

July 10, 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Luke 10:25-37

by [Susan Kendall](#) in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue

The lawyer asks, what must I do to be saved? Is this a test? Is he questioning Jesus' agenda?

Stephen Prothero wrote several years ago that as a culture the West was losing a connection to the religious stories that shape values and decision making. Fewer people know the story in detail and can place it in the context of the whole of the biblical text. This leaves us disoriented and unsure of ourselves. Something is missing, Prothero suggested.

We are caught in a time of competing and continual narratives, of ethical dilemmas we are not prepared to face. Too often, we are caught in a reactive mode, which leads to shouting and fear. Controversy is the watchword of the 21st century. The test is one of discipline and careful thought, of addressing the source. This leads to questions like the lawyer's: *How can this be that you speak the truth?* Through a measured question, he tests the viability of Jesus' words and actions.

In Luke's narrative, Jesus does not provide a straightforward answer. It appears that Jesus knows that simply responding "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself" will not suffice in this encounter. This proves true when the lawyer provides the correct answer, reciting these commandments, but has a further question.

How do we respond to the issues that trouble people deeply? Jesus and the lawyer have a proper debate, but the lawyer continues to wrestle and cannot let go. We too must allow for this when encountering the other, the one who continually pushes at the conclusions we reach. Can we provide the time, space, and safety for ongoing dialogue? Do we have mercy for those who think differently than we do?

I use the word *mercy* intentionally. It occurs at the end of the passage from Luke, after the parable. It is relevant as well at the beginning, in the debate before the parable. Effective dialogue may take a lifetime. It may take countries decades or centuries to find common ground; it may take families hours of counseling and support to resolve issues; it may take a concerted effort for institutions bound by

clear rubrics to become sources for peace and compassion rather than walled buildings for a chosen few. If we read this text with a focus on the dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer, it becomes less about the Samaritan's action as a model or an example and more about the discipline to attend to difference. It's about doing what is necessary to "go and do likewise."

These are major issues of our time. We are divided by ideology but also by a lack of awareness that is heightened by unrelenting change. Where can firm footing be found? What binds us together to begin with, if not our rich heritage of religious stories? At the beginning of the story, the lawyer asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. If we were to stop at the pause of the back-and-forth questions between Jesus and the lawyer, to allow the space between the questions to seep into our souls, then a certain kind of transformation might be possible. What is it, after all, that we inherit, if not an identity of some kind and a place of belonging?

Behind so much conflict and violence are long-standing notions of a family or a nation's inheritance. Inheritance is about more than land and property; it is a quality of being and source for decision making. Beyond this is the reality of love and mercy. When we have to consider mercy, this disrupts our routines, our patterns, and our bank accounts.

The phrase "good Samaritan" is often trivialized, watered down. We should be careful of this. This is someone who binds the wounds of an enemy and cares for that enemy's needs. Jesus tells of a person's compassion for a bitter rival—a rival for land and territory and a claim to the sacred. Such action upends assumed notions.

The Great Commandment can be mere words, and I think the lawyer knows this in his heart as he comes face to face with the law in action in a person's life. In practice, commandments require mercy—divine mercy. It is the motivator that leads to action.