

Agree or disagree: The Christian Church does more harm than good.

I hope I know how all of you are going to answer that simple agree/disagree. Barna asked the same questions in 2014 to a cross-section of Americans 30 years old and under. Anyone want to guess what they found?

Agree or disagree: The Christian Church does more harm than good.

1 in 3 agreed with that statement.

1 in 3 30 years and under agree that the Christian Church does more harm than good.

I don't know if that is surprising to you. I tend to think it is a bit of a bummer as far as statistics go. That means that when you associate with my generation that 1 in 3 of them believe Christianity is not good, not even just neutral, but harmful.

It's just one more stat piled on the mountainous heap of proof that we now live in a post-Christian culture - which has very real implications for us as individuals, as a congregation, as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. In fact, this last week was our Synod's national convention where this, how we move forward in a post-Christian world and try to share Jesus for generations to come, was a central topic.

There are a number of reasons why the church has a growingly negative reputation in our society. Jesus plops one of the bigger reasons before us today.

It's one of those stories of Jesus that just about everyone has some familiarity with – the Good Samaritan. Even in a post-Christian culture you can call someone a “good Samaritan” and most people will understand what that means.

This morning let's walk through this parable again. I know it is very familiar to many of you, but let's make sure we've thought this one through and then let's think a bit about what this parable means for we who are trying to glorify God in a post-Christian world.

That good old “expert in the law” wants to test Jesus.

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Knowing it's a test to see if he will support the law of Moses (the religious people of Jesus' day were always concerned that he didn't do enough to support the law of Moses), in classic Jesus form he answers a question with a question: “What does the law say? How do you read it?”

This expert in the law gives a great orthodox answer. Quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, a classic, two-fold summary of God's law: “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.”

“Spot on,” Jesus said, “Do that and you will live.”

But then comes the twist... The expert knows the law, but he wants to know exactly where the line is when it comes to this law, so he asks a commonly debated question in Jesus' day, “Who is my neighbor?” These guys took Moses' laws very seriously, so they needed to know just who was and was not included in this “love your neighbor” command.

Most Jews in Jesus' day agreed that *neighbor* included fellow Jews. Most Jews agreed that it included what they called proselytes (non-ethnically Jewish people who had converted to the Jewish faith).

But what about the Roman soldiers who were occupying them? What about the idol worshiping, mixed-blood Samaritans who lived right smack dab in the middle of good orthodox Jews in Galilee and Judea? What about those influential Greeks across the Mediterranean? What about the pagans from the far East in India and down in Egypt whose trade routes crisscrossed their land? Where they to be considered “neighbors” too? Were they to love them as they loved themselves?

In Jesus' day, a lot of experts on the law of Moses said, “no.” In the Dead Sea scrolls we've found a bit of Jewish teaching that said that “the sons of light are to be loved, but the sons of darkness are to be hated.” Some first century Jewish literature compares eating with a Samaritan to eating with pigs.

Hence the experts desire to “justify himself.” If *neighbor* means just fellow-Jews, this man might have been able to go home confident in his obedience, and his eternity, but he wanted to know where Jesus came down on this whole *neighbor* debate.

Again in classic Jesus form, he responds to the question with a parable.

A certain man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho.

This is a 17 mile trip that borders wilderness, but also has some longer lines of sight so you can see long stretches of the road at time.

He was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

The “stripped” and “half dead” parts are important to the question *who is my neighbor* because this man not dressed like a Greek or Roman or Samaritan – his clothes are gone. He's half dead so there's no conversation where you can pick up his dialect, and where he comes from. He is simply a man in need.

A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

At this point we are all up in arms, right? “How could you! You call yourself a priest? You should know better!”

But let me help you think through this decision with this priest. This isn't explicitly stated in Luke 10, but there are some culturally safe assumptions that can help us think through why a priest would do this - beyond just being a cold-hearted jerk. Maybe he was just a jerk, but there could be more to it than that.

In all likelihood, if this priest is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, he is on his way home after a two-week tour of duty at the temple. The priests did not serve in the temple 365 days a year. They lived all around the land of Israel and at the time of Jesus were slotted into regular two week rotations. They would gather tithes and offerings from wherever they lived, take them to the temple, serve for two weeks and then head home.

This priest very possibly had been away from his family for weeks. He had miles yet to travel. This was clearly a dangerous stretch of road - who's to say those robbers aren't waiting for someone else to jump? But there's even more to it than that. There is the risk of ritual defilement - becoming ceremonially unclean. The God-given rules governing priests were very strict. If a priest comes into contact with a corpse he becomes ceremonially unclean. That means he can't collect and eat tithes when he gets home. That means he would have to turn right around, head back to Jerusalem and go through a long and complicated process to become ritually clean again. That means facing cultural shame because he had done something to make himself unclean.

Putting the best construction on things, this priest is concerned with personal safety, time with his family, the God-given "do's" and "don'ts" of his day. Whatever the reason, for personal safety and convenience, he doesn't take the risk.

