



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### Your Greatest Opportunity to Put First Things First

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Matthew 22:35-40, Luke 10:25-38

**ME.** A month ago, I started this sermon series with these words: “If I’m honest, and we’re talking about first things first, I should say the first thing in my life is I sometimes find myself going crazy.” It was like God was speaking to me because I began to discover all the stuff I put first in my life wasn’t holding up in these times.

(I enjoy epics: movies and books. But people don’t create epic stories about people who just have a lot of stuff and are comfortable, or who are too busy and have no margin. Because they never do anything really significant in people’s lives. They don’t have time to put first things first. They’re being run by the clock, not by their compass.) I want my life to tell a story. I want to live a life that tells God’s story.

**YOU.** Don’t you want that too? How weird. For most of us, we’ve put our dreams away. Our dreams for making the world a better place. We can’t even seem to make our home or family a better place! What’s wrong? What happened that stifled us? What happened that sidetracked you? They say “life is all about love.” And because God is love, God wants us to learn how to love. The best use of life is love. But you may be saying “What life? Something happened, and my life is so far removed from any plan or control or even love, it’s like I’m lost.”

As we’ve been finding out this fall, there are ideas of first importance that we can’t ignore. If you’re tired of the gap between how you spend your time (the clock) and what’s deeply important (the compass), I have good news. You can go back (again!) to the Source of life to discover your life (again!) what those policies and truths are. What’s the first thing about life?

This gap has created...

- A serious lack of praise in the world.
- A serious lack of prayer. It’s as vital as breathing. It’s not wishful thinking.
- An awful lot of logs knocking into one another.
- A serious lack of kindness that comes from Godly wisdom.
- There is a serious lack of understanding money.
- A serious lack of putting God’s Kingdom first in our lives.

**GOD.** We’re not the only ones wrestling with this. On at least two occasions, lawyers came to Jesus to figure it out. And Jesus tells them what’s first:

Matthew 22:35 “...a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” 37 Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 “**This is the first and great commandment.** 39 “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Why is “Love God” first? Because it is the primordial reason you were created. Because it’s in your DNA, even though we’ve been marred by sin.

There was another time Jesus explained what it looks like even more. Luke 10:25 *“On one occasion a certain lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ 26 ‘What is written in the Law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’ 27 He answered: ‘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.’ 28 ‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’*

- For most people, the lawyer is *not* a good guy. He’s just trying to justify himself. But I find myself grateful to him for asking Jesus questions I have. And his questions are huge. He asks Jesus about major issues:
  1. Eternal life—these are high stakes he’s asking about!
  2. Interpretation of Torah: what does God mean?

So he asks Jesus. Did you catch Jesus’ answer? He tells the lawyer *“Do this and you will live,”* Jesus implies the lawyer wasn’t *doing* “this.” Church, it’s not just enough to know it and do nothing. For some reason, we men have the hardest time with this. So many men love their families in their minds, and even their hearts, but never take the next step. We provide for them, but we never love them with our time. We love them, but we never work for them the way we work for our bosses. To love God, and to love the people around you, Jesus says, **DO** this thing called love, and you’ll have the life I intended for you.

Look what happens next. The lawyer follows up...

*29 But he (the lawyer) wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ (Again I’m grateful). 30 In reply Jesus said: ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins 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.” 36 ‘Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’ 37 The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’*

Yep. It’s the Good Samaritan. Hopefully you heard it before. If you’ve heard a sermon on it, you know how Jesus would have shocked the Jewish people when he made a “stinking Samaritan” the hero, the rescuer. It be like us saying “a member of Al-Qaida” or “a drug dealer” or “terrorist” saved the day. Stories like this one don’t get forwarded on. They’re too embarrassing. They don’t “fit” well. The hero is not the one you want it to be...

So the lawyer asks Jesus a specific question, “What must I do?” and because he’s a lawyer, (A lawyer *is* a lawyer!), he follows up with the fine print. ☺ “What do you *mean* by the term neighbor?” Kind of a funny question. Hard not to think of Mr. Rogers “Won’t you be my neighbor?” The truth is we have a lot more neighbors than we think...

- Your neighbor is the one who lives so close to you in an invisible way...
  - The one who spun the cloth that you wear.
  - The one who dug the diamond you wear.
  - The one who grew the food you have at home is your neighbor.
- Let alone your children you haven’t related to in a long time, or your spouse who’s turned a cold shoulder to you, or your co-worker whose lifestyle drives you crazy.

So let’s look at the story Jesus gives us on how to put the first thing first. The parable begins in a violent way. The certain man is traveling from Jerusalem—a holy city to Jericho—a gated city, when he fell into the hands of robbers.

They rob and humiliate him. They’re so mean they beat him up and leave him half dead. Grim, but very real. Think of the number of people living today in grim situations. People criticized Mother Teresa for why she would spend her time doing nothing but working with dying homeless people responded “No one, no

matter how poor, should have to die alone.” For her, the beat up man represented Jesus himself, half-dead, at the cross. (Do you have eyes like that?)

