

‘LOVING’ LUKE 10:25-37

[St Mark’s Online Services – Sunday, July 26, 2020]

1. The Kingdom and the Need for Love.

Anyone who has ever studied psychology will be familiar with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Abraham Maslow was a 20th century American psychologist who made a name for himself by writing a paper in 1943 about what motivates human beings. And in that paper he proposed that there were five fundamental human needs that motivate human behaviour. He described them as a hierarchy in which each progressive need must be fulfilled before a person can move on to trying to fulfil the next need in the pyramid. His description of the five key needs went like this: {Go to slide¹} (1) Physiological Needs- things like food, water, warmth, rest. (2) Safety Needs- security, safety. (3) Belonging & Love Needs- intimacy, friends, family. (4) Esteem Needs- respect, feeling of accomplishment, recognition. (5) Self-Actualisation Needs- achieving one’s full potential.

Now, of course, you might argue about the order in which Maslow has put these things, and whether there should be an order at all, and plenty of psychologists since Maslow have argued about these things. But there’s a reason why Maslow’s hierarchy is still discussed today. Because he was on to something. Most humans feel these kinds of motivations in one form or another at some point. Maslow summarised a lot of human motivations very well. {Remove slide}

And today we’re thinking about love. It comes in at number 3 on Maslow’s scale. But for our purposes today I’m mostly interested in how he describes it- as a basic human need. Humans need love. And, as Maslow points out, the desire to be loved drives a lot of human behaviour. That’s patently true is it not? And when it comes to love, I think this is the dominant way that people in the world think about. It’s something we all need, something we’re all trying to find and hang on to.

But I hope you’ve noticed that when Christians talk about love we’re often starting at quite a different point. Christians often talk about love not so much as something to be found and clung on to, but something to give. In our society love is so often framed as the thing I want- there is a need for me to be loved. But in the kingdom, love is framed as something I share- there is a need not so much for me to be loved, as to love.

¹ <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4136760>

Now of course, that's overstating the case in a number of ways. I'm not suggesting for a moment that no one in the world is looking to give love but only to receive it. I know that's not true. Nevertheless I think I'm still describing a very real difference in the fundamental way people in the world and people in the kingdom of God think about love. And I hope that difference is recognisable to you too.

Last week we spoke about the kingdom and the need for work. This week we're talking about the kingdom and the need for love- love not as psychologists might understand it, but love according to God.

2. The True Story of the (Not So) Good Lawyer.

And the passage in front of us is what I like to call The True Story of the (Not So) Good Lawyer. You notice that my title for the passage is very different to the title supplied by the editors of the NIV. They call this section The Parable of the Good Samaritan. But you see, whilst there's a parable within our passage it's primarily a true story. And whilst there's a Samaritan in the parable in the story, the main character here is a lawyer. And whilst the Samaritan in the parable in the story might be good, the lawyer who this true story is really about thinks he's really good, but in reality- not so much. Thus my title. Perhaps it's a little less catchy, but it's a better description of what this section is really about. The True Story of the (Not So) Good Lawyer. And basically, these verses contain a discussion between this lawyer and Jesus. Essentially it's a series of questions and answers. And that's how we're going to look at it.

- a question about the way to life (v.25)

Verse 25 begins by introducing us to the lawyer. I'm calling him a "lawyer" for short, but Luke describes him here as an 'expert in the law'. And, of course, the law he was an expert in was the religious law of the Jews- the legal material we still have in our Old Testaments, and perhaps some extra bits as well. But if you're trying to locate this guy it'd probably be better to think of him in an office in a theological college rather than in a board room of a big city law firm.

And this expert in the Jewish law had a question for Jesus. But this is not the kind of question an inquisitive child asks a parent because they're curious to learn something. This is more like the kind of question a mischievous teenager asks the student teacher to try and make them look stupid. Luke tells us in verse 25 what the lawyer's motive was. He wanted to test Jesus. He wasn't looking to learn from Jesus. He was more

interested in showing Jesus up. And so this is the question he came up with: 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'²

Now I suspect he already had an answer to that question in his own head. It'd be hard to be an expert in the Jewish law and not have thought about that lots before. But he's interested to see what Jesus will say. And he's probably particularly interested in whether Jesus will show himself to be out of step with his Jewish contemporaries.

