

[Luke 10:25-37](#)<sup>1</sup>

“You’ve got an attitude problem.”

How often do we hear someone say that – or say it ourselves?

And how often is it true in the church, among the community of faith? Too often, I’m afraid.

I’m not going to tell any secrets, although there are far too many examples of attitude problems I could cite from my experience as a minister. And to be honest, it isn’t just congregations. I could tell some awful stories about ministers, if I really wanted to break confidences.

The lawyer whose encounter with Jesus leads to ‘The Parable of the Good Samaritan’ is also a man with an attitude problem. Multiple attitude problems, if truth be told. For starters, he is two-faced towards Jesus. He ‘stood up to test Jesus’ (verse 25). Standing up was a sign of respect, but he then sets out to test Jesus. The respect means nothing, because of the testing. Being acquainted as I have been with Christian backstabbers, this scenario is familiar to me. To your face come the affectionate words or respectful titles, but later you discover that in their hearts they are plotting against you. That may be shocking to some, but I am afraid it is true.

The lawyer thinks a lot of himself, too. He asks Jesus, ‘Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ (Verse 25) Hang on for a moment before those familiar words zoom past you. Since when can anyone *do* anything in order to receive an inheritance? An inheritance is a gift. When Debbie and I wrote our wills, we made decisions on what our children would inherit. It never occurred to us that we should enter clauses in the wills to make our children’s inheritance dependent upon them doing anything. They will receive from our estate simply because they are our children.

But it’s a matter of pride for the lawyer that he should feel he has done something virtuous to receive the inheritance of eternal life. He does not want mercy, nor does he believe he needs grace. He simply wants to know what signs mark him out as one of the favoured ones. And – as we shall see in a moment – he wants the bar set pretty low so he can jump over with ease in a way that shows that he is one of the chosen people, while other less desirable types most certainly are not.

None of this is an attitude of heart that is endearing to Jesus, but the remarkable thing is, Jesus responds to him on that very territory, all the while undermining his assumptions. He goes onto the lawyer’s territory by bringing the discussion to the Law (the Jewish Law):

He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ (Verse 26)

The lawyer comes back with his answer about wholeheartedly loving God and loving neighbour (verse 27). We're so used to these words, but it was a remarkable answer. Chronologically in the Jewish Law, the command to love neighbour was given before the command to love God. But perhaps the reason Jesus commends the lawyer's answer (verse 28) is because love of God leads to love of neighbour. 'Do this and you will live,' he says – that is, 'Keep on doing this and you will come alive.' If you make this a habit, you will know life like nothing else, Jesus tells him.

But that's the point at which we discover more of the lawyer's attitude problem. Jesus' invitation to discover true life brings this out in him:

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'  
(Verse 29)

It's always ugly when someone wants to justify themselves. I do it too often myself. When I feel I'm being criticised, I launch into a defence of my actions or motives. I want to justify myself, too. Perhaps the lawyer feels that Jesus' invitation to life is a criticism of his current lifestyle. He wants to prove he is in the right with God – something ultimately that we cannot do for ourselves, because we are sinners. What pride lurks in our hearts when we want to show we are acceptable to God by our own efforts?

Maybe he knows in the recesses of his heart that he can't justify himself entirely by the Law of God. However much he says he has kept the Law fully, probably he knows if he's honest that's a false claim. So he tries to lower the bar with his question, who is my neighbour? If he can just get an easy enough definition of neighbour, then he can believe he is justified before God. Jewish scholars debated who constituted a neighbour and who didn't. Roughly speaking, another Jew was definitely a neighbour, a convert to Judaism might be a neighbour, but a Gentile definitely wasn't, let alone a heretic like, say ... a Samaritan.

So when Jesus launches into the parable, this isn't a nice Sunday School story. You might just as well go into Tel Aviv today and tell the story of the Good Hezbollah Terrorist. No: Jesus launches into a subversive parable that will undermine all the lawyer is basing his life upon.

As he begins the story, the lawyer will sniff danger. The seventeen-mile descending road from Jerusalem to Jericho was known to be dangerous, and still has been in modern times. When the robbers leave the traveller stripped, beaten and half dead (verse 30), that description is important. Remember the Jewish categories of who constituted a neighbour? There were two ways in which you could tell where someone came from. One was their accent, the other was their dress. Both were very specific to particular groups. Because the traveller is stripped, no-one can tell his background from his attire. Because he is 'half dead' (a rabbinic expression that means 'at the point of death'), he is unlikely to be able to speak,

and hence no-one can tell from his accent, either. Big Question: does he qualify for neighbour-love or not?

