

# On doing good

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning, St Marks. As John mentioned earlier, my name is Scott. I'm the Associate Rector at St James, just down the road. As you can tell, I'm not originally from around here. I'm an Aussie, and I came over to Cape Town in 2000, so I've been here 18 years, believe it or not. Well, the parable of the Good Samaritan. I think if you only knew five Bible stories, then this would be one of them. You'd probably know Adam and Eve, you'd probably know Noah, you'd probably hear, I've heard something about Moses, maybe David and Goliath, and then, of course, you would have heard about the Good Samaritan. And what's more, this is a story that people who aren't religious really like. It's a story that doesn't seem to offend anyone, because we think it tells us what we already believe to be true, and that is that if we show kindness to others, like the Samaritan in Jesus' parable, then we too can consider ourselves good, and God will reward us. And ultimately, many people assume that is what the message of Christianity is all about, that God really wants us to be nice to each other. So this is a safe Bible story because it doesn't have any of that awkward stuff about Jesus dying on the cross or talk of your sin or your need for salvation. But as I've been rereading Luke 10, 25 to 37, I've discovered that I think this is the least safe of all of the stories that Jesus ever told.

I discovered that it didn't mean what I thought it meant. So I feel that this morning's sermon needs a warning label, like that inflatable beach ball you have says warning, not to be used as a flotation device. Or your toaster says, you know, warning, do not attempt to make toast in the bath. I've never actually seen that warning label on a toaster, but they should have it there. The parable of the Good Samaritan should come with this warning label. Warning, careful reading of this story will shock you.

But it should also say warning, careful reading of these verses will drive you back into the arms of Jesus. Because I'm convinced that that is what this episode is here to do, to knock the legs out from under us, so to speak, so that we fall back into the open arms of Jesus. And there's not a person in this room this morning, myself included, who doesn't need to be caught by Jesus.

So as we consider this parable, the aim isn't to be surprised for surprise sake, but to let this sudden jolt propel you back to the mercy of God.

Now the reason why Jesus tells the parable is because he meets a man who asks him a question. In verse 25, Luke tells us that this man was an expert in the law, not a criminal lawyer, but in the field of religious law. He was a Jewish theologian. And he asks a brilliant question.

[ 3 : 1 7 ] He says, Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What do I have to do to get to heaven? That's the million dollar question, isn't it? And if you haven't asked that question before, then you haven't really discovered what it is you're here for. It's a great question.

But already there's a problem because it wasn't just a question, was it? What does Luke call it in verse 25? He calls it a test or a trap. This man was setting Jesus up so that he could catch Jesus out.

He didn't really have a lot of respect for Jesus at all. It turns out he was trying to trick Jesus into saying something that could then be used against him. There's a story from the life of Martin Luther, which says that someone once asked Luther the question, what was God doing before he made the world? Kind of like one of those, aha, I've got you now questions. And Luther replied, he was busy making a hell for people who ask stupid questions like that.

That's a pretty blunt way to shut down a heckler. Fortunately, God has sent Jesus, not Martin Luther, to be the saviour of the world. Because even though that is the kind of answer that this teacher of the law deserved, it's not the answer Jesus gave him. Jesus plays along.

And in doing so, the expert in the law falls back into his own trap. Jesus asks him, well, you're the expert in the law. What does God's law tell you? And immediately the man blows his cover because it becomes obvious that this whole thing was a setup because he already knew the answer to his own question. He says, well, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself. And Jesus says, yes, that's exactly what God's law says. Jesus himself actually used the same formula when he was asked to summarise the commandments. So, so far, so good. But then we hit a snag because in verse 28, Jesus says, go and do likewise. Do this and you will live. Now, just pause on that for a moment. How does Jesus' answer sit with you? Because this is where the wheels fell off for me. Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself. Do these things and you will live. Do this and you will go to heaven.

[ 6 : 06 ] Does that sit well with you? To be honest, on a first reading, I didn't like it at all. And I'll tell you why. Two reasons. Firstly, if you're a Christian, that sounds a little bit like the opposite of the gospel. Here we have an expert in the law, a man who thinks that by keeping the law, he can go to heaven. And Jesus seems to affirm his thinking in his answer. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Well, Jesus says, do this and you'll get eternal life. So what's Jesus saying? Is he saying that you can do enough good works to earn your way to heaven? The second reason I choked on this verse was because I know what this week has been like for me. And don't get me wrong, I've had a pretty good week, but I didn't even get past Monday before I had already broken both of these commandments.

