

Compassion Sunday Sample Sermon (Words: 2,739)

Who Is My Neighbor? A New Take on a Familiar Story

This morning I'd like to take you to an isolated spot on a dangerous road in the Middle East known as "The Bloody Pass." The road, at the time of this event, was more of a narrow path — a twisting, turning path with cliffs and caves on either side — lots of places for thugs to hide. This particular place, "The Bloody Pass," got its name because of the violence that commonly occurred there.

Unfortunately, one poor man happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. He was attacked by bandits and left half-dead, tossed to the side of the road. He was bleeding and certainly would die without help. The bandits even took his clothes.

Recognize this story? It's one of Jesus' most well-known parables — the Good Samaritan.

In fact, most of us have heard it so many times that we tend to gloss over it, thinking, *Yeah, yeah, the Good Samaritan — help people in trouble and stuff ... got it.* But today, I want to slow down and take another look at this familiar story. I want to shine a different light on Jesus' words — a light that could quite possibly change your life.

Listen to the story again. ... (Read Luke 10:25-37.) First, I want you to notice the setup for the story of the Good Samaritan. What prompted Jesus to tell this story in the first place? Verse 25 says that an "expert in the law" wanted to "test" Jesus. In other words, this man, who knew the Old Testament and Jewish law backward and forward, inside and out, was trying to trip Jesus up.

When the man asked, "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" How did Jesus respond? He said, basically, "Hey, you're the expert. What does the Law say?" The "Law" Jesus referred to here is the "law of Moses," or the first five books of the Old Testament.

The expert then recited what Jesus calls in Matthew 22* the greatest and the second greatest commandments:

He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In return, Jesus responded, in essence, "You got it. Do those two things — one, love God with your

whole being and, two, love your neighbor as yourself — and you will live.” That’s it, pure and simple, discussion over. Right? Wrong — the expert of the law wasn’t about to let it go at that. He was determined to ask Jesus a question He couldn’t answer. So he said, “OK, Jesus, tell me this: Who is my neighbor?”

I can just imagine the expert folding his arms across his chest, a smug grin on his face that says, “I got you now!” I can also imagine Jesus looking the man square in the eyes, pausing a moment, taking a deep breath, then saying, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. ...”

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Who is my neighbor? That’s the question I want us to consider today. Who is it, exactly, that God calls us to love just as much as we love ourselves? And beyond that, once we know who our neighbor is, what do we do? How do we show that we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves? Jesus answers the question in a beautiful story of compassion in action. Let’s review this story and see what it has to say to us today.

After the man was beaten, robbed and left to die by the side of the road, along came three men, and the point of Jesus’ story is how each of them responds to this poor man in his time of extreme need. The first two were religious people — a Jewish priest and a rabbi. They knew God’s Word. They held positions of authority in the synagogue. People looked up to them as leaders. And what did they do when they saw the critically injured man lying on the roadside? They “passed by on the other side.”

The third man — not a religious professional like the priest and rabbi, not even Jewish but a native of Samaria — stopped. Why? Because, Jesus says, “He took pity on him.” Now, as you might already know, the Samaritans and Jews were longtime, sworn enemies. But not only did the Samaritan in Jesus’ story feel compassion for the Jewish man barely clinging to life, but he also got involved. He took immediate action to help. The Samaritan used wine and oil as antiseptics to clean the man’s wounds, then he bandaged them. Next he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he paid the innkeeper to care for him.

So what message did Jesus want to get across? Remember, He told this story to answer the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” So what is the answer? Let’s read verses 36 and 37 again. Jesus said,

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

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Now let’s fast-forward to today. Jesus ended His conversation with the lawyer with a powerful

command: Go and do likewise. That command — go and do likewise — rings through the centuries and lands squarely on our shoulders today. Make no mistake — the mandate to love our neighbor as ourselves is just as much the responsibility of God's people today as it was 2,000 years ago.

But just like 2,000 years ago, the question for us today is, "Who is our neighbor?" The parable of the Good Samaritan gives us the answer. It's simple — like the man on the side of the road, our neighbor is anyone in need that we are in a position to help. Let me say that again: Our neighbor is anyone in need that we are in a position to help.

Scripture has a lot to say about those who are in need — the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the discriminated against. In fact, did you know that more than 560 verses from Genesis through Revelation deal with the responsibility of God's people to the poor and oppressed? More than 560 verses! Listen to four of them:

Whoever is kind to the needy honors God. — Proverbs 14:31

*If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.
— Proverbs 21:13*

If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness. — Isaiah 58:10

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? — 1 John 3:17

And there are at least 556 more verses that say, basically, God expects His people — that's you and me — to care for the poor and oppressed in our world. We are blessed when we do this and held accountable when we don't.

God has a heart for the poor, and He wants us to have one too. More than that, like the Good Samaritan, He wants us to move beyond having a heart for the poor and just feeling pity for their condition to taking action on their behalf — in His name. He wants us to be His hands and feet and voice for those in need. He wants us to be their champions, as Proverbs 31:8 and 9 says,

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

I like the way the great theologian John Stott put it: "The perspective of Scripture is not the survival of the fittest, but the protection of the weakest."

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Let's revisit Jesus' story, but now imagine it in today's terms. Imagine that instead of a man left for dead on the side of the road, there is a child. This child is one of 135 million children born into our

world each year to begin their journey on the road of life. For children born in the United States and other developed countries, generally that journey is a relatively smooth one. More often than not, most of them receive the nurture, protection and learning opportunities they need to survive and thrive on the journey.