- an answer about life through love (vv.26-28)

Well, of course, Jesus is not going to be trapped so easily. In verse 26 he responds to the lawyer's question with a question of his own.

[Read 10:26]

What does the law say? That's what Jesus asks him. But I wonder if there was a bit of attitude in Jesus' tone. Perhaps something like: 'well you're the expert mate, you tell me!'

And of course, our lawyer man has a tightly worded response in his back pocket ready to pull out. He says, you can inherit eternal life through two kinds of love- love for God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love for your neighbour. What will Jesus say next? We find out in verse 28.

[Read 10:28]

Interestingly, the word translated in our Bibles as 'correctly' is the Greek word from which we get the word "orthodox". Jesus responds by saying that this is a straight down the line answer. None of his Jewish lawyer buddies could possibly fault him. He's proved his orthodoxy. And of course, in other places, Jesus himself summarises the law in a similar way³.

But we may wonder what Jesus words here really mean. He seems to agree with the lawyer that these two kinds of love are the way to eternal life. Can that be right? Well, I think the first thing to say is that Jesus can see into this man's heart and he knows he's not here to listen but to entrap. And Jesus is refusing to be drawn into the lawyer's

² The word inherit is the wisest part of his question. He seems to presume that eternal life is something bequeathed to you by God. But notice what else he presumes. His assumption is that in order to inherit eternal life you have to do something. Or perhaps a lot of things. And he'd like to hear what Jesus thinks those things are.

³ Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31

game⁴. But it's also important to point out that Jesus wouldn't say this if he thought it was false. There is, of course, a sense in which this is true. If a person were to love God with all their heart and soul and strength and mind, and if they were to love their neighbours as they love themselves, then they would be the perfect embodiment of God's law. They would be without sin, they would have no need of forgiveness, and they could be confident of inheriting eternal life on that basis. I think Jesus is affirming that here. Now I don't think for a second that Jesus thought this man was going to be able to do that. Nor any other man for that matter- with one significant exception. But nevertheless, for the purposes of this conversation, Jesus is happy at this point to sign off on the orthodoxy of the lawyer's answer.

- a question about who to love (v.29)

Perhaps Jesus knew that the lawyer wouldn't be able to leave it there? Because if he could see into the man's heart he would've known that he wasn't just interested in testing Jesus. He was also very keen to justify himself. Once again in verse 29 Luke reveals to us the lawyer's motives. And of course, in this respect Jesus hadn't given the lawyer any satisfaction at all. Perhaps what he was really after from Jesus was an affirmation that he stood to inherit eternal life. And whilst Jesus had conceded the orthodoxy of his answer, Jesus hasn't even gone close to assuring this man of eternal life. So the lawyer can't drop it. Jesus isn't playing his game. So he has another question for Jesus. Verse 29.

[Read 10:29]

He wants to know- if I have to do "neighbour love" to inherit eternal life, who do you think that includes? It's a question about who to love. It's a question about where the limits are, about how far one has to go in loving neighbours.

- an answer about how to love (vv.30-37)

And if Jesus' previous answer was fairly predictable, I think we'd have to admit that Jesus' next answer is completely unexpected. In response to the lawyer's question about who to love, Jesus tells a story. And it's a story that has become one of the most well-known stories in the history of the world. I don't think that's an exaggeration. And of course, you know it well, so I don't need to re-tell it to you.

But perhaps I can show you a picture instead? Unsurprisingly, this parable of Jesus has given rise to countless works of art down through the centuries. This one is an 1890 painting by Vincent Van Gogh. {Go to slide⁵}. You may have seen it before. The man in

⁴ He too is playing the "orthodox Jewish person" card here.

⁵ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/76/Vincent_Willem_van_Gogh_022.jpg

the foreground in the yellow tunic is the Samaritan. In his arms is the man in Jesus' story who was on a journey to Jericho when he was accosted by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left half dead. And the Samaritan man is putting him on his donkey before taking him to an inn where he pays for the injured man to be cared for. But if you look closely, you can also see in the background that Van Gogh has on the left of the painting the figures of the priest and the Levite continuing their walk down the road having passed the injured man by. It's a remarkable painting. And it represents the heart of the story very well. {Remove slide}

