

How Do You Treat a Stranger?

The Good Samaritan is probably the most famous story Jesus ever told. Even people who don't know much about Jesus can often tell you about the good Samaritan. They'll tell you it's a simple story: A guy gets beat up and left lying on the road. Some supposedly good guys walk right around him and ignore him. A supposedly bad guy stops and takes care of him. End of story.

But the short version leaves some unanswered questions. Why didn't the good guys do anything? Why was the Samaritan type cast as the bad guy? What question was Jesus trying to answer with this story? Did that question really get answered? What does it mean for us when we run into a stranger, in trouble or not? What's the difference between strangers and neighbors after all? ... I always found this story to be more of a puzzle than it is a helpful illustration.

It starts when an ordinary guy is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Some robbers attack who strip him, beat him, and move on, leaving him half dead. This road goes down from the mountains into a hot and dusty valley. Even now the area is not very populated, so it's not a surprise that bandits and robbers would hang out there. This man has been beaten to within an inch of his life, so he's lying there, not moving and covered with his own blood.

Why didn't the "good guys" help?

By chance a priest and later a Levite were going down that same road, minding their own business. They spot the man lying there and have to decide what to do. What will happen if they go to help? The man may be alive or dead. If they even come close, they're likely to get his blood on their clothes or feet. And they don't know anything about him, whether he's a Jew or not and whether he's ritually "clean" or "unclean."

Why does this matter? With other priests and Levites, their jobs are to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem. There are rules about what they can and can't do in order to be allowed to go to work in the Temple.

If the man on the road is dead, then his body is a corpse, and that brings up a whole series of biblical commandments. In the book of Numbers it says,

Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. ... Whoever touches the dead body of anyone and fails to purify himself defiles the Lord's tabernacle. That person must be cut off from Israel. (Numbers 19:11–13)

Even touching the man to see if he is alive would keep them out of the Temple for a week.

Ritual uncleanness is contagious, so even if the man is still alive but ritually unclean himself, just touching him will make the helper unclean. Leviticus says

He [a descendant of Aaron] will also be unclean if he touches something defiled by a corpse or by anyone who has an emission of semen, or if he touches any crawling thing that makes him unclean, or any person who makes him unclean, whatever the uncleanness may be. ... The priests are to keep my requirements so that they do not become guilty and die for treating them with contempt. I am the LORD, who makes them holy. (Leviticus 22:4–5,9)

This is a very serious matter for those who need to do their work in the Temple. The threat for those who ignore the regulations is significant.

So those two passed by on the other side of the road. They needed to keep far away from uncleanness that might keep them from performing their duties in the Temple. They might or might not have wanted to get involved, but their jobs would have made it hard for them to help.

Why is the Samaritan supposed to be a “bad guy”?

So then, why pick on a Samaritan to come into the story? The separation between Jews and Samaritans goes way back into history, and it’s still felt today. I tried to figure out exactly why Jews and Samaritans didn’t like each other and found it very confusing.

The Jewish accounts of the problems are different from the Samaritan accounts, of course, so it’s hard to reconstruct what actually happened. Both groups consider themselves to be the true people of Israel, and the Samaritans claim descent from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh as well as from the Levites.

Samaritans believe that their worship, based on the Samaritan Pentateuch, is the true religion of the ancient Israelites from before the Babylonian exile, preserved by those who stayed in the Land of Israel. They see modern Judaism as a related but changed religion, brought back from the Babylonian captivity.

The Samaritans believe that Mount Gerizim was the original Holy Place of Israel from the time that Joshua conquered Canaan. The major issue between Jews and Samaritans has always been the location of the place to worship. It is Mount Zion in Jerusalem in the south according to the Jews and Mount Gerizim in the north according to the Samaritans.

There were lots of prejudices in Roman Palestine in the first century—religious prejudice, racial prejudice, and political prejudice. Samaritans made a natural religious target, since their land was between the Galilee and Judea. The Idumeans to the south were another kind of not-really-Jews, even though Herod the Great was an Idumean, and their racial and cultural differences caused tensions. The Romans were the occupying army, and assumed to be all kinds of bad people. There were strong and sometimes violent tensions among many different groups living in the small area of Israel at the time. This made actually loving your neighbors a real challenge.

Even the disciples bought into the prejudice against Samaritans. When a Samaritan village refused to receive Jesus, the disciples wanted Jesus to bring fire down from heaven to consume them. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their hostility and simply moved on to another village.

Because of the prejudice against them, Jesus uses Samaritans to show that prejudice isn’t always accurate. At the time Jesus healed the ten lepers, he took the opportunity to point out that only the Samaritan came back to offer thanks for his healing.

