.

Never, ever lose sight of the first question the lawyer asks, that will lead to the parable. The man asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Whether “eternal life” was even a thing was a divisive question at the time; and it was one of the key points of conflict between the Pharisees—the lawyers and scholars—and the Sadducees, who were the priestly class.

In fact, in the passage that Bernadette read from Matthew, when Jesus is asked by a Pharisee which commandment is the greatest; his question came in response to Pharisees happily watching a smackdown by Jesus of the Sadducees for not understanding what eternal life even meant.

We'll go back to Matthew in a bit, but in Luke's account, which could be a variant of the same story, Jesus doesn't answer the question directly but turns it back on the man. He's a scholar of the law, he should know the answer, right? So, Jesus responds, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

Jesus is not going to fall into whatever trap the man was trying to set. The man is perfectly capable of answering the question himself—one of the reasons the question itself is suspect. And he does: "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." Jesus then says, simply, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

That the lawyer knew that answer, tells us that Jesus didn't invent that combination of two Old Testament laws—the first from Deuteronomy 6:5 and the second part from Leviticus 19:18. It had been circulating for long enough that not only did the lawyer know it, Jesus expected him to know it.

If the question had been sincere, they should have been able to just move on and go about their business, but no. The question—and therefore the test—was a setup to be able to ask the next one, "And who is my neighbor?" Clearly, the lawyer does not believe the answer is "everybody." He would like to know who Jesus would place outside the circle.

Mr. Rogers was not around to set the man straight, so Jesus does it with a bit of historical fiction—the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Set in a particular place everyone knew, in the time and culture of those who heard it, and describing an event that everyone knew was common on that particular road.

The challenge for Jesus in telling the story is finding a single character who could effectively signify that there are no limits on the word, "Neighbor." While carefully avoiding shining a negative light on the Pharisees, which could have shut off the lawyer's ability to engage the parable, Jesus has just a priest and a Levite be the two who ignore the man in the ditch.

The only main group of religious leaders not yet mentioned in Jesus' story were the Pharisees; and I think it's likely that Jesus set the lawyer up to expect his own group to be named as the hero of the story. Because, after all, he knew the answer to the eternal life question. He was a good guy.

And then the Samaritan saunters into the picture and steals the glory. Picking a Samaritan as the hero could not have been more upsetting. The hatred between Jews and Samaritans had been building for almost a millennium. For the lawyer, the only acceptable role for a Samaritan in Jesus' story would have been casting him as the violent thief, not the hero.

But the Samaritans and Jews were, quite literally, neighbors, sharing a border, and, in the most brilliant twist in the story, that difficult, dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho was the road you had to take if you wanted to get from Galilee to Judea without setting foot in Samaria.

Worse, Jesus drags out the description of the Samaritan's good works. The Samaritan doesn't just bandage the man up, but goes above and beyond, the "extra mile," if you will. The Samaritan puts the wounded man on his own donkey, which means that the Samaritan now has to walk that brutally difficult road.

He gives his all for this man. He gives his time, compassion, and supplies to clean and bind the wounds. He gives his ride and suffers physically to guide both animal and the wounded man to an inn where he pays two days wages for the man's care, with a promise of more. The Samaritan loves with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength and his literal neighbor as himself.

Then Jesus brings his would-be tester to his metaphorical knees to make sure the man has understood. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer is forced to answer, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise," knowing from the set of questions the lawyer brought to him in the first place, that such had not been the man's prior practice.

The thing that this parable does so perfectly is to connect the two parts of the Great Commandment. Technically, in Matthew, Jesus names the Deuteronomy 6 passage as the greatest, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.” And then Jesus adds that the second greatest commandment is “like it.”

That phrase for “like it,” is used throughout the Gospels when Jesus is comparing a heavenly thing to a more familiar earthly thing. Every phrase that begins, “The kingdom of heaven is like” is using the word Jesus uses to stitch together that first commandment to the one from Leviticus: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

I believe loving God with all we have and are is the greatest commandment, because putting that into practice by loving our neighbors grants eternal life; which Jesus and the lawyer both confirm in Luke 10. And the parable of the Good Samaritan is the greatest parable because it leaves no wiggle room in what that means. We don’t get to pick and choose those who deserve our compassion. When we live our lives the way the Samaritan lived his, we are in full obedience to the greatest commandment. If we don’t; we aren’t.

When we talked about the Ten Commandments, I made a point that God does not tell Moses to post them anywhere. All that sturm und drang (literally: storm and stress) on the mountain to get them, and he can’t even hang them on the wall. Nope. They go inside the Ark of the Covenant, which has a seat called the “Mercy Seat” on top of it, where Moses is to sit when he is judging the cases brought to him by the people. The law, as the foundation, tempered by the mercy of the one who uses them to judge the people.

Instead, it’s the Deuteronomy 6 commandment, the one Jesus names as the greatest, that God wants plastered everywhere. Listen to the full thing. Deuteronomy 6:4-9: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

That is the commandment we forget at our peril, which is why **it** is supposed to be posted everywhere and said multiple times daily. It is **that** command that is written inside the phylacteries worn by observant Jews on their hands or foreheads. It is **that** command that is written inside the mezuzah attached to the front door and gates. It is **that** command that is to be said first thing in the morning and the last thing at night and taught to children as soon as is humanly possible.

And when someone hears it and asks, but what does it look like to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, you could direct them to Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” You could go through the entire Gospel story, if there’s time. Or you could just reach for the quick and clear story, that a really famous first-century rabbi once told, of a man who was attacked and left for dead on the road and the sworn enemy who gave his all to bring him back to life. Amen.