Because this is a story about what love looks like. All three passers-by see the injured man. The priest and the Levite were in possession of the law we've just heard the lawyer discussing with Jesus and we might have therefore expected them to stop and love their neighbour. They did not. But, of course, Jesus shocks his audience by telling them that the one who saw the injured man and actually had pity on him was a Samaritan. As you know, in Jesus' day the Jews and Samaritans did not get on. So Jesus' hearers would not have expected a Samaritan passer-by to help a needy Jew. But in Jesus' story he's the only one who does. And by telling the story this way Jesus is making a comment about the foolish racial divide between Jews and Samaritans in his day. He points out that failing to help a dying man because of the country he came from or because of who his grandparents were is a failure of love. This is Jesus waving his "Samaritan Lives Matter" placard in the faces of the Jews. We can't avoid the fact that this is a story about racism- perhaps one of the Bible's most potent messages on that theme.

But of course it's more than that isn't it? Because it's chiefly a story about love. The priest and the Levite failed to love. The Samaritan loved. He had compassion. He showed mercy. And with this story Jesus says that the love which pleases God is the love that extends to the unlikely one. When the lawyer asks Jesus "who is my neighbour", this is Jesus' answer. It's anyone who crosses your path and needs your help. Regardless of their race. Regardless of their religious convictions. Regardless of how you might feel about them.

Jesus does answer the lawyer's question. But he also suggests by his answer that there's a better question to ask. The lawyer asked a question about who to love, and Jesus answers with a story about how to love. You love by showing compassion to the unlikely one. And you love by going out of your way to show mercy. That's what the Samaritan did. He went above and beyond what anyone could have expected of him. He didn't just stop and help the man and move on. And he didn't just take the man to where he could get further help. But he also paid for the man to be cared for and he promised to come back again to pay more if needed. The Samaritan's love was not just for an unlikely person. It was also strikingly generous. And this is Jesus' point too. The

Samaritan doesn't just do the minimum. He loves his neighbour generously- with a large heart.

And then, having finished the story, Jesus underlines the fact that this is a story more about how to love than who to love. Listen to his question in verse 36.

[Read 10:36]

The lawyer had asked: 'who is my neighbour?'. Jesus responds by suggesting he should think less about who his neighbour is and think more about how to be a neighbour. And Jesus sends him on his way with the exhortation to do as the Samaritan had done⁶. Once again, Jesus has turned the tables on someone who came to trap him. The cocky lawyer goes home with his tail between his legs because the one he came to test has ended up testing him.

3. Who Am I?

And of course, that's what Jesus' words tend to do. They test us. Even this morning/evening. Jesus speaks. And if we'll listen we'll find him searching our hearts. And as Jesus' words search us today/tonight, I want to return to the question we ended with last week as well. Who does Jesus say that I am? What do the words of Jesus reveal about my identity as one of his disciples? In the kingdom of Jesus, who am I? And once again this morning/evening I think our passage yields two important answers.

- someone who needs to love

The first is this. As a disciple of Christ, I'm someone who needs to love. This is the implication that people usually associate with this passage. Who am I? I'm a neighbour. I'm a neighbour to anyone who God brings across my path. And if I'm a neighbour to them, then I need to show compassion, to have mercy, to love. And, most importantly, I love others out of the overflow of my love for God. I am a loving neighbour because I first love God- with all my heart, and soul, and strength, and mind.

Who am I? I'm more than just an orthodox question answerer. I'm not just someone who knows the right answer and can rattle off what it means to be a Christian. I'm someone who isn't looking for the limits of my responsibility to love either. Rather, I'm someone who loves the unlikely one. I'm someone who goes out of my way to love.

And if I'm someone who loves the unlikely one, I'll love without regard to race or religious conviction or gender or social position. I'll love without allowing how I feel

⁶ The 'do' in verse 37 parallels the 'do' in verse 28 (echoing the question of verse 25).

about someone to determine whether I care about them or not. That's not easy is it? It means I'll love the person who doesn't love me, the person who makes no secret of the fact that they really don't like me very much. I'll love the person who's hard to love because they're socially awkward, because they're hard to finish a conversation with, because they smell bad. I'll love the parent who has been a great disappointment to me, the child who doesn't treat me well, the friend who keeps letting me down. I'll love the person in authority I find hard to respect. I'll love the colleague or acquaintance who no one else loves. I'll love the person with the unenviable job who everyone else seems to ignore. I'll love the stranger in need on the side of the road. I'll love all of them because I love the God who made me and them in his image. I'll love the unlikely one.

