

Scripture Reading for August 21, 2022

1 John 4:7-12, 19-21 (NIV)

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Luke 10:25-37 (NIV)

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷ 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.'" ²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ In reply 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. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.' ³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" ³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Sermon: “Go, Do, and Live”

The term “good Samaritan” has entered the English language through this much-loved story of Jesus, one that’s *only* told in Luke’s Gospel. The expression is used to describe someone who is charitable or helpful, especially to a *stranger* in distress. For example, someone who stops and helps you replace your flat tire could be described as a good Samaritan. It’s meant as a compliment because the person goes out of their way to help you in your need with no thought of personal reward for their act. For sure, the world needs more good Samaritans, but that’s *not* really the point of Jesus’ parable. So let’s explore this story together and discover its context and deeper meanings.

We are told that a Jewish scholar of the mosaic Law asked Jesus, “Teacher, what must *I do* to inherit eternal life?”¹ First, the expression “inherit eternal life” means “obtain life in the coming age” or life in “God’s kingdom.” The stress is *not* on the word “eternal,” as in living *forever*,² but means “life *with* God.”³ Second, the pious Jew anticipates *his own actions* can achieve the result he desires.⁴ Third, Luke indicates this question was a test to see if Jesus was a heretic.⁵ Jesus responds to the question with a question: “What is written in the law? How do you understand it?”⁶ And the expert replies⁷ with the summary of the mosaic law, namely that we are to love God with our whole being.⁸ And then he adds, and “love our neighbor as ourself.”⁹ Naturally, Jesus agrees whole-heartedly with those two commands and says, “*Do this, and you will live.*” In other words, it’s *not just about knowing* the commandments, it’s actually *doing* them! If you *do that* you are member of God’s kingdom.¹⁰ So far so good; Jesus has demonstrated his orthodoxy.

The Jewish scholar then asks a supplementary question: “Who is my neighbor?”¹¹ Now this expert of the mosaic law should know the answer to his question because in Leviticus it clearly states that, “The resident foreigner who lives with you must be to you as a native citizen among you; so you must *love* the foreigner as yourself, because you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD *your* God.”¹² Pious Jews following the exile, who were eager to stress personal holiness and religious purity, would

¹ Luke 10:25. This was a standard rabbinical question, and a standard response was anticipated.

² i.e., a temporal word of life’s *duration*. John 3:16 uses the same phrase, whereas the synoptics speak of *life in the kingdom*.

³ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Confusing-Conversation-with-Nicodemus.pdf>.

⁴ Concerning the matter of divine grace versus works, as in James or Paul (Rom 4:13-25); see: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Saved-by-Faith-through-God%E2%80%99s-Grace.pdf>.

⁵ See also Mark 12:28-34 and Matt 22:34-40; they report Jesus as *answering* the question, thus demonstrating his orthodoxy.

⁶ Luke 10:26. See also [3].

⁷ In similar confrontations between Jesus and a Jewish legal expert, see Mark 12: 20-31 and Matt 22: 37-40, it is *Jesus* himself who utters those words thus affirming his Jewish orthodoxy.

⁸ Luke 10:27, citing Deut 6:5.

⁹ Luke 10:27, citing Lev 18.18. (Linking these two is, apparently, unusual and profound; see [7].)

¹⁰ The matter of this age being a “coming” or future age (“*will live*”) is confusing. This age begins *now*; it’s not merely a hope for an afterlife. This temporal point is not the issue in this conversation, but it worth bearing in mind.

¹¹ Luke 10:29. Luke adds that the expert asked this to “*justify himself.*”

¹² Lev 19:34. (See also the later visionary oracles of Ezekiel in Ezek 34; 37:15-28; cf. Gen 12:1-3.)

have flinched at this instruction. Some later Jewish scholars had interpreted the word “neighbor” as simply fellow Jews - and *only* devout ones at that!¹³ Put more broadly and more positively, the scholar was asking “How *wide* is God’s mercy; *who* can be recipients of God’s grace?” And you can see that this question is a further test for Jesus.

