

THE GOOD SAMARITAN LAW?

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But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29)

It’s been nearly twenty-five years now since the television sitcom, Seinfeld, aired its final episode. Seinfeld famously billed itself as “a show about nothing,” and followed the quirky, self-absorbed lives of four friends on the upper west side of Manhattan. Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer were characters real enough to be believable, but exaggerated enough to be funny. The show won all sorts of awards, topped the ratings numerous times, and introduced various ideas and phrases into pop culture such as the strange holiday, Festivus, “Yada, yada, yada,” and “the second spitter.”

When Jerry Seinfeld, the star and co-writer decided he’d had enough, great secrecy surrounded how they planned to bring the show to an end. Millions tuned into the series finale, appropriately named, “The Finale.” The Finale begins with the four cast members on a corporate jet that needs to make an emergency landing in the small town of Latham, Massachusetts. As they are waiting to get underway again they witness a man being carjacked. But rather than help in any way, they do nothing other than crack jokes about the man’s weight, and videotape the crime as it takes place. A policeman arrives on the scene, only to arrest Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer. You see, they have violated a new ordinance in Latham called “The Good Samaritan Law,” which requires bystanders to lend assistance when able.

So the four bystanders wind up in jail awaiting trial. They hire a defense attorney named Jackie Chiles, who is a Johnny Cochrane look-alike (the lawyer who defended O.J.). In his opening argument Chiles argues passionately that you can’t have such a thing as a guilty bystander. Bystanders are, by nature, innocent. “That’s the nature of by-standing.” The prosecution brings in a host of witnesses from the entire run of the show, all of whom attest that doing nothing and laughing at the victim of a crime is entirely consistent with the overall moral apathy of the four defendants. In the end the jury finds them guilty of criminal indifference, and the judge sentences them to a year in jail. So ended the sitcom, Seinfeld.

Most of you need no introduction to the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story Jesus told in response to a series of questions from a lawyer. The lawyer wanted to know what one must do to inherit eternal life. In reply Jesus told about a certain man who was mugged and left for dead along the perilous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. *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. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him,* and the rest is the stuff of legend. The Samaritan – the one whose race and religion were despised by the Jews – stopped and did what was necessary to save the man’s life. For Jesus’ original listeners, it was a surprise, even shocking ending to the story.

We don’t hear the ending as a surprise anymore. Two-thousand years of sermons and Sunday School lessons have extolled the Samaritan and upheld his good deeds. We’ve named hospitals, nursing homes, and food pantries after him. We associate the word “Samaritan” generally with anyone who shows mercy. Likewise we have vilified the priest and the Levite. They have been tried in the court of Christian opinion, and found guilty of criminal indifference. Today you are expecting me to tee up these two reprobates and whack them down the homiletical fairway once again. But taking another swing at the priest and the Levite would be too easy. Instead, I rise to play the Jackie Chiles character, and be their defense attorney, and argue their unwinnable appeal. I promise that we

will finish with a rousing chorus of “For He’s a Jolly Good Samaritan.” But humor me for a moment. Why did the priest and the Levite pass by? Let us count the reasons and you, the jury, will decide whether we can overturn their conviction. Perhaps in justifying them we can justify ourselves.

First, the priest and the Levite passed by because the road between Jerusalem and Jericho was a notorious hangout for bandits and thieves. It could be that both of them had already helped other victims a half mile back, and that they would encounter still more a half mile ahead. Furthermore, this particular man lying in the ditch was as likely to be a decoy as he was a real victim in need of help. To plead the priest’s and Levite’s case I would call as witnesses other people who had been tricked by similar means along the road, mugged, and left for dead. It’s better to be safe than sorry. That’s the nature of bypassing: innocent.

Second, the priest and the Levite passed by because other people also had legitimate, even more important claims on their time and resources. Imagine: these two were choosing their own priorities. They had people waiting for them at the other end of the journey – perhaps wives and children who needed them to arrive home safely. The priest and Levite had to decide: is this man in the ditch worth the risk of leaving my wife a widow and my children fatherless? And what about their responsibilities at the Temple, where they worked? The priest and the Levite also had people depending on them there. I would bring all these people before you as witnesses to testify that their claims on the priest and Levite not only competed with, but outweighed the needs of any situation the two travelers might encounter on the road. That’s the nature of bypassing: innocent.

Third, the priest and Levite passed by because with a quick assessment they saw no end to the amount of help the injured man would require. Assuming the man was alive at all and wasn’t a decoy, if the priest or Levite stopped to help they would be sucked into a black hole of need from which they could never escape. We could go on and on with more good, sound, understandable reasons for why they passed by. But in summary, my closing argument would stress the dangers along the road, the possibility of a scam, the people who needed the priest and Levite to arrive safely home, and their limited resources to help in the moment. By-passers are, by nature, innocent.