If you still need help getting off your high horse of judgement: show of hands, how many of you have seen one of those rough looking men standing in the median by a stoplight on 27th street, or over on Howell by the airport, holding a little cardboard sign? Ok, now put your hand down if you have avoided eye contact and rolled on by because you had places to be and things to do, and maybe they are just scamming anyway?... I know I have... Back to the parable...

In the same way also a Levite happened to come by the place and having seen him, he passed by on the opposite side.

Again, putting the best construction on things: This was a dangerous road. 1st century travelers payed very close attention to fellow travelers because of all the dangers involved. As I mentioned, I've never been there, but I've been told this road as lots of long lines of sight. It is entirely possible that the Levite would have seen that this priest was traveling in front of him. It is possible that a Levite, whose job it was to be a servant at the temple, comes upon this guy and beyond the possible personal danger, his theological superior has passed by and he simply followed his pattern. Whatever the motivation, this is another person putting personal safety and convenience above mercy. But finally we get to the good part...

But a Samaritan, as he was traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii (a denarius was a standard day's wage, so not a small amount of money) and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

In Jesus' day, for Jesus' audience (a good, orthodox Jew) this is an incredibly unlikely hero. This Samaritan, traveling though the country of people who hated him, goes above and beyond - not only providing medical assistance and transport to a safe place, but paying for any future medical expenses.

After this shocking twist of a hero Jesus asks the obvious question: **"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"** Notice how Jesus turns the questions around a bit. *Neighbor* isn't just describing a group out there. It is an attitude in my heart. The self-examination Jesus prompts isn't, "who is my neighbor, who do I have to love?", but "Am I being neighborly to any needy person I find in my path?"

You can see why this is such a popular story. Who wouldn't want more people like this in the world?

So, what does it have to do for us who are trying to glorify God in a post-Christian society?

The point of the parable is clear: **Go and do likewise.**

If 1 in 3 people in my generation think the church does more harm than good than it might be time for us to take a good hard look at how well we are "doing likewise".

I don't know about you, but for me the conviction of my own heart and life is very easy on this one.

If you need a little more help getting convicted I'll ask just two questions.

Question 1: If I interviewed all of the people that came across your path this last week and asked them, "Did _____ go above and beyond to show you love and meet your needs?" - *all* the people, not just the ones who are easy to love, not just the ones who are convenient to love, but all of them - how's that poll turning out?

Question 2: If I interviewed the people of Franklin (starting with our city officials, and then the people in the neighborhoods around us) and asked them, "In your experience, is St. Paul's a church that is dedicated to being a good Samaritan, meeting the people of this community wherever they are and going above and beyond to help those in need?" how's that poll turning out? We've been in this city 150 years, if St. Paul's disappeared tomorrow, do you think anyone in this community (other than our school and church families) would notice? Would this community miss us if we were gone because we do so much to meet their needs? Or have we, like many older churches, become so focused on meeting our own needs rather than *going* and meeting the needs of others?

This parable doesn't pull any punches. It is hard, in your face law. This is a super convicting parable.

God have mercy on me, a sinner.

The comfort, as many before me have identified, is the man who first told this famous story.

This thing that we are so bad at (“doing likewise”), he is so, so very good at.

There is a cool chapter in the Old Testament that has just enough parallels to Jesus’ famous parable that it makes you wonder if Jesus had it in mind when he told this story. It’s Hosea 6.

Hosea 6 talks about the sins of Israel this way, “As marauders lie in ambush for a man, so do bands of priests. They murder on the road, committing shameful crimes. I have seen a horrible thing in the house of Israel.”

But in the midst of this Hosea describes how God is going to treat his people. “Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us that we may live in his presence.”

What we are so very bad at, Jesus is so very good at.

He sees our failures as individuals and as a congregation to above and beyond to meet the needs of everyone he puts in our way and it doesn’t drive him past us or away from us. Our failures to love this way just might be part of the reason why many people in my generation think the church does more harm than good, but not Jesus. Our failures don’t drive him past or away from us, they drive him to his cross where he will be hurt so we can be healed; where he will die so we can live; where he will revive us and restore us so we can live in his presence forever.

Friends, like I said last week with evangelism, you don’t have to be a good Samaritan. You could walk out of here and never go above and beyond to help those in need. You don’t have to because Jesus did it for you. Your sins are forgiven. Your Jesus has healed you, he has bound up your wounds. You are at peace with God. And that is the really good news. Jesus didn’t just tell this parable to fill you with guilt. He told this parable so that when he died on the cross to forgive you, you could stand in even deeper awe of Jesus’ over and above love for people who don’t deserve to be forgiven.

You don’t have to do this, but you are invited by your Savior to go and do likewise in joy and gratitude because you are forgiven. When you walk out of here today, remember the one who told this story. Remember his love for you. And go and do likewise.

Amen.