

From Religion to Relationship

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Preacher: Preaching Cohort

[0 : 0 0] Good morning. My name is Anselm Beach, and today, Skylar Shull and I will be using the most scandalous parable that Jesus ever told to talk about one of the most hot-button issues that we have today. And that's the parable of the Good Samaritan to talk about religion.

Now, before we get into this discussion, you know, let's define our terms. First, Good Samaritan, we're throwing that out. As a black man, I would hate to hear a story over and over and over again about the good black man. I mean, that's essentially what Black History Month was for me growing up. It's a story of all these good black people. But, you know, I digress. So instead of kind of using this patronizing and demeaning title, let's just call it the parable of the Samaritan. It's the only one that Jesus told about a Samaritan, if you didn't know that.

I think that's right. I'll check that later. Next, we need to define religion, because that's, again, it's a broad, sweeping concept there. So I actually found this great definition on Wikipedia of all places. It says that religion is a social-cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements. I think that's a very great, all-encompassing idea of what religion is. And I think, you know, religion has gotten a bad rap nowadays, and it's often because of the way that we human beings practice religion.

But even in this definition, I think that we find the key to what religion has always been meant to be. And that's a relationship between humanity and other humans, between humans and other humans, between humans and themselves as individuals, and between humans and that which transcends our corporal and mortal reality, God. Jesus was not opposed to religion either. He had more of a problem with how religious practice hindered that relational aspect of that. And so we're going to use the parable of the Samaritan in probably a different way than you're used to hearing. Usually it's a great sermon for talking about service, or it's a great sermon for talking about race, but we're going to focus primarily on the interactions, the two interactions that surround the parable. One between the lawyer and Jesus, and on the other side, the interaction between Jesus and the sisters Mary and

Martha. Yes, they go together, and it's really exciting to see how they do. So without further ado, let's hop into our text. In Luke chapter 10, verse 25, it says, On one occasion, a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What is written in the law, Jesus replied. How do you read it? The man answered, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.

[3 : 23] Oh, and love your neighbor as yourself. Let's pause there for a second, right? Our alarm bells should be ringing. Let's put ourselves in the seat of first century hearers of this text, right? When we're hearing this story, it's like, oh, this isn't a story about eternal life. This is a story about the greatest commandment. And wait, in Matthew's gospel and Mark's gospel, didn't this story take place near the end of Jesus's ministry rather than smack dab in the middle here? I think we're touching upon the significant reason behind why Luke organizes his gospel in this particular way. Right before this exchange, Jesus has just returned from sending out 72 of his disciples. And they come back and they are excited and they're rejoicing about all the cool things they got to do. But Jesus directs their attention to something else. He praises God because of the fact that the hidden things that the wise and the learned had sought to see, God had revealed to these little children. He says that many prophets and kings had longed to see and to experience what the disciples did, but didn't. Jesus doesn't exactly specify what that is. It could have been the the cool, you know, driving out demons and healing people that they came back reporting, but Jesus actually, he turns them away from it. He says, no, no, no, no, no. There's something more important.

And so what follows is this exact exchange. So what in this was unbeknown to the wise men? The prophets, the kings, the heroes of old? I think it's what we're, and I think it is what we're going to talk about today. How the healing love of Jesus moves us from merely practicing religion to living out relationship. Hello, I'm Skylar Scholl. I've been a member of the Table Church family for about three years, and I have the privilege and the honor to serve in our preaching cohort that is trying to nurture and teach lay folks the art and the science of preaching. So with that introduction, let's pick up where Anselm just left off. So today, for my part of our team sermon, I'd like to talk about in Luke 10, just next to the story of the Samaritan that Anselm's been talking about and will continue to talk about, is Jesus' visit to Martha's house, his visit to Martha and Mary in Luke 10. So why would we focus on Jesus' visit to Martha's house? What's that mean for us here and now? Well, I think it's important to remember that Luke, as a careful author, as any careful author would, didn't place the M&M, the Mary and Martha story, next to the Samaritan story, the parable by accident. The lessons in both stories do relate to each other, in addition to educating and inspiring us, even still today, roughly 2,000 years later. So let's dive in with the scripture.

So Luke 10, 38 to 42, gives us this brief story. As they continued their travels, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. She said, Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand. To which Jesus said, the master said, Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing.

