



# Seeking to Justify Himself

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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Assembly



## Introduction:

Let's begin with a story. A Jewish man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance, a priest was going down that road. When the priest saw the beaten man, he passed by on the other side of the road. Sometime later, a Levite was also walking down that road. When he saw the beaten man, he also passed by on the other side. Sometime later, a Samaritan, a man hated by Jews, came to the place where the man was. The Samaritan had compassion on this man who likely would have passed by had roles been reversed. He went to him, bound and treated his wounds using his own oil and wine. He set the man on his own animal and walked the rest of the way to the inn. He spent the rest of the day and night taking care of him. Then he gave two days' wages to the innkeeper to care for the man and promised to cover any other expenses when he returned (cf. **Luke 10:29-37**).

I hope in this month where we are hearing this story over and over again, it is impacting us on deeper and more profound levels. Don't forget that Jesus ended the whole story with, "You, go, and do likewise." But remember that this story wasn't told in a vacuum. This was Jesus's answer to a question: "Who is my neighbor?" (**Luke 10:29**). But why did the lawyer even ask this question? Was he genuinely asking this question? Was he concerned about all those neighbors out there that needed love? Did he know of a lot of people who were not loving their neighbors and he wanted Jesus to help them out? Was he trying to get an answer to a question he had struggled with all his life? Was he trying to get a leg up in an ongoing debate on this issue of neighbors? Why did he ask this question? Let's consider this for a few moments and see if any parallels exist to us and our good deeds.

## Discussion:

### I. Why did the lawyer ask?

A. Sadly, the lawyer was not asking a genuine question. Two points in this larger story drive this home.

1. First, notice **Luke 10:25**—"And behold, a lawyer stood up *to put him to the test...*" (ESV, emphasis mine, ELC). The text does not say, "A lawyer stood up to gain insight..." It doesn't say, "A lawyer stood up to understand God's will..." It doesn't say, "A lawyer stood up to get some help..." The lawyer was trying to lay a trap for Jesus. I don't fully understand how he hoped to trip Jesus up with this question. Probably, the lawyer knew enough to know that almost any answer to this question could be disputed. This is one of those "give him enough rope and he'll hang himself" questions. The lawyer, probably having too much faith in his own knowledge of the law was certain that Jesus would either say too much or not enough. In either case, he could accuse Jesus of disregarding God's Law. But the point we need to understand is the lawyer wasn't asking out of genuineness, he was asking in order to make Jesus look bad.
2. Second, notice **Luke 10:29**—"But he, *desiring to justify himself*, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (ESV; emphasis mine, ELC). The text does not say, "But he, seeking to understand better..." It doesn't say, "But he, wanting to know more..." It doesn't say, "But he, hoping to gain deeper insight..." He was trying to justify himself. Whatever kind of trap the lawyer hoped to spring on Jesus was turned on him. He had asked a question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And then immediately demonstrated that he already knew the answer. Now he looked foolish. In fact, he looked disingenuous. Everyone listening was figuring out that the lawyer wasn't actually trying to have a good discussion about eternal life; he was just trying to trap Jesus. So, he needed to salvage the situation. He needed to say something that would make it look like he really needed a good answer to help him on his walk to eternal life. So he asked about the neighbor. But again, he wasn't genuinely asking; he was simply trying to make himself look good.

B. What does it mean that the lawyer was trying to justify himself? Justifying is what we do when our conscience has been pricked. Here's how it works. You've done something you know you shouldn't do or perhaps not done something you know you should. Your conscience starts to bother you. You have a choice. You either confess, repent, and come back in line with what you know is right. Or you start to justify yourself. "I wasn't lusting; I was admiring beauty." "I didn't lie; I just withheld information that I didn't have to tell you." "I wasn't gossiping; I was just asking for your prayers on someone else's behalf because of a prob-

lem I know they have.” “You can’t expect me to do that; no one does that.” “You can’t expect me to do this; I don’t even know how.” On the list goes. That is exactly what the lawyer is doing here.

- C. This gets us down to the big problem in this scenario. Jesus highlighted that the lawyer already knew what to do; he just wasn’t doing what he knew. Remember in **Luke 18:18-21** when the rich, young ruler asked the same question and Jesus listed some laws, that man said, “All these I have kept from my youth” (ESV). The lawyer could have said the same thing in order to justify himself. But he didn’t. He asked a question which essentially claimed his reason for not loving his neighbor was that God hadn’t clearly explained who his neighbor was. So, the lawyer wasn’t loving his neighbor, but he felt he could justify why he didn’t because he didn’t know who his neighbor really was. This is tantamount to the lawyer saying, “I know I’m supposed to love my neighbor, but since I don’t know who that is, I’m free and clear. I have a clean conscience. You show me who my neighbor is, and I’ll get after loving him. Until then, you can’t expect me to do this.” That is justifying. It is salving the conscience when he wasn’t doing what God said.