Jesus responds with this very familiar parable; nevertheless, let me outline it. A Jewish man was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho.¹⁴ The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous in that it descended nearly 3500 feet in 17 miles and the path contained narrow passages and bends which offered easy hiding places for bandits. We are told the lone man was robbed, beaten, stripped, and left for dead. Consequently, there was nothing obvious to identify his status or nationality. This man was an innocent victim of random violence and brutality, and anybody hearing the story could identify with it and appreciate his desperate need. Since Jesus is addressing a Jewish scholar, he makes it personal by throwing into his story two highly-esteemed religious figures associated with the Jerusalem temple, namely a priest and a Levite – or a temple assistant.¹⁵ The two men act in identical ways: they arrive, they see the man, they pass by, and *nothing can excuse their refusal* to reach out. If a priest or a Levite found a corpse it was their duty to bury it. In the process, they would have automatically become ritually unclean and hence disqualified from their temple responsibilities until purified. So when they each saw the victim, they faced a choice between *duty* to the man and *duty* to the temple; they chose the latter and passed by “on the other side” – and it wasn’t for reasons of COVID! They sought to preserve their religious purity at the cost of obedience to God’s law of love.

If that inaction wasn’t shocking enough, the next to arrive is a Samaritan.¹⁶ The hatred between Jews and Samaritans had gone on for hundreds of years, and it’s still reflected, tragically, in the smoldering tension between Israel and Palestine today. To a Jew, Samaritans were regarded as ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, and religiously heretical¹⁷ – the very *opposite* of the two temple officials. This Samaritan saw the injured man and had *compassion* for him, which was then expressed *in practical action*. He approached the injured man, poured wine on the wounds to help cleanse them, applied olive oil to them to keep them soft, and bandaged him up. He then put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. If that wasn’t enough kindness, the Samaritan gave the innkeeper the

¹³ See Sir 12:1-4. This isolationism is also to be found in Nehemiah.

¹⁴ Jerusalem is about 2500 feet above sea level whereas Jericho is 770 feet below, near the Dead Sea.

¹⁵ Priests were the clergy responsible for worship and sacrifices of the temple in Jerusalem. Levites assisted them in these and other temple duties, e.g., providing music for the worship and maintaining the security of the temple building. Many of them lived in the fertile Jericho region, famous for its date plantations and a delightfully warm place to stay in winter. And there would have been a lot of traveling backwards and forwards to Jerusalem from Jericho as they came on and off duty.

¹⁶ What’s often overlooked is that the Samaritans hated the Jews too! (This was a *mutual* enmity.) The point of this story is *not*: be nice like the Samaritan not nasty like the clerics! (There is much more to it than that...)

¹⁷ Jews from the Southern Kingdom regarded Samaritans as unclean people, descendants of mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of the people from various regions in the fallen Northern Kingdom, see 2 Kings 17:6, 24. (See also John 4; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Jesus-Giver-of-Living-Water.pdf> .)

equivalent of two days' wages, saying: "Take care of him, and whatever else you spend, I will repay you when I come back this way."¹⁸ We witness compassion, kindness in action, and abundant grace.

At the end of the story, when Jesus goes back to the scholar's original question, Jesus responds to that question in a different way. He asks him, "Which of these three do you think turned out to be the neighbor of the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"¹⁹ The expert in the mosaic law replies, "The one who showed mercy to him." He understood the point even if he couldn't bring himself to utter the word "Samaritan." And Jesus pointedly responds, "Go *and do* the same."²⁰ In other words, "*Do* this and you will live with God, both now and in the age to come." And let's not overlook the fact that from the parable's perspective, it is the *Samaritan* who has eternal life in God's kingdom, *not* the two pious Jews! What a scandalous message!

Here are a few further observations concerning this story:

First, the religious expert wants to define *who is deserving of his* love. He sought some legal boundary to define his responsibility in "loving your neighbor as oneself," perhaps seeking to define the word "neighbor" as *not* a despised foreigner or a believer of a different creed. In order to make the parable more real for us today, we need to replace the word "Samaritan" with something different, such as a Muslim, or someone who is gay, or someone who's skin color is not white, or who's from a different political party. In the parable that Jesus tells, however, a neighbor is implicitly defined *not* as someone *worthy to receive love* but as *someone able to offer it*. Jesus leads the scholar to the conclusion that neighbors *are those who act in love towards others*. This is radical upside-down thinking that pushes any previous boundaries to define neighbor much further than they ever were before, well beyond any established prejudices. Authentic love, then, does not discriminate, it creates neighborly relationships because by its very nature *it seeks to meet the needs of others*. This message is stunningly simple, although it's *not* simplistic *or* easy to implement. Just a moment of reflection reveals that there's a distinct lack of *kindness* in many parts of our public world, just think of our national and international politics, or think of a world that's often driven by competition, ambition, greed, and individualism. Such things can be experienced in our workplace and social circles too. We need to be mindful of this, even when we focus on *ethics* because we may be more concerned about our *rights* than *forgiveness*, for *justice* rather than *mercy*, and for *equality* rather than *compassion*.

