

# The Annoyance of a Good Example

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 10:25-37

Mark Twain wrote once that, “Fewer things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.” In being honest with you I must admit that it’s these words that come to mind when I think of the story I just read to you this morning. “Fewer things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.” That may sound a little sacrilegious to speak in such a way about one of the world’s greatest stories – the story of the Good Samaritan. You have heard this story enough ... you have likely heard it preached upon enough – to have Jesus’ wonderful character of the Good Samaritan deeply ensconced in your mind. With every stalled vehicle on the side of the road, with every homeless person holding out their cup, with every hungry plea from a child on television, you and I always have this good example to serve as an annoyance ... a nag to our conscience. “What would the Good Samaritan do?” And of course we know the answer before we even ask it. The Good Samaritan would stop for the stalled vehicle, buy dinner for the homeless man, send in \$30 a month for the hungry child. And yet it is often the case that we don’t do those things. Let’s be real. If I had a dime for every stalled vehicle I passed ... I could buy myself a brand new one. The same goes for the homeless man and the hungry child. But there is the Good Samaritan who is there to gently tap on my shoulder and say, “Boy Steve, if you really were a Christian ... you would stop thinking of all the good and practical reasons why you shouldn’t stop ... and instead just stop and do the right thing. You see there is just enough in this story of Jesus to make me feel guilty just about all the time!

Now it’s not that guilt is such a bad thing. We all can stand a little bit of guilt from time to time – the annoyance of a good example. It wakes us up ... knocks on the door of our conscience and reminds us of those things which are of eternal value. But guilt seldom gets us off the dime. Guilt seldom motivates us to change our way of thinking. Guilt might get us to stop one time ... but it likely will not get us stopping all the time. And I suspect if Jesus were here he would cringe to think that this great story of his was somehow just making us feel bad. I doubt that it was in Jesus’ mind to “zing” us with this one. “I’ll tell them the story of the Good Samaritan ... that will really make them feel bad.”

It is, of course, not the point.

But maybe the point might have something more to do with Jesus’ inquisitor. “Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” The great human question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? How can I be sure that I will have life forever beyond the grave? Now when Jesus gets that question he turns it back around and asks the lawyer what his best guess might be. And the answer he comes up with are the two great commandments – to love God and to love neighbor. We know those commands, they comprise our mission statement. Jesus tells him he has the answer right and to go ahead and practice what he preaches. But then Luke has this very curious line when he writes: “But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Wanting to justify himself.

Now I don’t know about you but those four words sort of knock me off my chair. “Wanting to justify himself.” I’ll tell you something, if there is anything I want to do – it is to justify myself. How about you? It may be the best way to describe the human endeavor – the striving to justify ourselves. It may be one of the primary ways to explain why we do what we do – the striving to justify ourselves. We have been about this business of justifying ourselves ever since we were little kids.

In the nursery at two years of age ... wrestling with another two year old over the same toy. Yanking and crying ... we were trying to justify ourselves with what was ours and what was not ours.

When I was in kindergarten and little Tommy and I were building a little block building together and there was one more piece to go and Tommy got his piece in before I did I did the mature thing, I clumped Tommy over the head with my block and sent him crying. I justified myself.

Every day when we went off to school, or go off to school, we are off to justify ourselves. And at semester’s end we learn how well we have done in justifying ourselves.

When you put together a resume, putting down things that make you out to be a little bit better than you really are – you are justifying yourself.

When you accept a job and you have your business card made and you have a title – and when someone asks what you do – it’s good to have a title – in order to justify yourself. Here’s my reason for taking up space.

A friend of mine commented the other day about how parents of college students, and I was sure guilty of this, put on the back windows of their cars the name or names of the colleges their children are attending – and how that’s really our only way to publicly speak of ourselves. We don’t put on our car rear windows our resumes, our job titles, our salaries ... instead we put on the college our kids are going to. It’s a way, I suppose, of justifying ourselves. Or at least describing ourselves.

The lawyer wants to justify himself, but unfortunately the way he wants to do it is to find a way to back Jesus into a corner. He is going to justify himself by putting Jesus in his place. He is going to justify himself by showing him a little Perry Mason. He is going to show Jesus how smart he is; how well he can handle himself in a debate. Did you ever see that happen in a classroom? Someone asks a question less out of a reason to learn something and more out of a reason to show everyone else how much he knows. “Yes, teacher, understanding, of course, that Barth’s theory of the atonement suggests a wider universality and an ontological dichotomy I was wondering if you could comment on that?” It’s just another attempt at justification.

Wanting to justify himself. It is the great human longing, isn’t it? This desire to justify ourselves.

