

The Good Samaritan

By Brad Allison on 5/2/2004

Scripture Reference *Luke 10:25-37*

We come this morning to the most well-known of all Jesus' parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Even among those who don't know the Bible very well, a significant number know this story and could repeat it to you. Not only is it well-known, but it is also well-liked. The term "good Samaritan" has passed into popular usage to describe a person who helps those in need. We name churches and hospitals after the man in this parable. Some of Jesus' words are controversial, but this parable could not be included among them.

The story is a simple one. A Jewish man is traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a road that was notoriously dangerous. It descended nearly 3,300 feet in those 17 miles between the two cities, and its terrain offered many hiding places from which bandits could ambush travelers. Such a thing happened to the Jewish man in our parable, and he was beaten, robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. He was helpless to deliver himself and needed outside aid. The first man who came along was a great candidate to provide such help. After all, he was a professional, a priest from Jerusalem whose job it was, among other things, to provide such help to the needy. But as he saw the body lying in the ditch, instead of running to help, he crossed to the other side of the road and just kept walking. A second man then approaches, this one a Levite, who was something like an assistant priest. Maybe there were extenuating circumstances with the first priest that didn't apply to this one. Perhaps the first one was just especially busy and was on his way to an even more urgent need than this one. Surely this Levite would stop. But then he too does the same thing and crosses to the other side and passes the man in need. Finally, the most unlikely source of help comes along, a Samaritan. You are probably aware of the fact that Jews and Samaritans hated one another, not unlike the feelings Jews and Arabic Muslims have toward one another today. Surprisingly, this man gives the help needed, at significant cost to himself. Jesus applies the parable by telling his hearers to go and do likewise.

It is somewhat ironic that this parable is so universally embraced, because if we read it in its context, it is actually a shrewd trap on the part of Jesus. It is designed primarily not like a fable with a moral at the end, but as a mirror to our souls. The way we treat the poor and needy helps us to see our souls.

Illustration: A young seminary student noticed that there was homeless woman he encountered near the library where he studied. Listen to his description of this encounter.

A once beautiful woman, Angela, is withering away in front of the library on our urban campus. She wears many layers of clothes. They are plastered on her brittle body like clashing layers of peeling paint. She doesn't have socks on, but it's cold and the weather is growing hostile. I offered her food once, but she rudely rejected it. She turns away abruptly when I try to talk to her. Stung with bitterness I recoil. But then I gradually begin understanding how prejudiced we are with expectations of the poor. My arrogant anticipation of gratitude kills the goodness of the deed. She is hungry, exposed and sick; yet I resist reaching out, because she might not welcome me. Which one of us is truly sick? Angela, you're a mirror thrust before us, but can we bear the sight?

This parable is a mirror thrust before our eyes this morning, and I would like for us to take a good, long look into it. I want us to look into this mirror by seeing the two things Jesus does to this lawyer who comes to ask him a question. Let's look at the trap set, and the trap sprung.

I. The Trap Is Set - v. 25-28

A lawyer came to Jesus with a question. But we learn right off the bat that he wasn't asking in order to get information, but to lay a trap for Jesus. We need to understand that lawyers in this day were not lawyers like in our day. They were Bible scholars who were called lawyers because they were experts on the laws of the Bible. There was some feeling among them that Jesus downplayed the law and overemphasized grace. So he asked Jesus a question hoping to get him to say something bad about the law of God so he could be discredited. So he asks Jesus, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

This is where Jesus begins laying his trap, and, as we're going to see, it's a mercy trap. Instead of answering him directly, he asks a question of his own. "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The man knows the answer to this one. He quotes the summary of the law in the greatest commandment to love God with all your heart. In other words, we are to be completely devoted to God. And the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourself. In other words, we are to pursue the needs of others with all the sense of urgency with which we address our own needs. Just as we apply ourselves to the task of planning our meals and clothing, so we should apply ourselves equally to those in need.

