

## Dear 2020 | Following Jesus Through Injustice

**8 minutes and 46 seconds.**

As many of you know, that's how long Minnesota police officers knelt on the neck of a black man named George Floyd during an arrest this year that killed him.

The video of the incident was made public and the long standing race problems in our country were once again brought to the forefront of our national consciousness. The sad reality is that George Floyd is one of an increasingly long list of African-Americans whose lives have been unjustly cut short. Many of you would be able to rattle off ten to twenty names, just from the last few years that have made headlines. And all of it fits into a long history in our nation where black Americans have been treated as though they were lesser than the image-bearers of God that they are.

And this year, lots of different people have responded in a lot of different ways. There have been protests all over the nation, some peaceful and some not-so-peaceful. There have been all sorts of calls for change, from upending racism in our society all the way to dismantling the police system in its entirety. And to be honest, it can be a little disorienting because everyone with an opinion and a social media account is telling you what you need to do and how you need to respond. There are all kinds of different groups confidently telling you often competing ideas and it makes it difficult to know who to trust or how to think.

So, even in my head today, I've got three groups of people I feel like I'm talking to... I've got people on who skew right, who think we don't need to be talking about this from the pulpit. That's it not a Christian issue. And then folks on the left, who think we can't talk about it enough and I'm afraid are unknowingly swallowing unbiblical worldviews like Critical Theory because it just sounds better than the racist stuff you grew up with. And even beyond that, there are my black brothers and sisters who I just want to know that they are loved by God and their church stands with them. And I want to speak to everyone in roughly thirty minutes through a video... may God have mercy on my soul.

But it does beg the question: how should a Christian think about this? What do followers of Jesus do with injustice? In short, how should followers of Jesus respond?

And a bit of that is what I hope to answer for us today.

So, let's go **Luke 10:25-37** and look at a passage you're probably pretty familiar with - Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan.

### **Luke 10:25-37**

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

This is actually a pretty good question, right? Now, he doesn't ask it with a good motive, but it's a good question. He's an expert in Old Testament law and he's asking Jesus, "out of the 600 plus laws... what are the ones I actually need to keep to inherit eternal life?" Or, to put in another way, "if I want to experience life in the Kingdom of God... what do I need to do?"

And Jesus answers his question with another question to get to the heart:

**26** He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" Brilliant move by Jesus, by the way. This guy comes to test Jesus and Jesus flips the script and tests him.

**27** And he answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself."

These are two commands pulled from Deuteronomy 6 - known as the Shema, and Leviticus 19. And Jesus has said elsewhere that the entirety of the Old Testament laws really hang on these two commands. These two commands are really what the rest of them are all about.

**28** And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

Jesus says "Yes, you get it. A+ you passed the test. Just do those things fully... and you will have eternal life. Love God with every shred of your being and love your neighbor as yourself and you'll be good to go. But that sounded about as audacious to the lawyer as it does to us.

**29** But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

His correct answer was not enough, rather he wanted Jesus to define, or limit, exactly who he should love so he could prove his righteousness.

The lawyer realized that the only way he could possibly fulfill the law's requirement was to limit its demand. Which is what we all try to do by the way. And to help the lawyer see just how badly he missed the point, Jesus tells him this story that if you grew up in church, you probably know well...

**30** Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

**31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.

**32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Now these first two figures are important. As a Levite and priest, it would've been understood that these are two men well-versed in the Old Testament law. They served important roles in the religious life of Israel. More than anyone, they would know what the lawyer knew that God's law is about loving God and loving your neighbor and yet, when the rubber meets the road and they see a stranger jumped and left for dead on the side of the road, rather than moving towards him, they ignore and walk away.

I think it bears a bit of teasing out here it's very unlikely that the priest or the Levite had any sort of personal ill-will towards the victim... rather, they were just indifferent.

You see, both the Levite and the priest knew that by touching this man it would make them ceremonially unclean and being ceremonially unclean would have prevented them from doing their jobs in the temple - from doing their religious duty - they were just trying to keep their heads down, mind their own business and be good at their job.

It's very fair to assume that Jesus means for his audience to understand that both of these men simply believed that their work had to come before showing justice and mercy for this man.

And you better believe that Jesus is pointing out the irony here that people so dedicated to a system that was meant to facilitate God's goodness in the world could be so blind that they actually miss the point of it.

This is a huge theme throughout Jesus' teaching. In fact, just one page over in chapter 11, Jesus condemns the Pharisees saying in verse 42, "Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the other."