Only one thing is essential, and Mary has chosen it. It's the main course and won't be taken from her. Again, that's Luke 10, 38 through 42 in the Message Version, one of my favorite, more contemporary versions of the Bible. So let's talk about this in the context of religion versus relationship as we strive for true relationship with each other and God as opposed to only religious formalities or busyness alone. Although obviously, once we have good relationship with each other and God as we build that, religious habits and efforts and things can be a wonderful complement to that and help us get there, but they alone aren't the same as relationship. The first thing we're going to talk about is how the healing love of Jesus shifts our focus from the hereafter to the here and now. How does this story open up? It opens up with a lawyer approaching Jesus to test him by asking, what must I do to inherit eternal life? You know, if we go back to that definition of religion that I talked about, it talks about how religion relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements. This is extremely important for human beings who contain a mind that is able to comprehend the cosmos and infinity within a corporal body that ages and wrinkles and decays. And it's a deep existential strife that we feel. And oftentimes, we can turn to religion to answer that question. More so than just what happens after we die, but even what rewards can we inherit within this life to make this life mean something?

The practices, the rules, the laws, everything like that helps us to feel like our life has meaning. So this question that this guy is asking Jesus is more than just like, you know, kind of a run-of-the-mill like, what happens after we die? It's more of, what must we do to please God in a way that gives us the ultimate reward? And Jesus doesn't answer the question.

[9 : 45] He asks another, what does it say in the law? The very thing that you've had before you this whole time, what does it say? And as a typical, as a great Sunday school kid, or I guess a Saturday school kid in that culture, he says, oh, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Oh yeah, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said, if you do this, you will live, period. Not live eternally. Not live after you die. He will live right here and right now.

So from the hereafter to the here and now. So in this situation, what's Martha focused on? She's focused on the hereafter of her situation, right? She's stressed and worried about what if she's not perceived to be a good guest, or a good host, excuse me, to her guest, in this case, Jesus. What if she doesn't impress him? He's an important, he's the son of God, but to her, at the very least, he's an important rabbi, important man of the day, you know, an important prophet at the least.

So what, you know, she's worried about that. What if she meets with her friends in society? We believe from the story, scholars believe that she was a woman of some means and some social standing.

What if they disapproved of her, but she wasn't thinking about the then and now at that moment? Because the worst thing you could do really is to not be kind to your guest, let alone Jesus, but any guest, right? But let's contrast that. What's Mary focused on? She's focused much more on the here and now, and being present in her situation, not something later, right? She's at Jesus' feet, she's hanging on every word. And what's Jesus focused on? Well, clearly, as he tells Martha, he's clearly like Mary, more so than Martha in this situation. He's focused on the here and now, too. He also knows he won't be with us long. And if the story doesn't tell us, Luke doesn't tell us, but perhaps Mary has some sense that he won't be with us long. So in other words, Jesus and Mary are focusing and savoring on the moment and not missing the moment. It's a little bit like when you go to a concert and you have your smartphone, let's say your iPhone up, and you're filming the whole concert.

[11 : 50] At the end, you have this footage. Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad, but you kind of realize you missed really being present at the concert, right? The special moment you missed. Or maybe it's filming, you know, your child's birth or the first soccer game or something, but you cannot actually be there in the moment sometimes. When we focus on the hereafter, the stakes are so high. I mean, think about that, right? We're thinking about what's going to happen after we die. And so everything becomes about that and we miss out on the opportunities to respond with love to those who are in need around us.

It's no wonder to me why some of the most vocal opponents to climate change and environmental preservation initiatives are Christians. Christians who are taught to love, Christians who believe in a God that has, that made us stewards of God's creation, and yet are more concerned about our souls or the souls of our neighbors than whether or not they're even able to have access to power and clean water due to severe winter weather brought on by climate change.

We care more about addressing the sin problem that we believe hinders us from experiencing heaven than the skin problem that leaves many of our black, brown, indigenous, people of color, brothers and sisters in humanity to suffer through the after effects of policies that have been meant to advance only one particular group of people who fit the status quo.

Jesus' plea, or I guess Jesus' push for this man to consider what's going on here and now was a way to open up his eyes and to open up our eyes to see the needs and the opportunities to love and meet those needs around us.

