



## Sermon Caring

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“Just Do It” is the now-famous slogan for Nike, the world’s leading manufacturer of athletic shoes and apparel, and a major manufacturer of sports equipment. The “swoosh” has been Nike’s logo since 1971 when it was designed by a student at Portland State University. The slogan “Just Do It” was coined for a 1988 Nike ad campaign. It was chosen as one of the top five ad slogans of the 20th century and is so wildly popular that it has been enshrined in the Smithsonian Institute.

Here’s a creepy little piece of trivia: the slogan “Just Do It” was inspired by the last words spoken by convicted murderer, Gary Gilmore. When seated before a firing squad in Utah in 1977, and asked if he had any last words, Gilmore simply said, “Let’s do it.”

Despite its eerie origin, “Just Do It” is a great marketing slogan, especially for a company that sells athletic shoes. It’s simple, clear and motivating. In just three words it says a mouthful. It says, “Come on, quit being lazy. Get up and get going. No excuses. Quit procrastinating. Suck it up. You can do it. You’ve got it in you. Get moving!” It’s motivating. It’s inspiring. It’s a great slogan for couch potatoes and weekend warriors alike. “Just Do It!”

It is, however, a dangerous slogan to apply to our Scripture reading today, and I’m afraid that far too often that is exactly the message that we preachers have conveyed when talking about this text. And it’s easy to see why. Jesus ends this compelling story with the words, “Go and do likewise.” Sounds a lot like “Just do it,” doesn’t it? But I’d like to suggest that there’s much more going on in this story than meets the eye, so let’s break it open and see what else God might be saying to us.

It all begins with a lawyer, someone who is an expert in God’s law. He has a question for Jesus. He wants to know what he has to do to inherit eternal life. It’s a reasonable question. As an expert in the Hebrew Scriptures, this lawyer believes that God promises an eternal inheritance, a resurrection of the righteous. The lawyer wants to know if his ideas about how you earn that inheritance match up with Rabbi Jesus’ ideas. And Jesus, in typical rabbinic fashion, answers the lawyer’s question with another question. He asks the lawyer how he reads the Scriptures, and the lawyer answers beautifully: “Love God; love neighbor.” Jesus himself has said that the entirety of God’s law can be summarized with those two commands: “Love God; love neighbor.” And so Jesus says to the lawyer, “Bingo! Good answer. That’s what the law says. So just do it.”

I suspect that this lawyer is no fool. As is true of many lawyers, he is a precise man. He wants to know the exact terms of the contract. He wants to know the boundaries. And so he asks, “Who, exactly, qualifies as my neighbor?” Who is in, and who is out? Who is worthy, and who is unworthy? Who do I have to love, and who can I ignore? And in answer to the lawyer’s question, Jesus tells this remarkable little story about a man who is robbed, beaten and left

for dead. A priest and a temple worker see the bloodied man, but they avoid him. They walk by on the other side of the road. But a Samaritan – a race of people despised by the Jews – comes along, sees the bloodied man, is deeply moved, and goes to extraordinary measures to care for him.

And then Jesus turns the lawyer’s question upside down. The lawyer had asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus asks him, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” And the lawyer responds, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus says to him, “Go and do likewise.”

That’s as far as Luke’s Gospel takes the story, and again it would be easy to assume that the point is that we should all go out and do a better job of loving others.

But let’s play this story out together. The lawyer had asked what he has to do to inherit eternal life, and the answer he receives is this: “Love God, and love neighbor.” In addition, the lawyer learns that loving his neighbor means seeing himself as a neighbor to all humanity, to anyone who has need. That’s simple enough.

So we can imagine the lawyer walking away from his conversation with Jesus, perhaps headed to the temple. He doesn’t get ten steps before he encounters a blind man begging. He’s seen this blind beggar before. He has always suspected that, somewhere along the line, this man had sinned and his blindness is God’s punishment. Not only that, but the blind man’s hygiene is less than stellar, which is but one more reason that the lawyer has always avoided him and walked on the other side of the road. But in that moment, Jesus’ words come back to him. “Love your neighbor.” Surely, Jesus didn’t mean this guy.

The lawyer enters the temple for prayer. He reads a little Scripture and stands to pray, but his heart isn’t really in it. His mind is caught up in the fight he had with his wife that morning, and then it drifts to that shawl he saw in the market the other day, the one with the beautiful colors and many tassels. The one he wants, but doesn’t quite have the money to buy. How will he get the money to buy it? He is vaguely aware that he is supposed to be thanking and praising God in this time of prayer, and Jesus’ words come back to him. “Love God.”

