

## **Loving Like Jesus 6 – Merciful Love**

Back in September, a disturbing incident in Kansas City made the national news.<sup>i</sup> A woman was assaulted by a man outside of a shopping center in broad daylight. It was a brutal, humiliating attack in full view of witnesses. No one stepped in to intervene. No one helped, not even a security guard who simply stood by and watched. As the assault continued, cars pulled up to join the audience. Meanwhile, no one did anything, except to video the attack on their smartphones. The victim's mother learned of her daughter's attack when she saw the video on Facebook.

Sadly, such stories are not rare. In fact, they are common enough that they've been given a formal name. It's called the Bystander Effect.<sup>ii</sup> Sociologists tell us that it's social psychological phenomenon where witnesses are less likely to help. We may see it as proof of the decline of society, but the origins of the term go back more than fifty years to 1964. A 28 year old woman named Catherine Genovese was raped and killed in separate late-night attacks in Queens, New York.<sup>iii</sup>

The assault unfolded over thirty minutes in three separate attacks. During that time 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens witnessed as the killer stalked, raped, and stabbed the young woman. Twice, he was spooked and fled as people turned on their lights or chatted with other witnesses, and yet no one stepped in to help her. He returned to finish job each time. Only one called the police, after she was already dead.

One witness said he "didn't want to get involved." Another said, "I was tired. I went back to bed." Most, however, were not coldhearted or unconcerned. They were frozen by fear. Many times bystanders assume someone else will help. Someone else is more qualified to lend aid.

Witnesses choose to remain bystanders for far more than crimes. They stand by as people drown, are trapped in fires, or die of drug overdoses. States have tried to address this phenomenon with Good Samaritan laws that hope to turn bystanders into responders.

However, a law can never move a human heart in the way only merciful love can. The term Good Samaritan takes us back to the gospel of Luke and a parable of Jesus in Luke chapter 10.

This parable is almost universally known as the parable of the Good Samaritan. Yet nowhere in the parable is he called “good.” But it is the compassionate character of his kind, merciful love that has earned him this title. However, if you said good Samaritan in Jesus’ day you would have received only disdainful glares. Samaritans couldn’t be good. It was an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms like jumbo shrimp or military intelligence. In the mind of every Jew, there was no such thing as a good Samaritan.

When Babylon invaded Israel in the 6th Century B.C. they captured the Jewish people and sent them into exile. However, the poor, the undesirables, those whom the Babylonians considered unimportant were left behind. Meanwhile the Babylonians brought in many foreigners to settle the land. There they intermarried with those who’d been left behind. By mixing up the conquered peoples they hoped to keep organized resistance down.

When the exiled Jews returned from captivity, they looked down on the descendants of those who had intermarried. They became known as Samaritans, and were considered half-breeds and dogs by the Israelites. They were considered unacceptable to God. Over the years, resentment built up between the two groups. A righteous Jew living in Jerusalem who needed to travel to Galilee would not travel through Samaria, even though it was the most direct route. The racism there rivals the worst of what our own country has experienced.

The fact that Jesus picked a Samaritan as the hero of his story tells us a lot about the point he was trying to make. Jesus’ story is an answer to a question posed by an expert in the law. This was a religious scholar specialized in the intricacies of the Mosaic Law. As an expert in the law, he would have despised Samaritans. In fact, at the end of the parable, he can’t even bring himself to use the word. He simply refers to him as “the one who had mercy on him.”

His question was an attempt to justify a common Jewish excuse to not love their neighbor. They knew that God said in the O.T. , “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” But the Pharisees took the verse as if God meant this, “Love your neighbor, that is your fellow Jew, as yourself.” Others took it this way, “Love your neighbor as yourself, and hate your enemy.” They excused themselves by redefining the terms. But Jesus’ parable shatters all such rationalizations and undermines any attempt to justify racism.

The scene Jesus picked for his illustration would have been painfully familiar to his audience. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was treacherous. It was literally a trip down. In just 17 miles you dropped from a height of 2500 feet above sea level to 770 feet below. This descent took you through some of the most rugged and desolate terrain in Israel. The road wound its way through craggy limestone which provided ideal cover for bandits. Travelers feared this stretch of road. They rarely traveled it alone, and if they had to, they hurried through as quickly as possible.

With this scene Jesus sets the stage for one of the most dramatic illustrations of merciful love ever given. Notice that Jesus' definition of love has nothing to do with the warm fuzzies, or how the other person makes us feel. The Samaritan has no idea who the victim is. The victim is unable to pay him back in any way. Merciful love is defined purely by action— doing the right thing.

Some people in life are takers. What's yours is mine and I'll take it. These are the robbers in our story. Most people in life are simply keepers. What's mine is mine, and I'll keep it. They are not immoral. They are not criminal. They are just minding their own business. The priest and the Levite are both keepers. They represented what it meant to know, love and serve God, but they did not show God's merciful love. Finally, there are the givers. What is mine is yours, and I'll give it.

We are not Samaritans, and I don't think any of us are Jewish. None of us is a priest or a Levite, and hopefully none of you is a highway bandit either, but each one of us has the potential to play each one of these roles. As we travel along the sometimes treacherous road of life, sometimes we're the victim. We find ourselves in a desperate situation where we need someone not to be afraid, not to be too busy, not to walk on by, but to show us merciful love.

Other times, we choose whether we will simply be a bystander like the priest and Levite or those standing outside a Kansas City shopping center. We look the other way. We ignore the hurts of those around us. We're fearful of what might happen to us. We're too busy and preoccupied, and we walk on by. Or, we get involved. We show merciful love. We share our blessings and shoulder other's burdens. We can make their hurts ours and our joy theirs. That's merciful love— A love that doesn't just feel something, it does something. Our world defines love by how you feel. Jesus defines it by what you do.