The next aspect of how the healing love of Jesus transforms us from, moves us from religion to relationship, is how it shifts our desire to be right to the desire to find truth.

[14 : 17] Let's continue on with the story. The lawyer answers, he says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You get that. You have answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live.

But the man wanted to justify himself. So he asked Jesus, and who is my neighbor? You know, what we're seeing here is the result of someone steeped in a culture where rather than just focusing on what it is that we are meant to do, there's more focus on how we do that.

Because again, the stakes are high. The hereafter is at stake. Our reward is at stake. So we have to make sure that we get these things right. Think about the culture that Jesus is walking into.

A culture that had very strict laws about what was clean and unclean. What was the right way to do certain rituals or the wrong way to do certain rituals.

I mean, they grew up with the story of Nadab in a bayou who got burned because they offered the wrong fire. This life and the next are at stake with getting things correct.

[15 : 33] Another thing we want to talk about in relationship versus religion is being right versus truth. We want to get from being right or being overly worried about being right, whatever that means, to truth.

So let's look at it in this situation. So what's Martha focused on? Not to pick on Martha, but this is our story, this example Luke gave us. So Martha's focused on being right.

Yeah? In her situation. She wants to be a hostess in the right way. She wants to serve the right food. She wants to be at the right time, the right temperature. I don't know.

But what's Mary focused on? The truth. In other words, the substance, the meaning. You know, whether she's right or whether she's wrong. And in this situation, by societal norms, it seems that Mary is perhaps wrong, or at least Martha's more concerned about being right.

Martha's focused on the truth. Jesus is right in front of her. She has some sense, perhaps, that he won't be there forever, which is true. Jesus knows that. But Jesus is focused on the truth, of course.

[16 : 37] Jesus is the truth, the word, the light. So, again, Mary and Jesus are focused on the truth more than being right. Because, in fact, in that given social situation by custom, Jesus, but more so Mary, are not really doing what's expected of them.

Right? So, again, focused more on truth than being right. I want to give you an example from my own personal life. I used to be a minister. And I was a campus minister.

I was a 22-year-old guy, fresh out of college, trying to help people who are four years younger than me, max, understand. Like, find their faith and hold on to maintain their faith.

And needless to say, I made a lot of mistakes. And one of them was when I was engaged in a conversation with this one guy. While it was dinner time, we were in the crowded dining hall at a table with people surrounding us.

And we had our Bibles open. And we were, man, we were just laying into each other about this one particular topic that we just couldn't agree on. And I was, we were yelling at each other.

[17 : 45] And I think back to that with shock. You know, with that kind of like the second degree embarrassment that you have when you think back to something that was really, that you like realized was really silly. Because I, that was, even if I was right, I was not right.

I missed out on the inherent truth of that, of the, the, the, the, what that was, the, what was true about that moment. Because we were two people, two young people who were trying to connect with God, connect with, connect what we're reading to our lives.

And ultimately, we missed out an opportunity to connect with one another. You know, right, wrong, unclean, clean, moral, immoral, secular, sacred.

All of these things miss out on the nuance that relationship allows. Isn't it weird that some of the people who hurt you the most are the ones who also have, like, the, the, the keys to your heart?

That's nuance. The Bible is full of, is not full of evil people, of villains and heroes. The Bible is full of people who are trying their best to figure out this life that we have.

[19 : 06] And we make lots and lots of mistakes. When we make that about right versus wrong, we can justify some of the, treating people in the worst way possible.

But hey, for their sake, for the hereafter. Jesus' call and direction towards loving one another is how we move from a debilitating focus on how we do things the right way to seeing the truth that we are complicated beings.

All deserving of love because of the fact that we bear the divine image of God. The third thing that focusing on religion, or sorry, focusing on relationship allows us to accomplish is that it moves us from insiders to inclusion.

All right, now I'm going to briefly tell the story of the parable of the Samaritan, okay? So Jesus talks about this man who is traveling towards Jerusalem and gets, falls into the hands of robbers.

And they beat him half to death. And a priest passes by and doesn't do anything. And a Levite passes by and doesn't do anything. And the audience is waiting to hear about the everyman Israelite coming along the way.

[20 : 24] The carpenter, the fisherman, the, you know, the plumber, you know, coming down the street to see this man and tend to his wounds. And of course, Jesus completely subverts their expectations by using the absolute last person that any of those people would consider the hero, an outsider, a Samaritan.