## II. Do you ever justify yourself?

- A. Do we ever do this kind of thing when it comes to loving our neighbors in deed and truth? I know I have. The fact is I’ve known since I was a kid that God’s two greatest laws were to love Him and love my neighbor. But how many times have I talked myself out of helping someone in need? How many times have I failed to follow in my Savior’s good deed footsteps? How many times do I justify not doing what I know? I’d like to share some of the justifications I think we use sometimes. To be honest, I don’t necessarily expect you to remember all these examples. And I don’t expect you to remember all my responses to each one. I hope you get one thing from this lesson. If you are like me, some of these lessons are hitting home. We can do one of two things in the face of them. We can either increase our justifications so our conscious doesn’t bother us as much or we can repent and strive to improve our love this week. If any of these justifications hit home, please recognize it and work to disarm it.
- B. Seeking to justify ourselves:
1. *I don’t have enough information:* Like the lawyer we may plead ignorance. “The Bible is just so confusing. It doesn’t fully explain this part. I mean, how can I be expected to love my neighbor properly when the lines aren’t clearly drawn and I don’t know exactly what is right and wrong?” Jesus’s response to the lawyer should demonstrate to us that we know enough. We know we are to love. Do you respond to your neighbor from love? Or from fear, negligence, pride, judgment, haughtiness, convenience, etc.?
  2. *You can’t prove I have to?:* As we learned in a previous lesson, the lawyer is essentially asking “Who do I have to love?” The corollary to that is somewhat implied, “What do I have to do to love them?” He wanted a circle drawn around the group that he was required to love in order to get eternal life. In other words, until you prove to me that I have to do this, I’m not going to. There are two problems with this.
    - a) The first is that while we obviously have to love our neighbor. God has not spelled out a have-to list of deeds and people. That means no one can actually prove you have to do any particular act for any particular person. In other words, I can prove you have to love your neighbor, but if you ask me, “Well, do I have to stop to help a car pulled over on the side of the road?” Or “Do I have to give this person asking me for a handout some money?” No I can’t prove the particular to you. That, however, doesn’t change the fact that if you aren’t loving that person, you aren’t doing right.
    - b) The second problem with this, of course, is that love isn’t about have-tos. Think about it like this, wives. If you told your husband, “I really like to receive flowers on my birthday.” And he said, “Do I have to get your flowers on your birthday?” You’d probably say something like, “You don’t have to, but I really like it.” If he didn’t give you flowers, would you feel loved? Guys, if you told your wife, “When I get home from work, I really need just 20 minutes of decompression time to unload the stress of the day so I can really connect with you and the kids.” If she said, “Ugh, do I have to do that?” You might say something like, “I guess you don’t have to. But it would really help me.” When she repeatedly violated that time would you feel loved? Love isn’t about “have to.” It is about compassion, mercy, and “want to.”
  3. *What if I do the wrong thing?* If we are already saying we don’t have enough information, we may add this justification. After all, it sounds very noble to cite a fear of doing wrong. We’d hate to do anything wrong. But notice, this is not an assertion that the thing we are talking about is wrong; we are just talking about the fear of possibly doing something. I can’t help but think about the one talent man of **Matthew 25:24-27**. Here was a man who did nothing because he was afraid he would do the wrong thing. Certainly, there may be some particular actions you avoid because you can’t do them in faith. But if you are consistently doing nothing and using this, it is merely a self-justification and is not loving.

