

July 18, 2010

The Good Samaritan

LUKE 10:25-37

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“And Jesus said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’”

– Luke 10:28

Many of us have sincerely wondered, “What do I have to do to go to heaven?” If you are really wondering about this and asking God about this today, it is a good question. It is the same question that we hear in today’s text. It is asked by a “lawyer,” by which we mean a student of the Torah, or the Law of Moses. Now on the outside, it seems like he and Jesus are having a good conversation: A couple of questions are asked; a couple of answers are given; and everyone agrees. Jesus even let the lawyer go first to listen to him about what he thought he needed to do to inherit eternal life. So the lawyer says two things: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This, says Jesus, is a good answer.

But as often happens in debating about God, there is a lot going on underneath the surface. This lawyer is not asking an honest question about heaven; he is standing up to Jesus and trying to put him on the spot. The lawyer already knew the answer to his question. What he is trying to do is test Jesus in order to win a religious argument. Oftentimes we today still try to isolate a single fact for a basis not to follow Jesus or go to church, but it never ends in anything good.

In fact, it doesn’t even seem like the lawyer really wants Jesus to answer his question so that he can live differently; he is asking a question that he has no intention of living out the answer to because he is trying to test Jesus and wanted to justify himself. In other words, the lawyer wanted to restrict who was his neighbor. He wanted to figure out who qualified as his neighbor so that he could justify his own behavior and identify those people who were not his neighbors so that he did not have to love them.

So in response, Jesus tells this story of the Good Samaritan: a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, which is still a dangerous route today, and fell into the hands of robbers. He was stripped, beaten and left for dead.

Presumably the man was travelling from Jerusalem because he was Jewish and had worshipped God there. So it is no surprise that another Jew might come along the road. The first person that comes down the road was a priest, meaning he was a descendant of Moses’ brother Aaron. This priest purposefully walks on the other side of the road after seeing the man, and does not help him. It was not something he was apparently interested in doing, and he did not want to risk touching someone bleeding or dead and become ceremonially unclean.

The next person who comes by is a Levite, meaning someone who was a temple assistant. This man does the same thing, and walks on the far side of the road after seeing the hurting man.

If anyone were to help this beaten believer lying half-dead by the side of the road, you would think it would be someone who was a part of the Kingdom of God. You would think it would be someone who professed faith in God – someone who believed the Bible. You would think your best shot would be a priest. But the priest did nothing. You would think your second best chance would be a Levite. But the Levite did not care either.

Then along comes a Samaritan. Now there is something that we need to know about Samaritans. It is hard to capture the setting for us today, but Samaritans and Jews hated each

other. They had a very long and complicated history. They did not get along. They viewed each other as heretics. They also had racial and ethnic divisions between them.

Even just before this passage, in Luke 9, we are told that Samaritans would not be nice to Jews who were travelling to worship in Jerusalem because of their religious differences. In fact, they had just opposed Jesus. So when Jesus tells this story about a good Samaritan, it is absolutely shocking. Jesus is picking out the most controversial person imaginable. And, incredibly, the person that you would least expect it from – acts in love. The person that you would least expect to help – the only one who we're sure was not a good person – shows the hurting man mercy. Jesus just took the enemy and made him into the good guy.

To be clear, in this story Jesus is not supporting bad theology. Jesus is not a Samaritan. He is not saying that faith or the Bible doesn't matter. He is not trying to be clever just for the sake of being clever – but He is telling the truth. And the truth is this: knowing God is not the same as knowing all the “right answers.” Good theology is certainly part of knowing God. But there is another part: living out that faith.

Jesus did not say to the lawyer, “That’s great – you gave the right answer! You’re the best Christian I know!” No, He said “Go and do.” Live out the faith. Following Jesus means that because you know God, that you are called to extend love to everyone. Especially to those who offend you. Especially to the one who treated you unfairly. Especially to the one person – like a hated Samaritan – that you would really rather cross over to the other side of the street and avoid. Jesus tells this lawyer, this student to the Bible – that it is not enough to know God’s Word; he has to live out the Word.

This shows us the connection between the two commandments at the beginning of the story: love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is a profound lesson of discipleship. Will we live out the relationship that we have with God – that relationship that we know about through God’s word – will we use that as a basis of love and grace to reach out to others? Will we use that to reach out to everyone, even those who we’d rather not be friends with? Will we reach out in the community to people who are different than us religiously, ethnically, or those who are our enemies as the Samaritans were to Jews in Jesus’ day? ...Or, will we isolate ourselves? Will we try to be totally separate from them, as this lawyer was?

Are you beginning to see how radical this story about love and grace is? Jesus goes farther than answering a question for us to think about. He is saying, who actually acted as the man’s neighbor? This is more than thinking about morality, this is actually a way of life. In so many words, this parable says to us, “Can you recognize the hated Samaritan as your neighbour? If you can’t, you might be left for dead.”¹

Who are the Samaritans in your life? The one who really irritates you? The one at work with whom you just do not get along? The in-law or family member that you would rather not have to deal with? The one who believes something very very different than you – so much so that you are divided?

There is a lot of hurt in the world around us. There is a lot of pain in the community around us. There is even a lot of brokenness in the denomination around us. Shall we turn a blind eye and avoid it? Shall we walk on the other side of the road? Or shall we extend that grace and love that we have in the knowledge of Jesus Christ? Will we be Jesus’ disciples by “Going and doing?”

¹Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2004), 128.

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If you are beginning to see how radical this story of the Good Samaritan is, then realize this story goes even deeper. Sometimes we can be so familiar with a story, like the Good Samaritan, that we can easily miss things because we think we already know the story so well.

So let us remember the setting again: Jesus Himself is walking from Galilee to Jerusalem. This means he was walking on the same road that the man in the Good Samaritan who was attacked was on. And when He goes to Jerusalem, he will be betrayed. He will be beaten and flogged. He will be stripped of his clothes. Everything will be taken from Him. The priests will not help Him. The Levites will not help him. His own disciples will not simply walk away from Him, they will flee. They will pretend that they don't know Him. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus is marching to the Cross even though He did nothing wrong. Like the beaten man in the parable, Jesus was innocent.

So hear the story of the Good Samaritan once again, and imagine that Jesus is the man in the story. Imagine that Jesus is the one who was attacked. Imagine that Jesus is telling this story about *himself*: *“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when He fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.”*

Do you see what is at stake? Whatever we do to others, it's as if we did it to Jesus Himself. And it seems hard, it's because it is. In fact, it's so hard that we cannot do it. We have to depend on the Holy Spirit to give us strength. If it were all up to us, loving our enemies would be impossible, so we depend on God's grace; that's the only way we can go and do likewise.

Do you see that a life of discipleship is a call to action? Do you see that following Jesus is bigger than we ever knew? Do you see, that like the lawyer, we have to make a choice? Will we show others mercy, just as Jesus has shown us mercy?

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Our story began with the lawyer asking a question in order to trap Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Inheriting eternal life is not confined to right answers, or clever questions to justify ourselves, it is found in Jesus. And if we want to follow Him, it does not mean thinking about Him only on Sunday morning; it is a way of living every day.

Hold fast to good theology. And, at the same time, look upon one another in mercy. If you want to inherit eternal life when you die – if you want to inherit eternal life even now while we live, then remember the words of Jesus. “Go and do likewise.” Amen.

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