What do you think? Have we justified ourselves? Have we justified the priest and Levite, and argued them back onto the list of Biblical good guys? I didn’t think so. Their indifference condemns them – and us. In a recent New York Times editorial (July 8, 2022), the columnist David Brooks wrestled with the difficult question of *Why Mass Shooters Do the Evil They Do*. As a beginning place Brooks quotes the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who in “The Devil’s Disciple” put these words in the mouth of one of his characters: “*The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them. That’s the essence of humanity.*” Brooks dares to posit what is hardly a comprehensive answer to the horrific rise of gunmen opening fire in public places, but certainly a part of the problem: indifference. Mass shooters often perceive that the world has been indifferent to them. Parents and family, teachers and school administrators, classmates and peers, all like priests and Levites passed them by and ignored them. The evil they resort to is a demand for attention. It is payback for the world’s indifference.

What can we do about indifference? How can rise above the indifference in our hearts and be more like the Samaritan? Sad to say, passing a Good Samaritan Law and jailing violators won’t change anyone’s heart. You can’t legislate matters of the heart. I could stand here six feet above contradiction and scold that we must, should, and really ought to be more empathetic. But doing so would be hypocritical, and won’t incline our hearts towards mercy. Remember, the lawyer asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The answer requires a change of heart. So what will it take?

Perhaps a closer look at the parable of the Good Samaritan will touch our hearts. A subtle feature of the story that commentators have often noticed is that the answer Jesus provided doesn’t

match up with the question the lawyer asked. Listen carefully: the lawyer asked, “And who is *my* neighbor?” After telling the parable, Jesus answered the question with another question: “Who *proved* neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?” Jesus just as well might have asked, “OK, Mr. Lawyer, which one proved to be *your* neighbor?” What Jesus was implying to the lawyer was that the Samaritan was *his* neighbor. Thus, the proper perspective of the parable for the lawyer and for us is neither the priest, nor the Levite, nor the Samaritan. First we all play the role of the man who fell among thieves. The lawyer is the man in the ditch who needed to be pulled out by the help of another. We are the man being carjacked.

In this light, the parable functions as a summary of the way we understand salvation. Death and resurrection are both within it. It encapsulates in story form God’s rescue mission on our behalf. The man in the ditch is all of creation, which God pulled out of nothingness and into being. The man in the ditch is Israel who needed to be pulled out of slavery in Egypt, rescued at the Red Sea, and brought home from captivity in Babylon. The man in the ditch is all of humanity that has fallen among death itself, the thief who steals and kills and destroys. We are the people who walk in darkness, but we have seen a great light. And that great light is the Samaritan who sees the affliction of the man in the ditch, and hears his cry, and comes down to deliver him (Exodus 3:7-8). The Samaritan is Jesus, who literally raises up the man from the ditch, pours on oil and wine, gives him back his life, and promises to return.

It was a dangerous time and place when Jesus first told the parable of the Good Samaritan. We live in a dangerous world today. It’s hard to know whom to believe and how to respond. I recall a story from some years ago about a family of Jewish settlers who were traveling in a van along a road in the West Bank near Jerusalem. As they went Palestinian terrorists ambushed them and opened fire, killing the father – Rabbi Michael Mark – and leaving the others badly wounded in the overturned van by the side of the road. Now by chance a Palestinian doctor named Ali Shroukh was driving along the same West Bank road towards Jerusalem for Ramadan prayers. Shroukh came upon the overturned van. It was a dangerous situation, but Shroukh did not pass by. He put himself and his own family at risk, put aside the barriers of race and religion, and stopped to provide medical care.

When the medics arrived they urged Shroukh to leave. He was not dressed as a doctor and was covered in blood. He might be mistaken as one of the terrorists. Shroukh left the scene, but his courageous compassion did not go unnoticed. Some days later in a news interview about the attack, the nephew of the murdered rabbi asked about the Palestinian doctor who tried to save his uncle’s family. He began to weep and said, “Tell him thank you, thank you, from all my heart.”

The story is a contemporary, real-life version of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable bids us to look at the Samaritan the way the Jewish settlers looked on the Palestinian doctor. It bids us to look at Jesus in the way the injured man looked at the Samaritan. And it bids us to say thank you with all our heart. But it doesn’t end there. The parable of the Good Samaritan doesn’t allow us to remain staring at Jesus, lost in wonder, love, and praise. Instead, it challenges those who have been pulled out of a hole to consider extending the same courtesy to others. *Go and do likewise*, says Jesus. All of us who know ourselves to be raised with Christ now have the opportunity to thank him by being like the Samaritan. To be like the Samaritan is to be like Jesus. *Go and do likewise*.

Not every opportunity of need will have your name on it. I leave it to you to discern which ones do and which ones don’t. But stay alert and be ready. When Jesus calls I pray that you and I will be neither bystanders nor by-passers, but grateful participants in the kingdom of God, who respond with gladness and with courage.