

What Do You Do?

Luke 10:25-37

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Have you heard this one?

There is a runaway trolley barreling down the railway tracks. Ahead, on the tracks, there are five people tied up and unable to move. The trolley is headed straight for them. You are standing some distance off, next to a lever. If you pull this lever, the trolley will switch to a different set of tracks. However, you notice that there is one person on the side track. You have two options:

1. Do nothing and allow the trolley to kill the five on the main track.

OR

2. Pull the lever, diverting the trolley to the side track and killing the one.

What do you do? How do you determine who's life is more important?

Maybe you can justify pulling the lever, because sacrificing one life to save five seems to be the better choice. But what if the one is someone you know and you don't know the other five? What if the one is your friend? What if the one is your child?

What do you do?

It's called "situational ethics." The exercise is meant to put you in a high stress situation where you have to think on your feet and try to decide what act promotes the greater good. Can you do it? Can you choose what's best in even terrible situations?

You've heard the exercise in a million formats.

- An intruder has broken into your home, holds your loved one at gunpoint, and says, "Choose. Their life or your own." What do you do?
- You're out for a walk and you hear a boy crying for help from the lake. You're not a particularly good swimmer, but you're too far from help to get someone else. What do you do?
- Your house is on fire and you escape the burning building only to learn that both of your children remain inside on opposite sides of the house. There's only enough time to save one before the house collapses and kills both children. What do you do?
- You're out of work. You're trying to keep the family together. You, your spouse, and your kids are living out of a car. You believe stealing is wrong, but you don't even have the money to buy a loaf of bread. You go to the store. You know you could tuck that loaf of bread under your coat and not get caught. You need to feed your hungry children. What do you do?

Situational ethics.

I hate situational ethics – in part, because the situations only seem to offer an “either/or” option. Option 1 *or* option 2: which one do you choose? Kill the one *or* kill the five? Save one child *or* save the other? Steal and live *or* don’t steal and starve?

They paint a picture of an “either/or” world, but I don’t live in an “either/or” world – at least I don’t 99.8 percent of the time. No one holds a gun to my head when I stop to order a sandwich at Jimmy John’s. “Should it be the turkey club *or* the classic roast beef with dijon mustard? What do you do?!”

My world is grey with choice. Believe it or not, there is more variety in my world than turkey *or* roast beef.

And the other thing I hate is how most of these situational ethics exercises seem to induce an incredible element of fear. Usually, you are holding death or death in your hands. “Choose whose life is more important, his or hers, that child or that child, theirs or yours – quick the clock is ticking! Make a decision! What do you do?!”

It paints a picture of a threatening world, in which our most pressing and important decisions have to be made in an unexpected and unprecedented moment that is laced with *fear*.

I hate situational ethics.

Then along came a lawyer and tried to trap Jesus with his words.

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It wasn’t the first time and wouldn’t be the last time someone asked him that question. In typical rabbinic fashion, Jesus answered the lawyer’s question with one of his own: “What does the law say? How do you interpret it?”

In case you didn’t know, lawyers are experts in the law. His answer was swift and convincing: “Love the Lord your God with all you heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

His answer is absolutely and 100 percent correct. But Jesus doesn’t give him an “A” in the course just for *knowing* the right answer.

We know lots of people who know all the right answers about God, but who don’t seem to know God at all. They could recite to you – verbatim – the Nicene Creed, the Westminster catechism, and all ten of the commandments, but they treat others like they’re beneath them. They look down their long, sneering noses at others. They make others feel unimportant and insignificant and small.

I suspect that's what the lawyer was trying to do to Jesus.

Jesus says, "Your answer is right... now if you'll just *do* that, you'll have a chance."

But the lawyer wants to debate the fine print: "And who is my neighbor?"

It's not an easy question to answer these days. Until a pandemic struck, many of us may have lived next to our neighbors for years, but didn't even know their names. Is the list of friends on our Facebook account our neighbors? I have 679 "friends" on Facebook. Are they all my neighbors? None of them live within a mile of me, by the way. Who are our neighbors?

And, dad-gummit, Jesus answers the lawyer's question with a story that sounds a whole lot like an exercise in situational ethics. He says:

"There was a certain man who was going down from the city of Jerusalem to the city of Jericho, when some bandits laid hold of him, stripped him naked, beat him senseless, and left him there, half-dead, on the side of the road right where he fell.

A brutal crime. A desperate victim. What do you do?

The first to walk by was a priest — a man who attended to the holy of holies at the temple, a servant of God Almighty. But when he saw the man lying there half-dead on the side of the road, he walked by on the far side.

The second to walk by was a Levite — an assistant in the temple; another whose profession was service to God. But, he, too, upon seeing the bruised, battered, and half-dead man on the side of the road, walked by on the far side."

What is wrong with these men? Didn't their mothers raise them better? What kinds of villains would these two be if you were to cast them in a movie? You talk about wolves in sheep's clothing! Heartless villains wearing clerical collars — that's what they were, right?