And the Samaritans and the Jews were not very different from each other. They came from the same 12 tribes. The Samaritans were just, they were a conquered people by, they were conquered by the Assyrians.

And then the Assyrians kind of like forced them to mix with their people and the Babylonians took over and all that happened. So the Jews considered these people to be, you know, kind of mixed blood, mixed race people who did not worship God the right way.

And this is a natural thing. You know, the definition of religion that we use, it talks about how religion is a social cultural system. And in social cultural systems, there are insiders and outsiders.

It's necessary to the survival of the people to have people who you know are with you and people who are potentially threats. But when that translates to religion, compounded by the fact that we're trying to be right and wrong, compounded by the fact that the hereafter is at stake, it leads to some people being on the inside and some people being on the outside.

[21 : 52] You know, Jesus told this story to show that in his kingdom, everyone is included. Everyone has an opportunity to benefit from what we all bring to the table.

Let's talk about the theme here of insiders and outsiders versus inclusion. So you could also think of it as exclusion versus inclusion.

And we want to get from having insiders and outsiders to being inclusive. Because if we have insiders and outsiders, even if you may be initially an insider, not only is that not right to have outsiders, if we can help it at all, but if there's insiders and outsiders, even if you're once an insider, you may find yourself later an outsider.

So in other words, as long as we have outsiders, even every insider is at risk of being an outsider. How do we fix that? Inclusion. So let's look at our situation with Martha and Mary and Jesus.

So what's Martha focused on here? Well, as far as we know, she was an insider of her community in the day. Again, a woman of means in the community.

[23 : 01] She owned the home, the older sister. You know, she was in a position to have a great hospitality, perhaps lavish hospitality. Apparently, right?

She's working hard. So, you know, in a sense, she's an insider. And it seems like we often do in our anxiety and busyness.

She's taking the insider look at things. In other words, I have to serve him. He's a guest, so I need to serve him. And not thinking about being inclusive, perhaps, to Mary, you know, her younger sister, who should do what she says and help.

And it's important to note that Mary is more focused on the inclusion of the situation. And I'll get to that more in a second.

So what's Jesus focused on? Of course, Jesus is focused on the inclusion. So Jesus, subversively, as often as always Jesus does, sort of flips the script again and is inclusive in a way that's sort of subtle to us, not so subtle to an ancient audience, not to Luke, the author, at that time and place.

[24 : 10] What do I mean by that? So our best understanding of the culture and the times is that if anyone's going to hang on a prophet, a rabbi, the son of God, in the flesh is every word at their feet to study under them, if you will, which essentially Mary's doing, it was men in that time and place.

It wasn't women. So the very fact, this may also be perhaps what's in part bothering Martha, that this isn't what women do.

So Mary shouldn't be doing this, right? There's only a place for men to get this insight, this learning. But Jesus welcomes Mary. It doesn't matter that she's a woman. It doesn't matter when children come up to him.

He embraces them, although we don't have that in the story. So again, Jesus flipping the script, sort of somewhat subtle to us, not to them. The last thing I want to focus on is how the healing love of Jesus moves us from looking for value and honor to finding value in love.

I want to ask a question. Who do you think is the protagonist of this story? And I don't mean who's the good guy.

[25 : 20] Because remember, we're trying to shy away from the duality of right versus wrong and reflect the nuance that exists in scripture. So in that case, who is the person that we are meant to experience this exchange through?

I would argue it's the lawyer. But the person who's the most challenging, the one who I see myself in the most, is that lawyer. And the sentence that gets it for me is, But he wanted to justify himself.

He wanted to justify himself. This was a public discourse. This man just got his breakfast served to him. You know, he got served like Omarion did, you know, from the movie.

But, you know, but he couldn't let it end there. Because in this cultural, social system of religion, So much of our value within the system comes from honor.

And probably more at stake than the hereafter is determining what is our worth. Feeling what is our worth. Knowing that we are worthy.

[26 : 36] Knowing that we have value. Religion offers many ways to kind of scratch that value itch. By providing ways for us to have honor. For the lawyer, it was probably a deep honor for him.

To know the law. And to be able to show to everyone, Look how well I know the law. In this exchange, man, This Jesus guy has been going around doing all this kind of, Causing all this trouble.