Love, justice and mercy are what God is after. It's actually what His law is about. And if you think it's more about religious ritual than loving God and loving others... that's an adventure in missing the point. And don't miss hear me, he's not saying there isn't a place for those other things... he still says they should tithe your spices... but that those things are only there to facilitate the greater thing that God wants his people to be about.

So these two religious, upstanding, respected men miss it! Completely miss it! But they aren't the only two characters in the parable. Next, Jesus introduces us to an unlikely third.

**33** But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.

**34** He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

**35** And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back."

**36** Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

**37** He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Notice, here he doesn't say "the Samaritan." there's a reason for that. And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

For a devout, religiously conservative Jewish audience this would've been a real pearl-clutching moment. I like to imagine that someone in the audience gasped and fainted when they heard who Jesus makes the hero in this story.

Here's why: Samaritans were hated by Jews. Samaritans were the ethnic descendants of what we could call the losing side of Israel's civil war - the Northern Kingdom. They succeeded from the Southern Kingdom and were eventually overthrown by pagan rulers with whom they married, had kids, and adopted pagan-cultic practices from. And so in the Jewish mind, Samaritans weren't simply foreigners,

but the offspring of apostates and people who by their ethnicity were inferior to the Jews. They considered them half-breeds. Or “muggles” if that’s your cup of tea. They hated them. So much so, that it even drove them to racial violence.

**In Daniel J. Hays book From Every People and Nation**, he details an incident that happened in A.D. 51 where people from a Samaritan village murdered one or more—the sources contradict—Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. In response, an unruly ‘mob’ from Jerusalem then went down to the Samaritan village, massacred everyone who lived there, and burned it to the ground.<sup>1</sup>

For the record, that was right around the time Luke was compiling this narrative. To say that the society Jesus ministered and preached to was a racialized society would have been an understatement. If you were a Jew, you did not associate with a Samaritan. You did not eat with a Samaritan. You did not work with a Samaritan. You didn’t play, marry or do business with a Samaritan. It was unthinkable.

So, you can see what Jesus is doing here, right? He’s breaking down all kinds of prejudicial walls. He’s challenging negative generalized stereotypes of Samaritans and He’s making the point that loving your neighbor transcends all racial, cultural, economic, religious, and even ideological barriers we might erect.

Jesus refused to allow the law expert to limit the implications of this command to love. In no uncertain terms, He is saying loving your neighbor means being sacrificially involved with those in need - no matter who they are.

We instinctively tend to limit who we will love or exert ourselves for - people who are like us or people that we like - but Jesus will have absolutely none of that.

By depicting a Samaritan helping a Jew, Jesus could not have found a more forceful way to say that anyone at all in need - regardless of race, politics, class, and religion - is your neighbor. While everyone on the road might not be your brother or sister, everyone is your neighbor, and you. must. love. your neighbor.

Go, and do likewise. That’s what it means to follow Jesus. That’s what a life in the Kingdom looks like.

Now, let’s pause here and talk about the implications of this for us in this moment.

I would submit that few, if any, passages in the four gospels speak to our nation’s racial problems as directly as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

As Hays again remarks, “The relationship between Whites and Blacks in America, even within the Church, is remarkably similar to that between Jews and Samaritans of the first century: one that has historically been characterized by prejudicial animosity and distrust, with clear boundaries delineating “them” from “us.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Hays, *From Every People and Nation*. p.166

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Hays, *From Every People and Nation*. p171.

Maybe even a little more on the nose, 8 minutes and 46 seconds was how long a man was held down by his neck on the side of one of our roads.

And the back-to-back headlines and names over the course of the past several months and year - Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, remind us that those 8 minutes and 46 seconds were reflective of a pain and problem much bigger and much deeper than just those moments.

And what the Parable of the Good Samaritan should do for us is destabilize any sort of “us/them” worldview minds. It should demolish any ethnic, socio-economic or political boundaries we build on who will love, and help, and stand for. It should lead us to pursue love, justice, mercy and compassion for our hurting neighbors.

Now, I don’t want to stand up here before you today and act like I’ve a 10-step action plan to solve racism and injustice in America. I don’t have that and I don’t believe that’s my assignment from God. But, to pastor you, I do have a few things we see from Samaritan in this parable that I believe can help us move in that direction.

I want to share them with you today. The first is that loving our neighbor means we:

### **1. Move toward the pain.**

The thing that set the Samaritan’s response apart from the priest and the Levite is that while the Levite and the priest crossed to the other side of the road, the Samaritan moved towards him. What’s it say? he had compassion. In verse 34 it says: “He went to him...”