Well, along comes the poor priest, and then the Levite...each one saw, and passed. Don't be harsh toward these guys. There are good priests, like Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist), and good Levites, like Barnabas. They are temple workers, not paramedics. They were probably overwhelmed, more than they were uncaring.

The Samaritan comes along. He saw the man, and he was moved. (This is an emotional reaction). It's NOT that he was a Samaritan (after all, a Samaritan was a keeper of Torah). It's about "being moved" by compassion.

BEING MOVED = Compassion from feelings that come out of the heart of God.

1. Tearing his own shirt for bandages...
2. He was likely a merchant. Jesus' main heroes are more often not the priests and ministers. They are the businessmen and women. They are moms and housekeepers.
3. Never forget who God picks for heroes. It's not often the great, multi-talented people. It's the everyday ordinary folks who are moved by compassion.

This Samaritan traveling businessman is INTERRUPTED. That's where God usually comes. How sad that we run ourselves ragged to the point we have no margins in our life, and thus no fertile place to allow God to operate in us. The Samaritan was interrupted, but he's not a doormat. He does complete his journey and uses his resources. So **Quit freaking out or being frustrated every time you're interrupted**. It might just be your opportunity to put first things first. It might just be your opportunity to love God.

I don't know who he is. Maybe he is YOU. Are you prepared to be interrupted by God? Are you interruptible, or are you so important that your schedule can't find time for that? **God does some of His best work at the expense of our schedules**, if you're willing to be moved by compassion. And that's putting first things first.

This week, PRAY to see with Christ's eyes, until you can see no less than what Jesus sees. LOVE from the guts. May you be moved, so that you can share in that same journey.

One more thing. Jesus asks the lawyer "Which was the neighbor?" He answered "The one who showed him mercy." In other words, **Your neighbor is the one who shows you mercy**. Jesus says, GO AND DO LIKEWISE.

*Let us pray: Lord, as much as we have the tendency to put ourselves in the place of the Samaritan, we hear Jesus' words, and realize most likely we're in the ditch. We are living like we've been beat up and are walking around half-dead. Many of us have been robbed: by fear, by doubt, by loneliness or lust or fear. Some of us have been robbed by someone else. And many of us are there because of our own choice. When it all comes down, we're not usually the mercy-givers. We're the ones in need of mercy. Help that sink in, Lord. Amen.*

SO, WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP? This week, do what you must to receive mercy. Maybe it's time to let GO of all your frustration so when someone frustrated you, you don't blow up. That's a way to love God. That's a way to show mercy. That's a way to receive mercy.

Could you play this parable out in every situation you are in?

- Needing mercy, needing help.
- Giving mercy, giving help.
- Ignoring mercy, ignoring help, thus missing the opportunities.

If you travel through life, you travel down a dangerous road. It can leave you at times half-dead on the side of the road, unable to help yourself. But there is someone who can help you. It's pretty unlikely, not who you would think: He's a Samaritan. He carries a cross. The ancient Scripture says "*Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.*" (Deuteronomy 21:23). But he does...for you, for me.

### Study Guide

**Monday: Read Luke 10:25-37 in your own Bible.** Review your sermon notes. Pray for God to reveal what some of the thieves and robbers have been in your life. Open yourself up to the rescue operation of Christ in those areas. Receive His mercy! Receive His healing. Pray to be restored, that your journey with Christ may continue.

### Other "Firsts" in Scripture...

**Tuesday: Read Matthew 5:23-26.** Jesus says "*First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift...*" Reflect on how much you have tried to do, when there's been that someone who has a legitimate something against you. Imagine how it will feel when you put that first in your plan. Call this person. Write this person. "*Settle matters quickly.*" Then, offer thanksgiving to God, and enjoy the freedom of having put this as right as you can make it.

**Wednesday: Read Matthew 19:28-30.** In this "First," Jesus is preparing his disciples for the spiritual truth that life will be difficult just for following Him. He is also offering hope that "*the first will be last, and many who are last will be first.*" This is hard. Yet, many Christians around the world face terrible persecution and death for following Christ and putting Him first. What part of your life have you built around yourself that Jesus might be addressing in His words here? Could Jesus be saying you have built your life on a lie? Pray for wisdom and discernment from God. And if you sense God leading you away from that, take a step toward it today.

**Thursday: Read 2 Timothy 1:5-7.** This is a letter from Paul as a mentor to Timothy. Timothy came to faith through his Grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. It's a terrific reminder that you aren't the first to want to live your life for Christ, you don't have to invent how to do that, and you can depend on the faithfulness of God's people. This "Grandma's faith" that Paul reminds Timothy of is sincere. It's daily. It's a faith you live out in your own home and culture. Pray for all the Grandma's in our congregation, and pray for the daily-ness of your faith. It's a reminder that faith isn't always fancy or earth-shattering; just faithful.

**Friday: Read Matthew 28:1-20.** "On the first day of the week..." was the day of resurrection, and it's made a permanent difference in the world. Look at what those women faced, and look at the difference it has made for the world. Breathe deeply and take in what it means to live "first things first," as God continues to mend the creation and make all things new.