And that's a good week. If this is the way to get to heaven, then I'm in big trouble because these things are beyond me, no matter how hard I try. I mean, just look at verse 27 again.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart. That means you never have a divided loyalty. With all your soul, never having a part of yourself secretly loving something else.

With all your strength, never faltering. And with all your mind, never straying. All the time. And love my neighbour in the same way I love myself.

If that's what it takes to get to heaven, then I realised I'm going to hell. So are you. And so is the expert in the law. But he gets 10 full marks for effort because he's not giving up yet.

[ 8 : 09 ] Check out verse 29. The expert in the law wanted to justify himself. So he asked Jesus, well, who is my neighbour? Now what's going on here? Well, you only need to justify yourself if you've fallen short or you haven't made the grade. To justify yourself is a way to excuse the gap between who you should be before God and who you really are before God.

The expert perfectly summarised God's law. But what he didn't expect is that Jesus would call his bluff and say, OK, you want to get eternal life by doing those good works, by keeping the rules?

Fine. Then off you go. Go and keep every single one of God's rules. Can you see what Jesus is doing here? To an expert in the law, a legalist, he says, if you want to get to heaven by doing the law, then you have to do all of it perfectly all the time.

Do that. Yeah, then you'll be deserving of eternal life. And you can imagine as this episode was unfolding, there was an awkward silence. Tumbleweeds blow past. Someone in the crowd does one of those polite little golf coughs.

Because I suspect it began to dawn on this expert what is probably dawning on you and me right now. And that is if this is what it takes to get to heaven, then he's never getting in.

[ 9 : 44 ] In fact, Galatians chapter 3 verse 10 says, For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. For it is written, cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.

So how is he possibly going to get eternal life? And the answer is, the only way for someone like him or you or me to keep God's law is if we shrink it.

You've got to find some way to make God's law smaller, to make it more manageable, just to make it possible so that you can justify yourself before God.

And so that's what he tries to do. He thinks to himself, well, obviously I can't love everybody. So can we redefine neighbour so I can love those people?

And in that way, I might be able to keep the letter of the law, even if I don't stand a chance of keeping the spirit of the law. And therefore, the expert has a lot more in common with us than we would probably like to admit.

[ 10 : 57 ] Because we've all done that, haven't we? I can love my neighbour as long as I don't include my enemy as my neighbour or the poor as my neighbour or the criminals as my neighbours or my boss or the bully at my kid's school or the taxi drivers or the Guptas as my neighbours.

And that's where the parable comes in. Jesus says, look, let me tell you a story. But in telling the story, Jesus moves the goalposts.

The expert in the law wanted to know, who is my neighbour? Now look at verse 36. Jesus instead tells a story to show what it takes to be a neighbour that loves in the way that God's law requires.

The expert asked, who do I have to love? But Jesus tells a different story. In his story, Jesus answers the question, this is how you have to love if you want to keep the law and justify yourself.

Now the parable itself, we know it well and it's not that complicated. A man is mugged and robbed and beaten to within an inch of his life. And when a Jewish priest sees this poor man, he gives him a wide berth.

[ 12 : 19 ] And the Levite does the same thing. These two characters, the priest and the Levite, they were the Jewish clergy, if you like. They both had jobs at the temple.

Now we're not told why they avoided this man and left him to die, but I bet you they were doing the same thing in their heads as the expert in the law was doing in his head before Jesus.

They were trying to justify themselves. I can't stop and help this man because then I'd be late offering sacrifices at the temple and everyone's depending on me.

Or I can't stop and help because if it turns out he's already dead and I go and touch him, that means I become ceremonially unclean and I won't even be able to go to the temple.

Or maybe they just thought, look, this isn't my fault. I didn't attack the man. It's terribly sad, but it's not my responsibility.

[ 13 : 18 ] Well, whatever the reason, they didn't even come close to loving their neighbour the way that God's law requires. They had failed God's law.

And these are the professional religious guys. And then along comes a Samaritan. Now, Samaritans were the redneck, heretic, half-cousins of the Jews.