4. *Someone might take advantage of me:* This is a biggie. Back when I was 22, right before Marita and I got married, I was outside our new apartment, unloading furniture I had driven up from Alabama to go in what was going to be our new home. A man came up and asked for some money. In my mind I was looking at a prospect for the gospel. I had just moved to Dyersburg, Tennessee. It was my first “full-time work” as a preacher. And here I was looking at the first person I was going to baptize. Wouldn’t I look great to my new elders and new congregation? I wanted to help and turn that into a Bible study and then a convert. He hit me up a couple of times over the next week. However, the man was a con. When all was said and done, he swindled me out of \$80. Back then, for me, that was big money. It was more than I made in a day. It was like I had spent a day working, and he got the money for it. After that, you can imagine I got jaded. Nobody was going to take advantage of me again. Over time, however, I’ve had to learn, no one goes to hell for being taken advantage of. I’m not saying be reckless, I’m saying love your neighbor and don’t justify a lack of love with your fear of being taken advantage of.
5. *I don’t want to be a poor steward:* We might make this justification from two different directions.
  - a) First, we might be making a similar justification as our last one. If someone takes our help and uses it to sin, we don’t want to be responsible. Obviously, we don’t want to knowingly support sinfulness. However, many times the issue is not that we don’t help a particular person because we know they will use it to sin. Rather, sometimes we just never help anyone because we are afraid they will sin. If we are trying to help someone from love and they use it to sin, that is on them, not us. If we don’t help someone in need, that may well be on us because we aren’t loving our neighbor.
  - b) Second, we might be simply trying to preserve our own goods. If I give away too much of what I have, that would be poor stewardship. Where does all this stop? Be aware, we will have a specific lesson dealing with healthy boundaries in this area. However, let me also say that typically we think good stewardship means doing really well financially so that we have a great retirement program, good savings, etc. But keep in mind when the rich, young ruler asked Jesus about inheriting eternal life in **Luke 18:18, 22**, he was the kind of person the world would say is a good steward. But Jesus said He was not a good steward. You see, being a good steward does not mean managing your own goods well. Being a good steward means managing someone else’s property well. The first principle of managing someone else’s property well is doing what they have told you to do with it and using it to accomplish what the owner has said he wants to accomplish. The rich, young ruler was managing his material goods as if they were his own property. His management was designed to make sure his pocket was lined. And he was being very successful at that. The problem for him was he wasn’t doing what the owner of his property wanted him to do with it. Let me ask you this. If you gave me \$100 to go pay a bill for you, or to put in the collection plate, or to give to another friend and instead I invested it and made \$1000 that I kept for me, would that be good stewardship? “But look at all this money I made. I’m a savvy investor.” What would you say? Wouldn’t you say something like, “But it’s my money and I told you what to do with it.” Loving our neighbors is great stewardship because it is exactly what God has told us to do with His money.
6. *They got in this mess themselves:* This is a subtle form of pride that I have used to justify myself way too often. From on high, we can look down at others who haven’t done as well as we have. Perhaps it is someone who needs consolation because their sin has destroyed their marriage. Perhaps it is someone who needs forgiveness because their sin drove a wedge in our relationship. Perhaps it is someone who needs financial help because they made big financial mistakes, maybe even knowingly. There is a great little story in **Luke 7:36-50**. A Pharisee invited Jesus over for a meal. While there, a sinful woman (many think that means she was a prostitute) washed Jesus’s feet. Simon thought to himself, “Jesus must not be a prophet, otherwise he wouldn’t let this woman touch him.” Not only was this unloving, but it was unloving because of pride. What Simon was suggesting is that he should be able to touch Jesus because he wasn’t as much of a sinner as the woman. This justification that we are talking about is the same kind of pride. When we refuse to do good to our neighbor because they got themselves into the mess, we are forgetting The Good Deed we talked about in our first lesson. When Jesus looked at us in our mess, He could have said, “They got themselves into this mess. They can get themselves out.” But He didn’t. Though we were weak, sinful, and ungodly, He paid the price to get us out of our own mess. Please don’t misunderstand. I’m not talking about becoming reckless enablers. We’ll discuss that in a later lesson in this series. However, we must not justify a lack of love by sitting in judgment over those who got themselves into their own messes.

7. *I don't even know this person*: It may seem obvious in the context of the Parable of the Good Samaritan that this statement doesn't justify. After all, the Samaritan didn't know the man. However, let me share an illustration. Let's say a friend of yours got a job as a waitress. On her first night, you took a group of friends to show your support and give your friend a huge tip. You get there and your friend is just having trouble. The place is packed. She's running around trying to keep up with all her tables. She messed up your order. She didn't get the drinks out as quickly as you would like. What do you do? Most of us give the benefit of the doubt to our friend. We know it's her first night. We know everyone has bad nights. We know she isn't purposefully trying to mess up our eating experience. We were there to support her and so we give her the big tip anyway. And we bask in how much we love our neighbor because we know she didn't really deserve that tip, but we gave it out of love for our friend. But what if it is just a normal night out at a restaurant with a waiter or waitress we don't know and they do this? Do we chew them out? Do we ask them if everything is alright? Do we report them to the manager? Do we give the benefit of the doubt? Here's someone we don't know. Do we do good deeds to them in this situation or do we simply take out our frustration because we didn't get the service we thought we were entitled to? It's a justification we may subconsciously make. We're not only supposed to love friends, but even enemies. How much more strangers who are not at either extreme.

#### Conclusion:

Here is what I know. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (and many other passages) are extremely challenging. They don't draw easy lines. They don't allow for simple copouts. And when I read them, my first reaction is often to behave just like the lawyer. I start to justify myself for why I haven't done what it says. Of course, part of the reason for that is because all too often, like the lawyer we see this as a check off item we have to accomplish in order to attain eternal life for ourselves. If we learn anything from the story of the Good Samaritan it is that if we are going to try to be worthy of eternal life by loving our neighbor, we aren't going to make it. We've already blown it. We have so much growing to do to get to that level of love with everyone and all the time that we might as well just give up. None of our justifying is going to deal with how far short of loving like Jesus Christ that we fall. Instead of trying to earn eternal life and trying to justify the places where we haven't, let's just understand that we can't earn it. Let's just understand that there is no justifying ourselves. Let's understand that Jesus Christ died for us and by faith in Him we are justified. And having been justified, let's allow that justification to change us into people who are a little more like Jesus. We aren't going to gain eternal life by justifying the times we haven't loved. But having been justified by the blood of Jesus Christ we can become a little more like Him this week, passing on to others the love He has given to us a little better.