But I'll also go out of my way to love. I'll love generously. So I might not just flick the beggar my loose change but buy him breakfast instead. I might run late for a meeting with someone because I come across someone really in need of help. I might choose not to spend my evening the way I was looking forward to because I have a friend who needs me. I might stay in a conversation way longer than I'd like to because the person I'm with still wants to talk. My annual giving to the needy and to the work of the gospel might be more than I feel like I can afford. I might invite someone over for a meal or to come on holidays with me even though I don't find them the most relaxing person to be around. I might call someone who's going through a tough time not just this week, but next week too, and the week after, and the week after that. I might make a list of people I'd normally bump into at church but who I'm not seeing now because of COVID and slowly get in touch with each one of them to see how they are. I might pray for someone who isn't a believer not just every now and then but regularly for years and decades because I long to see them turn to Christ. I'll love beyond the minimum because I love God beyond the minimum, because I love him with all my heart, and soul, and strength, and mind. I'll go out of my way to love.

This is what Jesus says about me here. If I'm a disciple of his, then I'm a lover. I'm a lover of God. And I'm a lover of all those he brings across my path. I'm a neighbour. So I love by showing compassion to the unlikely one. And I love by going out of my way to show mercy.

Of course, I love with wisdom and thoughtfulness since I don't have limitless time and resources. So each day I prayerfully work out who to love and how to love them, conscious of what they need, and conscious of what God enables me to give. But each day when I get out of bed I remember that I'm someone who needs to love.

Last Sunday night after I got home from church I watched the Masterchef semi-final. They were down to the final three in the competition. And one of the contestants- a young woman named Laura- was really struggling with a particular process she had to complete and just couldn't get right. But both of the other contestants stopped what they

were doing and came over to her bench to see if they could help. And in the interview with Laura the producers then spliced into the show, Laura tearfully reflected on her fellow contestants help. This is what she said- I quote: ‘I honestly cannot believe that. We're all fighting for a spot in the finale and the two most selfless people I know have come over and stopped what they're doing . . . to help me succeed. Like, this would never happen anywhere else.’ It was a great tribute to the sportsmanship the other two showed. But what Laura said actually made me feel really sad. Did you catch her last line? ‘This would never happen anywhere else.’ I really hope that was a case of her emotions leading her to overstatement. I really hope it's not the case that she's never experienced selfless care like that anywhere else in her life. I really hope she doesn't think that that kind of compassion, that kind of humble love can only be found in the Masterchef kitchen! Heaven forbid! Because what Jesus is talking about here is the everyday life of all who love God. Jesus' story is not a story of something exceptional. It's the story of the approach a disciple of Jesus takes to every relationship they're in⁷. Where else would you see selfless love like Laura experienced last Sunday night? Try coming to church sometime for a start. Or perhaps just follow any Christian you know around for a day. If you did, you'd hopefully see it at every turn- in every interaction, in every conversation, in every relationship. Because this is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple- to love others as we love God, to be a neighbour- loving even the unlikely one, going out of our way to love. This is everyday life in Jesus kingdom- sincere compassion, tender care, generous mercy. Who am I? I'm someone who needs to love.

- someone in need of love

But that's not the only thing Jesus tells us in this passage about who we are? Is it? Because this is not primarily the parable of the good Samaritan. It's the true story of the not so good lawyer. So this passage is not just about being like the Samaritan. It's also about making sure we're not like this lawyer. The Samaritan may be someone whose conduct leads Jesus to say “go and do likewise”. But you get the distinct impression Jesus doesn't think this lawyer is someone to emulate at all.

And yet so many people today do. I'm not saying there are lots of people trying to undermine Jesus, although there are some. I'm not saying there are lots of people whose demeanour before Jesus is kind of arrogant like this man's is, although there are some. But what I am saying is that there are lots of people, like this lawyer, who are looking to justify themselves. Lots. There are lots of people in our world who think they know what God expects of them and who feel pretty confident that they're going to at least get a pass mark. There are lots of people these days who reckon that they will enter eternal life on the basis of what they've done. They've tried hard to be good

⁷ See also Romans 13:8-10.

people. They've taken note of the good Samaritan and sought to emulate him. And all their little sins and peccadilloes have been less than newsworthy. In fact, I would suggest that I'm describing the vast majority of the Australian population. Perhaps it describes some of you listening this morning/evening? But I need to tell you that this outlook is a mistake. A really big, and ultimately tragic mistake. For one thing, most people who say they keep the commandments and live well, like this lawyer, fail to admit that they really don't love God- certainly not with all their heart and soul and strength and mind. And as it turns out that's the first commandment. And if he isn't everything to you, then you've fallen at the first hurdle. But even if you thought you were having a really good crack at both loving your neighbour and loving God, you'll never do it perfectly. And if you can't, then like this lawyer, you'll never be able to justify yourself. Do you remember what Jesus said in verse 21 of Luke 10?