And they hated the Jews. But that was fine because the Jews absolutely hated them in return. And yet it's the outcast Samaritan who actually keeps God's law of love your neighbour as yourself.

When the Jews heard this story, they would have immediately associated the Samaritan to be the baddie in the story. And yet the way Jesus tells it, he turns out to be the goodie. But look at how he does it.

Verse 33. Firstly, he took pity on the man. So it wasn't just duty. This was genuine. It was from his heart.

[ 14 : 23 ] You can't obey God just by keeping the letter of the law. If you want to keep God's law, it's got to be from the heart. You've got to want to do it. Then comes the oil and the wine.

That was like the first aid kit of the day. And then he puts the man on his donkey, which meant that he had to walk. And then he paid for the room at the inn at his own expense.

And then he cared for the man. The next day, he paid in advance for the room and for the care of the innkeeper. But then he adds, whatever else it costs you, spare no expense, I'll cover it.

I mean, that's giving the innkeeper a blank check. So this man gave his heart. He gave his time. He gave his transport. He gave his resources.

He gave his tenderness. And he basically gave this guy his ATM card and pin number. I mean, this is absurd. This is reckless love.

[ 15 : 28 ] This is love with no boundaries. And in verse 36, Jesus says, this story is what it means to love your neighbour as God requires.

If you want to justify yourself before God, then this is what it takes. So go and do it. And do you know what I think? At this point, I think this story sucks.

Because there is no way that I can do this to everybody all the time. I can't even act like this towards some people some of the time. To love my neighbour to the full extent of God's law is beyond me.

Now, be honest. Could you do what the Samaritan did? Would you do what the Samaritan did? Do you do what the Samaritan did?

Every time a homeless person comes to your window at the traffic light, do you let them hop in? Do you drive them home? Do you give them a shower and clean clothes? Do you feed them? Do you open a bank account for them and then get them a job?

[ 16 : 37 ] Now, don't get me wrong. That would be amazing. And if everyone in Cape Town did that, then Cape Town would be a very different place, wouldn't it? But this is not a parable about social justice, about how to help the poor and vulnerable.

Although, as it turns out, Luke's Gospel is the Gospel that shows Jesus' concern for the poor. Back in Luke 6, Jesus says, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

In chapter 12, Jesus says, your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom, so sell your possessions and give to the poor. And in chapter 19, when Zacchaeus turned from his sin to follow Jesus, he said, I give half of all I've got to the poor and I'll pay back those I've stolen from, four times the amount.

So, don't worry, care of the poor and the marginalised is very much alive in Luke's Gospel. It's just that Jesus told this parable in response to a legalist asking the question, how do I get to heaven?

And so, this parable here is not so much to tell us how to help the poor. It shows us what is required if you want to keep God's law perfectly.

[ 17 : 56 ] That's the point of this parable. If you want to be the sort of person who keeps the law enough to get to heaven, then this is what you must do and I don't know anyone like this.

That's why I said at the start that this passage needs a warning label. Because perhaps like me, you thought for the longest time that the parable of the Good Samaritan was about Jesus showing us how to love our neighbour so that we can go and do what the Samaritan did.

But reading it more carefully, it turns out that Jesus is talking to a legalist, someone who thinks that if they can keep God's law, then God will reward them. And so Jesus says, that's fine if that's what you think, go and do it.

Give it a shot. Just try it for one day and you'll discover, not that God's law is bad, quite the contrary.

God's law is good. It is too good. It's so good, it shows us what God is like. He's perfect. And it shows us what his standards are like.

[ 19 : 02 ] Also perfect. The expert in the law said, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And did you pick up the problem there? It's a bit of a giveaway. You don't do anything to receive an inheritance.

An inheritance is given and received based on what? Well, based on your relationship with the person who writes you in their will. It's not based on your performance.

It's based on their love and generosity. So from the get go, Jesus saw this so-called expert was trying to earn eternal life, even though he could only ever receive it as a gift from God.

He also saw that this man wasn't listening. He wasn't teachable. Remember, the question was actually a trap. So Jesus says, fine, if I can't teach you, then I will humble you.

What must you do? Verse 28, do all the law perfectly and you'll get to heaven. You want me to shrink this so that you can justify yourself? Forget that.

[ 20 : 12 ] I'm going to make this as big as I can. So here's a story that shows you how to love to the full extent of God's law.

