

Plumb Line and Lifeline

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When I first read Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan as a child, I thought the priest and the Levite were the bad guys—heartless, hypocritical, maybe even evil. But now, as a grown-up, especially as a pastor and a parent, I wonder: were they really that bad? Or were they just... late?

It turns out that's not such an unreasonable question.

In the 1970s, two psychologists from Princeton University, Darley and Batson, conducted a now-famous experiment known as the "Good Samaritan Study."ⁱ They wanted to know what kinds of people stop to help strangers in need. So, they hired an actor to sit hunched in a narrow alley between two buildings on the Princeton campus. He coughed and groaned as if seriously ill. Then, they asked seminary students—students preparing for ministry!—to walk down that alley on their way to give a short speech.

Half of the students were told they were running late. The other half were told they had plenty of time. The content of their speeches varied, too—some were even asked to talk about the parable of the Good Samaritan itself.

So who stopped to help? It wasn't the topic of their speech that made a difference. Not even talking about compassion made people more compassionate. The key variable—the thing that mattered most—was whether they were in a hurry. Those who were not rushed were six times more likely to help than those who were. Some students even stepped over the actor, delivered a passionate talk about compassion, and then walked away feeling good about themselves. It turns out the greatest enemy of mercy isn't always cruelty or apathy. Sometimes, it's just a busy calendar.

In today's lectionary texts, we meet two kinds of divine lines: the plumb line of Amos and the lifeline in Jesus' parable. One comes from above—God's standard of justice. The other stretches across the road—an invitation to compassionate action. One measures us. The other reaches out to save us. But both are God's.

Let's begin with the plumb line. In Amos 7, the prophet receives a vision from God. The Lord stands beside a wall with a plumb line in hand. A plumb line is a simple tool—a weight tied to a string. Builders use it to measure whether a wall is straight. Gravity does the work. No politics, no excuses, no spinning the truth. If the wall leans, the plumb line shows it.

God tells Amos, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” That sounds harsh, but it's important to hear what God is really saying. God doesn't appear with a wrecking ball. God doesn't come storming in with fire. No, God comes with a tool of discernment. A plumb line is not destructive in itself. It is revealing.

In other words, God wants to assess, not annihilate. God's judgment begins with truth-telling. The plumb line reveals how far Israel has leaned away from justice and righteousness. Their worship is elaborate, but their hearts are cold. Their leaders prosper, but the poor are crushed. And now, God refuses to look away.

Amos delivers this message courageously, but not everyone wants to hear it. Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, tells Amos to go home and stop causing trouble. That's often how plumb-line truth is received—uncomfortable, disruptive, and unwelcome. Yet without it, we never know how far off-center we've become.

But the beauty of Amos's vision is this: God begins with measurement, not destruction. The plumb line invites course correction. God longs for alignment, not punishment.

Now we move from the wall to the road. In Luke 10, Jesus tells a lawyer how to inherit eternal life. The answer is simple: “Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” But the lawyer, like so many of us, wants clarification. “Who is my neighbor?” he asks.

In response, Jesus tells a parable. A man is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho—a notoriously dangerous road—when he is attacked, robbed, beaten, and left for dead. A priest sees him and passes by. A Levite sees him and passes by.

Then, a Samaritan—someone the audience would have considered a religious and ethnic outsider—comes near, sees him, is moved with compassion, and helps.

We know the story. But we often forget what Jesus leaves out. We are told nothing about the character of the wounded man. Jesus doesn't say whether the man was good or bad, rich or poor, a fellow Jew or not. We don't even know if the man was conscious. Why? Because it doesn't matter.

Jesus removes all qualifiers. Compassion does not depend on the victim's worthiness. It depends on the rescuer's willingness. The Samaritan doesn't ask, "Does this man deserve my help?" He simply helps. He gives time, oil, wine, bandages, money—he even promises to come back. He turns his donkey into an ambulance and an inn into a clinic. This is the lifeline.

While the priest and the Levite remain aligned with their religious routines, the Samaritan becomes aligned with the heart of God. He's not just righteous—he is merciful. And in God's kingdom, mercy is the measure of righteousness.

Even this past week, I found myself in a situation remarkably similar to that Princeton experiment. Our son Gaon started his ESY (Extended School Year) program, but the logistics—especially school bus coordination—were all over the place. I was juggling calls, confirming schedules, and staying alert in case something went wrong. Right in the middle of that, someone reached out asking to meet with me about a personal matter. Under normal circumstances, I would have made time. But just then, I got a call from Gaon's school asking me to pick him up. Torn between responsibilities, I told the person I couldn't meet. I explained the situation, but he left disappointed. As I've been preparing this sermon, that moment has stayed with me. It's made me pause and reflect: in trying to be faithful to one call, did I miss another? Was I stepping over someone in need—not out of cruelty or apathy, but because my life was simply too full?

That's why the results of the Princeton experiment matter so much. The students who were thinking about the Good Samaritan still passed by. Their theology didn't save the man in the alley. Their margin did. The availability of their time made the difference.

To follow Jesus, we don't just need good theology. We need room. Room to stop. Room to care. Room to love without a spreadsheet.

And perhaps more importantly, we need to recognize that we are not always the Samaritan. We are also the one left in the ditch.

We are the ones robbed by grief, wounded by sin, and left half-dead by the systems of this world. And yet—Christ comes near. Christ sees us, is moved with compassion, and tends our wounds. Christ binds us, lifts us, and carries us to healing. God could have used the plumb line and walked away. But instead, God dropped a lifeline through Christ.

That's the gospel. Not that we measured up, but that God came down.

Jesus doesn't love us because we are lovable. Jesus loves us because that is who God is—merciful, faithful, and overflowing with grace. God decided to love us before we did anything right. And now, God calls us to go and do likewise—not to prove our worth, but because we've already received that worth from Christ.

Amos shows us the plumb line—God's holy standard of justice. Jesus shows us the lifeline—God's healing compassion in action. And in Christ, the two are never separate.

God's judgment is not about condemning us for leaning; it's about calling us to straighten up and walk in love. God's mercy is not about lowering the standard; it's about lifting us up when we fall short.

So may we become people who live in alignment—not just with God's laws, but with God's heart. May we make space to notice those lying by the road. May we move not with guilt, but with grace. May we let go of what distracts us, and hold fast to what heals.

And above all, may we remember: before we ever reached out to help someone else, God reached out to us. Thanks be to God, who holds the plumb line—and becomes our lifeline. Amen.

ⁱ Darley, J. M., & Batson, C. D. (1973). "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27(1), 100–108

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