It would have been so easy for him to keep walking by. Perhaps even easier than the priest and the Levite. He had no religious or moral obligation to help a Jew. In fact, some would argue that he had more justification to kick the injured man while he was down than to help him recover.

But that’s not what he does. He moves towards him. He moves towards the man’s pain, towards the problem. He doesn’t shy away, but he goes to investigate and figure out how he can help.

And in order to love our neighbor, we must do the same.

But, I want to talk about what this means in a couple of different ways.

When it comes to compassion and moving towards the pain - there is a part of that means lamenting what has happened. Like the Scriptures teach elsewhere, we are to “mourn with those who mourn”.

Moving towards the pain is gonna mean possessing a willingness to sit in it with them.

Here's why I bring that up: There is a lot of "frenetic" energy in the world right now to fix something or to do something. Everyone wants to absolve themselves of the sin of racism. That's part of why there are so many voices telling you what you should do.

And there's certainly a place for that, but if we're going to move forward, we first have to be willing to sit and mourn the past. We've got to acknowledge, there is a real problem here with real pain that has affected real people. One, in fact, that church, at times, has contributed to.

You gotta know, if white Christians had been faithful to Jesus on this issue we wouldn't be remotely near where we're at now with this issue. And we just have to know that and own that. As a group we've blown it. And there are some outliers out there, but generally speaking we have passed by on the other side of the road.

So for some of us, what that means is that lament will require learning. What helps us move towards love is understanding the past, our history and someone else's experience.

We need the humility to listen to perspectives that may differ from our own. The humility to admit things we didn't see, or didn't want to see, or chose not see. We need to gain insight from people you don't normally read to understand and gain perspective. We need to listen to the stories of black and brown brothers and sisters to understand the pain and empathize with the problem.

For the record, we've posted a ton on our website recently, but one I'd encourage you to start with if you haven't read it already is Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson.

Like the Samaritan, **we need a willingness to examine what is easier to ignore.**

But the Samaritan didn't stop by merely moving towards the man... he also took action.

He went to him and bound up his wounds... Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

**35** And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'

The Samaritan didn't just go over to see and understand the man's pain, he then took responsibility to do what he could to care for him.

We did a whole series on this stuff a few years ago and the way we said it then was that love is doing...

## **2. Good Deeds According to Your Ability**

To do what you can with what you've got. To take action, pursue justice and mercy as you have the ability to do.

The Samaritan did not view the hurt man as somebody else's problem - someone more closely connected to him - a family member or a fellow Jew. This man saw this injustice as *his* issue to deal with. In the same way, the plight of our black brothers and sisters isn't somebody else's issue, it's our issue.

**Love takes action because love is an action.**

**1 John 3:18** - "let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth"

When it comes to the moment in front of us, I believe we'd do well to remember the words of theologian Don Carson, "Sometimes disease *can* be knocked out; sometimes sex traffic *can* be considerably reduced; sometimes slavery *can* be abolished in a region; sometimes more equitable laws *can* foster justice and reduce corruption... In these and countless other ways cultural change *is* possible. More importantly, doing good to the city, doing good to all people (even if we have special responsibility for the household of faith), is part of our responsibility as God's redeemed people..."<sup>3</sup>

As God's people who display God's glory, we have a responsibility to act.

This crisis presents the opportunity for the church to demonstrate, "this is who we really are" or perhaps more clearly, "this is who God really is." I'll say it even more directly, for the church, the treatment of fellow image-bearers of God is not a partisan political issue. It is a righteousness of God issue.

One that we are called to step into. One that if this parable tells us anything its that if God's people won't do it, He will raise up someone who will.

If we shirk the responsibility to enter into the risks and dangers of breaking theses barriers, if we place our own well-being and self-interest at the top of our priority list, and hide behind the notion of just "minding our own business," then we are more like the priest and the Levite than the Samaritan

The Samaritan did something. He acted. And we are called to do something, too.

Now, you won't be able to do everything. The Samaritan didn't even do everything, but he did do what he could with what he had. He had oil, wine, an animal and some money... and he used those things sacrificially to help the man on the side of the road.

So, I learned a few weeks ago that in response to the recent events, four moms in LifeGroup at our Lexington Church did a little book club with their 3rd grade daughters. They read a book about a little girl in the Civil Rights Era and discussed it together, including in what ways the issues still exist today. Then they got together to watch the movie about the book and talk some more.

