

“Rules in the service of relationships” Luke 10:25-37 Respice Domine 2025  
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Many people in our church (myself included) often second-guess ourselves when it comes to relationships – did I say the right thing to my child’s teacher, did I understand correctly when my wife says, “it’s fine”, am I being a good role model for my children? This is nothing new - even in biblical times, people often had a flawed understanding of how relationships worked. Jesus, in our Gospel today, corrects people on the relationship rules for both dealing with God and with our fellow man as he answers a seemingly innocent question from a lawyer.

The lawyer, as a Pharisee, believed in eternal life. One of the major differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, eternal life and angels. The Sadducees, more ideologically conservative, believed only in what was in the Torah, our first five books of the Bible. Since the Pharisees believed that their salvation, and hence eternal life, depended on their own efforts and power, it is not surprising that the lawyer frames his question “Teacher, what must I do,” in terms of “doing” and “obligation.” Jesus’ answer, which he makes the lawyer himself say, is not specific enough for the lawyer. So he asks another question about the meaning of “neighbour.” In answer, Jesus gives an example rather than a distinction or definition.

This story is an example of compassion. It contrasts two members of the Jewish clergy who fail to show compassion with a Samaritan, a layman and non-Jew to boot, the most unlikely of people, who does. Thus the theoretical question, “Who is my neighbour?” is answered by the practical example of one who showed compassion.

In verse twenty-five, to test him, the lawyer was not sincere in his question. He wanted to test and, presumably, trap Jesus. No matter how often the Pharisees

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What must I do to inherit eternal life? The question would make sense to a Pharisee but not to Jesus. His entire preaching could be summed up in the two great Old Testament commandments: love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself. While these, too, were obligations requiring obedience, Jesus would not conceive of them in terms of Pharisaic “doing” for the purpose of earning, achieving, or deserving “eternal life.” Loving God and neighbour proceeds from one’s inner disposition motivating all one’s actions rather than external actions alone, qualifying as measurable “works” to be put on one’s resume.

He now asks, “What is written in the law?” Unbeknownst to the lawyer, Jesus is setting his own trap to make the lawyer admit the truth of what Jesus has been teaching. Pharisees loved to quote from the law. They could not resist showing off their knowledge of religion. At the same time, Jesus will show that his teaching is not opposed to the written law. On the contrary, it is the fulfillment of it.

In verse twenty-seven, we hear “You shall love the Lord.” This command was regarded as the very heart of Judaism. The concept, undivided loyalty to the God who was so faithful to them, was central to the covenant, especially as laid down in Deuteronomy. With all your heart...soul...strength...mind, in Jewish thought, these were aspects of the whole human person. Heart denotes the will. Soul or being denotes the vitality and consciousness of a person. Strength pertains to one’s instinctive drives, and mind refers to one’s intellectual powers. Together, they sum up the human person.

Now the lawyer feigns confusion, a typical tactic when humans do not want to do something. He asks the theoretical question, “Who is my neighbour?” Most Jews interpreted “neighbour” in the second commandment to mean only one’s fellow Jews. The Pharisees typically excluded even Jews who did not observe the law as they interpreted it. The lawyer’s question amounted to the question, “Where do I draw the line?” Instead of answering theoretically, Jesus gives a practical example.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is challenging. In this eighteen-mile trip there was a drop in altitude from 2500 feet above sea level to 770 feet below. A man fell victim to robbers. Not a shock - it was a notoriously dangerous road. No one in his or her right mind would travel it alone. There were too many ambush places. Now the priest, one of the ruling class, and a Levite, just below the priests in rank, pass by. Samaritans, of course, were unclean mixed-blood hooligans whom God-fearing Jews had no interaction with! But look who is helping.

Now he does something we wouldn’t really think of - he uses oil and wine. This was a medicinal mixture. The oil would soothe the wounds, and the acid in the wine would serve as an antiseptic. He cared for this victim, despite the law forbidding contact with the “unclean.” Those who did not observe the law, prevented or, more correctly, provided a convenient excuse for the clergy to avoid helping the poor fellow. If they came into contact with someone made unclean by themselves coming into contact with unclean robbers, they would become unclean too. Thus, the observance of and fidelity to the law is used as a pretext to avoid the inconvenience of compassion.

We all use avoidance tactics to keep from doing compassionate acts. Compassion is not merely a feeling. It is not just feeling sorry for someone in need, distress or dire straits. It is doing something about it. We have all crossed to

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the other side of the street, at least figuratively, when someone’s need interferes with our planned day, our agenda, our own exaggerated needs. We can come up with any number and all kinds of excuses. These clergymen came up with a religious one. If they helped this fellow, who had become unclean because he came in contact with someone else who was unclean, they themselves would become unclean. Since they were Temple officials, being unclean would prevent them from functioning in the Temple, thus they had a moral and religious duty to avoid helping the man. A perfect excuse!

Now Jesus was showing how religion, as Pharisees understand it, actually prevents people from being religious, as God understands the term. For people who think like Pharisees the rules are more important than the Ruler. Keeping the rules- all of them, especially the minute ones- earns one’s way into God’s pleasure. What real good is a religious attitude that places dogmas above people, sees religion as a set of restrictive regulations, and leaves someone to suffer and die in the holy name of God?

Jesus clearly valued relationships over rules. That does not mean that Jesus ignored rules, intentionally disrespected them or violated them. It is just that he saw everything in the light of eternity and evaluated everything accordingly. For Jesus, a person in need, is himself or herself a “law” of God, challenging those with the power to help to obey God by helping humans. At first glance, that seems to be just another rule, albeit one above all other rules, cancelling out the other rules if they conflict with it. Indeed, Jesus did teach that truth when he spoke of “weightier matters of the law.” So, Jesus’ position is not “relationships vs. rules” and “rules don’t apply,” but “rules in the service of relationships.” It is a “rule” of Jesus that we “love our neighbour.” We do not do this out of good feelings for our neighbour, although good feelings may be present. We do it out of obedience to

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God, the Ruler, our Ruler. The word “love” in that rule is in the imperative mood, the grammatical mood of command. So, whether we feel like it or not, we go out of our way or stop what we are doing to help another in need, and we do so because we are in a relationship with God, Christ, that requires it. Obedience, then, is based upon and rooted in our relationship with God, not our relationship with the person we help. The Samaritan did not establish a relationship of any depth or length with the man who fell prey to robbers. They did not even know each other’s names. It was the legalists who wanted to base the commandment to “love your neighbour” on human relationships, namely, whether or not the person in need was related to them by race, nationality, religion or law. Such legalists could and would quote the law, either the letter of the law or their interpretation of it, as the basis for their behaviour or avoidance of behaviour. They had a relationship with the laws of God that was more important to them than a relationship with the God of the laws. It allowed them to finagle the law to suit their fancy at the time. Jesus took a different approach. He taught us to look for God’s decision, his “side” of an issue or argument and then look for ways to implement it. He valued examples over argument, and in giving us the example of the Good Samaritan, he showed us a model that is not nearly as easy to reproduce as it is to talk about.

We can substitute our own hot-button words for “Samaritan,” the list is usually long, groups of people we do not like for one reason or another or for no “reason” at all. When we do, we will experience the impact of this story and not reduce compassion to “making nice-nice.” God’s love, breaks down these barriers to love and reveals love as tough, capable of melting icy hearts and breaking through stony minds, changing the human situation and then going on its merry way to help another in any way on any day, come what may. Amen.