[Read 10:21]

I think we're meant to read the section in front of us today/tonight in the light of verse 21. What was the lawyer's problem? He thought he was wise and learned, and he thought his wisdom and learning could justify him before God. But that's just not how it works. God hides his truth from people like that. Instead, he reveals it to little children. Eternal life depends upon God's initiative not ours. It depends not on my brilliant living but on the bright grace of God in my life. People don't need to justify themselves. They can't. They need God to reach down and save them. This guy thought he could make his own way to heaven. But the central message of the Bible is that no-one does. No-one can. You can't justify yourself. But there is someone who can justify you. You can't stitch up eternal life for yourself. But there is someone who can give it to you.

It turns out what the lawyer needed was the very person he was talking to. It turns out that we need him too. We need his truth to show us how far we fall short of loving God with all we are, and how far we fall short of loving our neighbours- especially how far short we fall of loving the unlikely ones, and going out of our way to love. And then after we need Jesus telling us the truth about ourselves, we need him to do something about our failures. We need him to justify us because we can't justify ourselves. We need him to do exactly what he would do not that long after he spoke these words. We need him on that hill outside Jerusalem looking a lot like that traveller on the side of the road in Jesus' story. We need Jesus stripped of his clothes, beaten, with people passing scornfully by. We need him not half dead but fully dead. We need his sacrifice for failed lovers. His death for us. We need him to love us.

And of course, whilst there's a truth in what I said at the start today about the difference between the way the world speaks of the need for love and the way we do, it wasn't the whole story was it. Because before we stick out our chests and declare that we don't need love the way Maslow's hierarchy describes it, before we lift our heads and assure

the world that we're not people who need love but rather people who give love- people like this good Samaritan, and before we end up sounding a lot like the lawyer Jesus told this story to undermine, we better acknowledge that Maslow got something right. We do need to be loved. In fact, without being loved we're nothing. Without God loving us we'd never be able to love him, or our neighbours. As the apostle John would go on to write in years to come- 1 John 4:19: 'We love because he first loved us'.

Now I'm not going to stand up here today and tell you that Jesus is the good Samaritan in this parable. I'm not ultimately sold on that interpretation⁸. I think it is primarily a story about how we're to love. But I will tell you this. Because it's a parable about how to love, it's a parable that reflects back to us some pretty important things about how God loves, how Jesus loves. When verse 33 says that the Samaritan saw the man on the side of the road and had pity on him, Luke uses a word that's very significant in the gospels. It's the same word he'll use in Luke 15 to describe the compassion of the father who welcomes back his prodigal son⁹. Back in Luke 7 it's the word he used to describe the compassion Jesus felt for a widow and her dead son before he raised the boy back to life¹⁰. And right back in chapter 1 it was the word Luke used to explain the kind of tender mercy God has for the world he sent Jesus to save¹¹. When we see the compassion of the Samaritan here, we're given a glimpse of the world-saving, life-restoring, sinner-welcoming compassion of God. When we see the mercy of the Samaritan, we see a picture of the mercy of Jesus. When we see the Samaritan loving, we're offered a reflection of the love that we ourselves need more than anything else in the world.

And so we land again today/tonight where we landed last week. With humility. As much as anything else, this is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It means humility before God, and before his Son our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who am I? Who does Jesus say I am? He says I'm to be like the Samaritan, a neighbour- yes. I'm someone who needs to love.

But he also says, I must not be like the self-justifying lawyer. Rather, I am and always will be, someone in need of love- saving, justifying, compassionate, merciful love. Remember 10:21? [Read 10:21]

⁸ There is a long history of allegorical interpretations of this parable, starting with Origen.

⁹ Luke 15:20.

¹⁰ Luke 7:13.

¹¹ Luke 1:78.