No. They were probably good men. Most likely, they were meticulously faithful Jews. They were on their way to the temple, had responsibilities at the temple — *important tasks*. They were set apart for serving in the places where no other humans were allowed to go — in the holy of holies, in the very presence of God. They had a higher calling to serve as God's servants, not servants of individuals, but servants who by serving God served all.

The man on the ground looked dead, and "to come into contact with a corpse would have defiled [both] the priest and the Levite and disqualified them from their temple responsibilities" (Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary Series, 151).

You see, theirs was a hard choice between helping the man and serving God at the temple; between *duty* and *duty*.

It was several years ago. I was at the bedside of a man who'd been an over-achiever his entire life — excelled at everything he did. He'd been a decorated soldier. He'd been a successful businessman. His walls were lined with awards and trophies from his exploits as a weekend warrior — softball, tennis, golf. He had a comfortable home, a wife who loved him, and children who adored him. He was faithful a Christian and loved the Lord. He had lived a full and good life.

But now his body was ravaged with cancer. For the first time since he was an infant, he couldn't stand on his own two feet. This pillar of strength and success was now confined to a bed.

He asked for a pastor, and, well... he got me.

I came in. I sat in a chair beside the bed. It was a chair that I could tell his wife had spent far too many nights in. We exchanged pleasantries. I asked whether today was a good day or a bad day, and immediately regretted it. They were *all* bad days anymore.

And then, after a brief moment of silence, he asked me what was really on his mind.

"Pastor," he said, "I have lived a good life... been blessed beyond what I deserve. But this cancer has taken away nearly everything I am. I am not bitter about my situation, but I am going to die from this disease. I don't want to waste away in this bed, and I don't want my family's life to be consumed with watching me die slowly and painfully. Pastor, do you think the Lord will still love me — will still welcome me into his presence — if I choose to take my life and end the suffering this cancer is causing me and my family?"

What are we talking about here? We're talking about suicide.

You talk about roads you never thought the Lord would ask you to walk. When I signed up to become a pastor, I never thought in a million years I'd be asked for permission by someone to take their own life. I never thought I'd be asked to bless something that in another situation I might find to be a grave sin. I never thought I'd be so clearly asked to hold the weight of life or death with my next words. In that moment, I was torn between my duty and my duty.

What would you have said?

You see, as much as I hate exercises in situational ethics, life keeps setting them at my feet. And not to put too much of the burden on you, but *you* keep setting them at my feet.

How could I have foreseen this question? How could I not have an answer prepared?

Of course, that's not realistic. Life doesn't work that way. Sometimes it throws us a curveball when we were expected a straight ball. The real question isn't, "What would you do?" It's "What will you let *guide* what you do?"

Will it be the need to be right? Will it be fear? Will it be pressure from others? What principle, what value, what virtue will you build your life on, so that when the situation arises, you know what will guide you?

After the priest and the Levite, along came a Samaritan, an enemy of Israel, a heretic of the highest order. The Samaritans voted against the rebuilding of the temple and opposed making Jerusalem the capitol city. They worshiped at that second-rate, hack-job of a temple on Mt. Gerizim. Even worse, they were a mixed breed. They were the wrong race with the wrong political persuasions and the wrong interpretations of scripture.

But, says Jesus, when the Samaritan saw the man broken, bleeding, and half-dead, he didn't scoot by on the far side. He came near. He bound up his wounds. He put the man on his beast and he bore the man to an inn, where he nursed him the whole night long. The next day, he paid the innkeeper to take care of the man and he promised to repay whatever it cost to mend the man to health.

"Now," asks Jesus, "which one was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

"The one who showed him mercy," said the lawyer. It's a misleading translation. The Greek actually says, "The one who *did* mercy..."

And what does Jesus say? Not, "Very good. You've earned your 'A' in the course." Not, "Great answer! You are my star pupil. If only Peter had studied with you..."

He says, "Go and *do*."

Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones.

But no.

Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed.

Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety, and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts, Mead said.

We are at our best when we are serving others.

So what will guide you when the situation arises? Will it be fear? Will it be the pressure of a split-second decision? Will it be a rehearsed answer about what is right and what is wrong?

Jesus says, "It ought to be *love* – whole-hearted love of God, and love of neighbor."

Love is what ought to drive us Christians. It ought to be the engine that makes us go.

"They will know we are Christians by our love!" say the words of the hymn.

Augustine said it like this: "Unless we love, what good can we do? Or if we love, how can we fail to do good?"

When we are guided by love – by our love of God and our love for our neighbor – we cannot help but serve others. We cannot help but "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8). We cannot help but to do good.

And, if we choose love, as a discipline, every day of our lives – in all of the small things, in all of our encounters, in all our relationships – when *the* situation arises, we will know exactly what to do?

We *do* love.

Amen.