Jesus was traveling through Samaria when he met the woman at the well, even though he could have taken the long way around. He treated the Samaritan woman with courtesy, which surprised her since she was used to being ignored by Jewish men. When the people of the village asked him to stay, Jesus spent two days with them teaching and talking with the Samaritans.

Jesus liked to use Samaritans as an example of ways that prejudice can lead to making assumptions that are completely wrong, so in this story, he picked the Samaritan to be the good guy.

What is the story about, anyway?

Now we come to the question Jesus was supposed to be answering with this story. What question was that? ... Did that question really get answered in the story?

he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)

The lawyer knows that the answer to this question is going to involve some serious commitment. After all, he's just told Jesus, probably in his best Sunday School voice, that the law says,

"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, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27)

The lawyer is probably wondering exactly who is it that he's supposed to love as much as himself, and how much is it going to cost him?

Jesus' disciples also asked several times who their neighbors are supposed to be. Who are we supposed to love? Who all is included? I believe that it's everyone who comes near us, everyone who passes by, everyone that we can touch or interact with.

This includes lots of different kinds of people. It includes those who like us, those who don't like us, and those who don't care about us at all. It includes those who have good taste, those who have bad taste, and those who are just plain clueless.

Who are our neighbors?

One key difference between living in our times and living in Jesus's time is the number of people we normally come in contact with. We see hundreds of real people every day, and we're exposed to thousands of people when you include those we see and hear through television, radio, our phones, and our computers.

A normal villager in the time of Jesus knew the few hundred people in their village from the time they were born until they died. If they went to Jerusalem for the festivals, they'd camp out with their extended family every year and then see crowds of at most a few thousand in the city.

Women met other women at the wells where they went to get water for cooking and washing. Younger girls, especially in the cities, were not allowed to leave the house until they were twelve years old and ready to be engaged to marry.

These girls never listened to music, went to school, played sports, or listened to the news. Boys sometimes learned to read the scriptures, but most of their time was spent learning a trade or working in the fields. They didn't often see someone they hadn't known all their lives either.

In Jesus's time, the difference between a neighbor and a stranger was very clear. A neighbor was someone you knew all about. A stranger was someone you didn't know, someone who dressed funny, smelled funny, talked funny, carried stuff you didn't recognize, and was very unpredictably scary. In our day, you may or may not even know the folks who live next door, but you do know and have interacted with folks who are different from you in lots of ways.

Can a stranger be a neighbor?

What Jesus did in this story of the good Samaritan was to change the definition of a neighbor, from someone we know well to someone we happen to run into. For us, his new definition means that our neighbor is anyone, near or far, that we have contact with. These folks may be people we already know a little or a lot about, or people we have never met or even heard

about before. Jesus has an opinion about how we should treat these folks, whether they're relatives, friends, acquaintances, or total strangers. We are commanded to love them.

Sometimes the hardest people for us to treat well are the strangers, because we don't understand who they are or what treatment they would think is polite. We meet strangers in unknown territory. How do we express our love for them? We do what is best for them in their own terms.

We treat them the way we would treat ourselves. We take into account their strengths and weaknesses, their needs and values, their likes and dislikes. We don't automatically do for them what would be right for us, but we do try to do what is right for them.

What can we do for a stranger?

The first and most obvious thing we can do is provide them with help when they're in trouble. This is the situation of the injured man in the story. When there's no one else to help, it's up to us. This is what happened with the bystanders at the Boston Marathon bombing. They reached out to each other. They cared for the hurt. Those who didn't know how to help got out of the way or assisted those who did.

Even those of us who don't experience a big crisis sometimes see a need for help in our ordinary day. Usually the best help we can give is to call 911 to get folks who know what to do on the scene. I once saw a car ahead of us on the interstate go off the road and flip onto its side. When I called it in, the 911 operator said "thank you" and sent emergency crews and an ambulance. (Sometimes they say "thank you, we already know about that.") We have many more kinds of help available these days than a traveler did in the first century, but we can still help a stranger by bringing the right kind of assistance to an emergency.

We also need to be careful not to try to do too much in our desire to help. If a person is struggling in the water, jumping in to help, especially if we're not trained, can just make things worse. If we stay on the shore and throw a rope or something that floats, we can help the person come in more safely. The Samaritan helped the man on the road recover from the incident, but he didn't take him home afterward or adopt him into his family.

Any interaction with a stranger requires respect, respect for the person of the other and respect for the differences between us. When I was serving as a chaplain in the hospital, I was told that my natural habit of reaching for a patient's hand was not appropriate for male Jewish patients. I couldn't know whether the patient was observant, and the patient couldn't know whether or not I was in a state of uncleanness that would require ritual purification if I touched him. I needed to behave differently out of respect for his religious customs.