The lawyer heads home, feeling guilty about how distracted he was in prayer, and mildly annoyed by how crowded the streets are, and how few people seem to have enough respect for his position to move out of his way. As soon as he walks into his home he hears the shattering of a pot. His two-year-old son has accidentally knocked it from the table, and now it lays in pieces on the floor. The lawyer quickly moves to his son, yanks him hard by the arm, throws him over his knees and takes out the frustrations of his day on his son’s backside. When his arm tires he releases the child who runs to his mother, while the lawyer, annoyed at his wife’s scowl, goes outside

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and sits under a palm tree.

How hard life is, he thinks to himself. How wonderful it will be when this hardship is over, and he can dwell in God's perfect presence in eternal life. And that's when Jesus' words come back to him yet again. "Love God. Love neighbor. Do these things and you will live." In that moment, the lawyer realizes just how dead he is, and how dead he will always be – in this life and the next – if he must love God and love neighbor in order to inherit eternal life. The lawyer gets up and runs back into the city searching for Jesus. When he finally finds Jesus, he falls, breathless, at his feet. "Lord," he cries, "I cannot do it. I cannot love God as I ought. I cannot love my neighbor. I can't even love my own family. How can I possibly earn eternal life?"

"You can't," Jesus says with a smile, laying a caring hand on the lawyer's shoulder. "You never could. Eternal life isn't a thing to be earned. It isn't about what you must do. It is a gift I give because I love you. Loving God and loving neighbor because you have to isn't really love at all. So go. Know that you are loved. Love God and love neighbor because you get to, not because you have to. And know that my Spirit will always be with you."

Friends, if "just do it" were Jesus' final answer to the lawyer, and to us, then this story would not be good news at all. It would be just one more law to live by, one more reason to live in failure, guilt and shame. If we're honest, we'll admit that we struggle to love people we know and like, let alone those we don't know or don't like. So, if "just do it" is not the point of this story, what is? What might God be saying to us? Let me suggest two things.

First, I think the story of the Good Samaritan is meant to remind us that fullness of life does not begin with what we do, but with what has been done for us by grace in Jesus. I think this story is meant to drive us to our knees with gratitude because we are set free by God's remarkable, unconditional, unending love for us. We don't love God or love our neighbor because we have to, because that wouldn't be real love at all. That kind of love wouldn't breathe life into us or into others. It would only leave us dead, choked with guilt and shame. Instead, the good news of God's love for us in Jesus sets us free to really love.

I don't know about you, but I need to be reminded of that over and over again. My life is like a car out of alignment that constantly veers toward the ditch of "just do it" righteousness. Like that lawyer, I get subtly and not-so-subtly caught up into believing that I have to earn God's love, and so I wind up trying hard and

failing miserably. Then I wind up feeling guilty, telling myself I'm worthless and hopeless, which makes it even less likely that I'll be able to love anyone well, making me feel even more worthless and hopeless. It's a vicious cycle that I've ridden more often than I care to admit. But the good news of this story knocks me off that cycle and into the arms of God's mercy and grace, reminding me again that I'm loved not because of what I've done but because of what God has done for me in Jesus. God's love sets us free to love.

That, I think, is the first point of this story. Here's the second: we need help loving God and loving others well. Even though the primary point of this story is not "just do it," there is a definite call upon our lives as Christ-followers to love God and love our neighbor. As people so dearly loved by God, we are moved to love God and love our neighbor, but as soon as we try, we realize how challenged we really are. As I've thought about this passage, I've come to realize that I need at least two things to help me really love my neighbor more, two things that only God can provide.

First, I need new eyes, new vision. I need eyes of faith that will allow me to see all people in need as my neighbor, and not as a nuisance or a distraction. It's far too easy for me to "see" people without really seeing them, or at least not seeing them as any of my concern. But Jesus is calling us all to see in a new way. I need new eyes, and maybe you do, too.

Second, I need a new heart, a heart that beats for the things that really matter to God. When we hear the story of the Good Samaritan, we're often pretty hard on the priest and the temple worker. But truth be told, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. Or, to be more specific, they are caught between two competing laws. On the one hand, God's law forbade them to touch blood or a dead body. On the other hand, the law commanded them to aid someone in need. How can they be obedient to both aspects of the law? Such situations were common, and rabbis debated frequently about "greater" and "lesser" laws, so they could know which law trumped another in these circumstances. In this case, the priest and the temple worker choose poorly, because when it comes to living God's agenda, love trumps everything. I need a heart that beats with that kind of love, and maybe you do, too.

When it comes to eternal life, our calling is not to "just do it," but to dare to believe that God has already done it all in Jesus Christ. We've been set free to love God and love our neighbor. And that is very good news indeed.