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<sup>3</sup> Don Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*. p.218

Listen, these mothers cannot “change the world” as we’re typically prone to think. They aren't supposed to. In fact, right now, they are mostly stuck at home and can't even really get out that much. But, in fact, they are changing the world. They are helping their children see the issues at hand and teach them how to respond to those like followers of Jesus

That’s just one small, but beautiful example of doing what you can with what you’ve got.

And what we’ve got to understand is we’ve all got something. When it comes to racism and injustice in our world, we all have some way we can act to dismantle it. We all have leverage somewhere. Whether that be politically, in our places of business, our families, our relationships... or wherever. You have something.

But hear me on this: 400+ years of racialization and injustice aren’t gonna be undone with one sermon, or a few isolated acts of kindness. The road ahead is still a long one.

One that will require endurance and commitment and creativity. And like the Samaritan commits himself to the man for more than a day, loving our neighbor will mean the same for us. Commitment to keep looking for our opportunities to love... even when the rest of the world has seemed to move on.

If you need a starting place, I’ll give you some ideas you might consider. You might consider...

**1.) Supporting and partnering with organizations dedicated to biblical justice and reconciliation.**

From my seat on the bus, organizations are the best way to cultivate devotion and endurance. Institutions and organizations can keep momentum and do what individuals cannot not due to time constraint, depleting energy and distraction.

At some point you have to think about other things, like paying the bills, getting the kids to school, and etc. Organizations can keep the focus while you have to be preoccupied.

A few I’m personally fond of are the Equal Justice Institute led by Bryan Stevenson. The Christian Community Development Association - an organization that pursues holistic community transformation. And Be the Bridge - an organization dedicated to pursuing racial unity in light of the gospel.

**2.) Voting in local elections**

We talk so much national politics that we forget that so much of this stuff happens - especially regarding policing and criminal justice issues - on the local political level.

You might consider taking a more vested interest in your sheriff. What type of policies regarding policing and criminal justice do they hold? Learning about your solicitor. How do they prosecute cases? Whom do

they prosecute? And start voting in ways that don't just look out for your own self-interest, but the interest of others.

### **3.) Giving your time, energy and resources to support churches and serving our city.**

Historically, churches have been pillars in low-income and African-American communities. They have provided much needed resources like food and educational programs. We have the opportunity to bring flourishing and long-term change to these communities by strengthening and supporting these churches.

To be clear, this is why our Two Notch church exists. And why we partner with many of the Serve the City partners that we do like Ezekiel Ministries. To pursue love, justice and mercy for our neighbor.

A portion of every dime given to our church goes to help our Two Notch church and our Serve The City efforts. We must continue to come alongside them and others to support them and the work that they do in our city.

Those are just a few ideas to get your brain going.

But, it's at this point - and this will be the last thing I say - that I think we need to be reminded of what Jesus is really exposing to the lawyer in this parable.

The lawyer wanted to justify himself. He wanted to make the command manageable... but Jesus puts him in a spot where he can really only come to the conclusion that this is not a command he was capable of keeping.

The envelope he's pushing is "What if your only hope was to get ministry from someone who not only did not owe you any help - but who actually owed you the opposite? What if your only hope was to get free grace from someone who had every justification, based on your relationship to him, to trample you?"

You see, the primary thing Jesus wanted this lawyer to understand was that it's not just that he's called to be like the good Samaritan... but in truth, he *needs* a good Samaritan.

*HE* is the needy man. *He* is the one in need of mercy. And the same is true of you. Of me. Of us.

And when Jesus came into our dangerous world, he came down our road and found us - self-proclaimed enemies, bruised and broken by our sin - and had compassion. He bound up our wounds, he carried us on his shoulders, paid our debt and brought healing our broken soul.

He saved us, not merely at the risk of his life - as was the case for the Samaritan - but at the cost of it.

Jesus is our Great Samaritan. The gift of "the Great Samaritan" - the gospel - is what supports every amount of good deed done according to our ability.

- His sacrificial love shapes our mind and imagination.

- His grace undercuts our pride, but also lifts us up out of our despair and self-loathing.
- His gift of righteousness frees us from this need to “absolve ourselves” or to be “woke” enough.

As Christians, we don't have to fear stumbling our way through pursuing justice because we have a good Samaritan. We believe in racial reconciliation and justice, but we do not believe in salvation through racial reconciliation and justice.

Once we receive this ultimate, radical neighbor-love through Jesus, we can start to be the neighbors that Jesus calls us to be.