



Care For Your Neighbor and Live

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Southern Ambassador for Harm Reduction Overdose Prevention
Ministries

The term “Good Samaritan” long ago expanded from a character title in Luke’s parable to a colloquialism that encompasses all people who provide care for strangers in need. News stories about Good Samaritans going to extreme measures to save another person appear regularly. Every year, towns across the United States grant Key to the City awards to local Good Samaritans. And historically in most states, robust Good Samaritan laws protect lay people from liability while rendering lifesaving care.

We love a hero story, and somewhere in the shift from biblical parable to familiar phrase, that is what the Good Samaritan has become. But Jesus doesn’t tell the story outlined in Luke 10 to explain how to become an admirable exception. If we act as the Samaritan does to save the stranger dying on the side of the road, Jesus promises simply, “You will live” (Luke 10:28b). The Samaritan does what is required of all of us.

In North Carolina, where I live, it has become increasingly dangerous for people who use drugs—the same people who are the most consistent and effective first-responders to incidents of overdose—to follow the example of the Good Samaritan. The law that should protect people who call for help when a person is experiencing an overdose is full of caveats and doesn’t protect from prosecution anyone possessing methamphetamine, fentanyl, or any other criminalized substance if it exceeds a certain (very limited) weight. Even if the actions of a Good Samaritan save the life of a dying person, the Good Samaritan can be arrested at the scene for possession and face significant time trapped in the criminal legal system.

North Carolina may have a particularly weak Good Samaritan law, but it is not the only state with outdated and exclusionary Good Samaritan laws. Amid an ongoing and escalating overdose crisis, it's essential that we remove any barrier to calling for or administering aid—including the barrier of criminalization. Our country, through its multifront war on people who use drugs, creates barriers for folks who use drugs to receive appropriate help ... and now we are failing to remove barriers that would allow people who use drugs to provide life-saving care.

No one should lose their freedom for ensuring their neighbor's survival. We have been taught that protecting the life of another, showing someone the love we cannot just reserve for ourselves, is work we are all called to.

This week, take a little time to learn about how the Good Samaritan law in your state does or doesn't protect people at the scene of an overdose. How can you push to expand or change the Good Samaritan law where you are?

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