Jesus agrees with him and tells him to do as he has said. But something is troubling the lawyer's conscience, because he knows that he doesn't fulfill this law as he ought. So in an attempt to justify himself, he does what lawyers have always done—he seeks to define things in such a way that they suit his purposes. He asks Jesus, "Can we define 'neighbor' a little more carefully? Who exactly is my neighbor that I am required to love in this way?" His goal is transparent; he wants to define it in such a way that it will be within his reach. Jesus then tells this parable in answer to his question.

There are two things I notice about this encounter between Jesus and the lawyer, and the two go together. First, Jesus was being incredibly patient and respectful of this man. I've often marveled at his response to this question that preachers dream of. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" If anyone could have given a good answer to that question, it would have been Jesus. We could all memorize his answer and use it in sharing the gospel with everyone. But Jesus remains curiously restrained in his words. He simply answers the lawyer's question with a question of his own, which is essentially, "What do you think?" And then when the lawyer tells Jesus what he thinks, Jesus says something like, "I would say that sums it up nicely. Just go and do that." Why is Jesus so restrained in his words? It's because of the next thing I notice in our passage.

Jesus was so restrained and asked questions instead of giving answers because he was going after the man's heart. If you want to address someone's mind, answers work well. But if you want to pursue their heart, you have to ask questions. As readers, we are told something about this man's heart that was known only to Jesus. The greatest desire of this man was to justify himself. Jesus knows that desires are important, because people always end up doing what they desire. This is the case even if they aren't in touch with what they really want. If your greatest desire is to make it into the group of popular kids at school, then that will show itself in numerous ways in many of the things you do, even if you are unaware of that desire. This man's desire was to justify himself. He wanted to feel that things were okay with him, that he was doing the things he was supposed to do. But as he spoke about what he knew the law of God to require—the loving of his neighbor—he began to have some doubts about being right. Since his greatest desire was to be right, he had to do something. When we want to justify ourselves, we always revert to an area of strength, and this man's strength was in defining things so that they came out the way he wanted them. If he could define the word "neighbor" to apply only to those he was already loving, then he could feel that things were okay with his heart. That's what he was trying to do.

Application: Here's the application for us before we move on. If you want to reach the hearts of people who are antagonistic to the gospel, Jesus is showing us the way. We need to focus on asking questions rather than giving answers. We need to be patient with people and wait on God to move in their hearts. To use an analogy I've used with our Relational Leadership Training class, we need to be more like a sailboat and less like a powerboat or raft. If Jesus had been like a powerboat, he would have given a three point sermon and closed with a forceful invitation. If he had been like a raft, he would have become completely passive and ended the conversation early. But he was like a sailor, who is always looking for the wind to blow, and is patient in waiting for it. If you want to respect people and reach the hearts, you have to do the same.

II. The Trap Is Sprung - v. 29-37

So this lawyer comes to trap Jesus, and Jesus sets a mercy trap of his own. Will the man take the bait? He has answered Jesus' question and talked himself into a corner, and then he takes the bait. In an attempt to justify himself, he asks the question, "And who is my neighbor?" That's when Jesus springs the trap. He answers the man's question with this parable of the Good Samaritan, with the result that the lawyer is completely humbled. As Tim Keller has written about this, "Jesus is not telling us that we can be *saved* by imitating the Good Samaritan, even though he is clearly charging us to follow his pattern. Rather, Jesus is seeking to humble us with the love God *requires*, so we will be willing to receive the love God *offers*." (*Ministries of Mercy*, p. 38).

Let's look at the love God requires, the kind shown by this Good Samaritan. I notice several things about it. First, it is born in the heart. The Samaritan had compassion for this victim. The Greek word is the verb *splagxizomai*, which comes from a noun that refers to one's bowels or entrails. In almost every other occurrence of this verb in the New Testament, it is used of the compassion of Jesus. Jesus is requiring more than mere deeds of kindness; he is requiring a heart of kindness. It's the kind of compassion that a parent feels when his child is hurting and says, "Please, daddy, make it go away." A parent in that situation feels compassion in their gut, causing them to do anything within their power to help. That's what Jesus is commanding here.