You still think you can be that guy? Well, that's fine. You go do likewise. But when you realize it's impossible, come back and talk to me again. Jesus says, go and do likewise, not because this is the way to get to heaven, but because he wants the man to see how impossible it really is.

Jesus didn't use the parable of the Good Samaritan to tell you that you must do your moral duty. He told it to reveal your moral bankruptcy.

It's not there to tell you to be good. It's there because you and I need to realize that we can never be good enough. As one commentator put it, the parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus's demolition blow on the moral self-righteousness of those who want to try and justify themselves.

I said earlier that I don't know of anyone who loves like the Samaritan in this story, but that's not entirely true. I have met one person who loves like this.

[ 21 : 31 ] I met him when I was 10. Someone who loved that much, that fully, that sacrificially, someone who loved that willingly, someone who loved that completely.

You see, when you read the Good Samaritan, you're not meant to see yourself in his shoes. You're meant to see Jesus. Jesus is the only one who perfectly kept the full law of God.

He not only came to help people in their pain, Jesus came to intervene in order to take their pain. Jesus goes even beyond what the Samaritan did, in fact, because he steps in front of the robbers and he takes the blows himself.

The false accusations, the beating, the rejection, the nails, the cross. You see, Jesus is your good Samaritan.

He turned that character from fiction into fact. You see, Jesus is telling this parable as part of a far bigger story.

[ 22 : 53 ] This parable comes while Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. And if we had time, we could go back to chapter 9, verse 51, where we're told by Luke that Jesus resolutely set his face for Jerusalem.

Why? Because he resolutely was headed to die on the cross. He did that because you and I can't perfectly love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

You and I can't perfectly love our neighbour as ourselves. And that's why I said at the start this episode is designed to knock the legs out from under us so that we fall back into the arms of Jesus.

You might say, well, yeah, I have had my legs taken out from under me this morning. But how is Jesus going to catch me? Well, ironically, the answer comes from the lips of the expert in the law himself, although he can't see it.

It's right there in verse 37. The one who truly loved was the one who showed mercy. You see, the expert in the law didn't need a checklist of laws to keep.

[ 24 : 15 ] He needed mercy. He was the beaten up traveller on the road in the parable, lying there half dead, half dead, just as you and I are too.

See, when you are spiritually dead because you've been trying to justify yourself, you can't do anything to save yourself. So what do you need when your legs have been taken out from under you?

Where do you turn? You need someone to come and show you mercy. Are you a good person? a moral person?

Someone who always tries to keep the rules? If so, you probably think you deserve a pat on the back from time to time. But Jesus says, no, no you don't.

You don't need congratulations. You need mercy. You need to be saved from your good deeds, just as much as the rebel needs to be saved from their bad deeds.

[ 25 : 22 ] You need someone who is deeply moved in their heart, verse 33. You need someone to take pity on you. You need someone to do for you what you cannot do for yourself.

To bind up your wounds, to pick you up, to carry you, to pay an exorbitant price. In fact, you need someone to give up their life in order to bring you back to life.

This parable isn't saying you need to show mercy, it's telling us that we need to receive mercy. Have you been trying to justify yourself this week?

Do you know in your gut that you've fallen short, but you've been trying to make up for it before God anyway? I do that all the time.

I do that by trying to preach better sermons, by trying to train more people, by running a better church, by being a better father and a husband. How do you try and do it?

[ 26 : 31 ] By being a good parent, by being a good spouse, being a good Bible study leader or a committed Bible study member, by being a good son or a daughter, by being a good Samaritan.

How's that working out for you? It's not much fun, is it? And not just your best efforts, filthy rags. So let God's word convict you and humble you this morning.

Jesus is standing right now in front of you, just as he was for the expert in the law. Stop trying to justify yourself, he says.

And ask him who is rich in mercy to justify you instead. Well, before I pray, why don't we all just take a quiet moment, close our eyes, and take a moment to ask God for his mercy as we start a new week.

Father, thank you for this parable, this dangerous, unexpected, uncomfortable parable. Father, we pray that as we read it, as we consider it, as we digest it, as we take it into our week, that you might help us to ask you for the mercy that we need.

[ 27 : 59 ] Father, help us not to try and justify ourselves, but to look to your son Jesus, who comes to justify us, so that we can be restored to you.

Father, thank you for this great act of mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.