

Perhaps the best-known story Jesus told was the one we call the Good Samaritan. Even if we're not familiar with the story, we usually know the term Good Samaritan – it has come to mean someone who stops to help a stranger in trouble.

The story (from Luke 10) goes like this: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among robbers. This man is beaten half-dead. Two religious leaders pass by, but ignore him.

Finally, a despised foreigner sees him and helps out. Another character is an inn-keeper who is charged with caring for the man for a few additional days while the Samaritan continues his travels.

A few of the lessons are obvious: Like the Samaritan, take care of others in trouble. Like the innkeeper, take care of anyone who is brought to you by life's circumstances. And these are good lessons for believer and non-believer alike.

But there is another lesson a bit more subtle that the Savior's listeners would have picked up on, but we might miss. You see, Jericho had a bad reputation. It was a place of political corruption. Of business and moral corruption. It was a place of gambling, prostitution, decadence, and all manner of both petty and serious crime.

Jerusalem on the other hand, was God's holy city, the place of worship and the place of peace.

When Jesus tells us a man left Jerusalem and went down to Jericho, it was not some innocent

journey like saying a man was travelling from Clear Lake to Clayton when he fell among robbers. That would evoke our sympathy. No, it was more like Jesus saying, "A man left his wife and kids at church and went to the bad side of town to meet with his bookie at the meth lab. Oh, and he fell among robbers."

The typical response of the Lord's listeners would have been, "Of course he fell among robbers. What was he thinking? It's his own fault."

But this beginning certainly puts a twist on the lessons Jesus is teaching. What if the person we are called to serve is at least partially to blame for their situation? It's one thing to help an innocent victim. Who would be opposed to that? But Jesus sets up the story to teach us that we are also called on to help those who suffer even from their own errors, mistakes, and sins.

That might explain why the religious leaders in the story pass by our victim. Perhaps they were judging him or don't want to be associated with such a wrongdoer. But we are all sinners in need of help, and we all, so-to-speak, choose Jericho in our own way at one time or another.

The lesson of the Good Samaritan is more than just helping strangers. The lesson of the Good Samaritan is about helping others without judgment, without trying to decide if they are worthy of help – to be there with an open heart for whoever God brings to us.

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