Notice that the kind of help given by the Samaritan is costly. It costs his time for one thing. Unlike the two who passed by on the other side of the road, he served this needy man by giving his physical presence. The first words of verse 34 are easy to pass over, but are of such importance. "He went to him." People in a helpless condition are greatly encouraged by the mere presence of a friend, but that costs time.

It also required the sacrifice of his agenda. I assume that he wasn't just out here for a casual stroll. He had some destination in mind, and stopping to attend to this need cost him his agenda. Wherever it was that he was headed on this particular day, he didn't succeed in getting there. The point is that nothing less than a heart of compassion will be adequate for an active and fruitful deed ministry in our lives and in our church.

It could possibly have cost him his safety. It's obviously a dangerous road, and if one must go through the bad part of town, it is at least advisable not to linger there longer than absolutely necessary. The obvious cost was monetary, as he provided lodging for the man, together with an open-ended promise to give whatever would be required to care for him.

So Jesus is saying to this man, "You have said yourself that eternal life can be gained by

loving God and loving one's neighbor. I'm telling you that your neighbor is anyone in need, even if it's your sworn enemy. And to love him means to have a heart filled with compassion and to do the deeds that correspond to such compassion. Do this and you will live." Why does Jesus speak in this way to this man? The answer can be found in verse 29, where we read that this man was "desiring to justify himself." To be justified means to be righteous. In the original Greek, it's the same word. We don't say it like this in English because it doesn't sound right, but the sense is that he desired to "rightoufy himself." He wanted to be right, and he sought his rightness in this narrow definition of what it means to be a neighbor. His goal, to be justified and right, was a correct goal. It is one that is universal to the human race. There is something deep within all of us that desires to be right, or we could say righteous. God has put it there. But this man's method of securing that righteousness was where he had his problem. He was trying to justify himself, and that cannot be done. So Jesus was actually answering his question about how to have eternal life. He was trying to shake up his self-justifying efforts by getting him to see that he fell far short of the requirements he himself said he was to live by. He had not loved his neighbor as himself.

CONCLUSION:

How ought we to apply this to ourselves? Let me suggest two ways. First, stop trying to justify yourself. You cannot do it because the righteous requirements of God are simply far beyond you. He requires this kind of love, even of our enemies. Be honest, you simply don't have it. But you can still be justified or made righteous. It is a good goal, but there is only one path that will bring you to that goal. It is through giving up on trying to justify yourself and trusting in Jesus instead. The lawyer asked how he could inherit eternal life. How does one inherit anything? Well, someone has to die. Jesus has died the death you deserve that you might be free. Trust him for justification rather than yourself.

The second application is to love your neighbor as Jesus outlines it here. He really does require this, and for those who have trusted in Jesus for their righteousness, he also empowers this kind of love. Let me close with a portion of a sermon delivered by Robert Murray M'Cheyne, urging us to this kind of sacrificial giving for others.

Now, dear Christians, some of you pray night and day to be branches of the true vine. You pray to be made all over in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like him in giving--though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor.

Objection: My money is my own.

Answer: Well, Christ might have said, "My blood is my own, my life is my own," then, where should you have been?

Objection: The poor are undeserving.

Answer: Christ might have said, "These are wicked rebels. Shall I lay down my life for these? I will give to the good angels, the deserving poor." But no, he left the ninety-nine and came after the lost. He gave his blood for the undeserving.

Objection: If I give my charity, the poor may abuse it.

Answer: Christ might have said the same thing, yea with far greater truth. Christ knew that thousands would trample his blood under their feet, that most would despise it, that many would make it an excuse for sinning more, and yet he gave his own blood.

My dear Christians, if you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and the poor, the thankless and the undeserving. Christ is glorious and happy, and so will you be. It is not your money I want but your happiness. Remember his own word, it is more happy, more blessed, to give than to receive.

May God strengthen you all to trust in Jesus for righteousness instead of yourself, and to love your neighbor as yourself!