Remember that great scene at the end of that great movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, when the old American veteran makes his way onto the cemetery at Normandy ... where he had fought some 50 years before. And he is surrounded by all his dead comrades and he stares upon the one grave of the one comrade who saved his life. Overwhelmed at the cost that has been paid for him he turns to his wife and he says, “Tell me I’ve been a good man.” He just wants justification.

So seeing this quest for justification written all over the face of the lawyer Jesus tells him the great story about being a neighbor. And while there are twenty sermons to be preached about this Good Samaritan story – maybe the one thing for us to think about today is that hero of the story – the

“A child of God. And nothing more is needed than that – aside from a little mercy – to be justified.”

Samaritan – is the one whose justification came in the justification he gave to someone else. His justification came in the justification he gave to someone else.

“Who proved neighbor,” Jesus asked at the end of his story, “to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” And the lawyer replies, “The one who showed him mercy.” Of course another way of saying it is to say the one who proved neighbor to the beaten man is the one who gave him justification. The one who gave him the time of day and the time of night and in doing so was telling him that even though he was a stranger there was a justification for his life. The man wasn’t road kill. The man wasn’t an unacceptable risk. The man wasn’t one of them foreigners. He was a human being. A child of God. And nothing more is needed than that – aside from a little mercy – to be justified.

Have you ever thought of yourself as one who can give others a justification for their life? Our greatest justification comes when we give justification to others. It is the way of Christ. It is the life and death of Christ. The One who justifies our life through his death – is the one who says to us, “Take up your cross and follow me – because if you want to find your life you have to lose it in someone else.” So when we think about the living of our days ... and the taking up of earthly space – our day to day justification is found when we are about the business of bringing justification to our neighbors. Which is to say that our greatest purpose in life is to show others how valuable their lives are. The value of our lives is directly related to the value we impute to the lives of others. It is the fundamental human equation.

You’ve heard me speak before of the Molokai leper colony in Hawaii. Back in the 19th century when no one knew what to do with lepers – and everyone believed, falsely, that they were contagious to all – what they figured out to do is to take the lepers and dump them onto a peninsula called Molokai to let the fend for themselves. Tough luck to you. Off

to the side of the road you go. And it was a Father Damien who took his place in Jesus’ story – and lowered himself into the Molokai leper colony – a death sentence in the minds of most – and there he ministered to the lepers for the rest of his days until he contracted leprosy himself. Writing to his brother as his days drew to an end surrounded by the community of some 600 lepers who loved him almost as much as loved them -- he reported, “I believe I am the happiest missionary in the world.”

It’s the great human equation. We justify ourselves by justifying another.

It doesn’t take much to think who the lepers of today might be. Just pick out any Syrian refugee family in some camp in Lebanon or in Germany. Just imagine a migrant worker in Immokalee. Consider a homeless mom and her children. Or think of the next 250 kids who will visit us at our Day of Hope. Or a kid struggling with his math in need of a tutor. Our justification is inextricably linked to theirs.

It’s what the whole mission of Jesus was about – bringing justification to other people’s lives. The sick, the poor, the lame. The blind man, the ill daughter, the bleeding woman. The unclean lepers, the unrighteous sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors. All those that society has sort of squeezed out of the “value category” – Jesus spent most of his time with. Bringing justification to their lives ... by giving them the time of day. Across all the divides -- Samaritan to Jew. Sadducee to Pharisee. Religious to non-religious. Conservative to Liberal. Democrat to Republican. Black to white. Straight to Gay. Christian to Muslim. Because isn’t that the great equation for living? Isn’t that what life is all about? Our greatest justification for living is found in the justification we give to others.

It is what I thought of the other day when I visited my brother up in Northwestern Pennsylvania – my brother Jim. 62 years old. Severely mentally handicapped. Never spoken a word in his life. Blind. Totally dependent upon the care of others.

A resident since he was ten at a state institution in Pennsylvania. And I go along with my brothers to visit him as often as I can. Which is what I did a couple weeks ago. I went unannounced and walked in the day room where he spends most of the daytime – and without them seeing me I watched the state workers – folks making barely the poverty level in income – I watched this team of workers interact with my brother – he who has little understanding of what you’re saying and no ability to respond. And I watched them as they talked with him and interacted with him and cared for him. I watched them as they treated my brother as if he were the King of England. The King of England!

Need they worry about eternal life? I don’t think so. Need they to justify themselves? Oh, they already have. Kings and queens they are – as much as they have made one James Joseph McConnell the King of England.



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**March 5, 2017**

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Church of the Palms

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