

14.07.2019  
By Glenn Jordan

## Introduction

Living a life of faith would be so much easier if only I could find a short compendium of laws to instruct and guide me in every circumstance I might encounter. Or so I could be tempted to think. In the conversation with the lawyer Jesus exposes the fallacy of this thinking for a person of faith.

The lawyer was so brilliant that he could summarise the entire Mosaic Law in just thirty-one words of English, which is an astounding feat. But Jesus' simple rustic story of a traveller on a dangerous road exposes the complexity of putting flesh onto that summary of Law.

Rules make for predictable living, but also for some harsh and cruel treatment, particularly at the margins of our societies. But it is at the margins where we need an approach to life which, whilst it might make things less predictable and neat, can make for an altogether kinder world.

The parable of the Good Samaritan helps us consider what principle we might choose as the guiding ethic of our life, that of the Law or that of neighbourliness.

---

## Text

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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 neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

---

## Comment

The thing about this story is that the priest and the Levite do exactly what they are supposed to do, and everyone listening to Jesus tell this story would do the same. The Law REQUIRED them to pass by on the other side. Furthermore, nobody would think any higher of the Samaritan for doing what he did because, well, he's a Samaritan, and they didn't keep the Law anyway.

That's because the Law for many people was a law of limitations. They were required to know the minutiae of the Law so that they would know what to do and what not to do. The expert in the Law who prompted Jesus to tell the story, given that he was an expert, had probably kept the Law in its entirety as he understood it, but his question is important. "Who is my neighbour?" said the man (Luke 10:29).

The form of the question is critical to understanding this approach to Law. First, the intent of the question is to elicit a response which will direct me towards those to whom I owe the duty of neighbourliness, and by extension those to whom I have no responsibility. It is a Law of limitations. It's also a question which puts the questioner at the heart of things. This is a question designed to put 'me' at the centre as the subject, and the 'other' as simply the object of my actions. Taken together these two things could ultimately result in both acts of love (towards those who are acceptable as neighbours) but also in acts of cruelty (because there are those to whom I have no responsibility).

Jesus tells a story then which tests the elasticity of the Law. It's a story which examines how Law might work when it is pushed to extremes. For the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story, as well as the expert in the Law who questioned Jesus, navigating the requirements of the Law in unusual or unforeseen circumstances reveals the loyalties of the person who aspires to keeping Law. In the story, the Law trumps compassion. Faced with a situation in which I am challenged to extend neighbourliness in such a way as would break the Law, then I must ALWAYS keep the Law.

So the priest and the Levite do the right thing. The Law always trumps compassion.

At the end of the story though, Jesus very cleverly changes the question in a quite fundamental way, which reveals Jesus attitude to the Law. Jesus asks "Who was a neighbour to the man?" (Luke 10:36)

Now the man who was assaulted becomes the subject who defines neighbourly actions. Those of us who are participating in the story, imagining ourselves into this

scenario, find ourselves dependent on him to determine our status in the story.

For Jesus there is no limitation on neighbourliness and compassion. This is quite revolutionary, even today. For in Jesus' understanding, neighbourliness ALWAYS trumps the Law. Faced with a conflict between law and grace, grace always wins.

Faced with a situation in which I am challenged to extend neighbourliness in such a way as would break the Law, then I must ALWAYS be a neighbour. To state that in the reverse, if the keeping of Law results in un-Grace, then this is bad Law that needs to be broken and changed.

This parable is a profoundly challenging one because it uncovers the true motivations at the heart of our practice of faith. It removes utterly the cover of Law we often use to avoid actions of grace and kindness and tells me that I should never hide behind Law if doing so relieves me of being a neighbour.

And if I am ever conflicted as to the right thing to do in a situation, then best to err on the side of compassion. Always.

---

## Response

Take some time to reflect further on the grace/law conflict for living a life of faith.

There is an interesting eschatology opened up for us towards the end of this story. It's worth noting that Jesus leaves a significant loose end here by not giving us a clear conclusion to the story. The question that presents itself comes as a direct result of the Samaritan's closing comment "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

There is so much here to unpack. There is the instruction to take care of the wounded, a promise to come back, an implication that there will be work required to be done out of one's own resources, an undertaking to return and make good on extra expenditure.

Jesus never tells us what happened, but inside this lacuna is where the interesting stuff happens.

And so, for a moment, imagine you are the Innkeeper. What are your options? Can you trust the Samaritan? Has he the resources to pay? What factors do you take into account when the Samaritan leaves? Which actions will spring from law-keeping and which purely from grace?

How would you personally resolve the conflict the Innkeeper now faces if you were him?

---

## Prayer

God of love and grace  
It would be so much easier to be a disciple  
If I could just keep the rules;  
If I didn't have to navigate  
The dangerous territories of compassion.

But you seek disciples  
With hearts of flesh  
And not of stone.

You seek disciples  
Who are always willing  
To lay aside the law  
To bind up wounds.

Make me one of those kind

Amen