As the man lies on the point of death, a priest comes 'down' the road (verse 31). 'Down' indicates he is coming from Jerusalem. If a priest was leaving Jerusalem, he has probably just finished a tour of duty at the Temple. As a member of the upper classes, he is almost certainly riding on an animal. When you remember that when the Samaritan turns up he puts the injured man on his animal, you will realise that this priest is well placed to help.

But ... contact with a dead body or a Gentile would make him ritually impure, and this man could be either or both. If the priest becomes impure, it will have implications for him. First of all, when he returns to Jerusalem he will not be able to minister at first but will have to stand at the Eastern Gate with other 'unclean' people as a humiliation for becoming impure. This priest cannot cope with identifying with the unclean.

Secondly, if he is ritually impure, he cannot eat the food allocated to him and his family as a 'wave offering', a tithe of all the tithes. He will go hungry. So will his family.

Hemmed in by the purity laws which make him fear for his professional reputation and his family's well-being, the priest makes sure he stays more than the statutory four cubits from what he supposes to be a dead body, and passes by on the other side.

The Levite presumably comes from the same direction ('So likewise', verse 32). Given the contours of the road and the fact that the wounded man is close to death, I think we can assume it's not much of a gap between him and the priest. Which means the Levite has probably watched from a distance the actions of the priest. The purity laws are less strict for him: they only applied to him when he was on duty. He isn't now. He could help the man.

But he doesn't. He is inferior to the priest. If he helps a man whom the priest has judged should not be assisted, then he is criticising his superior's interpretation of the Law. And you just didn't do that.

Moreover, being from a more humble social class, he may be walking, not riding. If so, then all he can do is offer minimal aid and wait with the man. He then puts himself at risk of attack by the robbers. Put it all together, and there's only one thing the Levite is going to do: copying the example of the priest, he passes by on the other side.

At this point, the lawyer is expecting a third character. After a priest and a Levite, the next standard character is a pious Jewish layman. Will he help the man?

Except Jesus doesn't do standard characters, and instead we get a heretic. The Samaritan. Now the Samaritans still recognised some of the Hebrew Scriptures, and because of that he risks ritual contamination, too. If he becomes impure, then so does his animal (or animals) and any goods he might be carrying to sell. His animals and his wares also make him a likely target for the robbers. There is no way this man is going to stop and help.

Oh. Wait a minute. It seems he just did. He is 'moved with pity' (verse 33), a strong expression of compassion, used at other times of Jesus. He binds up the man's wounds and pours on oil and wine (verse 34). While in the story that describes physical first aid, the binding up of wounds is also a description of God's salvation in the Old Testament.

Furthermore, oil and wine, while being regularly used in ancient first aid, were also sacrificial elements used in worship at the Temple. They were the items regularly used by the priest and the Levite. Except here, those who used them frequently did not do so, and a man who has no right to use them does so. An unclean Samaritan who won't have paid the tithe uses them – and that means the responsibility for paying the tithe now falls on the injured man, who already cannot pay his hôtel bill. The lawyer would therefore have been pleased if the first aid had not been administered.

Then he leads the man – to whom he lends his own animal – to an inn (verse 34). There is an important social distinction between people who lead animals and those who ride on them. Those who lead are socially inferior to those who ride. Yet the Samaritan gives up what status he has for the sake of getting the man to an inn.

By bringing him to the inn and staying overnight ('The next day', verse 35), the Samaritan takes a huge risk. It is quite possible under the ugly practices of the day that the injured man's relatives, looking for someone to blame but not finding the robbers, could have taken their vengeance on him. Such cases were not unknown. But he risks his life for the wounded man.

The next day he saves the injured man from being arrested for debt by paying two denarii to the innkeeper (verse 35). By doing this, he probably also protects the man from potential retribution from the innkeeper. People of that profession had a terrible reputation for violence and lewdness.

The Samaritan, then, is a rejected outsider who uses symbols of salvation and sacrificial worship, and who risks even his own life for the sake of the half-dead man. Who does he sound like? Pardon me if he doesn't sound rather like the man to whom the lawyer is speaking. His name begins with 'J'.

Who was the neighbour? It was the Christ-like Samaritan. To love one's neighbour means loving Christ, and then loving like him. It certainly won't be the minimal 'what can I get away with' definition of neighbour that the lawyer wanted. For if we truly take on board what the Samaritan-like Christ has done for us, then what will we want to do in love as a response?

As the lawyer admits, the neighbour is the one who – like Christ – showed mercy. The only worthy response is, as Jesus said, to 'Go and do likewise' (verse 37).

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon owes much to [Kenneth Bailey, \*Through Peasant Eyes\*](#), pp 33-56.