Yo, what an honor it would be if I go in and I school this fool. And he finds himself in a place of public embarrassment, Where he has to strive to get this right.

I know for myself, I care so much about what people think that is debilitating. Can I let you in on a secret? I've been trying to record this sermon now for four hours.

I've started it and I've stopped it and I've rewritten my notes and everything like that. Why? Because I want you to like me. I want you to be impressed by me.

[27 : 47] Because I don't know how, I'm working it out with my therapist, But somewhere along the line, I became convinced that in order to like really matter, In order to have value, People have to like me.

People have to be impressed by me. And it is debilitating. It has hindered so many of my relationships. And so I see myself, Hands down, In this lawyer.

Somebody who was willing to argue with someone, Yell at someone at the dinner table to be right. So I can feel that, That, That, That, That, That, I can scratch that itch of, Am I worth it?

You know, One of the things that proves that I'm worth it, That proves that you're worth it, That proves that every single person out there is worth it, Is the fact that Jesus willingly took on dishonor to prove your value.

This week, Anselm and I had the wonderful yet difficult task of collaborating, Which was actually really enjoyable, But of preaching about two of the most well-known stories in the Bible.

[28 : 59] And, And the parable of the Samaritan in particular is, Is well-known and, And ground well covered, Although perhaps somewhat superficially at times, Even in, In kids church.

Uh, And then of course the visit of Jesus to, To Martha and Mary. So what did we talk about? We talked about, Think about the hereafter versus here and now. So what can we do about that practically?

Well the key is, To think about not just, The afterlife or heaven, Or someday, Or some year, But it's about right here and now. Jesus keeps pulling our attention back in this story, And really throughout the Gospels, To the here and now.

Not to be overly worried about the vague future, But to focus on today. Uh, Today has its own worries, Its own opportunities. We don't have to worry about a distant, vague future.

Just focus on today. And from being right, To truth, Is another theme we explored today. The truth, And, And, And, The, The, The heart of the matter, Is more important than just being right.

[30 : 02] As we know in our relationship, Sometimes being right in an argument, Can feel good in the moment, But, Maybe we didn't get to the truth, Of a deeper relationship, Uh, Level with that person, Or perhaps with God even.

Where we're worried about being right, And sometimes we put on facades, Because of that, Etc. Then we looked at insiders, Slash outsiders, Versus inclusion. So, Exclusion versus inclusion.

And how by being inclusive, And, Getting to the heart of the matter, And thinking about the opportunities, And the here and now, Not letting busyness and anxiety overtake us, If we can help it, As much as we can help it, Can help us focus on inclusion.

And that's true in our workplace, In our homes, With our friends, In church, If, If hopefully we get back one day, To physical church, You know, In hospitality, The folks at our church, And many others do a great job, But, If, They did all the great setup, But when a new person, That was hurting, And needed help, Came into the church, For the first time, And it happens, Happens at the table, Happens at other churches, And we were too busy, About getting the right cups, Set up for coffee, That is all really important work, But what if we miss the opportunity, To connect with that person, Coming in, That needs a place, A family, A good word, Hope.

So, That's important to consider too. And then finally, We looked at, Honor, Or shame, The converse of honor, Versus value.

[31 : 27] You know, Are we worried about being embarrassed, About being shamed, Are we worried more about the value, Of ourselves, As children of God, And, The value of our relationships, With each other, We got to remember, That never to let, Honor, Accolades, Awards, Recognition, Or the shame, Of not getting them, Drive us, Over the value, Of our own humanity, And those of others, Our other brothers, Sisters on this planet, And our relationship with God, And these are all things, We've gotten out of these, Two great stories today, The Samaritan, And Jesus visiting Mary, And Martha, So let's pray together, Lord, We thank you, For this, This collaboration, We got to have this, This week, We thank you for the preaching cohort, For the table church, We pray for all the people, Out there today, Suffering, Between COVID, Economic woes, And the political division, That's out there, We pray for healing, Faith, And that the words, We've spoken today, That Anselm and I,

Will get out of the way, So to speak, That we have, And that your spirit, Is spoken to those, Listening and in attendance, We thank you, For this opportunity, We love you, In Jesus name, Amen, Thank you for your time, And attention today, This week, Be safe, Practice good self care, And look out, For each other's welfare, Go in peace,