Second, let's consider ourselves the mugged person in the ditch for a moment and ask, "Is there any person, from any kind of grouping, about whom we would rather die than receive their offer of help? Are we able to recognize that the person we despise, or are inclined to mistrust, might be the neighbor who rescues us? Whether we are the helpless victim or the prejudiced religious-type who refuses to help, Luke has previously given the teaching of Jesus that says: "Love your enemies, do good to people

¹⁸ See Luke 10:34-35.

¹⁹ Luke 10:36.

²⁰ Luke 10:37.

who hate you; do good without expecting any return. Be merciful, just as your Father [in heaven] is merciful.”²¹ This command of Jesus is clearly embodied in this parable. And when I hear that word “mercy,” I am reminded of Jesus’ teaching to the religious leaders in Matthew, “Go and learn what this saying means: ‘I want mercy and not sacrifice.’”²² That saying is from Hosea, and Matthew has Jesus quoting this scripture twice in his Gospel. Earlier in the parable, I mentioned that the two temple officials faced a choice between *duty* to the victim and *duty* to the temple. Had they known their scriptures well, they would have known that God desires those words of Hosea to be lived out. High-minded religious principles, even good ones, does *not* excuse lovelessness. God’s grace eclipses law.

Third, for the Jewish scholar, God was the God of Israel *only*, whereas for Jesus – and for Luke – Israel’s God is the God of grace for the *whole* world. The expert’s question about “who is my neighbor?” was designed to reveal Jesus’ supposedly heretical views on God’s wider plan for the *whole* world, and consequently to show that he was justified in challenging Jesus. And it does indeed produce from Jesus an answer about the wide-reaching grace of God. But it’s also a story that makes it clear that these views of Jesus are *not* heretical, but a true fulfillment of the mosaic commandment - which the religious expert claims to regard as vital. What’s at stake, then and now, is the question of whether we will use that God-given revelation of love and grace and try and keep it for *ourselves* or whether we will see it as a call and a challenge to extend that love and grace to the *whole* world. No church, no Christian, can remain content with easy definitions of “neighbor” which allows us to watch most of the world lying half-dead in the road. We must find fresh ways of telling the story of God’s love which will do for our day what this brilliant parable did for Jesus’ first audience.²³

Finally, this parable illustrates that grace comes in surprising ways and from sources people seldom expect. Let me give you a modern example: There was a news story some time ago (in 2005) about a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, called Ahmed Khatib, who had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his house.²⁴ The boy had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital where, sadly, he died two days later. His parents, Ismail and Abla, made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant *to Israelis*. Various people received Ahmed’s heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. Abla, the boy’s mother, said: “My son has died, God rest his soul; maybe he can give life to others.” Through this act of kindness to an enemy, these parents made their own journey into the compassion of God and are living eternal life.

Yes, grace *does* come in surprising ways, but let’s not forget there’s a price to be paid. In the parable, the man who was left for dead is rescued and given life at the expense of the Samaritan. In the above news story, new life was graciously given to enemies through organ donation, bringing some good out

²¹ See Luke 6:27-36; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Love-Your-Enemy-Really.pdf> .

²² Matt 9:13; 12:7.

²³ See Reddish, *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A.* (Deep River Books, 2015), chapter 5.

²⁴ See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2005/11/12/life-and-hope-flow-from-palestinian-boys-death/1489edd1-6b2d-4886-8745-36d509b54b71/> .

of a terrible tragedy. The real-life story of Jesus also has a death, a crucifixion in fact, and the religious elite had a hand in it. Jesus came in peace and was misunderstood; as he approached Jerusalem, he wept with compassion for his fellow Jews, indeed for the whole world.²⁵ Yet out of his tragic death, new life came because God raised Jesus from the dead. The early church recognized that act as sign of God's GRACE, namely "God's Riches At Christ's Expense" (G.R.A.C.E),²⁶ riches that we can enjoy even now as members of God's kingdom, for God's new age that has *already* begun. Let us then, like the Samaritan, live in the fullness of our life in God, willingly extending grace to others for we are recipients of God's generosity, love, and mercy. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁵ Luke 19:41-44. Jesus being the Savior of the whole world is a major theme in Luke (Luke 2:10-11; 28-32).

²⁶ For example, see: Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:16-21. The resurrection was understood to be God's vindication of Jesus the Messiah.