And in the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus shows us that merciful does five things. Here are the five actions of merciful love.

### **I. A Love that Sees**

First of all, a merciful love is a love that sees. Now all three, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan all saw the man. The question is what, or who did they see. Vs. 31 the priest, *“when he saw him he passed by on the other side.”* Vs. 32 the Levite, *“when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”* But in vs. 33, it says the Samaritan, *“when he saw him, he had compassion.”*

They all saw the man beaten, battered, and bleeding, but they all saw something different. What did the priest and Levite see? Did they see an interruption? I’ve got duties to attend to. Too much stuff to get done. Maybe they saw an obstacle? The Levite might be some of us guys when we get on the road. I’m making record time, if I keep up this pace I’ll be in Jericho before dinner. They might have seen a threat? What if I get robbed while I’m trying to help this guy?

The Samaritan however, sees the man with merciful eyes. He sees a neighbor in need. He sees someone that very well could be him, if the sandal were on the other foot. A merciful love sees other people in their need.

### **II. A Love that Goes**

However, just seeing someone in their need is not enough. We see something and it tugs on our heart strings. A tear fills our eye. Maybe we even whisper a quick prayer. *“Oh, God, please be with them.”* But merciful love goes further. A merciful loves doesn’t just see. A merciful love goes. The Samaritan’s compassion led to action. Look at verse 34. *“He went to him.”*

Stop right there. Here is where we first see the difference between the Samaritan and the priest and Levite. When they saw the man, they crossed to the other side. They put as much distance between them and the person in need as possible. The Samaritan, sees him, and goes to him.

First responders are those who go to a problem, when everyone else is running away. The police head into violent gun fight, when everyone else is fleeing and taking cover. Firefighters head into a burning building when everyone else is running out. EMTs hurry toward those injured and wounded, when everyone else rubbernecks from a safe distance. Why? Why do they do that, and how? How do they do that?

They go toward the problem, because they have been trained to. I think as Christians, Jesus has called us to be spiritual first responders. We go to those who are hurting. We go to those in need, because we have been trained by His example, His word, and His Spirit to love others with a merciful love. We need to go toward those that others run away from. A merciful love goes.

### **III. A Love that Stays**

Thirdly, a merciful is a love that stays. The Samaritan doesn't just go to the man in need. He stays with the man in need. Merciful love takes time. The Samaritan takes the time to bandage his wounds, put ointment on him, turn his own donkey into an ambulance.

The phrase that really sticks out comes at the beginning of verse 35, "*And the next day...*" The Samaritan's whole schedule just got rewritten. He stayed all night, so that he could know the man was okay and his needs were taken care of.

I wonder how many times I miss opportunities to show Jesus' love, because I'm looking at my watch. I'm looking at my next appointment. I'm thinking about my to-do list. I don't mind doing a little bit to help out— a little money here, volunteer a little there, but am I really willing to invest the time to stay and love with a merciful love? Are you willing to stay? Are we a church that stays?

### **IV. A Love that Gives**

A merciful love is a love that sees, a love that goes, and a love that stays. Fourthly, a merciful love is a love that gives. We see the Samaritan's love in his overflowing generosity. He uses his own supplies on the man in vs. 34. In vs. 35 he pays two denarii to pay for the man's room at the inn and cover expenses. This was equivalent to two days wages for the common working man.

But his generosity really sticks out at the end of vs. 35 when he leaves his credit card with the innkeeper, "*Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.*" I'll cover whatever costs are incurred. This is a blank check. And this brings me right to our last point.

### **V. A Love that Risks**

A merciful love is a love that risks. If I'm helping somebody in need, I might take a \$20 bill out of my wallet, but I'm certainly not going to give him my VISA. He could claim anything. He could abuse his generosity. He could take advantage. Yes, he could.

But it wasn't just the financial risk. There was physical risk. What if the robbers were still lurking nearby. By even stopping to help, he was exposing himself to danger.

Now, I don't think Jesus is telling us to be unwise or foolish. He gave the money to a responsible businessman. It is likely he knew this man and had stayed in his inn before. He promises to be back, so there is some trust there. But he is vulnerable. He does expose himself to risk

However, love and safety can't always coexist. You see we want to love others, yes, but we want to do it from a safe distance. We want to love without getting messy. We want to love without risk.

Merciful love doesn't work like that. Somebody can always take advantage of your mercy. A merciful love risks. It's willing to lay it line for someone else. Vulnerability is necessary if we want to love like Jesus. The Coast Guard has a motto. "You have to go out; you don't have to come back." What that means is that if there's a shipwreck, if there's a storm and someone is lost at sea, then Coast Guardsman has to go out, even at risk to their own lives. Who, other than the church, is the Coast Guard sent to rescue those lost in the storms of life?

This is what it is to truly love like Jesus. Jesus didn't just love us from a safe distance. If that is all he wanted to do, He would have stayed in heaven by His Father's throne, and loved us from there. Yes, Jesus loved us in heaven, but he saw our need. He loved us enough to go from heaven and stay with us. He gave his life and risked everything on the cross. Jesus loved us all the way to the cross, even though most of us would never love him back. There was nothing safe about a cross. That's our model for love. That's how we are to love others.

Let me end by asking you a question. Given how Jesus loved us from the cross, is there any good excuse not to love somebody? Merciful love is loving even when it makes no sense at all. That how Jesus loved us. That's how he called us to love others.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://fox4kc.com/2017/09/27/witnesses-security-guard-do-nothing-to-help-woman-being-sexually-assaulted/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/the-bystander-effect-im-rattled-i-didnt-do-more/news-story/01df1506a885fd81a05637746cef1ccf>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/13/march-13-1964-new-york-woman-killed-while-witnesses-do-nothing/>