However, for one-quarter of the children born each year, like the child I want you to imagine today, the road of life is like the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It's a dangerous journey filled with the bandits of poverty, hunger and disease. Without mercy, these bandits strike children when they reach the place in the road where they are the most vulnerable — “The Bloody Pass.” And tragically, many of these little ones are lost along the way. Each and every day, nearly 27,000 little ones younger than 5 lose their lives to these bandits because no one came to their rescue as they lay dying on the side of life's road.

Of course, lots of people pass by our child on the side of the road. Like the Jewish priest and the rabbi, many of them are religious people. Like you and me, they are believers and good people, seeking to live lives that are pleasing to God. So why do they — why do we — ignore the child's cries and pass by on the other side?

For many of us, the needs of the world's poor are simply too large, too overwhelming, too discouraging. It's not that we don't care, but with nearly 1 billion people existing on less than a dollar a day, saving one child beaten up and left half-dead by poverty just won't make a difference. Others of us think that taking care of the world's poor children is a job better left to governments and all those big international organizations like UNICEF. Others of us think, *I've got my hands full taking care of the children in my own life. This other child — he's not my child; he's not from my community; he's not even from my country. Therefore, it's not my problem.*

But — and I want you to hear me on this — that's not how God's Word directs us to think about, and deal with, the world's poor and oppressed. Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan makes it clear: Whenever we see someone in need and have the opportunity to do something about it, we must.

The Good Samaritan didn't pass by on the other side thinking, *There are lots of people who get mugged on this road. I won't solve the problem by helping just one person. Or, I'll leave this problem to the government and its agencies. They're much better equipped to help this guy. Or, This guy's not from my family or my community or even my country. Therefore, it's not my problem.*

No, as Jesus relates, the Samaritan man got involved. And he didn't just get involved — he went out of his way, he went “the extra mile” to help an individual in great need. He used his own resources — his oil and wine, his donkey, his money — to help. He enlisted the assistance of another — the innkeeper — to care for the man. He followed up with the man to make sure he had fully recovered. And then

what does Jesus tell us? “Go and do likewise.”

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I want to close with the story of a more recent, real-life Good Samaritan and a specific challenge.

It was 1952, the Korean War was raging and Everett Swanson, an American evangelist, was on a preaching tour of Japan and Korea. Everett shared the gospel with thousands of troops, and by the end of the tour, the young evangelist had led many to Christ. Certainly, he could have gone home satisfied that his mission for God’s kingdom had been accomplished — and accomplished well.

But one thing hounded Everett Swanson — troubled him all the way back to the United States. While in the city of Seoul, Korea, he had noticed scores of children who were living on the streets, orphaned by the war. They huddled together to keep warm and begged for coins. The plight of these little children touched Everett’s heart. But one morning before departing for home, he had an experience that did more than touch his heart — it changed his life.

On an early walk in the city, Everett glanced up when a flatbed truck stopped a few blocks ahead of him. Sanitation workers emerged from the cab to gather up trash from doorways and alleys and gutters along the street. They threw what appeared to be piles of rags on to the truck bed.

As he came closer, Everett noticed that the workers were kicking the rag piles before picking them up. That made sense; rats were common. One rag pile lay in a doorway not far from Everett. He reached it about the same time as one of the workers. That’s when he noticed that the pile was not just a tangle of rags. A small arm extended from the pile, and Everett began to make out the shape of a child sleeping underneath it. Opening his mouth to warn the worker not to kick the pile, the words stuck in his throat as he caught sight of the cargo on the flatbed truck.

The horror of what he was witnessing suddenly dawned on him. The workers were not there to gather trash. They were gathering the bodies of children who had died on the streets overnight. Those who had survived another night of that bitter Korean winter would be awakened by the kick of a sanitation worker, checking for signs of life, only to face another day of hunger, cold and despair.

Everett couldn’t get this horrific image of Korea’s abandoned children out of his mind. Like the rabbi and priest in Jesus’ parable, he could have simply left the country and washed his hands of the whole matter — not my children, not my country, not my problem. But he didn’t.

Not sure how to help these poor children, but determined to do whatever he could for those left to die on the streets of Seoul, he returned to the United States and started asking people to commit to contributing a small amount of money each month. He planned to use this money to provide for the

needs of destitute Korean orphans.

Everett Swanson's efforts steadily grew as more people caught the vision to follow Christ's command to "go and do likewise." Now, more than 55 years later, what Everett started is a thriving organization called Compassion International. Through the years, Compassion has enabled hundreds of thousands of people to reach out to impoverished children around the world who have been left by life's roadside. Today, I want to challenge you to catch the vision, too. You can rescue a child in need, a child ravaged by the bandits of poverty, by becoming a Compassion sponsor. As a sponsor, you can lift a child up from the side of the road. You can see that he or she receives an education. You can provide that child with regular medical care. You can make sure that a child learns about proper hygiene and nutrition to grow healthy and strong. Most important, you can provide this child with the good news of God's great love and the hope of eternal life through salvation in Christ.

As a sponsor, your own life will be changed, too. You will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are following Jesus' command and pleasing your heavenly Father. Your perspective and heart for the world will expand. You will acquire a greater appreciation for life and a more thankful heart. You will experience the richness and joy of watching the child you love and support grow into a confident, productive adult — able, in turn, to help others in need on the side of life's road.

As Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan demonstrates, there is great power in one individual reaching out to another, just as Christ Himself reaches out to each one of us on an individual basis. I pray today that you will join me and the thousands of other caring people who have taken up Jesus' challenge to "go and do likewise," who are changing the world, one child at a time, through Compassion sponsorship.

**All scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.*