There's a wonderful book from years ago called *How To Be a Perfect Stranger*, which has lots of advice about how to behave in unfamiliar cultural settings, out of respect for the culture we're visiting.

Courtesy is the bare minimum requirement of the love that followers of Jesus are called to give to friends, neighbors, strangers, and even enemies. Jesus set us an example in openness and care for those who are different, and not just in unimportant ways. He ate and drank with social outcasts, treating them with respect and friendship. He didn't shy away from those whose disease symptoms made them repulsive.

Jesus was open to listening to all those who came to him or called out to him for help, and he was open to them just the way they were. If we're to follow his example, we must learn not

to avoid those who're distasteful, irritating, or pig-headed. We need to learn to accept their idiosyncrasies, treat them with sincere respect, and be open to appreciating the best that they have to offer in their own way.

How can we build a relationship with a stranger?

We do want to get to know and engage with lots of different kinds of people. In these days, however, we know that some of the people we meet will be on the other side of the liberal/conservative split that seems to divide everything—politics, religion, and even sports.

Trust is based on an underlying conviction of the good intentions of those on the opposite side, regardless of where they or we stand. As we engage with strangers, we need to assume that their intentions are good and not motivated by some desire to cause harm. When we treat others the way we want to be treated, we have to believe in the best intentions of the others, the same way we expect others to believe in our own good intentions.

Building trust across differences means that each side expects the other side to play fair, and doesn't expect the other side will resort to sneakiness, trickery, or manipulation. When some part of an interaction works to the disadvantage of one side, it's very hard not to see it as a result of some kind of a conspiracy or plot. Even one incident that feels unfair or underhanded can undermine trust, and can lead to the negative cycle of lowered expectations of each other.

The essence of courtesy includes respect for the other person and respect for the honest differences between us. We mustn't condemn others for honest and sincere disagreement, and we need to address controversial issues with patience. We mustn't punish those who disagree with us by avoiding them or excluding them. Above all, we mustn't impose situations on others that presume agreement between us that lead to public embarrassment.

When you disagree with someone, it's much easier to slide into fighting if you think of the others as "the bad guys." By looking at their faults and not their virtues, their weaknesses and not their strengths, it's easier to see the others as "deserving" to fail. This then leads to a cycle of having low expectations of their behavior,

- interpreting their actions in the worst possible light,
- finding lots of confirmation of their evil intent, and
- concluding that the opposition doesn't deserve either respect or fair dealing.

This polarization is natural, human, and disastrous.

I need to give my neighbors the benefit of the doubt, because this is what I would want them to do for me. I don't read minds well, so I'm often guessing why my neighbor did what they did that bothered me. Did they walk by without saying "hello" because they think I'm not worth talking to? Or did they walk by because they're mad and not speaking to me? Or did they miss me because they're busy thinking about something else and not paying attention?

I hope when I don't notice someone, that they realize I didn't mean anything personal in it. I know that I'm often distracted, embarrassed, or not paying attention and that it's my fault. I just hope my neighbor would give me the benefit of the doubt, and assume that I didn't mean to hurt their feelings.

Showing our love is up to us

In any interaction, we demonstrate our love for others when we deal with them honestly and with compassion. This is more than speaking the truth in a loving way. It also includes

thinking hard about which of the many things that are true are also helpful for others. Paul says to the Ephesians,

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. (Ephesians 4:25)

But he also says,

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29)

Not only must we speak the truth, but we must also choose those messages which also give grace to others and build them up. Loving words, like loving actions, are always working toward the best interests of others.

As Jesus demonstrated by telling this story about the good Samaritan, we need to watch out for our own assumptions. Every human being is an individual and not a stereotype. When we don't have enough information, stereotypes can be helpful in setting expectations, but they are not complete information and can be misleading. When we meet a stranger, we should never bring assumptions about what characteristics are better or worse. A person may appear to be disadvantaged or handicapped, but this shouldn't affect the way we act or respond to them.

Making assumptions about people can color what we see and hear. We may

- hear what we want to hear, focus on what we expect and ignoring the rest
- only hear what confirms our expectations
- react to a person's similarity with someone else (reminds me of my obnoxious cousin Harry)
- engage our own sensitivities (bringing up painful memories)
- trigger our own habits of emotional reactions (lose it unexpectedly)
- key into our own internal conflicts (bringing in our uncertainties and discomfort)

Any of these reactions can keep us from interacting with the real person in front of us.

The same way God loves those who deserve it and those who don't, we're expected to love those who deserve it and those who don't. This is not easy. Let me say this again. We are expected and commanded to love those who don't deserve it as well as those who do. How do you feel about that? Jesus said,

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. .. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:32-36)

References

Magida, Arthur J., and Stuart M. Matlins. *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies*. Woodstock, Vt: Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999.